

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 045

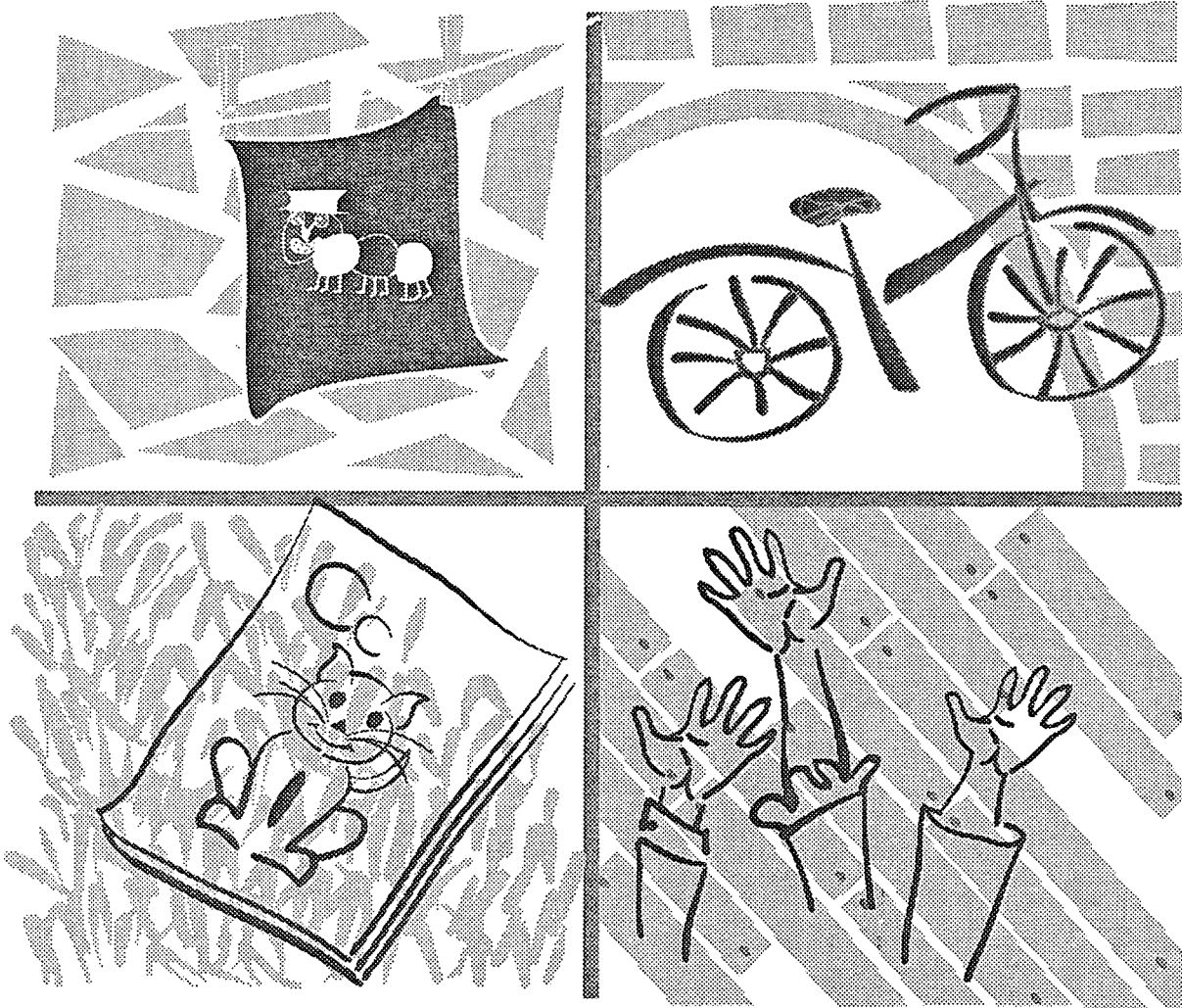
CS 013 212

AUTHOR Briggs, Kerri L.; Thomas, Kay
TITLE Patterns of Success: Successful Pathways to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools.
INSTITUTION Texas Center for Educational Research, Austin.
PUB DATE 1997-06-00
NOTE 58p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Instructional Leadership; Primary Education; Reading Ability; Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Reading Research; School Culture; *School Effectiveness; Student Evaluation; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Texas; Texas Assessment of Academic Skills

ABSTRACT

A study examined the experiences of students, teachers, and principals involved in the day-to-day teaching of early elementary reading in four of the 12 Texas "Spotlight Schools" (schools that emphasize early elementary reading and are useful in helping all children to read). Data were collected during four-day site visits to each school. During these visits, teachers were interviewed about their teaching practices, classroom instruction was observed, and principals were interviewed about how they support instruction. Results indicated that (1) teachers met with other grade-level teachers to discuss reading; (2) principals were involved with teachers' lesson planning; (3) schools used a variety of programs and materials to teach reading; (4) students took home reading materials; (5) students participated in reading incentive programs; (6) teachers organized and directed most of the reading instruction; (7) students worked in small groups during reading instruction; (8) students worked alone during reading instruction; (9) teachers organized small groups that were usually based on ability within the class; (10) schoolwide strategies helped teachers use time more effectively; (11) teachers used many approaches to assess reading ability; (12) teachers had information about students' reading ability at the beginning of the year; (13) schools analyzed formal test data; (14) schools prepared for the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) in different ways; (15) teachers developed skills through formal and informal learning opportunities; (16) instructional leadership was found throughout the school; (17) each school had a unique culture; and (18) schools worked with volunteers and local business to support reading. (Contains seven endnotes; and appendix contains a description of the research methodology. (RS)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *



Patterns of Success:

Successful Pathways to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

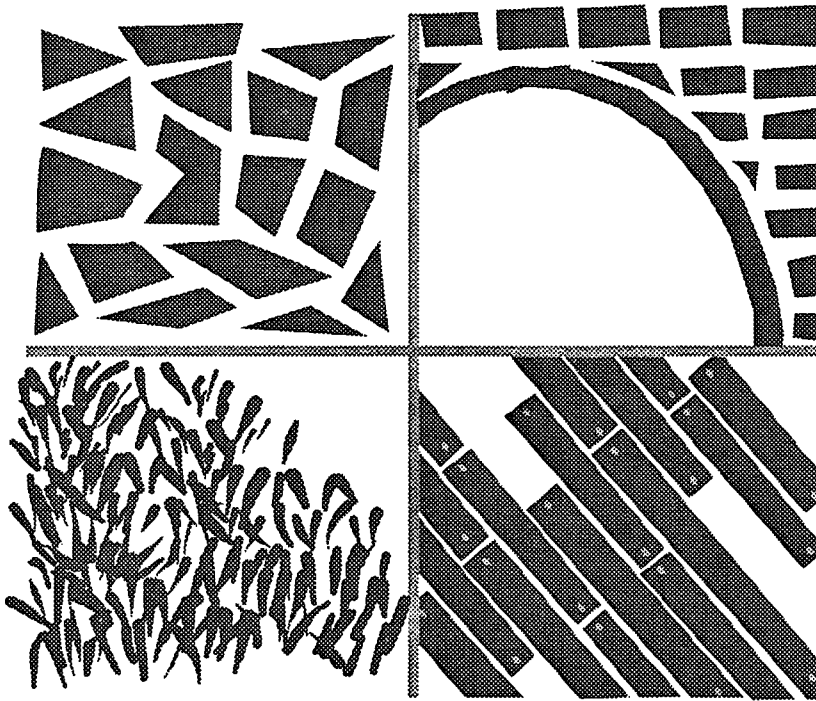
K. Briggs

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)



TCER Texas Center for Educational Research

CS013212



Patterns of Success:
*Successful Pathways to Elementary
Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools*

A report from the
Texas Center for Educational Research

By Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.
with
Kay Thomas, Ph.D.

June 1997

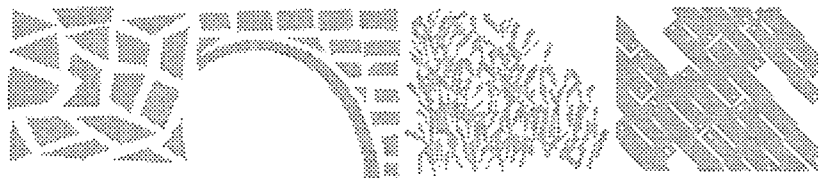
Texas Center for Educational Research
P.O. Box 2947 • Austin, Texas 78768-2947
512-467-3632 or 512-467-3618 (fax) • www.tasb.org/tcer/

Acknowledgments

Several people deserve thanks for their contribution to this research. Jean Osborn helped get this project off the ground and provided valuable advice in the planning stages. The principal and several teachers at Austin ISD's T.A. Brown Elementary School served as willing test subjects for our instruments. Belinda Nauseda, Deborah Diver, Steve Knight, and Kay Thomas patiently read through the report, offered tremendous suggestions, and put in extra time to make the final report special. Robin Gilchrist, Linda Groseclose, and Carmyn Neely generously allowed TCER staff to conduct this research so we could determine what made these schools and teachers successful. Catherine Clark encouraged this project and provided tremendous intellectual support for the research. The TCER board of directors willingly listened to ongoing progress reports and provided suggestions about how to improve this work. The support of all these people is gratefully acknowledged.

Lastly, being a Spotlight School is not an easy task. With the award came scrutiny and increased visitor traffic. The teachers, students, and administrators of these schools graciously opened their doors to our questions and observations. I wish to thank those individuals for supporting this project and hope that the information contained within these pages accurately captures the liveliness and complexity of what happens in their schools.

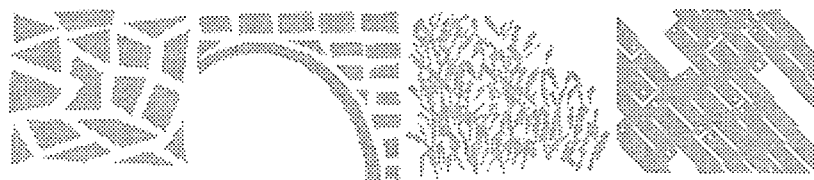
Kerri L. Briggs
Austin, Texas



About the

Texas Center for Educational Research

The Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) is an independent, nonprofit research organization established in 1988 to study major issues affecting public education in Texas. TCER conducts and communicates nonpartisan research on education issues in order to serve as an independent resource for those who make or influence education policy in Texas. TCER conducts its own research projects and works in cooperation with other organizations dedicated to performing and communicating education research.



Foreword

In January, 1996, Governor George W. Bush challenged educators across the state with the announcement of the Texas Reading Initiative. The Governor's goal is to ensure that all students in the state of Texas read on grade level by the end of the third grade and continue to read on grade level throughout their school experience. The Initiative was founded on the fundamental principle that proficiency in reading is the essential key to success both in school and in life. Therefore, the Governor and his administration have placed the highest priority on providing assistance and support to school districts and educators as they strive to meet this important challenge.

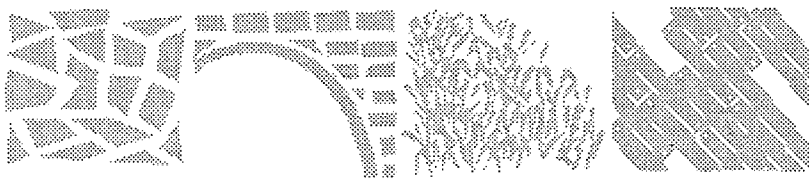
In collaboration with the Governor's Reading Challenge, the Commissioner of Education approved the statewide selection of twelve Reading Spotlight Schools. These sites were selected to serve as models for other campuses across the state. Spotlight Schools were identified for this honor because they were providing balanced, well-organized instructional programs in reading, and a high rate of their students were performing successfully on measures of student achievement. Among the criteria used to identify Spotlight schools was a diverse student population in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

Along with the selection criteria, these 12 schools demonstrate strong leadership and management abilities. The consistent monitoring of the instructional program by campus leadership and community ensures all children's successful performance. Reading Spotlight Schools have highly committed teachers who believe all children will become successful readers and are located in communities that are dedicated to fostering family, community, and business partnerships.

Reading Spotlight Schools are fortunate to have the opportunity to work with faculty in the education department at the University of Texas at Austin to enhance research and staff development. Reading Spotlight Schools are also a part of the Texas Mentor Schools Network as they implement research-based practices for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.

We are pleased that the Texas Center for Educational Research has selected four schools to serve as subjects in the Spotlight Schools research project. It is our belief that the report, *Patterns of Success: Successful Pathways to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools*, will make a positive contribution to the success of the Texas Reading Initiative and to successful reading experiences for children.

Carmyn Neely, Deputy Director
Statewide Initiatives, Region XIII Service Center

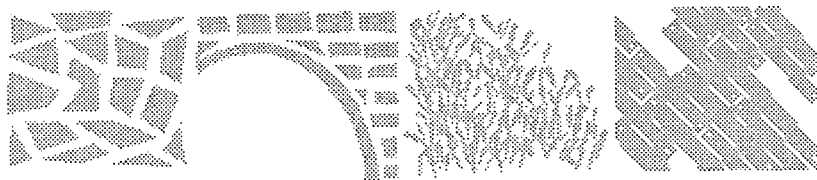


Patterns of Success: *Successful Pathways
to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools*

Table of Contents

The Four Schools	3
Dellview Elementary	3
Heights Elementary	4
Nathan Adams Elementary	5
Wesley Elementary	6
Teaching and Learning	7
Planning for Reading Instruction	7
Teachers meet with other grade-level teachers to discuss reading	7
Principals are involved with teachers' lesson planning	8
Reading Curriculum	8
Schools use a variety of programs and materials to teach reading	8
Students take home reading materials	9
Students participate in reading incentive programs	10
Instructional Strategies	10
Teachers organize and direct most of the reading instruction ..	11
Students work in small groups during reading instruction	13
Students work alone during reading instruction	14
Teachers interact with their students frequently	16
Schools use different approaches for placing students in classes	18
Teachers organize small groups within the class based on ability	20
Use of Time	21
Reading is a priority	21
Teachers are prepared to teach	21
Teachers are good managers of their classes	22
Students have a role in classroom operations	24
Teachers use classtime for purposeful learning	24
Schoolwide strategies help teachers use time more effectively ..	26
Assessment of Student Progress	27
Teachers use many approaches to assess reading ability	27
Students Who Have Trouble Reading	29
Teachers use informal methods to identify these students	29
Teachers try different teaching strategies to help students	29
School Context for Teaching and Learning	31
Evaluation Practices	31
At the beginning of the year, teachers have information about students' reading ability	31

Schools analyze formal test data	33
Responsibility for TAAS is shared throughout the school	34
Teachers are familiar with the format and content of TAAS	35
Schools prepare for TAAS in different ways	36
Professional Development	36
Teachers develop skills through formal professional development	36
Teachers develop skills through informal learning opportunities	38
Leadership	39
Each principal ensures students become successful readers	39
Instructional leadership is found throughout the school	41
School Culture	42
Each school has a unique culture	42
The importance of reading is evident in tangible ways	44
Schools work with volunteers and local business to support reading	45
Appendix	47
Endnotes	50



Patterns of Success:

Successful Pathways to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools

Green and white cinder block walls. Bulletin boards loaded with calendars, home work, and student art. The scent of well-handled books. Elementary schools across our nation share these characteristics, but Texas schools also share a challenge:

All students will read on grade level or better by the end of grade three and will continue to read on grade level or better throughout their schooling (Governor George Bush, 1996).

Governor Bush's challenge has prompted Texans from all walks of life—including educators, students, parents, businesses, professional associations, government agencies, and volunteers—to respond and participate in the Texas Reading Initiative.

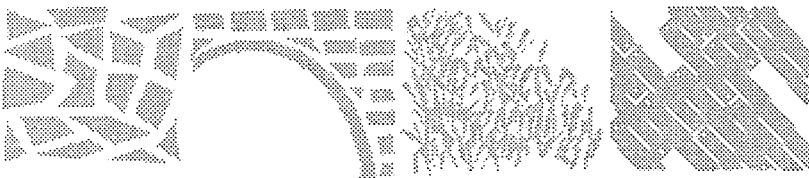
The Texas Education Agency (TEA) teamed up with the Texas Mentor School Network at Educational Service Center, Region XIII to choose 12 reading "Spotlight Schools." The schools chosen as models emphasize early elementary reading and are successful in helping all children read. The schools had to meet some assessment and demographic standards as well. Spotlight Schools were chosen because they met these criteria:

- The percentage of third and fourth graders passing the reading section of TAAS in spring 1996 averaged 85% or higher.
- The percentage of third and fourth graders taking TAAS equaled or exceeded the state average.
- Each school has a diverse ethnic and socioeconomic student population.
- Testing irregularities or accreditation problems were not present.
- Site visits (conducted by TEA and ESC XIII staff) showed that research-based practices are used.

Why are these schools successful? How are they accomplishing their goals? What are teachers in these schools doing that works? Researchers from the Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) examined the experiences of students, teachers, and principals involved in the day-to-day teaching of early elementary reading in four of the Spotlight Schools to answer those questions.

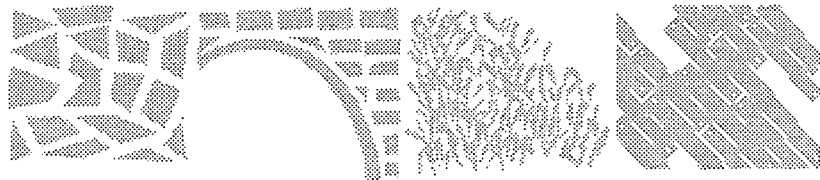
Researchers collected information during four-day site visits to each school. During these visits, teachers were interviewed about their teaching practices, classroom instruction was observed, and principals were interviewed about how they support instruction. As a check on accuracy, principals at each school had

All students will read on grade level or better by the end of grade three and will continue to read on grade level or better throughout their schooling (Governor George Bush, 1996).



the opportunity to review an earlier draft of this report and make corrections or provide additional information to clarify findings and examples. (See the Appendix for additional details about data collection activities.)

In this report, the story of how kindergarten through third-grade teachers in four schools provide reading instruction and how the school environment supports their work is told in three sections: (1) a description of each school, (2) teaching and learning, and (3) the school context for teaching and learning.



The Four Schools

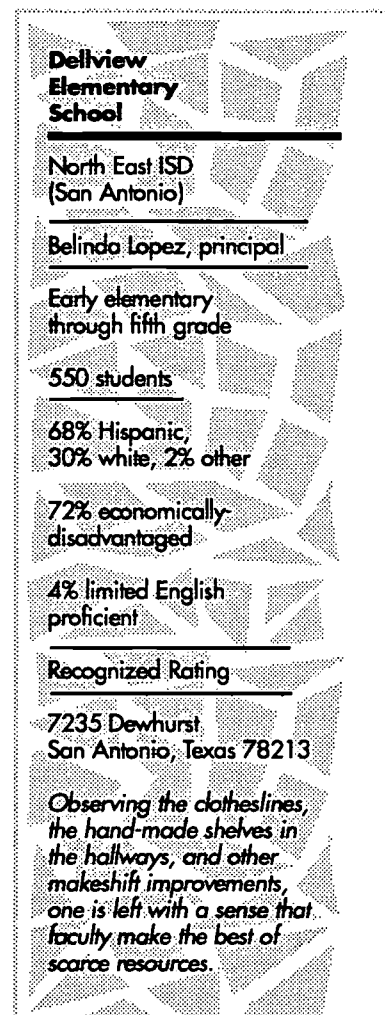
Dellview Elementary School, North East ISD (San Antonio)

Located on the northeast side of San Antonio, Dellview Elementary's surrounding neighborhood is made up of older, smaller single-family homes; some needing repairs. The families living in these homes appear to be of modest means. Driving through the neighborhood, you see several basketball hoops in the street—it is not difficult to imagine neighborhood kids getting together for after-school and weekend games. In the afternoon, a few adult men can be found gathering around their trucks and talking. The families in this neighborhood seem to know each other; in the school, teachers interact with each other in ways indicating they are a close community. During one visit, teachers brought homemade soups, desserts, and other food to celebrate birthdays among the faculty.

Visitors entering the main school building are greeted with the familiar "grade-school" green-and-white cinder block walls, but the main lobby has a beautiful mosaic tile floor, laid in geometric patterns. The aging school building spreads out on top of a small hill. Getting from one end of the building to the other is a longer walk than you would expect in an elementary school. Kindergarten classes meet in one wing of the building; first graders are in the main section. The second- and third-grade classes meet upstairs, and the older elementary students (grades four and five) meet in portable buildings. Next door to Dellview is a private Catholic school.

The first signs of a dynamic reading program are found in the hallways. A poster for the Accelerated Reader program decorates the wall outside the main office. Nearby a display case is decorated to look like the storybook three bears' house and encourages the students to "Hibernate with a Good Book." Hallway walls are decorated with covers from children's books. Plastic boxes stacked outside the classrooms contain copies of children's trade books (usually 10 or more copies) and sometimes additional materials for teachers. Many such boxes line the hallways, stacked on shelves made of lumber and cinder blocks.

The school enrolls 550 students in classes beginning with early childhood education and continuing through the fifth grade. The majority of the students (68%) are Hispanic, 30% are white, and 2% belong to other ethnic groups. Almost 72% of the students are identified as economically-disadvantaged; 4% are identified as limited English proficient (LEP).¹ Dellview is a neighborhood school; the only students bused into the school come for the early childhood and special education programs.



**Dellview
Elementary
School**

North East ISD
(San Antonio)

Belinda Lopez, principal

Early elementary
through fifth grade

550 students

68% Hispanic,
30% white, 2% other

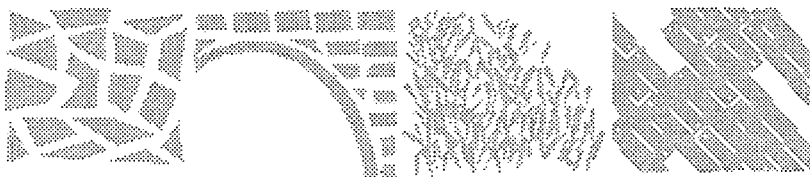
72% economically-
disadvantaged

4% limited English
proficient

Recognized Rating

7235 Dewhurst
San Antonio, Texas 78213

*Observing the clotheslines,
the hand-made shelves in
the hallways, and other
makeshift improvements,
one is left with a sense that
faculty make the best of
scarce resources.*



In Dellview classrooms, wall space is at a premium—one full wall of windows and three others of cinder blocks make it difficult to decorate and post information for students. As a compromise, “clotheslines” span most of the rooms, giving teachers much-needed space to display information and student artwork. Observing the clotheslines, the handmade shelves in the hallways, and other makeshift improvements, one is left with a sense that faculty make the best of scarce resources.

Heights Elementary School, Laredo ISD

Driving into Laredo, you notice the influence of two cultures blended in this south Texas city. The thoroughfare two blocks north of the school appears to be a route for large trucks exiting the interstate highway where it stops at the Mexican border. Leaving the main streets to get to the school, you drive through several neighborhoods. Closest to the school is a residential area with established homes that are fairly large and nice, with older families and fewer children than previous generations. Less-affluent neighborhoods surround this middle-class area.

Heights Elementary School has a pleasing appearance, with large arched windows in its red brick facade. Before becoming a school, the oldest section was a firehouse. Large trees shade the well-landscaped grounds, where a variety of bushes and shrubs grow including roses, lantana, bougainvillea, and banana trees. The spacious school grounds are surrounded by a chainlink fence, and all gates but one are padlocked during school hours. Students politely monitor these gates in the morning and afternoon. A large sign in the yard proclaims the school’s recognized status.²

Classrooms in the building’s older section are small, with two entrances and a bank of low windows on one wall. An unused classroom has been converted into a teachers’ lounge and workroom. Two wings have been added to the original main building. The newer classrooms are larger and have one entrance, a large two-basin sink, and one wall of high windows. Uncovered sidewalks connect the wings to the main building. These walkways and the grounds contribute to the open-air feel of the school. Because of this openness, it isn’t until you enter the classrooms that the importance placed on reading and other academic pursuits becomes apparent.

Classroom walls and bulletin boards are decorated profusely with purchased and teacher-made decorations, most of which pertain to academic content or to class management. A couple of rooms have been set aside for early childhood education. In these rooms, parents and students find rooms stocked with books, toys, stuffed animals, and other materials designed to expose young students to new ideas and to written and oral language.

Heights Elementary is the smallest of the four Spotlight Schools visited. Although it once enrolled more than 600 students in the early 1980s, the school now enrolls 210 first- through fifth-grade students, 98% of whom are Hispanic. Part of the decrease in enrollment is a result of moving grade levels of students to other schools. Kindergarten students attend kindergarten centers that are close

Heights Elementary School

Laredo ISD

Martha Rubio, principal

First through fifth grade

210 students

98% Hispanic

70% economically-disadvantaged

55% limited English proficient

10 classroom teachers

Recognized Rating

1208 Market Street
Laredo, Texas 78040

The small scale and friendly informality of this school and its faculty contribute to a pervasive family atmosphere.

by. Similarly, sixth-grade students now attend middle schools. Another reason for lower enrollments is that fewer children live in the surrounding neighborhoods. Almost 70% of the students are identified as economically-disadvantaged, and 55% are identified as limited English proficient. Each grade level has two classes. The small scale and friendly informality of this school and its faculty contribute to a pervasive family atmosphere.

Nathan Adams Elementary School, Dallas ISD

From the outside, Adams seems unlike the other three Spotlight Schools. Located in the north Dallas area, the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school is composed of relatively large, single-family homes with neatly manicured lawns, thriving businesses, and several exclusive private schools—Hockaday School, for example. It is a nice suburban area.

When arriving at the school in the morning, you notice the large grassy areas and the playground and the many buses dropping off students. The attendance zone area for the school extends over a 12-mile radius, bringing students in from Addison, Carrollton, and Farmers Branch. The students streaming out of the buses and cars come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and represent several cultures and ethnic groups. Where the other three Spotlight Schools tend to have fairly homogenous student bodies, the 650 Nathan Adams students are a diverse community: 19% are African-American, 19% are Hispanic, and 55% are white, with the remainder of students (about 8%) falling into other categories. A second-grade teacher of an English as second language class noted that her students spoke seven different languages. Almost 35% of the students are economically disadvantaged, and 7% have limited proficiency in English.

The school is divided into two portions: the main building and the portable classroom area. The main building has large hallways, a full-size auditorium, library, gymnasium, computer lab, cafeteria, and teachers' lounge. All of the kindergarten, first-, and second-grade classrooms (and a few older grade classrooms) are in this main building. It seems like a typical older elementary school building—not particularly impressive, but clean and safe. What is inspiring are the displays covering the hallways of Nathan Adams. These displays, which focus on reading and convey the concern of teachers, are colorful and add life to the school.

In the lower elementary grades, there are four kindergarten classes and five classes at each grade level (first through third). Thirteen portable classrooms house all five of the third-grade classes and an assortment of other classes: prekindergarten; fourth, fifth, and sixth grades; an art studio; and a special program for students with behavioral problems. The presence of portable classrooms is interesting given that the school was previously closed because of low enrollment. Four years ago it was reopened. Since that time, student enrollment has increased by 40%. Although it seems like an ordinary elementary school, its success in helping students learn to read is extraordinary.

Nathan Adams Elementary School

Dallas ISD

Cathy Bratton, principal

Prekindergarten through
sixth grade

650 students

19% African-American,
19% Hispanic, 55% white,
8% other

35% economically
disadvantaged

7% limited English proficient

31 classroom teachers

Recognized Rating

12600 Welch Road
Dallas, Texas 75244

Although it seems like an ordinary elementary school, its success in helping students learn to read is extraordinary.

**Wesley
Elementary
School**

Houston ISD
(Northwest Charter
District)

Wilma "Suzy" Rimes,
principal

Prekindergarten through
fifth grade

1106 students

95% African-American,
5% Hispanic

79% economically-
disadvantaged

2% limited English
proficient

49 classroom teachers

Recognized Rating

800 Dillard
Houston, Texas 77091

*This is a school filled—
overflowing, in fact—
with elementary school
students enthusiastic
about learning.*

**Wesley Elementary School, Houston ISD
(Northwest Charter district)**

After leaving the freeway that leads to Wesley Elementary School, it is apparent that this is one of Houston's poorer neighborhoods. The local businesses look run-down and the houses in the neighborhood are small and in need of paint and repairs. Several small housing projects are nearby. The school building, one of the nicest buildings in the area, is surrounded by a chainlink fence that is locked after the school day begins. Given the setting, it would come as no surprise to find a school struggling to succeed.

What is found instead is a school filled—overflowing, in fact—with elementary school students enthusiastic about learning. Wesley Elementary students are striking! They walk quietly in the halls in straight, single-file lines. Most students wear a school uniform of a navy jumper, skirt, or pants and a white shirt. From the classrooms, chorale responses to teacher questions echo through the hallways. Students' voices are strong, clear, and vibrant. Among the more than 1,100 students, most (95%) are African-American, 5% are Hispanic, and a few are white. Almost 79% of the students are economically-disadvantaged, but relatively few (2%) are limited English proficient. Most students live in the surrounding neighborhood; only a few buses serve Wesley. Many children ride church or daycare center vans, or they walk with family.

The school can be described in three sections: the new wing, the older main building, and the portable classrooms. Although, the addition of portable classrooms has cut down on campus lawn space, the school grounds are well kept. A custodial staff that appears to work nonstop keeps the school building and grounds immaculately clean. The new wing houses eight kindergarten classes (plus some of the third-grade classrooms) in rooms that must be a kindergarten teacher's dream: spacious with large windows along one wall, each room has a sink and two bathrooms, cubby holes for students' bags and coats, and built-in shelves for teacher materials. Although most of Wesley's hallways are sparsely decorated, teachers in the kindergarten wing have created colorful displays and brightly decorated doors.

The older main building houses the cafeteria, school administrative offices, and most first- and second-grade classes. The old-fashioned hardwood floors in these classrooms can inspire nostalgic thoughts of school days past, and the students' small wooden chairs and desks further emphasize those feelings.

As Wesley's enrollment has grown, portable classrooms have been added. Currently, the portables contain a range of classrooms from prekindergarten through fifth-grade classes, science labs, computer labs, a school-based clinic, and the Northwest Charter District offices.

The Northwest Charter District refers to a cluster of schools (Wesley, two other elementaries, and one middle school) that are overseen by the Coalition for School Improvement. In 1995, Houston ISD awarded a charter to the Coalition to oversee the operations of these four schools. The Coalition comprises an alliance of community and business leaders, pastors, and citizens. Dr. Thaddeus Lott, a former Wesley principal, serves as the Coalition's Project Manager and is responsible for the Northwest Charter District.

Teaching and Learning

In this section, we look at those things directly related to what goes on in the classroom. In particular, we consider six questions:

- How do teachers *plan* for reading instruction?
- What *curriculum* do teachers use to teach reading?
- What *instructional strategies* do teachers use to teach reading?
- How do teachers *allocate time* within their classes?
- What *assessment strategies* do teachers use to measure student progress?
- How do teachers *identify and help* students who have trouble learning to read?

Although the information below is presented in terms of what typically happens in each school, differences exist among teachers and grade levels, of course. Furthermore, many of our findings regarding reading curriculum and instruction will not be particularly surprising. Instead, we show how the people in these four schools are using common resources (such as planning times) in uncommon ways. Some of these approaches may only be slightly different—if at all—from other Texas elementary schools; other approaches may be unique. Individually, these methods are not revolutionary, but their influences make the difference in student performance.

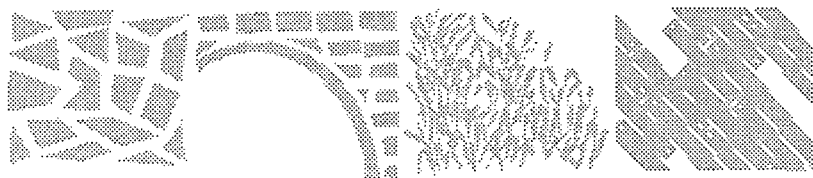
Planning for Reading Instruction

Finding. *The schedule is designed for teachers within a grade level to have the same planning period. Within those planning periods, teachers hold regularly scheduled grade-level meetings, where they frequently discuss reading. Outside of formal meetings, teachers often have informal conversations about classroom instruction.*

During the scheduled grade-level meetings, teachers typically take one of two approaches. One approach is for teachers to plan or coordinate instruction by identifying the objectives, strategies, or themes that they will teach in the next week or unit. For instance, a second-grade teacher at Dellview described grade-level meetings this way:

[We] talk about various teaching strategies, themes that we may use in class, and what skills we will teach throughout a particular theme. We will brainstorm about theme ideas and share ideas. We may start with a book that we all like and build lesson plans around that book (Benson, interview, D.Pln5).³

Teachers at Heights have weekly grade-level planning meetings that include the librarian and computer teacher. In each meeting, teachers plan and coordinate reading instruction.



A second approach to the grade-level meeting is to discuss, but not necessarily establish, exactly what will be taught in the classrooms. Teachers look at this planning time as an opportunity to share ideas, discuss problems, identify enrichment activities, share information, or divide the workload. The second-grade teachers at Wesley have a list of reading and language arts objectives (provided by the grade-level chairperson) that their students should master. During planning times, teachers discuss ideas and strategies about how to reach those objectives (Bailey, interview, W.Pln5). Teachers at Wesley are also likely to discuss how to share the workload or how to improve the students' vocabulary.

Informally, teachers in Spotlight Schools stop one another in the hallway, meet in the lounge, or walk into one another's classroom to discuss reading instruction. The principal at Heights Elementary said:

[the teachers] are always talking shop, constantly sharing information. It's a very close-knit family that works very well together (H.PP3).

Finding. *Principals are involved with teachers' lesson planning.*

At every school, there is some kind of check on what teachers have planned to teach. Typically the principal collects written lesson plans and reviews them for certain elements. At Heights and Dellview, the principal or assistant principal checks lesson plans on a weekly basis. The Heights principal said she "allows flexibility in their plans but looks to see if teachers are covering the essential elements and following the district TAAS instructional time line" (Rubio, interview, H.Pln2). At Adams, most teachers submit plans on a monthly basis, although a few turn in weekly plans. In return, the principal or assistant principal reviews them and provides written responses. Because Wesley's faculty is numerous, the principal has delegated this task to grade-level chairs and the assistant principal. Spotlight School principals' actions ensure that teachers' classroom instruction stays focused on addressing students' needs.

Reading Curriculum

Finding. *All schools use a variety of curricular programs and materials to teach reading. No school relies solely upon one program or set of materials for its entire reading program. The reading curriculum varies among the schools and within the classrooms.*

Teachers use a basal series, but not as the sole reading curriculum. In fact, only one school uses a basal series as its primary source of reading curriculum. Teachers at Heights supplement use of the basal with a variety of other materials, such as the phonics portion of *Open Court*, SRA Reading Lab kits, computer software programs, and library books, to teach skills or to improve reading fluency and comprehension. In the other three schools, the basal series is used in conjunction with other reading materials or as a supplement.

Wesley Elementary uses the *Reading Mastery* program as its primary curriculum. One teacher stated: "That is our foundation—we all follow it. *Reading Mastery* is the one street straight through the school" (Baker, interview, W.V1). While teachers rely heavily upon this program for their reading instruction, the curriculum is supplemented with other language arts materials directly related to

the primary reading curriculum (such as *Spelling Mastery* and *Reasoning and Writing*), SRA Reading Lab kits, and a vocabulary skills program (*Vocabulary Works*). Once students can read at a specified level, additional reading materials are added to the program including library books, chapter books, novels, the Silver Burdett Ginn basal and literature series, and out-of-adoption basal readers.

Adams' and Dellview's teachers have accumulated curriculum materials from their years of teaching, and the schools have devoted resources to create rich collections of children's books and other items to enhance reading. The reading curricula at these two schools are quite diverse. At Adams, the curriculum includes a basal series, children's novels, the Barnell Loft series (a series of language arts workbooks designed to teach comprehension and thinking skills), SRA Reading Lab kits, *Junior Great Books* materials (children's literature used to teach comprehension), an out-of-adoption basal series, sets of books published by the Wright Group, chapter books, books on tape, manipulatives (such as clay or salt trays) that help teach letter-sound relationships, big books, student- and class-made books, and teacher-made materials. In any class, some combination of these materials is present.

At Dellview, plastic boxes filled with multiple copies of books and other materials (for example, audio tapes) are found in classrooms, hallways, and teacher resource rooms. These literature boxes are used both for classroom and home instruction. In addition, kindergarten teachers at Dellview are enthusiastic about the "letter people" (blow-up dolls representing letters of the alphabet) and love to use them, for example, to help students learn how Mr. J collects junk. Additional materials include several programs used to teach letter-sound relationships and big books.

Finding. *Students take home materials that are intentionally selected to reinforce reading instruction.*

To reinforce instruction and provide additional practice, teachers at all schools select materials for students to take home. For example, Dellview primary grade students are given "book bags." The principal said this about the home reading program:

We give each student a book and we put it in a [plastic, sealable] bag. Students are supposed to read 15 minutes aloud every night. Parents are required to sign the student's ticket indicating the reading was finished. If the students get the signatures, they are entered into a contest every Friday (Lopez, interview, D.C1).

Teachers at Heights give students laminated books with decodable text. Laminating the books protects them from spills and accidents. The decodable text ensures students can read them on their own—especially important at Heights because many parents can read Spanish but not English. At Wesley, take-home reading materials reinforce what students learn in the classroom. Teachers send home work sheets to practice skills and out-of-adoption basal readers to improve reading fluency. Wesley teachers often ask parents to sign homework as a way of communicating to students that "the parent values school" (Baker, interview, W.C8). Adams teachers take steps to ensure that

students and parents know what homework is expected each night. One third-grade teacher described her stance on homework:

In my room, you do your homework or there are consequences. Everything is laid out for them. For example, the students know that Wednesday night is story night (Olea, interview, NA.Pl1).

In addition, Heights and Dellview have special programs, funded by federal Title I money, that target the home. Heights has two such programs: (1) the Home Instruction Program teaches parents how to prepare their children for school, and (2) Parents as Teachers, which helps parents who have children from ages birth to 5, is intended "to prevent later learning disabilities" (Rubio, interview, H.Tch7). Dellview's program provides videotapes designed to teach parents to model reading for their children.

Finding. *The Spotlight Schools have created or participate in reading incentive programs.*

Elements that the reading incentive programs have in common are that they let students select their own reading materials, encourage students to read for fun, and offer students enjoyable rewards for success. Most of the schools participate in programs designed outside the school. These programs included *Accelerated Reader* (a computer-based program), *Book It!* (a federally sponsored program with incentives provided by Pizza Hut), *Earning by Learning*, and the Texas Bluebonnet Challenge. Heights students had recently joined in a district challenge in which the student who read the most books at each campus received a bike. Dellview designed its own program (Read for Fun) with two main components: (1) community people (such as a local State Board of Education member) read aloud to students; and (2) teachers set reading goals for their classes. With each new month, students are given a goal and are rewarded by the principal or assistant principal when they meet the goal. Adams conducts a schoolwide Read-A-Thon. The point is not that one incentive program is better than others, rather in these four Spotlight Schools, teachers and principals make reading a priority while they look for ways to encourage students to love reading.

Instructional Strategies

Beginning reading instruction in primary grades should provide balanced, well-organized instruction as well as practice opportunities that permit all children to make sense of reading instruction the teacher provides. As they learn to read, children develop an understanding of how spoken and written language relate to one another. For this to happen, the components of the classroom reading program, including the instructional materials the teacher selects, must coordinate with one another and be orchestrated into sequences of instruction that engage all children.

To identify common characteristics of reading instruction, we observed reading instruction in Spotlight School classrooms. The following questions guided our thinking about instruction and helped us characterize instruction in each school:

- How do teachers provide reading instruction to students?
- How are students grouped for instruction?
- How do teachers and students work together during reading instruction?

Finding. *Teachers organize and guide most of the reading instruction that students receive. Students initiate their learning experiences only occasionally.*

For much of reading instruction in the early grades, teachers organize the learning experience for students. Students read the book or story the teacher selects. Students work on activities the teacher devises. Teachers guide instruction so students learn a particular lesson, such as rhymes or new vocabulary words. Teachers carefully select activities to give students opportunities to learn, practice, or apply what they have learned. More important, teachers decide how time will be allocated during reading instruction.

We saw instruction where teachers led entire classes through lessons by explaining, questioning, modeling, and practicing. We saw instruction where teachers led students in a short lesson and then explained to students what they were to do in various classroom centers. We saw instruction where teachers worked with a small group of students after getting the rest of the class started with individual practice work.

In the following example of teacher-directed instruction, a first-grade teacher instructs some students to do independent work while she works with small groups of students.

In this class serving at-risk students, the teacher divides students into three groups of five. She instructs one group to write sentences with words that have the short U sound, a second group is directed to write their spelling words (such as *flag* and *class*) and draw pictures that match those words. The teacher takes the remaining students aside to begin a lesson with her. The lesson is a modified *Project Read* lesson that she and another teacher altered for use in a classroom setting. Seated at a cluster of desks on one side of the classroom, the teacher begins by having students recite a motto from memory. The motto relates the connection between letters and sounds and the path that reading takes from seeing, knowing, and touching the letters. Students also have another saying (which they repeat with enthusiasm), "every word that I will ever write in my whole life has at least one vowel." Using flash cards and salt trays (baking sheets filled with salt), the lesson proceeds. The teacher holds up flash cards printed either with a letter or a consonant blend. The students look at each flash card and then go through a series of steps. First, while making the shape of the letter in the salt trays with their index fingers, the students and teacher state, "M says \mmm\ . \Mmm\ is M." Then they shake the tray clean and go to the next letter. The students repeat the same pattern with about 15 letters. After these letters, the students use the same sequence with a set of consonant blends. For example, the teacher holds up the flash card "ing." The students look at the flash card and, while making the shape of each letter in the salt tray, the students say, "I-N-G says \ing\ . \Ing\ is I-N-G." These students go through this pattern with about 10 flash cards.

Teachers carefully select activities to give students opportunities to learn, practice, or apply what they have learned.

The last activity the teacher conducts with this group is an activity called "finger spelling." The teacher shows the group a word written on a flash card. Students and teacher read the flash card aloud, "glad," and then sound out the word, "gglllaaadddd." Next, students and teacher sound out the word using a finger to indicate each sound. "\G\ (point to thumb) \a\ (point to index finger) \duh\ (point to second finger)." Then the students point to each finger again, while naming the letter and sound. The group of students say: "\gl\ (the sound) is G - L (while pointing to thumb), \a\ is A (while pointing to index finger), \duh\ is D (while pointing to second finger). Glad." The students repeat this pattern with five words. Afterwards, the teacher sends this group of students to their desks to do a writing assignment, and another group of students joins her to go through a similar activity. She works with three different groups during the observation and each group seems to be at a different level in terms of understanding letter-sound correspondences and ability to read and spell words. The teacher spends about fifteen minutes with each group for this activity (Shade, observation, 1/24/97).

The following third-grade teacher provides an example of direct teacher instruction that involves the whole class for much of the lesson. Of special note is the amount of student-teacher interaction that occurs.

The teacher begins the lesson by having students read aloud the new words from a story's reading list. After the whole class reads them aloud, the teacher asks a couple of questions to ensure that students were listening to what was read.

Teacher (T): What are we reading about from this list?
Jill: Brooklyn.
T: What are we reading?
Anthony: A biography.

The pace of this and other exchanges is fast and the teacher's tone is direct. She then leads students through a series of questions to help them define what the words mean.

T: What is that word?
Students (all): Daring.
T: I have a brother who likes to jump out of airplanes.
He is very daring. What is the next word?
All: Athlete.
T: What is an athlete?
John: An athlete is a person who likes
to play sports.

They follow this type of pattern for a few minutes until all of the words have either been defined or used in a sentence. Next, the teacher introduces the main character of the story (Jackie Robinson) and talks a little bit about baseball. After this, each student takes a turn reading part of the story aloud. When the students make mistakes (which is not often), the teacher corrects reading errors. She also questions the students about

what they are reading. Students respond to these questions chorally and individually. When one student gets stuck on a word, the teacher has the student spell it and sound it aloud. The teacher asks all of the students,

T: What is the word?
All: ROUGH.
T: Again.
All: ROUGH.
T: How is it spelled?
All: R - O - U - G - H. ROUGH.
 R - O - U - G - H. ROUGH.

The reading begins again with the student who initiated this exchange. He starts by reading the sentence with the word "rough" in it. As students continue reading the story, the teacher interrupts on occasion to ask questions to ensure they are listening and understood what is being read. After each student has read aloud, the teacher has the students finish reading the story silently while she walks around the class. Afterward, the teacher again asks questions about the story the students just read. She alternates between asking questions of the whole class and asking questions of individual students. At the end of this lesson, the students divide into groups of three or four to play a "fact game." The students have done this activity before and need little direction about how to play it. The students ask one another true and false questions, or they decide whether something is fact or fiction. The game also includes questions about stories the students have read over the past several weeks. This lesson lasts about 45 minutes (O'Shea, observation, 12/5/96).

From our classroom observations, it is apparent that teachers in these four schools take most of the responsibility for planning, directing, and guiding reading instruction.

Finding. *As part of reading instruction, most students have opportunities to work together on various reading activities. These activities, involving pairs or small groups of students, are usually designed by the teacher for students to practice what they learned in a previous reading lesson.*

In a survey of instructional practices, more than 80% of the kindergarten through third-grade teachers in these four schools said they established reading groups in their classes. Thirty-two percent reported having two groups, 50% said they had three groups, and almost 17% had four groups. Based on this information, teachers working with groups of students to provide reading instruction seems a common practice. However, the similarity ends there, as teachers appear to use different methods for working with student groups. The examples shown here describe two of those methods.

This example of students working together occurred in a second-grade class. While waiting for classmates, several pairs of students initiate their own group activities.

Their spontaneous and self-initiated actions are contagious. Before long, several pairs of students are reading aloud to one another... (observed in a second-grade class).

The teacher leads students through a lesson where they learn about the difference between real life and fantasy. As part of the lesson, students are to complete an activity where they identify statements as either real or make believe. She encourages students to work together to complete the activity. Students are given 20 minutes for this exercise. Not unexpectedly, some students finish early. Two students who finish early pair up and begin reading library books to each other. Their spontaneous and self-initiated actions are contagious. Before long, several pairs of students are reading aloud to one another while waiting for their classmates to finish. Their actions do not appear to disrupt the others (Sanders, observation, 12/10/96).

In the next example of how reading instruction occurs within student groups, the teacher prepares an activity and has pairs of students work together to complete it. The purpose of this lesson is to compare two books (*The Three Pigs* and *The Three Javelinas*) along several categories including story setting, characters, the problem in the story, and how a problem was solved.

The teacher uses a chart to show students how to compare the books and models the activity for them by comparing the titles. After they are placed into pairs, students begin working on the activity. The students must use what they remember from the two stories and not refer back to the books. For the most part, the teacher lets students work on their own, providing little guidance. A few pairs finish early. The teacher instructs those who finish early to write a line or two on the back of their papers telling which book they liked and why, and then to share what they wrote with a partner. A couple of the pairs do this and seem happily surprised that they liked the same book. The teacher allows about 15 minutes for the pair work before she has students share their answers with the whole class. As students report their results, the teacher writes students' answers on a poster. Because students can choose to focus on different characters or problems in the story, differences of opinion make for a lively discussion (Carpenter, observation, 3/18/97).

Finding. *As part of reading instruction, students have opportunities to work alone on reading activities. These activities are often designed by the teacher to reinforce reading instruction or to give students opportunities to practice what they have learned.*

Many students are given frequent opportunities for individual practice. As teachers work with small groups of students, individual students complete activities that support teacher instruction. The extent to which students have individual work varies among the four schools. In these examples, we illustrate the various ways that students work alone to practice what they have learned.

In this example, a kindergarten teacher guides students through a routine morning activity, which gives students time to practice writing letters.

The teacher has students move to "home base" position, which means students are to sit in assigned places within a large circle on the floor.

The teacher begins reviewing with students how it is they learn about letters and sounds. By using plastic blow-up dolls (one for every letter of the alphabet), students learn about letter-sound correspondences. In this lesson, students are reviewing the letter J. To begin this lesson, the teacher relies upon the "student leader" (a position that rotates to a different student every day) to facilitate instruction. The teacher asks, "What is special about Mr. J?" The student leader chooses a fellow student who responds, "Mr. J likes to recycle." The teacher follows up on this answer, "What does he like to recycle?" The student replies, "Junk." At this point, the teacher reminds the students that they were to think of "J-words" (such as *jewels*, *jelly*, and *junk*) for the list. With each new letter they learn, teacher and students create lists of words that have the appropriate beginning sound. Before reviewing the list of J-words they created the previous day, the teacher plays the Mr. J song on a tape recorder and allows the students to play with the doll. As the students pass the doll around the circle, the teacher gives each student his or her journal. Once the song is over, the teacher reads each J-word from the class list while underlining the word with her finger. Students are asked to repeat the word after the teacher. After reading the list, students offer additional J-words for the list and the teacher writes them on the flip chart.

Following this, the teacher leads students through the morning writing exercise. This morning writing exercise is part of a schoolwide program to help students develop better writing skills. All the kindergarten teachers lead students through a similar activity. Every morning, the students copy the "morning message" from a chart into journals. The student leader assists the teacher by providing a weather report to fill in some of the blanks. With the leader's help, eventually the message reads:

Today is Thursday, January 17, 1997. The leader is Douglas. Today it is a cool, cloudy, and sunny day. We will go to the library at 11:30 a.m.

As the teacher writes words in the blanks, the teacher directs students to copy the message into their journals. As this proceeds, the teacher asks the student leader to call on individual students to spell words (such as *Thursday* and *January*) from the message. During this time, students also sing several songs about the message and the weather report. The writing of the morning message, which takes about 25 minutes, is designed to give students time to practice spelling and writing and to expose students to a narrative writing style. Throughout the activity, the teacher focuses on spelling, writing, and reading aloud. The morning message transcript is used to monitor student progress. Every six weeks, she selects one example of each student's morning message to keep in a portfolio. This information helps her identify student strengths and weaknesses (Nuñez, observation, 1/17/97).

In this next classroom observation, a first-grade teacher begins by reading aloud to students and then providing them with time to write an epilogue to the story. As an individual writing opportunity, it is quite challenging for the students.

The teacher begins the lesson by asking students to think about what might happen in the story based on the initial picture. She spends a few minutes on this prediction activity before reading the story aloud to the students. As she reads, students follow along in the text (using their fingers) and the classroom aide walks around to ensure students are keeping up with the story. Since several of the students are Spanish speakers, they need the aide's assistance. After the teacher finishes reading the story, the teacher asks the students several questions about what they heard: "Why does she like the water now? Why did he do that? Where did he go? Then what happened?" The next step is for students to write a story about what they think happens "the next day" in this story. When asked to write their stories, students are given the chance to think about what they heard and read, and to practice writing. The range of abilities is wide—some students need no help while others need nearly constant oversight. As students finish writing their stories, they show them to the teacher or aide, who provide some guidance and editorial assistance. One student, who cannot yet write his letters, dictates his story to the teacher. Students are given about 30 minutes for this activity. Once the students have finished, the teacher calls the class together again and asks each student to read his or her story to the class. A few stories are well-developed with six or more sentences and a simple plot. Other stories are shorter and mostly descriptive. The teacher tries to persuade them (even the shy ones) to read their stories aloud to the class (Rains, observation, 2/24/97).

At times, students select activities for themselves. Students have some opportunities to choose their reading experiences. Every student has access to a school library and may select reading material. Independent reading is encouraged during free time and by schoolwide incentive programs. Many students have dedicated times during the school week when they go to the library. Aside from access to the library, some students have opportunities to use individual reading modules or self-directed learning kits between other classroom activities.

Finding. *Teachers interact with students quite frequently. These interactions occur between teacher and whole class, teacher and small group, and teacher and individual student.*

Both student and teacher benefit from interactions. By working with the teacher, students see good examples of reading and other important language arts skills. Teachers benefit from these interactions by seeing how well students are progressing and where they are having difficulties. The next examples show how frequent teacher-student interactions occur in different settings.

In this kindergarten class, the teacher leads students through several activities using frequent questioning.

At 8:10, the teacher begins the lesson by asking students to complete a work sheet focused on sounding out and blending skills. The work sheet presents students with two words and a fill-in-the-blank sentence; they are to choose the appropriate word and sound it out. For example, the students decide that "Sam filled the pan." The teacher responds, "Say the

sounds in pan." All of the students isolate each sound aloud in an exaggerated fashion. The teacher then has the students blend the sounds when she tells them to "say it fast."

Students (all): Pppaaannn (in loud, clear voices)

Teacher: Say it fast.

All: PAN

Teacher: Again.

All: PAN.

Seven additional sentences are on the work sheet. The teacher leads the whole class of students through the same exercise for each sentence. The pace is quick and both the teacher and students' voices are clear, loud, and decisive. At 8:15, the teacher has the class read aloud a short passage entitled *The Ball*. As students read the story aloud, the teacher interrupts on occasion to make sure the students are listening to what they are reading. For instance, the teacher asks, "What color is the ball?" The students all reply, "RED." The teacher also has students spell aloud some of the words in the story. The teacher is in command of what happens in her classroom. She directs the students from one activity to the next and quickly chooses which students—sometimes all, sometimes one—respond to a particular question. The lesson also develops listening skills.

At 8:20, the teacher leads students through another work sheet where students match words with pictures. The teacher begins by saying, "Look at the first picture. What is that?" All the students respond, "CAT." The teacher says, "Spell it." The students reply by naming each letter, "C - A - T." To match all of the words and pictures takes about five minutes. The pattern of the teacher leading students through activities continues for the next 30 minutes, until the observation period is over. During those thirty minutes, the teacher directs students to practice sounding out and blending rhyming words (such as *sand, land, hand*), decoding words with the long A sound (such as *mail* and *shave*), and defining those long A words. Students also practice identifying opposite words. In this activity, the teacher calls on every student to provide a pair of opposite words. Some of the examples include boy-girl and loud-quiet. Near the end of the lesson, the teacher shows students a poster that has various consonant clusters on it. The teacher points to a cluster, asks the students to say the letter, and then asks the students to sound out the cluster. At the end of the lesson, the teacher brings out a big book and has everyone read the book aloud (in unison) with her (Ellis, observation, 12/5/96).

In another example, a kindergarten teacher divides her students into two groups for a game to help students review beginning sounds they have learned. Dividing students into two groups gives them more time to practice.

Following the morning writing exercise, the teacher begins to explain how to play the "review game." The game works in this fashion: students use a magnet to "fish" picture cards from a large pile. Each card

has a picture pasted on it and a paper clip at the top. These cards have pictures of things (such as fish or a key) that start with the letters they are reviewing (F and K). Students are told to look at the picture, tell the name of the picture, show the picture to the other students, and then name the beginning sound. Once they name the sound correctly, they put the picture on top of a larger flash card that has the letter on it. The teacher divides students into two groups—she works with one group and a high school aide works with the other group. The groups sit on the floor at the front of the room where the teacher can easily see them.

Within the two groups, each student has a chance to fish a card and identify the beginning letter. Some students get stuck. In one instance, a student picks a card that has a picture of “vitamins.” The student has a hard time correctly identifying the beginning letter, so the teacher steps in to help. Teacher: “Let’s try that one. Vitamins. Valentine. Vitamins. Valentine.” (As she says these words, she stresses the V sound.) The student repeats after the teacher. Eventually the student determines that the beginning sound is made by the letter V. The students play this game for about 10 minutes before the teacher calls it to a stop and explains (to the whole class) what they are to do next. The next activity involves reviewing the piles of flash cards (recall that once correctly identifying the beginning sound, the student places the card on a larger flash card with the corresponding letter). Having received directions, the students reconvene in the two groups. The teacher holds up all of the cards that have the same beginning sound. As she shows each picture to the students, the students identify the word and beginning sound. The teacher repeats the word and stresses the initial sound. Following this review, the class is asked to sit in a large circle so the teacher can tell them about the next activity. Students spend about twenty minutes in groups (Hanna, observation, 2/19/97).

Finding. *Each school’s approach to assigning students to classes is related to school capacity and supports the reading program.*

Part of the differences in assignment procedures relates to school size. Heights is limited to two classes per grade level. The principal describes the school’s method for assigning students to classes:

Because of our size, we have to go with heterogeneous grouping. Within classes, there are high, middle, and low ability students. Our third grade this year, because of mobility and incoming students from Mexico, ended up with too many subgroups within the classes. One teacher had five groups. That was too much, so we regrouped within third grade for reading (Rubio, interview, H.PP5).

At this school, they consider the number of groups a teacher might have within the classroom and try to limit those groups to a manageable number. Since the students are quite mixed in terms of reading ability, the teachers rely on assistance from teacher aides and the librarian.

On the other end of this size and student placement continuum is Wesley. Students are assigned to classes based on reading ability.

Students are grouped so that no teacher has more than three groups of students in a class....Grouping is based upon an individual placement test through *Reading Mastery* and each student reading [aloud] to a teacher. No student is locked into a group or class....The key is to reach them where they are and to move them forward. We will move students around during the day. For example, a new fourth-grade student could not read, so we put her in the third grade (for four months) for reading instruction and in a fourth-grade class for everything else. When she improved, we moved her into the fourth-grade class for the whole day (Kennedy, interview, W.PP5).

Grade-level chairs assume most of the responsibility for placing students. Although the system seems somewhat complex, it suits Wesley's size and reading program. Because reading instruction is delivered to students in a way that requires frequent student responses, it helps the teacher when students are at the same level. The principal stresses that flexibility to assign students to an appropriate class is important. She also notes that moving the students in and out of classes is not difficult.

The two other schools—Dellview and Adams—assign some students within a particular grade level by ability. At Dellview, third-grade students are placed into classes based on ability. "They are tested with the Gates-MacGinitie test at end of second grade year and beginning of third grade year to determine placement" (Dellview documents). In the other grades, the principal, assistant principal, and counselor assign students to classes after considering many variables: mix of ability level within a class, age (they prefer to spread out the "summer babies"), socioeconomic status, and behavior (Lopez, interview, D.PP5). A similar approach is taken at Adams where only first-grade students are assigned to classes based on ability levels. In the other grades, the principal's system for organizing students within classes considers overall ability in reading and math, gender, ethnicity, prior school experience (for new students), and special needs. The principal referred to the outcome as "compacted heterogeneous grouping" where students in any one class reflect a range of abilities.

Because the teacher in me says, if your range is from here to here [she uses her hands to indicate a small spread] you are going to have a greater opportunity for success for every child. [This is] not true if your range is from here to here [again uses her hands to show a much larger spread]. It works. The classes remain flexible (Bratton, interview, NA.PP5).

In every situation, the school assigns students to classes based on the capacity to create various grouping patterns. Further, they consider student needs and teacher strengths with the intent of creating productive learning situations for students.

The key is to reach them where they are and to move them forward (heard from a district support person).

Finding. *Within the classroom, most teachers organize small groups of students for reading instruction. Teachers place students into groups primarily based on ability, although this is not always the case. Small groups give the teacher more time with students and help the teacher reach students at an appropriate level.*

Student reading ability weighs in as an important factor in organizing small groups within the classroom. Most teachers organize students by ability. Often, ability level is assessed when the teacher listens to the student read aloud or when the teacher examines student work. Teachers also consider language proficiency, readiness levels, and student scores on weekly and end-of-unit reading tests. One teacher uses vocabulary and spelling tests. "I also observe and listen to them read. I try to understand how well they are comprehending what we are reading" (Shade, interview, NA.I1). Teachers at Heights, Dellview, and Adams use different strategies for grouping students. One Heights teacher asks the higher ability group to help other groups of students after finishing assignments (Ramos, interview, H.I1). Other teachers use several ways of grouping students. A third-grade teacher said she uses ability groups for some instruction, but also uses "mixed-ability groups, cooperative grouping, and peer grouping" (Day, interview, NA.I1).

Teachers will use different materials and methods with the various groups. A kindergarten teacher described how she works with her four reading groups.

With the low group, I use the basal, sight words, and read stories aloud to them. We use words on cards to make sentences. They will read sentences to me and write on the chalkboard. We do oral reading and discuss the story. Other groups are in the middle and end of first-grade programs and one [group] is in the second-grade program. I will read a story and then ask them to write something about what they read, such as write a similar story where they change the ending or change a character. They will write stories using new vocabulary words (Kramer, interview, NA.I1).

In synch with its reading program, teachers at Wesley have a schoolwide system for placing students in groups. Reading "checkouts," where students read a short passage aloud to the teacher within a designated period, are used to group students. These regularly-scheduled checkouts help teachers monitor progress and let the teacher know whether students are placed appropriately. In a first-grade class, group placement is based on "reading rate, fluency, and expertise with decoding" (Cannon, interview, W.I1).

At all the schools, students move in and out of classroom groups, and the number of groups seems to change throughout the year. Several teachers mentioned starting with one or two groups and then adding others as students progress at different rates. Other teachers said they had combined groups during the year as students reached similar reading levels.

Use of Time

The elementary school teacher works hard to keep students enthusiastic and engaged in reading instruction. This teacher must also ensure that students learn mathematics, science, and social studies—not to mention the time spent in fine arts, physical education, recess, lunch, and with computers. Thus when you ask teachers from almost any school about their greatest needs, additional instructional time is somewhere near the top of that list. Although the teachers in the Spotlight Schools haven't found a magic potion for time management, most have found ways to cope with this classic education dilemma.

Finding. *Reading is a priority. More time is spent on teaching and practicing reading than is spent on any other subject in these early elementary grades.*

Whatever competing demands an elementary school teacher faces, reading is a top priority. This is true of schools across the nation: a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education states that public schools allocate 10.8 hours a week (or 49.7%) on reading and language arts instruction.⁴ Principals and teachers are aware of the importance of teaching students to read. Teachers report allocating between two hours and three hours a day on reading and language arts instruction. At the high end of that range, teachers integrate reading instruction with other subject areas such as science and social studies. Typically, schools tend to offer reading and language arts instruction in the morning when students are at their best. And, as one principal put it, "the more you read, the more you read" (Rimes, interview, W.C1).

Although, it may seem worthwhile to mandate that all elementary students spend at least two and one-half hours every day in reading instruction, the value of such a policy is questionable. It is not enough to set aside time for reading instruction. From observing teachers in these schools, it is apparent that how time is used is also important. The following observations provide concrete examples explaining what it means to make reading a priority.

Observation. *Teachers are prepared to teach their classes.*

We observed that teachers in Spotlight Schools have lesson materials ready for students and close at hand. Teachers spend time getting ready for the day, collecting materials, copying information, or reading ahead in the curriculum guides. Here are some examples:

- A kindergarten teacher has students' seat work "ready for two weeks in advance. It is in manila folders on the shelves" (Bardole, interview).
- Teachers at Heights have aides who help with classroom preparations.
- Adams teachers select instructional themes as a grade level and then organize materials needed to teach within that theme (Day, interview, NA.Pln4).

...Schools tend to offer reading and language arts instruction in the morning when students are at their best. And, as one principal put it, "the more you read, the more you read, the more you read."

- Similar types of grade-level planning occur at Dellview and Heights. Teachers, during weekly planning meetings, will plan similar activities to teach certain lessons (Nuñez, interview, D.Pln4 and Rains, interview, H.Pln2).
- One teacher talked about reading ahead in the curriculum guide and making plans for enrichment ideas. “For example, when we learned about bark, I brought back bark from Maine, where I am from. I brought in photos from flying in the plane, and photos of the layers of rocks” (Baker, interview, W.Pln2).

Observation. *Most teachers are good managers of their classes. Students know and (most of the time) follow classroom rules.*

Among the four Spotlight Schools, it was the rare classroom that didn't have classroom rules posted or a behavior management chart hanging on the wall. While it is not difficult to write some rules and display them on the wall, it is much more challenging to enforce those rules consistently and fairly. In most of the classes we observed, teachers were good managers of students behavior. A good example of this consistent classroom management is Wesley Elementary.

At Wesley, teachers establish and uphold standards for classroom behavior that are similar throughout the whole school. Teachers and students are assured that in each classroom the expectations for behavior and participation are comparable. Students learn to raise their hands before speaking or leaving their chairs, and not to talk while others are speaking. Wesley students are quiet (when appropriate), engaged in the lesson, and focused on their work. In some classes, students sit in a “listening and learning position—feet on the floor, sitting up straight, arms folded, and facing forward—that helps them focus on the task at hand” (Bardole, interview). One class of second-grade students wrote the teacher “friendly letters of promises” indicating how they would behave in the classroom (Bailey, observation). You do not have to watch these students for long to know that they are well aware of how they are expected to behave and that they have accepted those standards.

Classroom management is a priority at Wesley. The principal underscored this idea as she talked about professional development activities.

It is important to teach teachers how to manage their students. All of those questions—how to sharpen pencils? line up the students? A teacher won't hear or won't understand all of this when training is before school. Teachers will say “line up for lunch” and it doesn't work. ... Once a code of conduct is established, the teacher can do both individual and group activities. But you cannot move from no structure to structure (Rimes, interview, W.Pd1).

Because of the emphasis on effective management, students learn in an environment where there are few distractions. In the other schools, while there are certain schoolwide expectations or norms for behavior, teachers have more unique systems for monitoring behavior. It remains true that most teachers are very good at enforcing whatever system is in place.

Transitions—beginning new activities or moving students from one place to another—are potential trouble spots in elementary schools. Teachers demonstrate a variety of techniques for keeping students engaged and under control during transition times. Teachers, mindful that occasionally moving younger students around helps dissipate energy, have ways of keeping the movement under control. For example, during one observation, a kindergarten teacher uses several strategies for moving students.

The teacher moved the students from a large group sitting on the floor to smaller groups at their desks. In a class of 21 kindergarten students, the teacher uses several strategies for herding these energetic five-year-old students. During the first move, the teacher simply has the students stand up and move to their desks. She asks a few students to get the crayons while she hands out paper. After about 15 minutes of practicing writing letters and words, the teacher has students put their hands in their laps and go through several oral exercises.

Later, she has students move back to the floor. When students get a little loud during the move, she whispers, "I am looking for perfect statues." As students hear what she says, they immediately freeze (some in very funny positions, at least funny to a five-year old). Then as the teacher releases them from their positions, she continues whispering. Five minutes later, she asks them to move back to their desks. This time she says, "I want to see who can do this the best. Can the boys or the girls walk the quietest?" She takes advantage of this time of concentrated quiet to explain how to write the letter "Y" with their hands. The last transition involves moving students from their desks to a large circle on the floor. She first asks the girls to move to their "circle place" followed by the boys. During the course of 70 minutes, students move from various locations about six times. Each is slightly different and effective in getting the students' attention (Kramer, observation, 1/23/97).

Other teachers have students repeat instructions for the next activity or ask students to anticipate their questions before moving to the next task. While working with one group of students, teachers ensure that the remaining students have assignments to do. In one instance, a second-grade teacher asks students to help distribute materials while moving from one task to another. She also gives the other student groups specific directions about what they are to do while she works with a smaller group of students. She lets students know how much time they have to complete a particular activity and then instructs them either to read or complete independent work after finishing that activity (Bailey, observation, 12/6/96). In a third-grade class, the teacher gets students to anticipate problems they might have with their partners.

After giving instructions to students about the next activity (comparing two books), the teacher pairs students together. After she selects the pairs, she asks "Do any of you have a problem with your partner?" Two pairs of students say yes. So, the teacher rematches the students into what she hopes will be more acceptable arrangements. Again she asks if students are okay with their partners. One of the students still is

not happy with his partner, so she asks, "Who do you get along with?" After the student indicates that "Bob would be okay," the teacher places the students together so they could begin working (Carpenter, observation, 3/18/97).

Because the teacher allowed students to voice preferences about partners, she was able to prevent problems among the students. It was an effective device for addressing the concerns of students, and one that did not use an inordinate amount of time.

Because students were aware of our presence, we may have had a calming effect in some classrooms. Even so, students and teachers seemed to have an agreement about what was acceptable behavior and what was not. This agreement helped classroom instruction occur with few interruptions and, even more important, with little wasted time.

Observation. *Students have a role to play in making the classroom work.*

By assigning the students roles in instruction, the teacher gives them a vested interest in making the class an effective learning environment.

Teachers are good at enlisting the help of students to make classroom instruction work well. In a kindergarten class, one student serves as the student leader for the day, assisting the teacher in handing out materials, leading the class in the morning writing exercise, and calling on classmates for answers. Other teachers assign "table leaders" or "row leaders" to distribute and collect materials. A first-grade teacher has students "apply" for classroom jobs by submitting a mini-resume where the student indicated which job was desired and indicating "why I [the teacher] should hire you for this job" (Baker, observation). Although none of these systems is new or unique, they serve two purposes: (1) they help the teacher use instructional time efficiently, and (2) they engage students in helping the class operate in a smooth fashion. By assigning the students roles in instruction, the teacher gives them a vested interest in making the class an effective learning environment.

Observation. *Although the pace of instruction varies, teachers use classroom time for purposeful learning.*

Each Spotlight School has a certain rhythm that is influenced by two key factors: the school schedule and teaching styles. The combination of these two elements creates a distinctive tempo at each school. For instance, at Heights, as in so many small schools, the schedule is busy, busy, busy. Students leave their regular classrooms to attend computer class, the library, music, and theatre arts one or two days a week and participate in other activities (P.E. and lunch) on a daily basis. To ensure these full learning experiences for students, blocks of time are intricately carved out of the day. Perhaps in response to this schedule, teachers seem to create relaxed environments for students while they are in the classroom.

The teachers at Dellview and Adams go through the instructional day at a quicker rate. With larger faculties, scheduling time for special activities is less disruptive to classroom time. In using blocks of instructional time, teachers lead students through whole-class and group activities with lots of student involvement. The result is a classroom tempo that is somewhat fast but not necessarily

rushed. Although the pace at Wesley Elementary seems rapid and nonstop, students are given enough time to understand what is being taught. Teachers and students move from one activity to the next with seamless transitions and no wasted time. The school schedule is perhaps the least intrusive at this school than in any of the four. Students have fairly large blocks of uninterrupted time with their teachers.

Despite differences in how they use time, most teachers at all four schools demonstrate an ability to maximize every instructional minute. Moreover, teachers adjust the pace of instruction to meet students' needs. This may mean spending extra time on directions, answering questions, or finishing an activity; at other times it may mean moving ahead of schedule when students are ready. The priority on reading instruction, through the use of time and classroom management strategies, promotes learning.

When conducting an activity frequently repeated by students, teachers have established routines for ensuring it goes smoothly. For instance, a kindergarten teacher has students line up in alphabetical order by first name when going to lunch or recess (Bardole, observation, 12/6/96). Wesley students keep a stack of reading books on their desks, neatly aligned. These books are organized in a certain fashion to assist with instruction. One teacher explained that the books are stacked this way "because movement is distracting. We try to keep what they need close by" (Cannon, interview, W.C9).

For reading instruction, many teachers work with smaller groups of students. Although groups can be potential time-management nightmares, most teachers devise ways to organize students and divide their time among the groups. The key to managing groups is keeping everyone engaged in learning without wasting time. Here are a few examples of how teachers from different schools manage time spent in groups.

A first-grade teacher gives several groups the same task and a set time frame:

Instead of moving students around the room into groups, the teacher has already grouped students by pushing their desks together. As the teacher passes out necessary materials, she explains that students are to think of as many compound words as possible. One student is to serve as scribe while other students are involved in thinking of words or helping with spelling. They are given 10 minutes to complete the activity. Afterwards, the scribe from each group (and a peer if the scribe wishes) announces the group's words to the rest of the class (Manns, observation, 3/18/97).

A third-grade teacher describes how she moves around to various student groups.

When the students are doing reading, I start with the students who are reading on grade level. I will give them the lesson and then let them do silent reading or another activity. Then, I get the next group and meet with them. I introduce the lesson and explain written work activities they need to do. Then I continue with the next group. The teacher aide works

with different groups as well. She helps me with all four groups (Aldape, interview, H.Tm4).

A second-grade teacher describes how she works directly with one group while keeping the other students on task:

With each group, I spend about 30 minutes on the reading lesson. Before I turn students loose on independent work, we go over the directions and expectations. It is relevant work, so they don't interrupt me. (Bailey, interview, W.Tm4).

One kindergarten teacher has a pegboard that she uses to assign activities to student groups. When she directs them to go into groups and centers, students know how to look at the board and figure out where to go. On one particular morning, for instance, members of the blue group headed to the writing center; while the red group went to the listening center (Nuñez, observation, 2/10/97). When teachers work with groups, especially among the second and third graders, students in many of the classes seem aware of class norms and what to do if they have questions.

Expectations about moving from task to task or behaving in a group are different for students among the four schools. At Wesley, students are expected to be quiet during transitions and focused on the teacher while in a group. At the other schools, teachers allow more activity and noise, but students rarely become loud or uncontrollable. On occasion when students get a little rowdy, teachers sing a song, whistle a tune, or clap their hands to a certain beat to indicate that the students need to settle down.

Finding. *Schoolwide strategies help teachers use time more effectively.*

These strategies range from time-saving devices to group management techniques to beliefs about protecting time. At Dellview, students have a red folder for homework and a blue folder for work to be signed by parents. According to the principal,

this system helps the kids find things quickly. It keeps the whole school organized—it is a way to train both the kids and the families (fieldnotes, 1/19/97).

This school has also put together a comprehensive packet of materials for parents and school visitors explaining its reading program. From looking at these materials, it is apparent that the faculty shares the responsibility for instruction. For each program, a teacher or group of teachers is assigned to manage and help others use the program or strategy.

A different approach to efficient time use is found at Wesley. At this school of 1,100 students, logistical arrangements become very important. As you walk the halls several strategies are apparent and consistently applied:

- Students walk in single-file lines with their arms crossed.
- Every class has scheduled bathroom breaks throughout the day; these breaks are monitored by teachers. To prevent problems (bathrooms are hot spots for activities in any school), students enter the bathroom in small groups usually no more than two at a time.

- Teachers eat lunch with their students.⁵
- Cafeteria workers have systems in place for moving large numbers of students through without delays.

At Heights, federal funds pay for aides: the first-grade teachers have the added help of a full-time aide, and third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers share an aide at each grade level. These individuals help prepare materials, work with Spanish-speaking groups of students, and help teachers divide their time among the students. Plans for a midyear visit by Texas First Lady Laura Bush further illustrate how the faculty and the principal have created an environment where everyone pitches in to get things done. Teachers, aides, office staff, and the principal contributed extra time to prepare for her visit. At a later staff meeting, the principal thanked teachers and other staff for their willingness to pull things together for her visit (fieldnotes, 2/24/97).

A final approach to using school time efficiently was stated by the principal at Adams. She talked about how she views time:

I try very hard to make sure that in scheduling [the teachers] are allowed every opportunity for uninterrupted instruction. Whether it is not making announcements 10-15 minutes long or not scheduling unnecessary staff or committee meetings, or assemblies for children—I really value and keep sacred their instructional time and planning time (Bratton, interview, NA.L1).

The principal applies this belief; for example, when asked about how often faculty meetings occur, she says, “as infrequently as possible. I really value their planning time and if there are things that I can put to them in writing, I do” (Bratton, NA.PP1). The end result is that she does not typically use meetings for one-way communication tasks (those are handled in writing). Furthermore, planning meetings or problem-solving sessions are called with smaller groups of teachers rather than whole faculty meetings that tend to be difficult to organize. By communicating in writing and organizing efficient meetings, instructional time is protected.

These schools use various approaches for scheduling time. Because faculty and administrators place a high value on making things simple, ensuring smooth logistical arrangements, helping colleagues, or respecting time, teachers are able to find the time to make reading a priority.

Assessment of Student Progress

Finding. *Teachers use a variety of approaches to assess reading ability and to identify students who are having problems learning to read.*

In addition to TAAS, all but one school give students the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Some in-class methods are fairly universal as well. For example, every teacher uses questioning techniques to determine the extent to which students understand what they are reading. Another constant is the use of oral reading in class to identify students who are having difficulty learning to read or who are not yet fluent readers.

Individual schools use particular reading assessment methods (or combinations of methods). Assessments identified by Dellview teachers include end-of-book

tests designed by the publisher of the basal series, the Silvaroli Informal Reading Inventory, and the Gates-MacGinitie norm-referenced group reading test. Teachers also assess student progress with activities such as story maps, character development, and story summaries that are related to the school's emphasis on literature. In addition, kindergarten teachers at Dellview use the writing of the morning message as a check on student progress.

At Wesley, individual students read a passage aloud to the teacher after completing every five reading lessons. Additionally, students take a written fact recall and comprehension test after every 20 reading lessons. Mastery on these assessments is required before students may move ahead. We observed a reading checkout in one first-grade class.

Each student comes to the teacher's desk at the back of the room and reads a short passage aloud to the teacher. As the teacher times the reading, students read as much of the passage as possible within one minute. One student, for example, reads the passage in 48 seconds with only one mistake. The teacher records how well each student reads and makes notes of trends in the student's reading. She is quick to point out when students have improved (Baker, observation, 12/5/96).

Heights teachers tend to rely upon book and unit tests that are associated with the basal series, along with weekly vocabulary and spelling tests. Adams' assessments include the Dallas ISD Diagnostic Survey, as well as teacher-made inventories. These teachers also use several different types of assessments, spanning from weekly vocabulary and spelling tests to student appraisal of one another's work. One teacher described how students' assessments of their work occurs:

For example, I will take the stories that they wrote and have another student (without knowing who wrote the original story) read it aloud. The kids will grade the story based on criteria; they grade each other. You have to do character-building first, before you can pull that off. Otherwise, the kids get their feelings hurt (Day, interview, NA.A1).

This same teacher had another assessment technique, a learning log, that she liked to use with her students. Following a project where students had to write and present research papers to their classmates, she had students create a learning log. With the log, students were told to write ten things that they had learned while doing this project (Day, interview, NA.C8). It is a quick method of assessing both content knowledge and writing skills.

"Can they take information to a higher level and apply what they learned? For example, what would the three bears find in your house?" (kindergarten teacher)

The variety of assessments used in the four Spotlight Schools underscores the complexity of reading instruction. Consider what one kindergarten teacher said when asked what she looks for while assessing reading:

Have they mastered letters, short vowels, ending sounds, beginning sounds? Are they reading and are they comprehending? How is their fluency? Do they know vocabulary words, can they use these words to make sentences? After the units, can they tell me what they read? Do they remember the sequence? Can they recall events? Can they take information to a higher level and apply what they learned? For example, what would the three bears find in your house? (Kramer, interview, NA.A1).

Students Who Have Trouble Reading

Finding. *Teachers use informal classroom methods for identifying students who are having trouble learning to read.*

For the most part, teachers do not wait for test results from TAAS or ITBS to identify problems. They rely upon what they hear as students read aloud in class. As students read aloud, teachers pay particular attention to accuracy and fluency. They look closely at homework and other written work for insights into how well students understand. Teachers listen as students try to apply reading skills (such as decoding or blending). The answers students provide to questions about reading passages also provide valuable information. Here is what some of the teachers said when asked about how they identify these students.

From a kindergarten teacher:

The kids cannot focus. They do not know how to recognize letters or beginning sounds.... They don't hear beginning or ending sounds. They cannot put letter sounds together or blend (Kramer, interview, NA.15).

From a first-grade teacher:

It is usually easy. Through the pretest (which is one-on-one), I see if they are struggling. I also listen in the Reading Circle. The Reading Circle gives you a chance to hear the students read. I can also talk with their previous teachers (Cannon, interview, W.15).

From a second-grade teacher:

If they can't talk about various reading things (such as long vowels), then I will give them more help with decoding. If they struggle with oral reading—making and forming words—then they have problems. If they can't answer questions about what I have read, then they are having comprehension problems (Benson, interview, D.15).

From a third-grade teacher:

Mainly through oral reading and by looking at the student's grades from the previous year. I work with the previous teacher to find out what is happening (Aldape, interview, H.15).

From all of these statements one idea seems very important. Teachers get valuable information about student progress by listening to individual students reading.

Finding. *Teachers take responsibility for helping students who are having difficulties. To assist these students, teachers will try different ways of teaching or provide additional practice for students.*

What does it mean that teachers "take responsibility" for their students? Essentially, teachers use different methods or materials to help students. They do

not ignore the problem and hope the student will grow out of it. They feel a personal responsibility for helping every student learn. The following are quotes from teachers as they describe how they help students who are having a hard time learning to read.

A kindergarten teacher tries to provide help in fairly inconspicuous ways.

We will go over ideas or skills as a class. I will say, "blend a word. Okay, how do we spell it? Blend again." We will do all of this as a large group. Even the workbook, we do that as a large group. I walk around the room to check understanding. When the kids read, I will assign kids to read sentences. I let the kids skip if they cannot read it (I don't want to embarrass them) or they will read it with me (Kramer, interview, NA.15).

This first-grade teacher uses a tutor and student cooperative groups to help her students.

The tutor comes on Tuesday and Thursday. She works with small groups. They will go over sound/symbol relationships. The students know that they are responsible for their peer's learning. I have one student in resource. This student did not even have prekindergarten skills at the beginning of the year. He has improved. He has learned sound-symbol relationships in cooperative groups (Rains, interview, H.15).

A second-grade teacher uses different settings, grouping methods, and materials to help her students.

If they are having a hard time, I will teach them again. I will teach them the same skill but using different materials or a different book. I will give them one-on-one help or use peer tutoring. If it is severe problem, I will send the student to content mastery. I also have tutors. I take responsibility for the learning of my students. When I use a tutor, I feel guilty so I rarely use tutors. Motivation is key. I try to get parents involved to help. I send home weekly reviews that cover two things: behavior and skills that the students need help learning. The parents are great at helping with the kids (Day, interview, NA.15).

This third-grade teacher has specific teaching strategies for specific learning difficulties.

Comprehension skills (such as analogies and deductions) are taught through both the reading and language curriculum. For decoding problems, I will pull phonics practice to help the students see different morphographies. If it is a fluency problem, the students will practice reading easier sections. If it is a comprehension problem, I will model comprehension strategies (O'Shea, interview, W.15).

Each of these teachers and many others have unique ways for helping students who haven't quite got it yet. These teachers are willing to use alternative means of helping students and they are willing to put in extra time or effort in the process.

School Context for Teaching and Learning

The four Spotlight Schools employ a variety of strategies to support reading instruction. These issues are more adult-focused—they directly affect faculty and staff at the school. Moreover, they shape how teaching and learning occur within the school. In particular, we consider four questions:

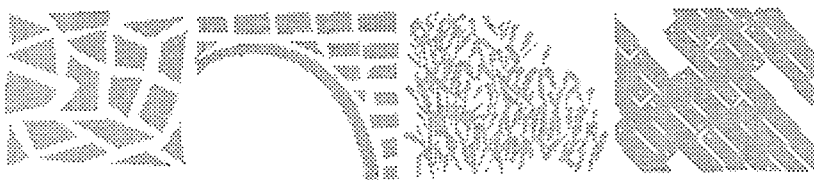
- How do *evaluation practices* inform student progress in reading?
- How do teachers participate in *professional development*?
- How does *leadership* affect teaching and learning?
- What is the *school culture* and does it support reading instruction?

Evaluation Practices

Finding. *At the beginning of the school year, teachers, especially in the larger schools, are given information about the reading ability of students. It comes from a variety of sources including student placement in classes, analysis of test data, evaluations from the student's previous teacher, or writing portfolios. Teachers have devised different methods for using this information and for determining what other data they will collect to plan for instruction.*

Teachers at Adams are given test data for individual students. At Dellview, teachers send the students' writing portfolios from the previous year to the new teacher. Second-grade teachers also have the students' scores on the Gates-MacGinitie test. While the two schools have different approaches for student placement in classes, both Wesley and Adams teachers receive information about students based upon their placement in a particular class. In addition, the Wesley teachers are given the students' spiral notebooks containing numerous classroom assignments from the previous year, and they know the students' ITBS scores (Baker, interview, W.Pl1). The fourth- and fifth-grade teachers at Heights have individual TAAS student profiles. Teachers also have information about the English-speaking abilities of the students from an oral language proficiency test that is given to students in grades one through five whose home language is a language other than English (Rubio, personal communication, April 22, 1997).

Again, having information is only one part of the equation. For the information to be of optimal value, teachers need to examine it and then target instruction to meet specific student needs. Several teachers talked about how they direct their instruction based upon this type of information. Here are some of their strategies for using student test information.



According to a second-grade teacher:

We use [test information] to diagnose problems and to be accountable for what we've taught. Part of it is to see what problems we're having. We give the Gates at the beginning and end to find the students' level. We plan based on our assessment results. For example, they did descriptive writing recently. Next week we will cover this more because they didn't quite get it yet (Benson, interview, D.A5).

Another second-grade teacher describes her use of test data for designing instruction:

I use ITBS scores to rank and graph the students. I profile the kids and I know what they need to learn. For example, I may know that five of 17 kids are low on compound words. So I will tailor instruction based upon what I learn from the ITBS. I share that information with the parents and individually, with the students. I share with the kids how they are doing. I set goals and keep track [of achievement] by keeping a running progress (Day, interview, NA.A5).

A third-grade teacher uses information from tests in a similar manner:

I look at the ITBS scores and graph each of the student's scores.... I look at graphs from the previous year and find out where our weaknesses are. I look at the fourth-grade TAAS and plan for the third-grade year. I look at the second-grade ITBS scores, especially for summarizing, inference, and identifying the main idea (Olea, interview, NA.Pl1 and Pl2)

Although TAAS is not given in the first-grade, teachers are mindful of it. One reports:

At the beginning of the year, we look at the first-grade objectives for TAAS.... Also, I have their ITBS test scores. [Student scores are printed and taped to her desk.] The objectives highlighted in yellow are the ones I will work on more than the others. For example, listening is one that needs improvement. So we will do oral reading and the students will answer questions from what they hear, not what they read (Baker, interview, W.A7).

Information from several sources (such as a previous teacher, report card, and the oral language proficiency test) helps a third-grade teacher plan bilingual instruction and group students within the class for reading instruction.

I use that information to find out their reading levels. I also get teacher input. We meet with the second-grade teachers. They tell us about the background and abilities of the students and they make suggestions about helping the kids move from Spanish to English. They tell us about the behavior of the students. I use this information to group students within the class. This information is critical (Aldape, interview, H.Pl1 and I1).

Other teachers approach student information from the previous year differently. Although they may have the information at the first of the year, they may not

look at it until later, preferring to rely upon their own data-gathering methods done in their classrooms at the beginning of the year. In either case, the benefit of knowing about past student performance is underscored in comments by the Adams principal, who indicates that

providing specific student information lets the teachers know where [the students] were; it also helps them go back and talk with other teachers about identifying why something happened (Bratton, interview, NA.A5).

Finding. *All schools analyze formal test data to identify students' strengths and needs. Principals (or other school leaders) are heavily invested in this process. Teachers change the instructional program based on this analysis.*

Once receiving results, the schools analyze TAAS scores and scores from other assessments (such as the ITBS). The process for the analysis of scores differs among schools. For instance, while revising the Campus Improvement Plan, the Heights principal has groups of teachers analyze TAAS data.

When we met in August they [teachers and paraprofessionals] looked...at [school scores] and at scores for the entire district by grade level. I sat them on three committees by grade level (third, fourth, fifth) and I included the first, second, and other teachers. And said, "OK, you've got their scores, now figure out for me by looking at them, what are the strengths in the area of reading for third grade and what are the weaknesses." They did the same thing for math and fourth did it for writing. They came up with the biggest areas of strength and weakness. (Rubio, interview, H.PP4).

Wesley uses an administrator from the campus-based charter school offices to coordinate the analysis of TAAS and ITBS information. During an interview, this person describes the process:

I meet with teachers by grade level to analyze test data. I help teachers learn pedagogical strategies related to test-taking skills. I help them become aware of the skills that are on TAAS. I look at the test format, classroom instruction, and school programs and how they all relate to testing (Adkinson, interview).

Other leaders at Wesley also help teachers understand what the test data mean. For example, the lead teacher makes copies of individual student test scores. "These will be given to teachers, so they will know each child's test score. The test scores can tell us what we have and haven't done" (Rimes, interview, WA5). At Adams, the principal analyzes test data in the summer and then shares the information with faculty.

Everyone...sees everyone else's ITBS and TAAS scores. Everyone throughout our building, whether you are regular education, whether you give TAAS, whether you don't give TAAS, whether you are special education—it doesn't matter. Everyone knows the strengths and greatest areas of need (Bratton, interview, NA.A7)

The second part of this equation is making changes or modifying the instructional program based upon documented student needs. At three of the schools,

"OK, you've got their scores...what are the strengths in the area of reading for third grade and what are the weaknesses?" (principal)

test information is also used to place students within classrooms. At Wesley, an identified weakness in students' vocabulary skills led planners to adopt new materials and to organize professional development sessions for teachers. At Adams, the principal talked about how faculty react to test data:

I tell teachers, "If you are out somewhere and you see something that you think would be good for your grade level or the grade above you or below you, bring it back, buy a copy of it. Let's take a look at it." I'll reimburse them. Share it with other teachers and see if you think that would be something we could utilize and that would benefit our kids (Bratton, interview, NA.C6).

Finding. *Responsibility for TAAS is shared throughout the school. The burden does not rest solely with teachers in the upper elementary grades. Early elementary grade teachers are held responsible for preparing students to take TAAS.*

The principals of the four schools stressed schoolwide responsibility for TAAS. As one principal stated, "All teachers buy into the idea that they are responsible for TAAS. In practice, reading and math are a focus" (Lopez, interview, D.C1). The belief in collective responsibility is shared by the principals. The principal at Dallas' Adams school expressed it this way:

The teachers are certainly knowledgeable about where children need to be in order to be successful with TAAS by the time they reach the third grade. But it is very much our philosophy that it takes every single one of us and it starts from the first day that the children come to school. There is no way that a third-grade teacher can start with a child in August and make sure that all those TAAS objectives are covered (Bratton, interview, NA.A7).

Teachers in the lower grades are expected to do their part in helping students prepare for TAAS. At Heights, the principal expects teachers in first and second grade to respond to weaknesses in TAAS scores:

[TAAS has] a lot of influence, even though we don't test in TAAS at those levels, because we look at the third- and fourth-grade scores... and examine [them] for weak areas. So then as a first- or second-grade teacher, what are you going to do about it? They cannot sit back and relax. They are all responsible as an entire campus (Rubio, interview, H.A7).

Did these ideas ring true with the teachers? Yes. Do teachers feel responsible for TAAS? Yes. Here are some of the comments from kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers about how they respond to TAAS. According to one kindergarten teacher, "the activities we do in my classroom are the basis for TAAS, such as main idea, writing, and expressing themselves" (Kramer, interview, NA.A7). For a first-grade teacher, helping students prepare for the statewide assessment does not have to disrupt normal instruction.

I prepare them for the TAAS. I don't change my instruction when it comes around. The way I teach is automatically linked to TAAS. At the beginning of the year, we look at the first-grade objectives for TAAS. For

first grade, students have to recognize letters, blend, recognize and create sounds, and talk about sounds (Baker, interview, W.A7).

This teacher is confident that the organization of instruction is relevant and appropriate. At the second-grade level, teachers seem to gear up a little more and put more emphasis on preparing for the testing aspects of TAAS. One second-grade teacher spends time with students in small groups “working on analyzing paragraphs and preparing for TAAS. I am trying to pull in more work on TAAS because this is a school focus” (Benson, interview, D.I1). Preparing for TAAS is a progressive exercise that becomes more intensive as students get closer to the third grade. As students approach the testing year, some teachers provide them with more opportunities to become familiar with this assessment.

Finding. *Teachers are familiar with the format and content of TAAS.*

Familiarity with learning objectives and testing format helps teachers understand and respond to expectations for students.

Many of the teachers talked about various elements that are tested through TAAS. Elements such as vocabulary, drawing inferences, summarizing reading passages, or finding the main idea are on the minds of teachers and subsequently taught to students. Their familiarity with the objectives that are assessed likely contributes to the success of students. As one second-grade teacher put it, “We have to keep TAAS in mind when creating our curriculum and instruction because we’re accountable” (Benson, interview, D.V1). The schools have various strategies for helping teachers become familiar with content issues. At Dellview, a schoolwide strategy toward writing that begins in kindergarten and culminates in the fourth grade helps every teacher become familiar with the four writing methods assessed by TAAS and helps students become proficient in these methods. Heights relies upon district-provided materials to familiarize teachers with TAAS content. Wesley teachers use lists of learning objectives that are assessed through TAAS.

Recall that several of these schools administer other assessments (such as the ITBS) in addition to the TAAS. The schools that give additional tests help students understand the differences between the tests, including the test format.

ITBS and TAAS have a completely different format. One is timed; one is not timed. They may be testing the same basic skills, but the format is different. Unless the child has had the opportunity to practice in that particular format then they may not be able to transfer that knowledge.

So I do expect that they put emphasis on learning the format (Bratton, interview, NA.A8)

In response, teachers provide those opportunities by using practice tests, testing booklets, and work sheets. At Wesley, a support person, who is responsible for evaluation, helps teachers learn pedagogical strategies related to test-tasking skills.

I help them become aware of the skills that are on the TAAS. I look at the test format, classroom instruction, and school programs and how they all relate to testing (Adkinson, interview)

Teachers are aware of what each test requires and monitor student progress throughout the year in meeting those requirements. Teachers learn new

instructional strategies to better address student needs, and teachers give practice tests and organize special instructional sessions focused on writing to ensure that students are prepared for these assessments.

Finding. *The schools prepare for TAAS in different ways.*

As has been noted, one of the criteria for selection as a Spotlight School is an 85% (or higher) passing rate on the TAAS reading section. The high passing rates were not an accident. Two of the four schools (Dellview and Heights) provide TAAS tutoring on a regular basis. The tutoring occurs in the morning before the regular school day. Dellview selects students to participate in tutoring while Heights includes all students in first through fifth grade. Dellview has devised several instructional strategies to help students on the TAAS. One of these strategies is directed at reading passages and answering questions about those selections. Adams administers a practice TAAS test a couple of months before the actual test. It is used “as a guidance on planning where we need to go, as a last minute check before the real TAAS” (Bratton, interview, NAA5). Wesley has a regular schedule of administering practice tests to students that address certain skills. At both Wesley and Adams, these practices are whole class activities during the regular school day. Every student at Wesley also takes the Texas Extender, which is “a predictor of TAAS scores for third through eighth grade. We have students make up this test if they are absent—everyone takes it” (Adkinson, interview, W.Misc). Results from this test help teachers identify student weaknesses. Within the classroom, teachers from all four schools have various materials that they use with students to help them learn content and become familiar with the testing format. Some teachers choose TAAS practice materials based upon their preferences and student needs. At other schools, teachers use materials chosen for the whole school.

Professional Development

Finding. *Teachers develop reading instruction skills through formal professional development workshops. Upon attending professional development workshops, teachers are expected to share information with colleagues. When schools are able to select professional development workshops, their selections are tied to faculty interests and student needs.*

At the four Spotlight Schools, teachers or groups of teachers have attended formal professional development workshops focused on reading. Teachers from Heights, for example, attended professional development sessions about cooperative learning and now use these techniques during reading instruction. Similarly, teachers from Wesley attended full-day sessions on managing a classroom, writing workshops, teaching reading with novels, and using a five-step method of teaching reading with the basals (Rimes, interview, W.Pd1). Teachers are using the methods learned during those sessions. One teacher found the training for the basal teaching method to be particularly beneficial: “It is the best way we have ever used the [basals]” (Baker, interview, W.Pd4). The location for these formal sessions varies by school. Wesley teachers attend professional development sessions at school and in off-campus locations. In the other three schools, ses-

sions tend to be held in off-campus locations such as a community college or regional education service center.

At Wesley, professional development activities are tailored, when appropriate, to certain grade levels. For example, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers attend a session called “Thinking and Learning about Print,” while first-grade teachers attend a session on “Beginning Reading” (Wesley 1996-97 staff development document). New teachers participate in intensive training for the school’s reading program. One described her experiences following a summer week-long program:

My first year, a teacher observed me every week for one hour. Once a month, a teacher observed me for an entire day. I learned a lot from that (Opland, interview, W.19).

In addition to these activities, both Heights and Wesley are involved with district reading initiatives, and teachers have attended professional development sessions related to those initiatives. The four schools also participate in sessions as a result of selection as Spotlight Schools. Teachers and principals say they have benefited from reading conferences and workshops held in conjunction with the Texas Reading Initiative. These conferences and workshops feature researchers discussing their work and findings about how young children learn to read. For the most part, principals selected (or asked peers to choose) teachers to attend the sessions associated with the Texas Reading Initiative. The principals have been involved in presenting at statewide conferences on behalf of their schools and the Reading Initiative.

According to Dellview’s principal, “If we send teachers out to training, they are expected to share with others” (Lopez, interview, D.Pd1). Teachers from all four schools are expected to instruct their colleagues after they attend formal professional development sessions, and at least one school has a formal mechanism for this sharing. At Adams, a vertical reading team—one teacher from each grade level, kindergarten through grade three—attends district training and workshops in the area of reading. Afterwards, each team member is responsible for training his or her grade level (Bratton, interview, NA.Pd1). At Heights, information from professional development sessions is shared with the staff through meetings or grade-level planning sessions (Heights documents).

The principals at all four schools indicate that professional development is organized around faculty interests and student needs. When asked about planning for professional development, the Adams principal describes the following process:

We give a spring survey of what they [the teachers] would like to do for the following year. We plan from there. Part of the days, the district decides what we do. Part of the days, we have the opportunity to decide what we will do. Our best days are the ones that we get to decide on our own. As diverse as our needs are here, take that and multiply that across the district. The professional development [the district] chooses is not always what we need (Bratton, interview, NA.Pd7).

Teachers from all four schools are expected to instruct their colleagues after attending formal professional development sessions...

At Dellview, a committee of teachers talk about faculty interests to generate a professional development plan. In addition, the principal and assistant principal bring in speakers on related topics (Lopez, interview, D.Pd1). The Heights staff development committee plans for workshops in a fashion similar to Dellview's. Wesley's staff development plan is designed to focus on identified student needs. According to a district-level planning facilitator:

At the beginning of the year, we do a staff development proposal of general topics. This year, we modified the plan to focus on vocabulary. We wanted to make sure that we addressed vocabulary in staff development. In the spring, we will get the ITBS scores. These will help us decide what has worked and help us make decisions about staff development.... It [the staff development proposal] is based on school results. (Adkinson, interview).

Finding. *Aside from the formal professional development opportunities, teachers develop reading instruction skills through other activities including grade-level meetings at school, visiting other schools, modeling by colleagues, oversight by and help from school leaders, educational journals and books, and informal discussions with colleagues.*

While formal sessions are an important part of continued professional development, the more frequent and casual encounters with colleagues and leaders at the school appear to be equally important. These encounters are frequently mentioned by teachers and principals at the four Spotlight Schools. Several teachers and principals gave testimonials about how informal methods help teachers learn to teach reading.

Ideas may come informally from the principal:

She will model ideas.... She talks to us about instruction and gives ideas and makes suggestions and meets with us regularly—often informally (Benson, interview, D.L1).

Information about a specific program may be offered by a colleague:

The special education teacher taught me how to use *Project Read*. Together...we designed [it] for the class. I supplement vocabulary instruction with *Project Read* (Shade, interview, NA.19).

Learning about new ideas from a colleague:

We have technology and computers. I learn from the [computer] technician (Aldape, interview, H.Pd4). This technology training occurs in two different ways. First, teachers meet once every six weeks at the district to learn about technology. Second, a technology teacher trainer comes to the school every week to meet with first- through fourth-grade teachers (Rubio, interview, 4/25/97).

A grade-level team can serve as a forum for discussions about reading instruction:

The first-grade team is the best at working as a team. We share ideas, we eat lunch together, we plan together, we go to recess together.

Through this, we can really work as a team. Through even these informal gatherings, you can get lots of information (Shade, interview, NA.L3).

School leaders can provide effective and informal instructional leadership:

They [grade-level chairs] feel responsible for their teachers.... For new teachers, grade-level chairs need to model instruction.... but [just] watching someone work with their own students does not work. You need mentors to work with the new teacher's students. It makes it very clear whose problem it is when the mentor teacher does not have problems with the new teacher's students. It points out that the issue is not with the students, but with the new teacher (Rimes, interview, W.L2).

For many teachers, professional reading provides news ideas about teaching:

One of the reading professional development things that we did was to read the Marilyn Adams book. Along with that, I assigned articles to teachers and asked them to discuss their articles with other teachers in their grade levels. The teachers did research, read, talked, discussed, and then presented findings to one another (Kennedy, interview).

A valuable informal learning opportunity occurs through visiting other schools:

For staff development, we visited schools and looked at lots of different things. We didn't want just one program—we mixed lots of different things (Lopez, interview, D.Pd1).

Finally, observations of colleagues are a good source of information about instruction:

You can observe as much as you need to at Wesley. If you need someone to watch you, someone will come. This happens a lot here. We have lots of observation time here. Experience is the best teacher. Knowing what to do and what to listen for is learned through doing—even in nonverbal communication (Bailey, interview, W.19).

In addition to these informal professional development opportunities, teachers talked about learning from previous principals at the school, from their students, through college and university courses, in special programs (for example, the Wright Group or New Jersey Writing Project), through peer coaching, by on-the-job training, with student teachers, and from district and regional service center personnel.

Leadership

Finding. *Using her unique leadership style, each principal ensures that students become successful readers.*

The Dellview principal established a team of people to improve achievement when she became the principal four years ago. Since that time, teachers and administrative staff have been assigned responsibility for various reading programs (Benson, interview, D.PP2). The programs, part of an overall plan, are designed to ensure that students learn to read and have fun reading. The

principal has communicated the importance of preparing for the TAAS, and even persuades teachers to volunteer time to participate in the morning TAAS tutoring sessions. In addition, both the principal and assistant principal personally reward students for meeting monthly reading goals. To receive rewards, students line up outside the administrative offices in the morning and select a toy from grab bags supplied by the PTA.

The Heights faculty and principal work closely as a team to make progress. To guide her small faculty of 10 teachers, the Heights principal sets and enforces high expectations for teachers and students. Evidence of this is in her weekly commitment to checking lesson plans and in her involvement with writing and reading.

I like to visit classrooms. When it comes to the area of writing, I check fourth-grade writing every week, and every other week I do the rest of the grade levels. They turn in their creative writing to me, and I score them holistically. I have charts of how they've been doing since the beginning of school. And then I'll write comments to the kids. I like to make classroom visits; I talk to the kids. [I ask them,] "what are you reading this week?" [A] second-grade class is one of my favorites to visit. The kids have invited me and I go and listen to them read. One time they acted out the story for me instead of me asking them questions. It's not a major contribution, but it's how I have helped out in the area of reading (Rubio, interview, H.L1).

Although the Heights principal is modest about her influence in creating a school environment where reading and writing are a priority in teaching and learning, several teachers affirmed her influence in ensuring that essential elements are taught and that students are learning.

At Adams, the principal talks about assembling a team of teaching professionals; she supports their work and expects the best from them. Since her arrival four years ago, this principal has hired half the teachers at this school. Her approach is to use teams of teachers in the interview process and to look for certain qualities when hiring new faculty members.

I believe very strongly that my responsibility is to find those outstanding teachers, the most innovative, creative, resourceful teachers I can find. I want them to have a strong foundation in the *science* of teaching and then, I turn them loose to do whatever they feel they need to do to create and come up with the *art* of teaching (Bratton, interview, NA.L1).

The principal also talks about how she is open to teachers' new ideas. In turn, teachers note that the principal supports their work. Evidence is found as teachers talk about the principal purchasing materials to help teachers with their instruction, arranging professional development to learn about new ways of teaching reading, and reinforcing school values through her words and actions.

At Wesley, a curricular and instructional focus is the driving force behind the school. To this end, the principal ensures that teachers have materials, administrative support, and training they need to teach within that focus and make sure that students learn. The principal exercises her authority over personnel matters

to ensure that students get good instruction. It is not uncommon for the principal to move teachers down a grade level, because knowing the requirements of the next grade level, "they bring higher expectations with them" (field notes, 12/6/96). For example, a first-grade teacher, who taught one year at second grade, explains the principal's idea as follows:

If you take a teacher from an upper grade to a lower grade, she will bring that class up. The teacher will have higher expectations for the students (Baker, interview, W.Tch3).

This principal also stresses the importance of letting new teachers know what is expected:

I like to interview new teachers on a regular school day, so that they can see what is expected of teachers and students, and see what is required in terms of preparing for instruction. I want them to see what we expect teachers to do in the way of modeling for students and instructing students (Rimes, interview, W.V1).

The principal's approach is to "spend a lot of time looking at students' work. I look to see if it is being done as expected. I spot check homework" (Rimes, interview, W.L1). In return, teachers appreciate the support she gives them in the classroom.

Finding. *Instructional leadership goes beyond the principal to include other administrators and teachers. These individuals play an important role in making sure students learn to read.*

At Dellview, it is evident throughout the school that teachers and administrators share a leadership role, including responsibility for the school's instructional program. A kindergarten teacher who is the grade-level leader talked about her involvement with a particular reading program. She actively helps other teachers learn about the program and suggests ideas about how the program can be used in other grades (Nuñez, interview, D.C1). A reading specialist organizes several reading programs at the school, including the schoolwide reading incentive program, by monitoring school goals and creating themes for each month. Groups of different teachers and administrators are responsible for the school's writing program, evaluation, the collection and use of children's literature, special education inclusion, technology, and preparation for TAAS.

The Heights principal particularly attributes the school's success to a curriculum specialist. While the specialist is no longer at the school (they lost her services because of decreasing student enrollment) the principal said she had a tremendous influence while at the school and that her ideas are still in effect today:

She was here two years and played a major role in the improvement of the scores. While she was here we started the extended day (instead of tutorials at the end of the day), so it became very structured. We started the Sustained Silent Reading, and we're still doing it at least three times a week. She was a major influence (Rubio, interview, H.L2).

Teachers and administrators share a leadership role, including responsibility for the school's instructional program.

At Adams, the principal and teachers also talked about leadership spanning beyond the principal to include everyone at the school. A second-grade teacher said the following about teachers as school leaders: “We are all leaders in different ways.... We are all very experienced and confident” (Day, interview, NA.L2). Another teacher talked about the leadership qualities of grade-level leaders: “The leaders are really good teachers who want the best for our students” (Shade, interview, NA.L2). According to the principal, “Everyone here is a leader...every adult here from custodial staff to support—every single person is a leader for children” (Bratton, interview, NA.L2). A specific example of Adam’s schoolwide leadership is the vertical reading team, as mentioned in an earlier section.

At a school as large as Wesley, it is not surprising that individuals other than the principal are noted as leaders. Several teachers and the principal refer to the previous principal as someone who continues to provide instructional support, in his new role as the charter school project manager. They note that he keeps teachers aware of new ideas, finds solutions to problems, and brings in speakers for development activities. Wesley’s current principal relies upon grade-level leaders to ensure that teachers are meeting expectations. These teacher leaders serve as mentors to new teachers, provide information about student performance, plan for the school year, group students for the next year, and demonstrate lessons.

School Culture

Finding. *Each school has a unique culture. Teachers are concerned about their students and want to provide the best possible educational experience.*

This may seem pretty obvious—what elementary school teacher wouldn’t want the best for his or her students? Yet it is one thing to desire the best and quite another to take action and make it happen. In the four Spotlight Schools, teachers and administrators are working to provide the best education for students. Their efforts are shaped by the school culture in which they work.

For instance, the culture of Dellview can be characterized as supportive, interesting, peaceful, relaxed, and collegial. How does this environment affect reading? A Dellview teacher describes the school’s focus on reading as follows:

At this campus, most of what we do is centered around reading—maybe that’s an administrative goal. The TAAS and essential elements do set what we teach and what we expect our kids to do. The emphasis at this campus is reading—that is our number one priority. We want to make it fun and promote it for life-long learning. TAAS is a big emphasis but it goes deeper than that (Benson, interview, D.V1).

How does this attitude manifest itself in Dellview classrooms? Teachers strive to find activities that provide students with skills needed to read, but they still make reading fun and interesting. The school’s literature-based philosophy is evident in this regard. Students work in writing, art, listening, reading, and mathematics centers; they write in journals; they have time every day for silent reading; they spend time in the library checking out books and listening to adults read aloud; they have special days when they dress up like a favorite book character; and they read with partners from different grade levels.

The school culture of Heights is like a family—the teachers and staff are warm, concerned, and committed to their students. Thus teachers organize reading incentive programs for students; the school participates in several early childhood education programs where they work with families to prepare children for school. Reading instruction is provided not only by the classroom teacher but also with the help of the classroom aide, computer technician, and librarian. Teachers and staff at each grade level work together to organize and deliver instruction. One teacher notes: “We are a small school. We have created a close bond with teachers and students. It helps the students learn” (Rains, interview, H.Misc). The principal comments about how she and the faculty have an interdependent relationship:

It's a team effort and an insistence that the children can and will be successful. The kids are willing to learn. Everything that the school is being spotlighted for is a reflection of the teachers, not me (Rubio, interview, H.Ev15).

In addition to being professional and collegial, the culture at Adams combines some of the elements found both at Dellview and Heights. One teacher described the people at her school as “a family—kind, courteous, and sharing. This comes over the [loud] speaker. It doesn't take long for new students to pick up on these ideas” (Olea, interview, NA.Pl1). This teacher's remarks reflect the principal's efforts to focus on a “quality for the day”—such as kindness—during the morning announcements. During one of the observation days, the principal mentioned that she had seen students being kind to one another and observing the kindness made her happy (fieldnotes, 1/24/97). Part of what fashions the culture at Adams is student diversity. In honoring that diversity, teachers look for ways to meet every student's needs:

When we have children who come in with as much diversity as we have, from both ends of the spectrum and everything in between, there is a need to look for new things. To look for new ways to challenge children as well as ways to remediate and reinforce the very most basic concepts (Bratton, interview, NA.V1).

The proximity of several exclusive private schools also shapes the culture of the school. As one teacher noted, “we want our kids to be prepared for those schools. It is always in our minds” (Shade, interview, NA.V1). Shaped by these issues—diversity, excellence, and personal qualities—teachers work together to come up with multiple ways of reaching students and helping them learn to read, write, and understand. Teachers are very willing to try new approaches, to modify old approaches, and to collaborate to help children become successful.

The culture of Wesley is distinct among the four Spotlight Schools. The atmosphere is efficient, disciplined, focused, and full of high expectations for its students and teachers. Education is serious business. How can you tell? Every minute of every day is used to its fullest potential. Because standards are clear, it is the rare student who misbehaves in class by talking out of turn or distracting classmates. When students do misbehave, teachers typically react in barely noticeable but effective ways. Students are focused on the work at hand, only vaguely aware of the constant stream of visitors in their classrooms.

Students receive frequent praise for excellence; conversely, teachers do not hesitate to correct student mistakes. As one teacher put it, "I let the kids know what the problems are. Self-esteem comes from success not from sugar-coating mistakes. I tell them what they do wrong" (Opland, interview, W.15). For instance, while observing one class, individual students received rounds of applause from both teacher and fellow students when they had scored a 100 on a recent spelling test. After the teacher announced the grade to the class, individual students were visibly excited about the grade. Similarly, students who did not make a 100 on the test were announced to the class. Those students were asked to come to her desk where she talked to them about what they had missed and why (Bardole, 12/6/96 observation). Another example of the value placed on quality is observed in the way a teacher worked through a proofreading assignment. Students were asked to identify grammatical and spelling errors in a paragraph that was written on the chalkboard. Upon correctly identifying an error, students were given stickers. Again, students were noticeably excited when they were right (Bailey, 3/12/97 observation). Classroom displays of homework are showcases for excellent work. Evidence of high expectations is also seen in the daily grades that students receive in reading and mathematics and the daily homework.

Wesley's campus culture is also slightly affected by its reputation as an educational renegade of sorts. Almost 20 years ago, Dr. Lott (the former principal) discovered the Direct Instruction curriculum (now called *Reading Mastery*) and began using it in place of a program that was based primarily upon language experiences. Since then, teachers have used this curriculum—which has received mixed reviews from educators—for reading instruction of all students. Wesley's commitment to this program has resulted in success and a few frustrations. Many of the teachers voiced approval of Wesley's comprehensive reading program. They are proud of the work they do and feel successful: "Kids at Wesley appreciate the things you do and we are a successful school. We are proud of that" (O'Shea, interview, W.Cltr2). At times, however, a few teachers feel frustrated with how the school is perceived:

Sometimes our reading program gets a bad rap; on a personal level, that offends me. I do a lot to make it not just about phonics. We have a reputation for *Reading Mastery*, but we try to stay in the middle of the road. We try to use it all—phonics and literature. The balanced approach is where I hope we're at (O'Shea, interview, W.Misc).

Despite the occasional criticisms, faculty members are pleased with their reading programs because they see the results with their students. Wesley's success is well-known; visitors to the school are a frequent occurrence.

Finding. *The importance of reading is apparent in school artifacts such as books, signs, posters, and programs and by the actions of students, administrators, faculty, and staff.*

In the four Spotlight Schools, students have access to well-stocked libraries and are encouraged to check books out frequently. During one observation, students

waiting in line for lunch are reading library books. Bulletin boards, posters, and displays encouraging students to read are found in the schools. These displays were made both by teachers and students. For example, Adams students made "Long, Tall Texans" out of construction paper and wrote stories about those large-size paper cowboys. Both the stories and the Texans were posted in the hallway. Signs proclaiming selection as a Spotlight School and as a Recognized school were also conspicuously displayed at all schools.

All of the principals believe that teaching reading is one of the most important things they do. This quote from the principal at Heights is an example of how the principals stress the importance of reading.

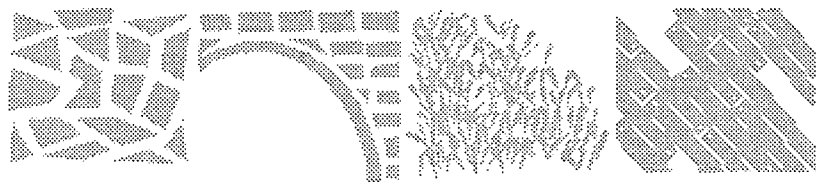
You've got to believe in instruction, in reading. If I don't believe in it, it's not going to work. If I'm telling them that they have to do it, just because it's a mandate, it's not going to work. I have a love of reading that was instilled by my mother. I encourage the children, when I make my daily announcements, to go and read (Rubio, interview, H.L1).

Teachers at several schools show their dedication to education as they give time to find new ways to teach reading. Immaculately clean buildings at each site provided further evidence that concern for the students extends to non-instructional staff members.

Finding. *The schools work with local businesses and individual volunteers to support reading instruction.*

At Wesley Elementary, 50 employees (referred to as Royal Readers) from a downtown Houston bank regularly spend time reading aloud to the students in addition to providing treats for both students (such as cupcakes) and teachers (such as gift baskets). Adams also has volunteers from several businesses and local schools that work with the students. Volunteers from these organizations staff tutorial programs at the school. Dellview has several business partnerships in the San Antonio area, and they work with social service organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters to provide mentors for students. The selection of students for the mentor programs are done by teachers and the programs are coordinated by the assistant principal (fieldnotes, 1/19/97). Authors of children's books are also brought in to read and talk to the students about reading, writing, and being an author. Both Dellview and Heights have community leaders visit the school and read aloud to the students. Several local companies in Laredo sponsor Heights' reading incentive programs. At every school, connections with local companies and organizations help support the reading programs and encourage students' learning.

At every school, connections with local companies and organizations help support the reading programs and encourage students' learning.



Appendix

Research Methodology

This study was designed to answer two key questions: (1) How do good teachers teach reading? and (2) How does the school support their work? The research methods describe the methods used to find answers to these two questions.

Sample and Data Collection

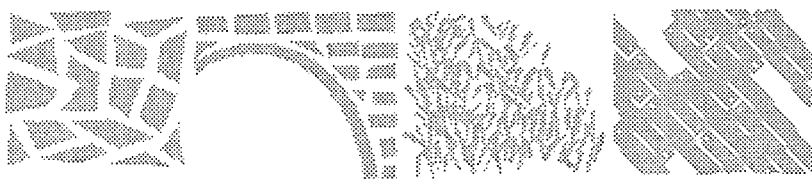
The sample for this study consisted of four elementary schools: Dellview Elementary, North East ISD; Heights Elementary, Laredo ISD; Nathan Adams Elementary, Dallas ISD; and Wesley Elementary, Houston ISD. These four schools were among 12 schools chosen as Reading Spotlight Schools in conjunction with the Texas Reading Initiative. To choose the initial 12 Reading Spotlight schools, the intent was to focus on schools that successfully teach reading to a diverse group of students. Each of the 12 Spotlight Schools met several criteria.

1. The percentage of third- and fourth-graders passing the reading section of TAAS in spring 1996 is 85% or higher.
2. The percentage of third- and fourth-graders taking TAAS is equal to or higher than the state average.
3. Each school has a diverse ethnic and socioeconomic student population.
4. Testing irregularities or accreditation problems are not present.
5. Site visits (conducted by TEA and ESC XIII staff) have shown that research-based practices are used.

From those schools, four schools were chosen for this study by considering two issues: location and differences in program design. The four schools profiled in this report are from different regions of Texas and use differing approaches to reading instruction. The four schools were selected by TEA staff and the Texas Mentor Network at ESC XIII.

Instruments for collecting data were designed prior to the site visits to ensure similar information would be attained at each school. The instruments—which include a teacher interview guide, a classroom observation guide and list of instructional codes, a principal interview guide, and instructional staff survey—were field tested at an Austin elementary school. Additional changes were made based upon the field test and feedback from a consultant to the Texas Reading Initiative. (The instruments are available from TCER.)

TCER staff visited each school for at least four days. Data were collected through structured interviews, observations, and surveys. The visits were not consecutive days—typically, the first site visit lasted two days with the second site visit



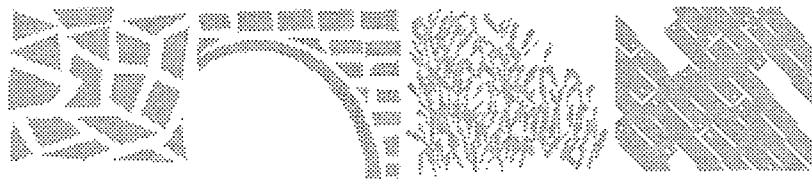
occurring later in the year. Site visits were carefully scheduled to avoid conflicting with testing schedules and other events that may have made the school day "less than normal."

Several data collection activities were employed at every school. All four principals were interviewed, and in all but one school, the interview was taped and then transcribed at a later date. The average length of a principal interview was about one and one-half hours. With one exception,⁶ at least four teachers were interviewed, and at one school ten teachers and administrators were interviewed. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with an average of five teachers interviewed at each school. Kindergarten through third-grade teachers were interviewed in times typically lasting from 45 minutes to an hour. Classroom observations in kindergarten through grade three ranged from 45 minutes to two hours; in a couple of schools individual teachers were observed more than once. A total of 55 observations were conducted, with an average of 13 observations per school. Teachers were informed of the observation ahead of time and were asked to teach a typical lesson. The instructional staff survey was given to all kindergarten through third-grade teachers. A survey of teachers yielded 72 completed questionnaires. Response rates ranged from 84% to 100%.⁷ Table 1 presents a summary of this information.

Table 1. Data Collection Activities

Data collection technique	Dellview	Heights	Adams	Wesley
Teacher interviews	2	4	4	10
Classroom observations	11	15	18	11
Instructional surveys	18	6	16	32

Instead of relying upon one source of information, this study gathered information from several sources. The use of multiple data collection activities and numerous sources enabled staff to triangulate data and improve the reliability of findings. Observations served as an additional check and helped confirm information collected through interviews.



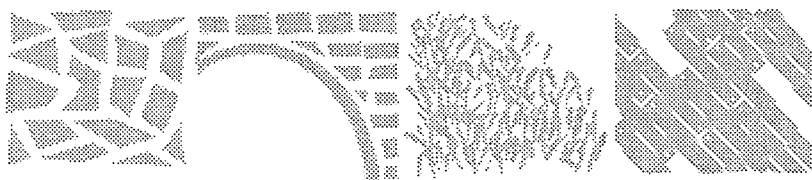
Data Analysis

To answer the study's research questions, we examined five teaching and learning variables and four school context variables to see what commonalities or patterns could be identified among the four schools. The five teaching and learning variables are instructional planning, curriculum, instructional strategies, classroom time, and assessment strategies. The four school context variables are evaluation practices, professional development, leadership, and school culture.

The first step in analyzing data was to reduce the data to a more manageable volume. To do this, relevant responses from individuals were classified according to the variables identified above and grouped by school. From this point, the data were read and reread for commonalities. These commonalities, which form the basis of this report's findings, were defined as those ideas that were true of a majority of schools or a majority of teachers. The goal of data analysis was to identify patterns among the schools that answered the research questions and addressed the variables of interest. Within the general findings, there may be differences among the schools, but these instances and exceptions are noted within the report.

As a check on the findings, a draft of the final report was sent to the four principals (who often passed the report along to teachers) and to people with the Texas Mentor Network, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts at the University of Texas, Austin. Their comments, whenever possible, have been incorporated into the report. Particular attention was paid to the responses by the principals and teachers at the Spotlight Schools.

The approach toward analyzing these case studies was descriptive. We were generally looking for patterns that described what was happening in these schools and for insights into how these schools had attained success and had qualified to be Reading Spotlight Schools. The findings that are identified and described within this report are on the positive side. Any problems or concerns that became apparent were, for the most part, ignored. We are not claiming that these schools are perfect; they continue to search for ways of improving instruction and student achievement.



Endnotes

¹All figures reported in the description are from AEIS 1995.

² Of the twelve Spotlight Schools, one was rated as “exemplary” and the others were rated as “recognized” through the Texas Education Agency accountability rating system. The four schools discussed here are rated as recognized. Since 1993, Texas public schools and districts are rated based upon several indicators. Those indicators include TAAS scores in reading, writing, and mathematics; the student dropout rate; and student attendance rate. The “recognized” rating means the following: (1) at least 75% of students passed each subject area, (2) 3.5% or fewer students dropped out of school, and (3) 94% attendance rate. For elementary schools, the most revealing measures are the TAAS scores.

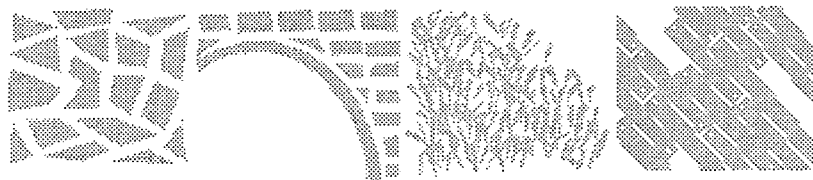
³ The information in parenthesis tells several things: who the information is from and how the information was collected (through interview, school documents, classroom observation, or fieldnotes). If the information was gathered during an interview, the question number is referenced. For instance, this parenthetical note (Benson, interview, D.Pln5) identifies the teacher (Benson), the source of information (interview), the school (D for Dellview), and the question number (Pln5). This pattern is used throughout the report. The names of teachers have been changed to protect their privacy. Principal's names have not been changed.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). Time spent teaching core academic subjects in elementary schools: Comparisons across community, school, teacher, and student characteristics. (NCES Publication No. 97-293). Washington, DC: Author.

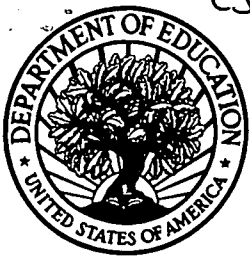
⁵ Wesley Elementary is a charter school within Houston ISD. As a charter school, Wesley successfully sought a waiver from the duty-free lunch requirements for teachers.

⁶ At Dellview Elementary, a kindergarten and second-grade teacher were interviewed. Scheduling difficulties prevented the additional two interviews.

⁷ Information needed to calculate a response rate for Dellview, namely the number of kindergarten through third-grade teachers, was not available.



CS013212



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Patterns of Success: Successful Pathways to Elementary Literacy in Texas Spotlight Schools.	
Author(s): Kerri L. Briggs with Kay Thomas	
Corporate Source: Texas Center for Educational Research	Publication Date: June 97

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1



The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A



The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B



Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for reproduction to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Signature: Kerri L. Briggs

Organization/Address: Texas Center for Educational Research
7703 North Lamar, AUSTIN, TX 78752

Sign here, → please



Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.
Research Analyst

Texas Center for Educational Research

Post Office Box 2947 • Austin, Texas 78768-2947
512-467-3632, ext. 6317 • Fax: 512-467-3618

7703 North Lamar • Austin, Texas 78752
800-580-8237 • E-mail: kerri.briggs@tasb.org
Web site: www.tasb.org/tcer/



III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management 1787 Agate Street 5207 University of Oregon Eugene, OR 97403-5207
--

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1100 West Street, 2nd Floor
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: <http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com>