RESEARCH for ACTION

Effective Organizational Practices for Middle and High School Grades

A Qualitative Study of What's Helping

Philadelphia Students Succeed in

Grades 6-12

Prepared for the
Accountability Review Council

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About this Report

Research for Action identified effective organizational practices used by better performing schools serving middle and high school students in the School District of Philadelphia. These practices are organized into three spheres: Conditions for Teaching, Student-Centered School Community, and Instructional Program. This report offers an explanation of each sphere, broad strategies and specific practices to enact the strategies, and case studies of schools that illustrate what the practices look like when put together effectively.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In summer 2008, the Accountability Review Council (ARC)[1] commissioned Research for Action to conduct a qualitative study that would shed light on the kinds of practices used in Philadelphia schools that were relatively successful compared to other schools serving roughly the same student population. Members of the ARC were eager to identify "best practices" used in schools that effectively serve middle and high school youth. This report appears during the first year of a new superintendent for Philadelphia's schools – Dr. Arlene Ackerman – and at a time when she and her staff, with community input, are creating a strategic plan. The five-member School Reform Commission (SRC) is also undergoing changes, as some members rotate off the Commission and new members join. It is our hope that this report will make a contribution at a critical juncture; that it will provide a knowledge base to inform district leaders' understanding of the job that needs to be done and the strategies and practices that they should encourage and support with resources – both human and material.

Focus of the Report

The report presents findings from qualitative research in 22 schools conducted during the period August 1, 2008 – December 31, 2008. It addresses the ARC's central question:

> *What **organizational practices** are contributing to the **relative success** of a set of Philadelphia schools that **serve substantial numbers of middle and high school students with multiple risk factors** compared to other schools serving roughly the same student population?*

This question drove the way in which we designed and carried out the research and are reporting the findings. For example, the schools in our sample are enjoying *relative success*; that is, they are performing well relative to other Philadelphia schools serving similar student populations. The designation "relative success" would not necessarily hold for the schools in the study if the sample had, for example, included schools from across the state or across a number of urban school districts.

In addition, all the schools in our sample served large numbers of low-income students, many of whom had additional risk factors. (We will discuss the sample in detail in the section that follows and Appendix A.) As the research question indicates, the ARC was interested in schools that were making progress with students who match the profile of the majority of Philadelphia students.

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[1] The ARC is an independent assessment and reporting center, created according to school reform legislation of 2001 to gauge the outcomes of the district's reform. The ARC evaluates and validates the results of student and school achievement and the district's reform initiatives, and summarizes its findings and recommendations in annual reports to the School Reform Commission.

The research focused on *organizational practices*.[2] We use the term "organizational" to denote practices that occur across the school or that contribute to conditions across the school. Our use of the term includes more than strictly managerial practices. In the case of some practices, school leaders – administrators and teacher leaders – are the primary actors; in other cases teachers, other staff, students and/or partners are important actors. A major goal of the study was to move beyond broad, abstract strategies to identify mid-level and even micro practices.

Organization of the Report

As we conducted fieldwork, the research team met to discuss themes that were emerging from the data. These discussions led us to organize the report around three spheres of school effort:

- Conditions for Teaching,
- Student-Centered School Community, and
- Instructional Program.

For each sphere, we identify five broad strategies and then list specific practices for enacting each strategy. We offer brief examples from the schools to illustrate the practices. The order in which we list the strategies and practices does not suggest a hierarchy of importance or a sequence for implementation. All of the practices are significant and they work best in concert with one another.

Each of the three areas of the report also includes a note on the obstacles that schools face within the focal sphere. Philadelphia public schools, including the schools in our sample, face systemic challenges, and some schools have more obstacles to overcome than others. Particularly at the high school level, the admissions selectivity of individual schools has resulted in a tiered system of neighborhood, citywide admissions and special admissions schools, which influences the types of challenges that different kinds of schools face.[3] Given their relative autonomy from many district mandates, charter schools also face a unique set of conditions which give charter schools an advantage over district schools. The size of the school is also a mediating factor with smaller schools at an advantage over larger schools as they allow for greater personalization for both adults and students, particularly at the high

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[2] This focus was dictated by limited resources; conducting a sufficient number of classroom observations to identify effective classroom practices was prohibitively expensive.

[3] Philadelphia's 15 special admission high schools are the most selective, requiring that students meet their individual admission criteria that often require a strong record of grades, test scores, behavior, and attendance in seventh grade. There is variation among the 16 citywide admission high schools, which include large Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools and small themed schools. Most citywide schools require that applicants attend an interview and meet three of four criteria related to grades, attendance, lateness, and behavior (but *not* test scores). Any student who does not apply or is not admitted to other schools is assigned to one of 31 neighborhood high schools, based on their middle school feeder pattern. (Students may apply to attend neighborhood schools other than that to which they are assigned; their admission at these schools is based on a lottery and the number of spots is determined by how under- or oversubscribed the schools are after enrolling students from the feeder pattern.) In the fall of their eighth grade year, students may choose to apply to up to five special admission, citywide admission, or neighborhood high schools. In a separate process, students may apply to any of the city's 22 public charter high schools, where (except for preference given to siblings of current students and to students whose parents helped develop that charter school) students are selected by random lottery from the pool of applicants. Given this study's focus on students with multiple risk factors, special admissions schools were excluded from our sample of schools. (See RFA's forthcoming 2009 report "Getting to High School" for more information on the high school selection process in Philadelphia.)

school level.[4] As a result of these differences between types of schools, particular supports and interventions may not have the same impact in two different schools, as external conditions influence the ease at which promising strategies and "best practices" can gain traction. For this reason, in this report we have included a note about the admissions and selection process before each highlighted case study school. In sum, schools with greater challenges may need greater supports and an influx of resources in order to achieve comparable student outcomes to other schools in the district.

Finally, for each sphere of effort, we present more nuanced portraits of two schools in which school stakeholders moved beyond simply applying a few good ideas and instead intentionally implemented a coherent combination of strategies aimed at improving student outcomes. The two schools are places where we would send you to see how the strategies and practices can work together in concerted ways to have a positive impact on student learning. These case studies offer descriptions of the interdependence and relatedness of the strategies, showing how they work synergistically in a specific context. They provide the kinds of detailed and coherent explanations of good practice that are useful to school practitioners and district decision makers because they offer concrete, attainable images for school-based practitioners and the actors whose job it is to support them.

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[4] See RFA's forthcoming 2009 report, *Going Small: Public/Private Collaboration in Restructuring High School Education in Philadelphia.*

Research Methods

This study did not use an experimental design, and therefore did not isolate individual variables and draw linear causal connections between them and desired outcomes. Instead, in the tradition of qualitative research, our study offers evidence that suggests explanation. Below and in the appendices to the report, we describe in detail how we collected our data and our analytical approach, thus making the rigor of our process visible. Another test of the credibility will come as those familiar with urban middle and high schools read and assess our findings.

Creating the Sample

As discussed in our introduction, the central research question for this study is:

> *What organizational practices are contributing to the relative success of a set of Philadelphia schools that serve substantial numbers of middle and high school students with multiple risk factors compared to other schools serving roughly the same student population?*

To answer this question, we developed what in qualitative research is known as a purposeful sample (Patton, 1987) in consultation with district staff in the Office of Accountability and Assessment, Dr. Ron Zimmer formerly of RAND Corporation and Dr. Kenneth Wong of Brown University. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to generate knowledge from information-rich cases "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the evaluation" (Patton, 1987, p. 52). Given the study's goal of identifying the kinds of organizational practices employed by better performing schools, we sought schools that would generate lessons relevant to improving more typical programs/practices. Within the tradition of purposeful sampling, this is known as extreme case sampling.

We chose better performing schools that served significant numbers of students with multiple risk factors, with a particular focus on schools that serve a large majority of low-income students, which is true of the majority of schools in the district. Because of this stipulation, we eliminated middle grades schools and high schools with the most selective admissions policies, defined as schools in which students need to have scored in the 88th percentile or above on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) as one requirement for admission. This assessment, administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), is used in the No Child Left Behind Accountability System as the primary determinant of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

There were two achievement criteria used to select middle grades schools:

- Achievement growth trajectory of schools as determined by Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) data[5]
- Percentage of students scoring Proficient/Advanced on PSSA in math and reading

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[5] PVAAS is a valued added program that is applied to all schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvanis. PVAAS is the analysis of current and past PSSA results to produce measures of progress at the school, grade, and student levels. For further information, see http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t/lib/a_and_t/PVAAS-FAQs.pdf.

There were four achievement criteria used to select high schools:

- Achievement level using mean NCE[6]
- Graduation rate
- Ninth grade promotion rate
- Overall rank among district and charter schools

Please see Appendix A for more detailed information about each of these criteria and how the sample schools were selected.

To achieve a variation in the schools that mirrored school differences across the district, we also looked to add specific kinds of schools including:

- schools that varied in their governance models (including schools managed by educational management organizations, charter schools, and regular district schools);
- schools that varied in their admissions criteria (applied to high schools only);
- schools that varied in their racial composition (from racially isolated schools[7] to less racially isolated);
- schools with racial and ethnic diversity[8] (including schools with a significant ELL population); and
- schools that varied in their poverty level. It was important to have some schools with extreme poverty.[9]

Middle Grades Schools[10]: Our sample includes 8 better performing middle grades schools: 4 district schools, 3 EMO schools and 1 charter school, 3 racially and ethnically diverse schools, 5 racially isolated schools, and 1 school with extreme poverty.

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[6] The NCE indicates the position of a scaled score on a specific reference scale. It can be used to measure gains over time on the PSSA standardized test.

[7] The term *racially isolated* comes from a Desegregation (Commonwealth Court) lawsuit in which one race group comprises more than 90% of the student population in the school.

[8] We define racially and ethnically diverse schools as those schools labeled either as a "mixed minority school" under a Desegregation (Commonwealth Court) lawsuit in which no race comprises more than 90% of the student population but white students account for 10% or less of the student population" or a "mixed minority/white" school in which "no race represents more than 90% of the student population, with white students comprising more than 10% of the student population." Our sample includes both "mixed minority" and "mixed minority/white" schools.

[9] Defined as school in which more than 90% of the student population qualifies for free/reduced lunch.

[10] Under the administration of CEO Paul Vallas, the district restructured elementary and middle schools to create K-8 schools. Vallas believed that K-8 schools were more effective than traditional middle schools. The majority of middle grades schools are K-8 schools. Our sample includes a preponderance of K-8 schools and one middle school.

High Schools: Our sample includes 9 better performing high schools: 1 special admission school, 1 citywide admission school, 3 neighborhood schools, and 4 charter schools,[11] 5 racially and ethnically diverse schools, and 4 racially isolated schools.

In addition to our sample of better performing schools, we also selected a small sample of lower performing schools. We did not select lower performing schools as a strict comparison group. Instead, our purpose was to provide context for our better performing schools. To select our lower performing schools, we identified middle grades schools that showed low or negative growth across grades, subject areas and years using PVAAS data. Similarly, we selected high schools that had an NCE mean of 25 or lower. We ended with a sample of 2 lower performing middle grades schools and 3 lower performing high schools.

The tables below include information on the schools that remained in the sample, after we applied the two-step decision making process. For further detail on the sampling process as well as demographic and achievement profiles of the sample schools, see Appendix A.

Table 1: Sample schools by organizational structure and governance model

Better Performing Schools

Organizational Structure	District Managed	EMO	Charter
Middle grades	4	3	1
High schools	5	0	4*

* One high school charter serves grades K-12.

Lower performing Schools

Organizational Structure	District Managed	EMO	Charter
Middle grades	0	0	2**
High schools	3	0	0

** One middle grades charter serves grades K-12.

Qualitative Research in the Schools

Literature Review

Before we began the research in schools, we reviewed the literature on characteristics and practices of middle grades and high schools judged to be effectively serving low-income youth. We read and abstracted 25 studies. The goal was to cull ideas generated by these research projects about: methods, data analysis, and findings. We looked to see how the findings of these studies overlapped and differed and what categorization schema researchers had developed to present their findings. We used these studies to inform the development of our

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[11] A recent report from the RAND Corporation found that there is "a relatively small positive effect for charter high schools and a small negative effect for charter primary schools in both math and reading" (Zimmer, et al., 2008, p. 22). Our search for charter schools meeting the achievement criteria reflect and support this finding. There were many more charter high schools meeting our criteria than charter middle grades schools meeting our criteria. This is why our middle grades sample only includes 1 charter school while our high school sample includes 4 charter high schools.

interview and observation protocols and early development of analytic codes (recurring themes found in the data set). As we will describe below, we moved back and forth between the literature and the data that we were collecting in schools in an iterative process of refining protocols and analytic codes.

Data Collection in Schools

Our research design called for three rounds of fieldwork in each school, with analytical meetings between each round to refine protocols and codes. We conducted the research in teams of two and sometimes three researchers. One researcher took responsibility for becoming the primary source of expertise about each school with responsibility for the quality of the data and deep familiarity with the site. The first round occurred in August and the early weeks of September; the second in mid-October; and, the third in late November and early December of 2008. Each round took us more deeply into the operations of the school and exposed us to an increasing number of perspectives on the overall research question.

In the first round, we conducted an in-depth interview with the school administrator. In many cases, these interviews approached two hours. In some, another school leader was also present. Almost all of the interviews occurred before the opening of school and therefore were less subject to the interruptions from staff, students, parents, and district officials that so typify the life of a school leader. They provided the opportunity for the administrator to reflect on areas of effort in the past three years, bringing the school's history up to the present moment. During this interview, we asked the administrators to list and explain two or three efforts in the school that they felt were responsible for improving student achievement. We asked about the school's academic and instructional culture, about the structure, makeup and role of the leadership team and about human capital and professional development at the school.

In addition, during this first round we also conducted an observation of a school event that was an important part of the opening of school: for example, student orientations, professional development meetings for staff, and parent nights. These observations provided information about the messages that leaders implicitly and explicitly communicated about the school to staff, parents, and students and how key players interacted with one another.

In the second round of fieldwork, we focused on interviewing school leaders beyond the head administrator. This was important because it offered confirmation/disconfirmation on what we had learned during round one. It provided the opportunity to probe more deeply into the micro-practices of these additional school leaders who often played central roles in the implementation of school improvement strategies, for example the support of new teachers, school scheduling, and organization and interpretation of student performance data. These interviews focused on the school culture, supports for students, the academic and instructional program, the policies surrounding human capital and professional development and the culture and role of the leadership team. Teacher leaders were asked to fill out a questionnaire answering how they work with other teachers and with students. The results of this questionnaire are provided in Appendix B.

In the third round, we observed and interviewed at least two teachers who had been nominated by school leaders as exemplifying what their school viewed as good teaching. We used these interviews and observations to learn how organizational practices identified by

school leaders had influenced teachers and teachers' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. In this last round of fieldwork, research teams also followed up on loose ends – collecting documents that had been mentioned in interviews, following up on unanswered questions, and confusing data.

Data Management and Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed and these transcriptions were reviewed by team leaders for accuracy and completeness. All observations were written up. In all, we interviewed 96 school staff and conducted 46 observations of school events and classroom lessons. The tables below show the staff we interviewed and the events we observed.

Table 2: Data collected during the study

Staff Interviewed	Middle School	High School	Total
Administrators	8	7	15
School Leaders	21	26	47
Classroom Teacher	15	19	34

Type of School Event	Middle School	High School	Total
Professional Development Session	3	4	7
Student Orientation	-	5	5
Parent Night	1	-	1
Classroom Visits	15	19	34

During the period between rounds of fieldwork, the whole research team (7 members) met. We discussed the quality and kinds of data that our protocols were eliciting and made adjustments where necessary. We also identified emerging themes across the 22 schools. These discussions informed our eventual decision to organize our report around the three spheres of Conditions for Teaching and Learning, School Community, and Instructional Program. It also became clear that the spheres, strategies, and practices applied equally across the different school grade organizations – middle grades and high school. After each round of fieldwork, school research teams also met individually to customize the interview and observation protocols to follow up on important lines of inquiry for its school.

The data for each school were organized around the three spheres of school effort by the school research teams. A lead researcher then took responsibility for analyzing the data for one sphere and identifying the key strategies and practices for that area. Subsequent analytic meetings focused on the whole team reviewing the work and debating the categories, strategies, and practices. After several such meetings, the team identified which schools best exemplified each of the three areas and would serve as the case study schools. School teams assumed responsibility for writing up the case studies.

Sphere A: Conditions for Teaching

Increasingly, education reformers have looked for ways to ensure that high quality teaching occurs in every classroom. This makes good sense in light of the growing body of evidence that teaching quality – more than any other factor – affects the size of student achievement gains (Olson, 2003; Wayne and Youngs, 2003; Ferguson and Brown, 2000; Sanders, 1998; Monk, 1994).

In this section we identify five strategies that the better performing schools in our study used to create school conditions that support good teaching. The strategies in this sphere of school effort relate to establishing optimum conditions for teaching and include recruiting, hiring, assigning, supporting, assessing and retaining good teachers. The five strategies are:

> **Strategy A1:** Staff built a shared, concrete vision of good teaching.
>
> **Strategy A2:** Leaders provided high quality professional learning opportunities focused on a common curriculum, the school vision of good teaching, and responsiveness to student needs as determined by student performance data.
>
> **Strategy A3:** Leaders designed daily, weekly, and yearly schedules and other important structures that supported professional learning and collaboration within and across formal instructional communities.
>
> **Strategy A4:** Leaders recruited a strong pool of applicants, developed a rigorous hiring process, and assigned teachers where they could make the greatest impact.
>
> **Strategy A5:** Principals built a strong leadership team focused on creating a professional environment that supported teacher learning, valued teacher input, and fostered teacher trust and morale.

Research has shown that schools are perhaps the most important site for teacher learning (Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, and Cean, 2003; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; Spillane and Thompson 1997). Hence, identifying the practices related to creating learning opportunities for all teachers that cultivate continuous professional growth around a shared vision of teaching is essential. Further, instructional communities inside schools can help teachers to cultivate open relationships that foster the inquiry and critical reflection on practice that make constructive change possible (Supovitz and Christman, 2003; Scribner, Madrone, and Hager, 2000; Kruse, Louis, and Bryk, 1995). Given the importance of school context, the research on school leadership has recently focused on "learning leaders" and emphasized the importance of teacher as well as administrative leaders (DuFour, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Smylie and Hart, 1999). Our research sought to identify the practices related to building a strong leadership team that would establish a school environment focused on the ongoing professional learning of all staff and on building relationships of trust that would foster commitment to the school (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Obstacles to Creating Positive School Conditions for Teaching

School staff faced multiple obstacles as they sought to establish the organizational conditions that would promote quality teaching. While the better performing schools in our sample had overcome more obstacles than the lower performing schools, impediments remained in all of the schools. Some obstacles were more salient for particular kinds of schools. We do not present an exhaustive list of the challenges schools faced as they worked to create a positive environment for professional learning. However, we do offer examples that we encountered in numerous schools.

District-managed and EMO schools were disadvantaged by well-documented district recruiting and hiring practices that resulted in too many teaching vacancies across the system and inequitable distribution of highly qualified teachers (with high poverty schools having less qualified and experienced teachers). The district/PFT contract as well as district policies[12] also exacerbated district and EMO school leaders' staffing challenges and limited schools' autonomy in such things as establishing longer school days that would support more staff planning and professional development time.

Unpredictable funding levels plagued all of the schools, often making it extremely difficult and frustrating for school leaders and faculty to plan ahead. Also, high turnover at both the administrative and faculty level was a significant impediment for schools, making it difficult for supportive practices to gain sufficient traction. In the lower performing schools, in particular, unexpected leadership turnover left staff with the sense of perpetually starting over. At one lower performing district high school, a school leader noted that the school has a high rate of teacher turnover, especially among the experienced teachers who exercised their right to transfer to "better schools." As a result, finding mentors for the newer teachers has been difficult. An administrator reflected, "We have a lot of newer teachers who are not the lifelong want-to-be teachers; they just discovered it, so it's on the job training for them. We're not able to provide mentoring because we just don't have the staff."

The lack of capacity at multiple levels also undermined improvement efforts. Roster chairs in some schools did not know how to create the kinds of schedules that support instructional learning communities. For example, one lower performing district high school was unable to build common planning time into the daily or weekly schedules. The principal explained, "We don't really have the opportunity within the school day to train teachers or share best practices. … [Common planning time] is almost impossible because there's so much else you have to take into account." At other district lower performing schools, leaders did not know how to make the most of new contract provisions for site-based selection of teachers. Some teacher leaders did not have the content and pedagogical expertise needed to help teachers take students to the next level of achievement.

Finally, the multiple levers of accountability, incentives, and support did not always work in concert to maximize the performance of school leaders in the sphere of creating school conditions for quality teaching.

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[12] For example, in one of our schools, a position for music teacher remained unfilled because the only available candidates would upset the racial balance of the faculty.

Below, we identify and describe the strategies that were making a difference for the better performing schools.

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Strategy A1: Staff built a shared, concrete vision of good teaching

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Key Practices and School Examples

- **Staff developed rubrics aligned with the school vision for good teaching and used them to provide teachers feedback about their instruction.**

  The principal explained that, "Teachers would ask me, 'What is it that you're looking for [when you visit my classroom]?' Teachers wanted us to be specific." And so, school leaders developed a rubric that outlined specific areas of classroom instruction that they look for during observations. Each teacher is observed informally seven times a year and formally, two times. The principal said, "After a walk-through, I meet with a teacher about what I saw. I look for one thing one month, then another thing the next month." -Charter high school

  Over the past several years, school leaders have developed what they call "Instructional Standards." The standards serve as the framework for classroom observations, both formal and informal. There are four categories -- Objective-Driven Lesson, Instruction, Classroom Systems, and Student Motivation -- and a total of 35 standards that are quite specific. (e.g., For example, under Student Motivation, one of the 9 objectives includes: "A minimum ratio of 3 positive comments to 1 negative comment is employed. Students are always addressed by name." A school leader explained, "So we've really been able to define what good instruction looks like. And we can help people use this as a tool, to say this is how it is defined, and here is how we need to do it." -Charter high school

- **They created a structured system for monitoring instruction and providing teachers with feedback.**

  Teachers reported that the walk-through process was an important component in their professional learning. The math teacher leader described the walk-through as "two plusses and a push. For example, when you are focusing on how the teacher is differentiating instruction, you say 'This is what I saw you doing to differentiate instruction. And here's another thing you did to differentiate. Now just add this third thing also.'" -District middle grades

  At this high school, leaders were in and out of classrooms constantly and provided quick feedback in brief interactions after the class and by email. The principal explained that these visits reinforced accountability for good teaching. In addition, each teacher was formally observed three times a year as part of the performance review process. Rubrics were used for the observations and teachers were rewarded monetarily for improved teaching performance. -Charter high school

- **They read and discussed a common book about instruction and strategized about how to put suggested practices to work in classrooms.** *(Some of the books mentioned included: The First Days of School, Secrets of the Teenage Brain, Highly Effective Tools for Teaching Writing and Teaching for Mastery.)*

At an elementary school where the middle grades were being added, the whole faculty read <u>Secrets of the Teenage Brain</u>. The principal explained that one of the goals was for teachers "to learn that they shouldn't take the words and actions of these early adolescents personally." -EMO middle grades

At a middle school, the faculty read <u>Highly Effective Tools for Teaching Writing</u> and then invited the book's author to come lead professional development sessions and consult with individual teachers. -District middle grades

> **Strategy A2:** Leaders provided high quality professional learning opportunities focused on a common curriculum, the school vision of good teaching, and responsiveness to student needs as determined by student performance data

Key Practices and School Examples

- **They developed or accessed high quality professional development that was custom-tailored to both student needs (based on data) and faculty strengths and weaknesses (based on student performance data and teacher input).**

  This school partnered with Johns Hopkins University to bring the Reading Edge literacy program to the school. The partnership provided 10 staff with week-long training sessions in the summer and monthly support to help teachers provide lessons that are appropriate to the students' reading levels. Each year, the program scaled up adding 10 additional teachers. The literacy skills that the students learned were transferrable to other classes across the curriculum. -District high school

  The teacher leaders at this district middle school talked of "tweaking" the district-scripted professional development to suit the needs of the school. Leaders also sought input from the faculty by asking teachers to submit recommendations they thought would be useful for the year. -District middle grades

  Teachers and teacher leaders described how their school had changed its approach to professional development, making it more frequent and more customized to individual teachers. The academic coach explained, "It's more individualized professional development – which helps. First, we look at the data and explore strategies for individual students. We've learned that you need to hit the ground running and that once-a-month support is just not cutting it. As academic coaches, we see how teachers are implementing new learnings and we work with them to develop their skills. Teachers and teaching assistants learn strategies, then go into the classrooms and work on them. Then they report back on how it's going at the next week's professional development." -Charter middle grades

- **They modeled and demonstrated rigorous and effective instruction so that teachers had concrete images of what it looked like.**

  The principal and vice principal emphasized how important it is for faculty to see that school leaders know how to teach well. And so, they modeled effective teaching in grade group meetings and whole faculty sessions. The vice principal explained, "With the staff, we did extensive professional development. We showed them what rigorous instruction meant. We would show them, demonstrate it, and find ways to help them with it. They were surprised that we knew how to teach well." -EMO middle grades

  A teacher leader described her job as that of "a mentor and friend". She informally observed teachers and offered feedback and advice. She helped develop lesson plans with struggling teachers during their

prep time. If necessary, the teacher leader co-taught lessons in order to show the teacher the type of instruction the administrators looked for. -Charter high school

Voluntary "best practices" meetings were held regularly before school. Teachers demonstrated strategies that they had found successful in the classroom. These were highly popular, especially among new teachers. -District middle grades.

Strategy A3: Leaders designed daily, weekly, and yearly schedules and other important structures that supported professional learning and collaboration within and across formal instructional communities.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **They established common planning times for formal instructional communities such as grade groups, subject areas, and leadership teams and as much release time as possible for teacher leaders so that they could work with teachers in their classrooms.**

    In order to schedule both grade group and subject area meetings, teachers were paid to give up one prep period per week. -District middle grades

    *This school "banked time," lengthening instructional time beyond the state requirement on some days, so that on other days students could be dismissed early and the faculty could meet. Leaders felt that this practice helped teachers "to check in with people and help them feel connected… to share and debrief."
    -District high school*

    Weekly faculty meetings, special education department meetings, and emotional support team meetings were built into the day. Wednesdays were half days for students so teachers could meet in teams by grade and by content area. It was also common for teachers to meet informally, after school or during preparation time. -Charter middle school

    This school had a longer school day, so that time could be built in for leadership and grade teams to meet twice weekly. -Charter middle grades

    The three lead teachers had five released periods each week. The math coordinator had five periods released. The reading coordinator and school growth teacher were fully released. -District middle grades

- **Teacher leaders used their released time for working directly with classroom teachers – modeling lessons, planning, providing curriculum resources, coaching (observing and providing feedback), leading grade group and subject area meetings, and reviewing student data.**

    Teacher leaders were fully released from classroom teaching responsibilities. They coached teachers in their classrooms, gathered curriculum support materials for teachers and led weekly subject area meetings and grade group meetings. -District middle school

Teacher leaders helped other teachers by modeling or demonstrating a lesson, observing lessons and then giving feedback afterwards. While the teacher leaders did not have release time, other teachers were available to cover their classes when necessary. -Charter high school

A teacher leader explained that he tracked and posted student data and created incentives for good performance. He explained, "I track attendance and cuts, student grades and their involvement in extracurricular activities." The students are divided into several competing "colleges," and students in the college with the best record in each of these categories get prizes. -District high school

- **The staff worked collaboratively on developing innovative curricula, visiting one another's classrooms and providing feedback, and formally and informally supporting new teachers.**

Interdisciplinary collaborative lesson planning and teaching were encouraged. For example, the English and History teachers worked on Greek mythology lessons together. The eleventh grade Instructional Leader commented on the impact this has on teachers and students: "Facilitators [teachers] are more informed; the outcome in terms of collaboration really provides for the student getting the full impact of the class rather than just being, 'Ok, that's history over there, math over here.' The students start to see that this is a collaborative effort among teachers, providing you the resources for an excellent education." -Charter high school

This school established a non-evaluative peer visitation program for teachers. The Vice Principal for Instruction explained, "We encourage peer observations. Our goal is that teachers do one 30 minute observation of another teacher each semester. But they're also doing shorter ones whenever they can." A faculty member coordinates this program of peer observations, a further sign teachers are taking charge of their own professional learning. The VP emphasized that a culture of "open doors" permeated the school, "This is not a place where people are sitting behind desks. Teachers are constantly getting feedback. [Teachers and administrators] are constantly in and out of classrooms, and I think there is that sense of accountability, and that comes from our superiors down to us, from us to our teaching staff and from our teachers to the students." -Charter high school

This school established a two-year mentor program for new teachers. Mentors observed their new teachers and provided feedback. The school also established a peer observation program. The observer used a rubric for the observation and then provided non-evaluative feedback to the teacher. -Charter high school

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Strategy A4: Leaders recruited a strong pool of applicants, developed a rigorous hiring process, and assigned teachers where they could make the greatest impact.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **School leaders worked to recruit and retain strong and effective teachers. They wanted to know that the teachers they hired would be successful. Site selection and other processes allowed schools to be selective in hiring.**

The principal and teacher leaders called all of the successful middle grades teachers that they knew and recruited them to come to their school which was adding the middle grades. -EMO middle grades

This school has capitalized on full site selection for the past several years. The principal and teacher leaders credited site selection with the school's ability to build strong teaching teams. At this school, the principal's leadership approach was on building distributed leadership, making certain that leadership responsibilities were spread across many staff members and that all teachers and staff played a role in the decision-making processes at the school. He emphasized that the ability to choose a strong team of teachers and leaders has facilitated putting distributed leadership into practice. He trusts his team members to make good decisions in the areas for which they're responsible and when he is not in the building. The school's EMO has also made a contribution to leadership development in the school, getting teacher leaders involved in teacher networks and continued learning opportunities.   -EMO middle grades

The hiring process was very specific and collaborative. Candidates were required to demonstrate they were qualified and fit the culture of the school. The principal said, "We interview by team – myself, academic coaches and teacher. We made the decision as a team. The candidate then has to do a demonstration of a lesson which we observe and grade by the rubric." This school often hired teachers they were familiar with; teachers who had been in the school as student teachers. -Charter middle grades

Leaders looked for a particular profile when they were hiring teachers: 1-5 years of experience, idealistic, believe students can achieve, are amenable to training, and believe in a business model not a union model. This profile reflected a core belief that the CEO described, "Schools are organizations and adults need to be organized and motivated and work efficiently and effectively in order to be successful. That's been one of our operating principles. [Our school is] more management focused, measuring results." -Charter high school

- **Assigned teachers strategically based on school goals and student needs, rather than teacher preference.**

The principal asked a successful third grade teacher who was certified in the middle grades to move to the seventh grade. While the teacher was reluctant, she also recognized that she could make a real difference with those seventh graders and that it was something that she wanted to do for the school. -EMO middle grades

The principal encouraged the strongest teachers to teach in Saturday School, a program for students who were not doing well in their courses. -Charter high school

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Strategy A5: Principals built a strong leadership team focused on creating a professional environment that supported teacher learning, valued teacher input, and built teacher trust and morale.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **Key Practice: The principal perceived him/herself as a leader of leaders and knew how to practice distributed leadership.**

The school had seven leadership positions plus the principal and assistant principal, all of whom met weekly or biweekly. The principal believed that the budget trade-offs that were necessary to "buy" this

non-classroom personnel was worth it. He saw developing these leaders as individuals and a team as central to his job and set high expectations for their role in making school a positive environment for teachers and students. -District middle grades

The Assistant Principal explained, "We have had a strong leadership team in place for a long time. This has helped the school have continuity and keep the momentum going even when we've had a change in principals." -District middle grades

Lead teachers met with their team twice a week (one formal meeting; one informal, usually over lunch). Meetings were used to go over PSSA results and other data. -Charter high school

- **Key Practice: School leaders provided support to teachers that made their jobs easier.**

Teacher leaders compiled a portfolio of lessons, projects and assignments that other teachers could use. This portfolio was online so that any teacher could access it, download files and upload or modify any new files. -District high school

The principal and leadership team were willing to run around making copies, print material and find resources for the teachers. The principal explained that the teacher's job is to teach, so her job was to help teachers maximize their time. She and other school leaders recognized that in order for teachers to meet the needs of students, the needs of teachers need to be met as well. "If to get your job done, which is to educate children, you need this and this, then our role as administrators is to get what you need." One instructional leader reflected on the support of the CEO and the principal. "They offer an unprecedented amount of support to their staff. I can go and talk about personal issues and professional issues and get what I need." -Charter middle grades

The principal talked about how important it was to build morale in a school where there had been leadership churn for several years. He and his leadership team instituted monthly "Focus Fridays." Teachers met in grade groups with the principal for an hour and then were free for an hour to do whatever they needed to do – plan lessons, prepare bulletin boards, etc. The principal believed Focus Fridays helped prevent burn out. The leadership team also believed that teachers needed celebrations. When the school made AYP, the leadership team threw a big party for the whole staff. There was a plentiful buffet, singing, and games. -EMO middle grades

- **Key Practice: School leaders valued and sought teacher input as a way to bring forward the best ideas, build teacher ownership of new initiatives, and strengthen teachers' commitment to the school.**

A teacher commented, "The leadership is just willing to listen, open to suggestions and then coming back to you with very concrete reasons for why this would work or wouldn't work. So you're part of the whole thing." -Charter high school

At this school, teachers' ideas and initiatives are welcomed and respected. For example, teachers decided that they wanted to make changes to how the space in the building was used and allocated. Teachers brought the idea to administrators, who approved it. Teachers then led the process of implementing the change, creating the plan on how to move all parties involved. -District high school

Putting It All Together: The Case of Calder Middle School[13]

School Context: Calder Middle School has one feeder elementary school. Both schools are in the same neighborhood, and administrators at the two schools regularly take the initiative to meet together for professional development. Because of their close relationship with staff at the feeder school, administrators at Calder are successful at getting completed student data forms on all of their incoming students from the elementary school counselor, which assists Calder faculty in tracking students' academic progress and other needs.

At Calder Middle School, teachers systematically learn from one another and from long-standing external partners. A lead teacher provides this example: "If one class scored really well [on Benchmark assessments], we like to find out why and how. We want to know what that teacher was doing, so we ask the teacher to model the lesson and share it with the rest of the staff." Since its inception in the early 1990's, Calder has valued the professional development of teachers and embraced resources that build teachers' professional expertise. Building upon nearly two decades of school staff's active participation in professional learning opportunities, school leaders are able to capitalize upon the strengths of their faculty to build a concrete vision of good teaching.

School leaders build a *shared vision of good teaching* through job-embedded professional learning. They ask teachers to model good instruction for one another. Each year, they also select a book on education for teachers to read over the summer, and then invite the author to speak. "It's great for motivating the staff," says an administrator. In addition, school leaders support a group of teachers who volunteered to run a "Best Practices Group" after school. These meetings are scheduled as a result of teachers' initiative, whenever they want to share teaching strategies.

School leaders also draw on the professional expertise of partner organizations to *provide high quality professional learning opportunities focused on the school's vision of good teaching*. Calder has a history of successfully partnering with universities and educational reform organizations to support the professional learning of faculty and staff. For example, a math expert from a university partner comes to the school regularly. "She comes in four times a month—sometimes more—to work with our math teachers and students," notes a teacher leader. This individual is also a former Calder faculty member, which aids continuity. Such partnerships are highly valued by teachers and are one reason many teachers report that the school is a supportive place to teach. For their part, administrators are dedicated to securing grant money to keep such partnerships going because they have observed the partnerships to have a direct and positive impact on teaching quality.

To further support teachers, administrators have *designed schedules and structures that encourage professional learning and collaboration*. They are willing to put time and resources towards developing professional learning communities. In order to have content area meetings, "we agreed to using one prep and we pay them for this time," explains a teacher leader. Teacher

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[13] Pseudonyms are used for all case study schools in this report in order to assure the confidentiality of the schools and the persons interviewed for this report. For the sake of consistency, all pseudonyms are based on the last names of famous Philadelphians. However, the use of pseudonyms is not intended to allude to specific persons or to their personal characteristics. Similarly, no association is implied with schools by these names in other cities.

leaders convene weekly content area meetings for each grade level. One teacher leader explains that when she came to Calder a few years ago, "Everything was divided into professional learning communities. It was the dynamic of the school. All sixth grade teachers were a team, and they could have a common prep and would have meetings together, to figure out the best ways to help students in their grade level. Now we can spend more time with our content area as well. It helps." Teachers in special education, music and art also meet weekly. The meetings have been key to Calder's success at building a shared understanding of good teaching.

Everything was divided into professional learning communities. It was the dynamic of the school.

–Teacher Leader

Contributing to the culture of collaboration, Calder has developed a teacher leader role that supports professional learning. In the past four years, the teacher leader position has been strengthened by increasing amounts of release time to focus on improving the quality of teaching school-wide. Teacher leaders in math and literacy, the areas tested on the PSSA, are fully released from classroom teaching in 2008-09. Teacher leaders use this time to work with classroom teachers in several ways. They visit classrooms to do peer observations; they co-teach or team teach with other faculty; they research instructional strategies and provide lesson planning ideas; they conduct demonstration lessons; and they "pull out" special education students and/or struggling students for individual instruction. One teacher leader explains, "If students are doing poorly on a particular skill, we'll do a lesson on that. When we see a weakness [in students' skills], we go in and take care of it right away," by modeling skills to both the students and the teacher. Teacher leaders also review Benchmark assessments, reading levels, and other kinds of data every few weeks to assess teacher effectiveness in the content areas.

An important component to Calder's continuing success is that school leaders have taken advantage of site selection to *recruit a strong pool of applicants and develop a rigorous hiring process.* The school has had site selection for the past five years, and used it to achieve a 100% highly qualified staff. However, administrators still face some challenges in staffing due to particular district policies and procedures which can overrule school-level hiring decisions. The school currently has some vacancies as a result. Despite these constraints, the leadership has been able to maintain a commitment to a hiring strategy that will best serve its students. For example, when school leadership was recently in transition, a new leader was chosen from one of the feeder schools, thereby providing continuity for students.

Ultimately, Calder's commitment to improving the quality of teaching begins with the school's *leadership team, which focuses on creating an environment that supports teacher learning and values teacher input.* A veteran teacher noted that Calder's most recent principal, "had a strong focus on the professional development of teachers. He was bound and determined that we would know what was going on in the educational community in the U.S. So I've become more knowledgeable in my subject area in the past five years." Teachers clearly value administrators' emphasis on professional learning. Additionally, teachers value the role of their teacher leaders, and hope to see supportive structures such as a fully released teacher leaders and common planning time continue. Strong leadership has created a culture that encourages professional learning and develops the conditions for high quality teaching.

Putting It All Together: The Case of Malone Charter Middle School

School Context: As a charter school, Malone admits students through a lottery. Before the lottery, school leaders meet with potential students and their families. These interviews allow the families to learn about the school's philosophy and decide if it would work for their child. They also allow school leaders to explain what is expected of students and parents at the school and to say whether they think the school would be a good match. Both the student and parents or guardians must sign a contract to be admitted, which includes a requirement for parents to attend monthly meetings and various requirements for student behavior.

After his school did not make AYP two years ago, the principal of Malone Charter Middle School recalls that school leaders realized they needed to pay more attention to classroom instruction: "We had to change the way we do things, we had to have more teacher observations." Adopting the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), a state funded system of observations and supports, allowed school staff to unite around a *concrete vision of good teaching.* Now, the principal says, "I have master teachers and mentor teachers not just going into classrooms to say, 'I gotcha'…TAP helped us to see that when somebody comes into your space, it is actually to help you and then we start a dialogue."

> **I have master teachers and mentor teachers not just going into classrooms to say, 'I gotcha'…TAP helped us to see that when somebody comes into your space, it is actually to help you and then we start a dialogue. –Administrator**

TAP's detailed classroom observation rubric provides the conceptual framework and vocabulary for such a dialogue. While rubrics at some schools sit on a shelf, at Malone they are put to use daily. A blown-up version covers one wall in the master teachers' office and the entire staff has a working understanding of it. The rubric breaks down "good teaching" into distinct components organized around "Teaching Skills, Knowledge, and Accountability Standards." School leaders, including the master teachers, mentor teachers, and principal himself are all "TAP certified," which involves intense training. Professional development during the first few months of school focuses on helping the whole faculty internalize the rubric. As a master teacher explains, "We tell everybody, 'know the rubric, sleep with it, focus on it, because that is what we are going to observe you on.'" Professional development during the first few months of school focuses on helping the whole faculty internalize the rubric. These professional development sessions are the kind of *high quality professional learning opportunities focused on the school vision of good teaching* that have a direct impact on the quality of teaching.

Classroom observations occur regularly. In addition to informal drop-ins, teachers are formally observed four times per year. The observation includes:

- a pre-conference in which the teacher explains her lesson plan and the observer offers feedback,
- a scripted observation between 30 and 90 minutes long ,
- a post-conference in which the observer gives the teacher a score based on the rubric and identifies areas for "reinforcement" and "refinement."

The rubric's common language provides a powerful learning tool. For example, a master teacher described one interaction with a teacher in which, "I asked him to do some self reflection. I said, 'Look at that area of the rubric and grade yourself,' and I could just see something click for him."

The quantity and structure of these observations allow administrators and faculty to communicate constantly about a shared vision of good teaching. Although the principal and master teacher acknowledge the program is a lot of work, they believe using TAP and focusing on instruction have brought results. They note that teachers are up from behind their desks and using a variety of instructional strategies: "We saw students getting it in a way they weren't before." As a teacher observes, TAP "verbalizes all of the things we should be doing so we know to include them in what we do….It makes us more conscious of what we need to do."

In addition to focusing on a shared vision, Malone's leaders support quality teaching by developing *professional learning opportunities focused on student needs as determined by performance data*. For example, the leadership team decided to devote a substantial amount of this year's professional development to the kinds of open-ended questions asked on the PSSA. They made the decision after identifying this as an area of weakness in the previous year's test data. To identify strategies that meet the needs of the school's students, the master teachers do "field testing;" they pull out a small group of students and experiment with instructional strategies focused on open-ended responses. This "action research" is the basis for developing teaching models to share with the entire faculty. Such context-specific, focused professional learning aligns teacher learning with what students need most.

Malone's staff has proven their commitment to developing quality teaching by *designing schedules and other structures that support professional learning and collaboration*. The school's two master teachers have no direct teaching responsibilities so they are able to implement TAP and act as full time instructional leaders. Each grade "cluster" (K – second, third – fifth, sixth – eighth) has a mentor teacher who is released from teaching responsibilities one day per week to support the teachers in her cluster. As a result, teachers have multiple sources of support that are accessible and consistent. Weekly "cluster" meetings are intentionally used as collaborative learning opportunities. On Mondays, master teachers inform the leadership about the agenda for Wednesday's cluster meetings. On Tuesdays, master teachers work specifically with mentor teachers to convey the information that they want to reach the teaching staff. On Wednesdays, the mentor teachers deliver this content, modeling as they work. As a master teacher put it, "In the clusters, it is all about modeling. You are trying to show what you want the teachers to do in their classrooms, so you go in and out of this mode…sometimes you're teaching and then you break and talk about what you were doing and then go back to teaching."

Overall, the school leaders make strategic choices about where to place Malone's teachers, both to make them most comfortable and to *assign teachers where they would have the greatest impact*. As the lead teacher put it,

> *We do like our stronger teachers in the key grades – third, fifth, and eighth. But we also look at our teachers' strengths – and since we do some cycling, we want people who are strong in math to teach math, people who are strong in reading to teach that. We also look at age group because kindergarten is very different than eighth, so we really try to make teachers comfortable.*

The result is that teachers stay at Malone and are committed to its success.

The leadership team, which includes the master and mentor teachers *focuses on creating a professional environment that supports teacher learning and values teacher input.* The team meets once a week, using the meetings to share school-wide news and information, and to plan professional development. Members of the leadership team say that communication with the principal is constant and open. With the leadership team's support, the work of improving the quality of teaching can flourish. Equipped with a common vision for good teaching and an "open door" culture in which teachers' classrooms are learning laboratories not only for the students but also for the teachers themselves, Malone's leaders and faculty are able to collectively focus on professional growth.

In Summary

Some of the better performing schools had come far in establishing an environment where classroom teaching could flourish. In these schools, leaders and staff had taken steps to coordinate curriculum across the grades and concretize their images of good teaching. They had well-designed and coordinated systems of professional development that included enhancement of content area knowledge, collaboration with peers, and ongoing instructional assistance from experts (school-based teacher leaders and external partners). Instructional coaching – whether from peers or experts – was aligned with the school's vision of good teaching and with the performance appraisal system. Only a few schools in our sample had pulled all of these things together and, even then, teaching was by no means uniformly excellent across the school.

The quality and stability of the school leadership team was apparent. In terms of creating a team that supports good teaching, our research shows that the following are key:

- spreading leadership across multiple actors;
- making certain that the whole team is thoroughly knowledgeable about school data and can help teachers understand it and figure out what to do in their classrooms as a result;
- getting leaders into classrooms often to observe, help teach, provide materials, plan, debrief, and model;
- knowing what every teacher is good at and what she needs help with and doing something about it; and
- creating as many opportunities as possible for teachers to get together to discuss their practice and make the most of those opportunities.

Most of the leaders in the better performing schools were taking advantage of as many mechanisms as possible to recruit and hire good candidates. District and EMO school leaders were working hard to make the most of the district's site-selection policies, tapping into informal networks to recruit candidates and involving staff in selecting teachers. Recognizing that there are challenges within the school district's hiring practices, school leaders at the better performing schools were innovative in reaching their staffing goals.

Sphere B: Student-Centered School Community

Research shows that creating a strong sense of community can positively affect student achievement (Parker, 2002; Hoy and Sabo, 1998). At the heart of this sense of community are respectful, trusting relationships among community members, which form a foundation for student success (Wilcox and Angelis, 2007; Swaim, 2003). While Sphere A identifies strategies important to the relationships between schools' *adult* community members, Sphere B focuses on *student-centered* school community. To investigate the ways school communities served students' needs, we asked interviewees questions about climate and culture, the nature of relationships between adults and students, and the school's approaches to parental and community involvement. Sphere B focuses on student-centered community, meaning that adults intentionally design a school community that prioritizes student engagement and students' needs and that students actively participate in this community-building process.

Below, we identify five strategies the better performing schools in our sample used to create a purposeful student-centered school community. Strategies in this sphere relate to establishing an environment that respects and supports students and the learning process. Rather than existing in isolation, we found that strong school community grew out of the dynamic interplay among these strategies:

Strategy B1: School staff encouraged students to develop a well-defined academic and social identity.

Strategy B2: School staff engaged students in a personalized, safe, developmentally appropriate and celebratory experience that made them feel respected and supported.

Strategy B3: Students played active roles in shaping and improving their own performance and the school as a whole.

Strategy B4: School leaders integrated parents and community partners into the school community, inviting them to support student growth and expand educational opportunity.

Strategy B5: School leaders purposefully designed a physical environment that affirmed respect for students and adults and communicated school values.

Lee, et al. (2002) argue that both social support and "academic press," or rigorous academic expectations, are necessary components for student success. The authors emphasize that, rather than think of these two areas as competing, they must be tackled simultaneously. In our research, we looked for ways that schools attended to *both* the academic growth *and* social needs of their students. Supporting students in both ways is critical to creating an integrated, meaningful community.

Research has also identified a number of related practices that help build student-centered school community. In particular, we know that emphasizing trusting relationships and

establishing a strong sense of student identity are important (Allensworth and Easton, 2007; Morocco, et al., 2002). We also know that students benefit from practices that engage them and provide them with plentiful supports (Lee, et al., 2002). Finally, we know that schools' approaches to partnering with parents and the broader community in support of student learning are significant (Morocco, et al., 2002).

Obstacles to Creating a Positive School Community

In all of the schools in our sample, school staff faced a number of obstacles in their attempts to implement the strategies we have identified for creating a strong student-centered school community. However, some schools by nature of their admissions criteria and organization have certain advantages that have made it easier for school staff to foster a strong student-centered school community. First, newer schools and theme-oriented schools have a significant advantage in establishing a clear and powerful identity for students. The chance to develop a vision from scratch and convey it uniformly from the beginning of a school's existence provides opportunities not all schools have. Charter schools were more likely to ask students who did not live up to the school mission or conform to their culture to leave.

Smaller school size facilitated adults' ability to build personalized relationships with students. Faculty reported that these personalized relationships were an important factor in motivating students to participate and achieve. Smaller size also seemed to allow the opportunity to foster a community cohesion that most larger schools were not able to establish as readily. Parental involvement can be affected by factors particular to certain schools. For example, some schools require parents to sign a contract that ensures their involvement. Finally, some schools have external fundraising mechanisms that provide them with extra resources. In particular, charter schools are able to raise money for their capital budget from private partners, a strategy district schools cannot pursue.

Although all of the schools we visited faced some obstacles in creating a strong student-centered school community, the lower performing schools particularly struggled to create a strong school community as they did not have many of the advantages described above. These schools had no theme or clearly articulated identity to distinguish them and motivate students. They did not screen applicants to see if the school was a "fit" for them or expel students who did not live up to the community's vision, both strategies used by charter schools.

Adults at some of the lower performing schools described lacking the resources and staff necessary to create personalized relationships and support students. For example, one administrator at a district school noted, "We work with our students no matter what their shortcomings are. We are required to become a city hall for them, offering programs, support, a community to them, but there are not many resources out there to help us. We're expected to provide students with services that we just can't manage." Parents and community partners, while present, were not always used strategically and these schools often struggled to clearly identify what role parents and community partners could serve. And as such, school leaders at lower performing schools did not always pursue partnerships that would best complement their efforts to provide a supportive, student-centered environment. For example, at a middle grades charter school, one administrator listed several organizations and community groups that partnered with the school, but did not know how some of the partnerships would work or what they would entail. This lack of coherence undermined the ability of schools to use partnerships in ways that would be most effective in supporting students. In some cases,

poorly maintained facilities added to the burden on community members to create a positive student centered environment.

While the challenges can be severe, the strategies below offer some concrete approaches we saw that strengthened school communities in better performing schools.

> **Strategy B1:** School staff encouraged students to develop a well-defined academic and social identity.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **Staff consistently communicated vision-driven messages that "hooked" students into a shared identity and united teachers in a common purpose.**

  The school was centered around a theme that allowed students to share a common interest and identity. According to a school counselor, "What's unique about [this school] is that we hook students here – that's through our theme." The theme was incorporated throughout the curriculum. It helped students develop a single identity and bond with each other and their teachers. -Charter high school

  At the year's opening faculty meeting, the principal and assistant principal announced that the theme for the year would be "Getting Results." All year, they constantly asked the teachers how their lessons would contribute to getting results. Teachers were required to turn in lesson plans on a regular basis that detailed how the lesson would help get results. -District middle grades

- **Staff intentionally implemented formal and informal practices that supported students' personal development.**

  A counselor explained that she worked with all students once a month "to develop the socio-emotional skills they need to be successful." These lessons focused on building communication skills, learning to work in teams, understanding learning strategies, and creating positive relationships. With the active encouragement of administrators, counselors at this school also developed a "Character Education" curriculum that teachers used once per week for 40 minutes. Administrators explained that this was a more effective way of teaching discipline because, "calling it character education leans toward the more positive focus rather than the negative focus. So instead of saying. . . 'You can't do this; you can't do that. . . We're migrating toward a focus on, how do we say this in ways that are positive." To further develop students' "character education," the counselor also developed an optional "peer leadership program" that met once a week for an hour, during which students learned and practiced mediation and advocacy skills while further developing their listening, note-taking and public speaking skills. -Charter high school

  Teacher leaders and administrators created a well-structured CSAP (Comprehensive Student Assistance Process) program for students who display any type of difficulty – academic, behavioral, attendance – in the classroom. CSAP meetings occurred every two weeks and included a member of the leadership team, the classroom teacher, school social worker, nurse, counselor, parent, and, if necessary, an outside psychologist. Interventions were tried for two weeks and then there was another meeting to assess progress. "We will put a time limit on interventions. We'll say we'll try it this report card period

or two weeks. We might put the student on attendance contract or behavioral contract. We may say we want a behavior management piece – at our level, because we have a behavioral management piece that we do right here. To get them re-centered. We believe all children are good when they're centered. If they're acting out, then we say they're off-center. We like that language better than 'in-house suspension,' or 'detention' so we can get them back to where they need to be." -Charter high school

One charter school's emphasis on nurturing the "whole child" led them to provide an Emotional Support Team to students, made up of a psychologist, counselor, and social worker. Students at this school understood that they could go to this support team at any time. -Charter middle grades

Two full-time teachers trained in this area provided a Socio-Emotional Learning [SEL] class to students during all four years of high school. In ninth grade, the SEL curriculum taught students decision-making skills, conflict resolution skills, and peer support skills. In tenth grade, students built upon these skills. Eleventh graders put their new skills to use in an internship at a business in the city, and twelfth graders continued to receive motivational support as they learned to navigate the intricacies of applying to college. This SEL program was not peripheral to academic achievement; rather, teachers at the school viewed the SEL program as key to the success of the overall academic program. As a teacher leader put it, "If we're going to close achievement gaps, if we're going to turn around urban education, students need personal skills and self-monitoring. They are going to need more than just a good teacher and a good class. We teach peer relations—personal skills and interpersonal and emotional skills that they need. That's unique to [our school's approach]." -Charter high school

- **Staff connected messages about behavior and demeanor to academic success and beyond.**

  The School-Wide Effective Behavior Plan (SWEB) at this school included a specific component for middle grade students. The counselor met with students in groups to emphasize the importance of the behaviors required by SWEB for academic success in high school and college, and more generally for success in life. The counselor noted, "For me they're life-lesson rules. I teach life-lesson guidance to sixth-eighth graders. These are rules that you'll need to follow every day of your life – high school, college, work, etc." -District middle grades

  At this school behavioral expectations were linked to academic expectations and/or messages about future aspirations and success: "Your clothes speak before you do;" "Successful people follow the rules." -Charter high school

  Staff members at this school used their college prep purpose to explain why certain behaviors weren't acceptable: "It's a very easy thing to hold over the students to say, 'Look, this is a college prep environment.' We have students now who are going on, who are being successful in college, so we can say, 'This is who you want to be, this is where you want to be, and if you're doing something that doesn't fit with it, that's not what we do here.'" -Charter high school

- **School leaders developed thoughtfully structured orientations that took place before the first day of school to introduce students to the school and establish high expectations.**

During the ninth grade orientation, one administrator told the incoming students that the school was now part of who they were, and that they would all live up to the school's expectations. He said, "This is now your school … in 4 years you will graduate, and you will go to college." -Charter high school

This school's ninth grade orientation emphasized literacy; in advisories, students discussed behavioral rules. The structure was first a whole-grade assembly, then small-group time in advisory, then a return to a whole-grade assembly. Meeting in small groups allowed students to ask questions and have a more personal introduction to the school. -Charter high school

The college-going expectation is a critical part of this school's mission and was communicated strongly at a school-wide three-day student orientation. The first two days focused on the school's Code of Conduct; the third day students followed a "mini-roster" and visited all classes. All orientation work was done in classrooms of 25 students, each with 1-2 teachers, a new teacher paired with an experienced teacher. -Charter high school

> **Strategy B2:** School staff engaged students in a personalized, safe and celebratory experience that made them feel respected and supported.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **School staff emphasized building relationships with students.**

  Great relationships with kids were the keystone of good management at this school. As one administrator said, "A lot [of the school's approach to classroom management] comes from attempts to motivate the students and engage the students as opposed to rote discipline and obedience. And you can definitely see the people we use as models of tremendous classroom management have great relationships with the kids and are able to push the kids to do anything." -Charter high school

  At this school, a group of administrators and faculty planned a collective intervention with a ninth grade transition class that was not doing well. A team including a counselor, the principal and assistant principal, a social worker and several teachers who work with this class met with the class and reviewed their grades and data with them. After the meeting one student looked particularly sad. When asked why, he explained, "Well I really had a chance to look at my grades and I saw them in black and white and I did not like what I saw." The fact that these kids had a group of adults willing to take the time to sit with them seemed to have reached him. -District high school

  At this small school, staff emphasized the ability to build strong personal relationships with students as a strength of the school. Because of the stability of staff, many of the teachers watched their students grow from year to year, and were able to have little conversations with them in the hallway and generally keeping an eye on them. The staff organized ice cream sundae parties and other fun celebrations for students throughout the year, which allowed staff and students to build non-academic relationships. -District middle grades

- **School leaders planned events that recognized student success and made school fun.**

School leaders made eighth grade special so students had something to look forward to through trips, parties and other activities. The students had dances, went on field trips around the city and to other cities, put on a musical, went swimming, and played sports outside of the school. According to an administrator, "These things help the attendance rate because it gets them excited – they have things to look forward to and really want to be here." -EMO middle grades

Teachers had a tradition of dancing for the ninth grade students every Thursday. This showed that teachers were there to have fun, and created a friendly, fun environment for the students. -Charter high school

Throughout the year this school built in assemblies, pep rallies and awards. At the end of the year, they had an entrepreneurial fair to teach students financial literacy. The fair allowed students direct experience figuring out what it takes to run a business. They also had a school cultural fair where students did research and performed skits. According to an administrator, both events "[brought] student engagement up…. [With] the cultural fair, I was surprised how much the kids got into that. They really seemed to enjoy it." -District middle grades

- **Staff planned interventions that helped individual students overcome non-academic obstacles that interfere with learning.**

At this school, staff actively pursued struggling students in order to provide them with support. As an administrator explained, "Each report period we try to identify specific youngsters who are in need of support…. Once we identify those youngsters, we get supports for them. Some youngsters we might notice an attendance problem; other times they might have certain academic challenges. It varies but the point is, we identify those youngsters, and we identify the reasons they are failing." -District high school

School staff believed they must do whatever it takes to support the whole child at this school. They constantly reworked and revisited interventions in order to ensure they were effective. As an administrator described, "We will put a time limit on interventions. We'll say we'll try it this report card period, or for two weeks. We might put the student on attendance contract or behavioral contract." -Charter high school

Chronically absent students received extra support at this school. According to one administrator, "Daily school attendance is monitored in the morning, and goes to one of the deans who monitors that. . . . Last year he was calling every home to find out where the [absent] child was. If the student isn't here, we want to have the contact with the family to see why not, what's going on, is it an issue of they left home and didn't show up to school, or what's going on….. We have a goal of over 95% attendance. When we're not meeting it, we look at interventions. Last year the students that were chronically late, the highest flyers on that list, we set up a voice service, where we called the house to wake them up at 6 a.m. every morning and told them to come to school. It started this year, based on data from last year. . . . Looking at the data, some students met the goal they had. If they met the goal they were taken off the list. Some students were added to the list. For students who are chronically late or absent, our social worker is also doing home visits, at least once per week." -Charter high school

Strategy B3: Students played active roles in shaping and improving their own performance and the school as a whole.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **Students played leadership roles in school's daily functions.**

  The middle grade level students helped with the school's reward system. Several of them traveled around the school building as students arrived and during lunch. They had a list of behaviors, like walking quietly to class and not running or shouting or lingering. They gave a list of students/classrooms meeting high standards to the principal and teacher leaders. Advisory classrooms that met these behavioral standards hung a banner on their classroom doors. The banners were a very visible way of encouraging and recognizing positive behavior, and allowed students to take pride in their actions." - EMO middle grades

  The ROTC program at this school "teaches discipline and leadership." Students learned what was expected of them from the actions of other students, as opposed to just other adults. "In the…twelfth grade they become a commander and they bring the entire school to attention at an assembly… the student leaders would actually stand up and put them to attention." -District high school

  Students had input into what student work went on the walls at this school: "People were worried that kids would just rip things down. So we let them put their own stuff on the walls." -EMO middle grades

- **Students examined their own test data, a practice that improved academic performance as well as increasing student ownership.**

  At this school. faculty used a "Student Voice" form that asked students to examine their Benchmark data and consider the implications for subsequent learning. In addition, the school instituted Thursday-Friday Test Prep Days in which students answered PSSA-type constructed response questions under test taking conditions and scored their own and peers' writing according to the PSSA rubrics. According to the Literacy Leader, students took the process seriously: "You teach [rubric scoring] to the whole class, and they rate each others' work much more stringently than we would. For example, we ask, 'Does it have a closing sentence? Are there three pieces of information that you can find in the text that you have cited?' Then you give the answer to another group, and see how the other group rated it. And if it's not the same, then the kids fight it out."   -District middle grades

  This school created "Passports to Learning" (for grades 9 – 11) and "Passports to Graduation" (for grade 12) that had students track information including their discipline record, attendance, grades and Benchmark scores. Students were offered incentives based on their progress and improvement in Benchmark scores. -District high school

  This school found multiple ways to share data with students. As an administrator put it, "Most importantly, data, data, data. If you notice. we let the kids know where they stand. The charts are up in every classroom that show just where kids are in their standardized test scores. At first we used codes and pseudonyms – but the kids knew – so we use their knowledge of where they stand to

motive them….We also post bars that show the kids where we are in relationship to the state and to other schools. The kids know that we have to be above the yellow bar – they know what all of this means. When I assign them to groups – they know what skills they need to improve and they really love to work hard." Students also graphed their own test results after each benchmark and taped the graphs to their desks so they could see how their test scores changed over the year. -EMO middle grades

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Strategy B4: School leaders welcomed and integrated parents and community partners into the school community, inviting them to support student growth and expand educational opportunity.

- **School leaders incorporated parents into the academic and social lives of their students.**

This school brought parents in to help mediate disputes between students or to help the students avoid suspensions. Teachers and counselors also met with parents to explain where their children were on the road to graduation, and what it would take to get them to graduate on time. -District high school

This school had a "Welcome Barbecue" for parents and students. Administrators and teachers made home visits to all the students who did not attend the barbecue. During the visit, parents were given a welcome folder with info and resources. It let families know that expectations are high. An administrator pointed out that it "sends a powerful message to the student's family [and the student]: 'They must really care about me, they must really want me to do well.'" -Charter high school

This school had mandatory monthly parent meetings, which parents agreed to when they signed a contract that allowed their child to enter the school. These meetings included workshops to discuss data, talk about Study Island (a web-based standards mastery program aligned with the PSSA), tips about creating learning environments at home, and the opportunity for teachers to talk to a whole grade of parents. Parent volunteering was also highly encouraged at the initial interview. At the end of the year, the school hosted a "Power Workshop" where staff asked parents what gave them power and what took it away, and then took the feedback into account when they worked on things like teacher communication, putting homework on the website and other issues. -Charter middle grades

- **School leaders welcomed community organizations into playing a role at the school.**

The School District of Philadelphia expects all its schools to have a faith-based partner. These partnerships are most successful when school leaders welcome the opportunity to forge relationships with the surrounding community, and are optimistic about the benefits that such partnerships can bring to the school.[14] At this school, one administrator shared, "We have a faith partnership with [a local church] that is outstanding. It started about 6 months ago -- they sought us out. They've supported us with our men's day activity and women's day activity. The pastor belongs to many organizations that

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[14] Maluk, H., et al., 2008 (August). *Faith-Based Partnerships from the Perspectives of the Schools: An Exploratory Study of Partnership Benefits and Challenges.* Research for Action.

we will bring in – talking about violence, gun control, teenage pregnancy -- those challenges." -District high school

The administration sends the message that the school welcomes the community surrounding them as a partner. The community partners participate and help foster students' academic and social identities. For example, a representative from Pathway Supermarket met with the academic coaches to discuss sponsoring a Spelling Bee for middle grade students. Featuring experiential learning, the teacher leaders reported that the teachers moved the lessons beyond the walls of the classrooms and used Fairmount Park, the Please Touch Museum and additional nearby "community treasures." The school was open for Saturday and afterschool activities and community members brought services into the building. -Charter middle grades

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Strategy B5: School leaders purposefully designed a physical environment that affirmed respect for students and adults and communicated school values.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **School leaders devoted resources and time to upgrading facilities.**

  At this school, leaders put money into renovating facilities: "It sends a better message to the kids, that we care about you, and we trust you." -Charter high school

  The principal and assistant principal spent the summer working on the facility – cleaning, painting and replacing windows. "If the school looks like a prison, the kids will act like inmates, so we turned it into a school." -EMO middle grades

  Since some classrooms had air conditioners, the new principal made it a priority to make sure they were installed in every room, and repainted or replaced the doors and lockers and put in two new computer labs. This helped get buy-in from both the teachers and the students. -District high school

- **School leaders designed the physical layout to support focused learning and create smaller learning communities.**

  At this school the school leaders structured the physical space so that ninth and tenth grades occupy one floor and eleventh and twelfth grades occupy another. This allowed the school to create a variation on small learning communities, and build smaller support structures within the larger school. -Charter high school

  "We spent the summer reconfiguring so it would make sense. We walked the building every day so we would know how it would work – how would it work to have the fifth grade here, and the sixth grade there, and things like that…. The structure we created kept older kids upstairs so they don't come in contact with the younger. We changed the entrances, the classrooms, everything." -EMO middle grades

- **Staff displayed school principles, learning benchmarks and other evidence of academic focus in hallways and in classrooms. Consistent displays across classrooms helped build "single school culture."**

The hallways and auditorium area are very beautifully decorated with art, live plants and student portraits and work. Each classroom has the school mission statement and instructional strategies related to critical thinking and writing. -District high school

This school has inspirational sayings posted throughout the building, pushing students to believe in themselves and aim high. A quote from Milton tells students, "If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door," while another sign reads, "Set your goals high and don't stop 'til you get there." The school's code of conduct is posted in hallways and classrooms. In classrooms, teachers have posted student work, inspirational posters, and charts to track student outcome goals. -Charter high school

Every classroom has these core values prominently displayed: integrity, hope, responsibility, courage, justice, wisdom, compassion, respect. The classrooms also have academic standards for the relevant subject area posted. A number of classrooms have a line of string across the middle of the room and student work attached to it with clothespins. This display is unmistakable when walking into the room. –EMO middle grades

Putting It All Together: The Case of Scott Charter High School

School Context: As with other charter schools, admission to Scott is based on a lottery system. However, before the lottery process Scott interviews students and families to introduce them to the school's philosophy and make sure it's a good fit. Once admitted, students can be asked to leave the school if there are significant behavioral concerns. In fact, school staff make it very clear from the beginning of the year that any student who does not abide by Scott's rules will be asked to return to his or her neighborhood school.

Founded on traditions of African philosophy, Scott Charter High School explicitly focuses on helping students transform themselves into "African scholars" who will diligently assume responsibilities to themselves, their family, and their community. As a ninth grade instructional leader explained, "The student changes. By the twelfth grade year, you just see this brand new person. It's not just a senior. It's a different person who is really proud of who they are. They'll say to you, 'I'm African, not just African American.'"

> **The student changes. By the twelfth grade year, you just see this brand new person. It's not just a senior. It's a different person who is really proud of who they are. They'll say to you, 'I'm African, not just African American.' –Instructional Leader**

From day one, students participate in highly structured, consistent rituals that socialize them into the community, *encouraging them to develop a well-defined academic and social identity*. During orientation, ninth graders are introduced to Libation, described by staff as an African ceremony to bless the day. This ritual occurs every morning throughout the school year and all students and staff participate. During Libation, the expectations about behavior and success are clearly communicated through call and response exercises and collective recitation of the school's Affirmation Statement.

In addition to Libation, specific socialization activities, described by staff as "rites of passage," occur throughout the year. These rites of passage signify the transformation from developmentally evolving African American students in ninth grade to mature, African

scholars in twelfth grade. Students participate in gender specific activities as well as overnight trips in which they learn to value respect, responsibility, and service to themselves and their community. In interviews, staff repeatedly spoke with pride about the process by which students not only grow academically but are also personally transformed.

Indeed, school leaders emphasize that the transformation into African scholars is a transformation of the whole self and not just the academic self. An important part of Scott's guiding mission is to support each individual student in their development "by any means necessary." School leaders firmly believe that in order to support students academically, staff must recognize and support students' social and emotional growth. School leaders describe going above and beyond the call of duty in order to support students so that all students have an opportunity to experience success. Such an approach clearly helps Scott's *students feel respected and supported.*

Scott emphasizes developing strong relationships between students and staff, which contributes to students having a *personalized, safe and celebratory experience.* Cohorts of students remain with a core team of teachers for two years, which strengthens the bond between students and teachers. In addition, before intense academic work begins, there is a week of socialization so that teachers can get to know their students. Part of this includes a learning inventory to familiarize teachers with students' individual learning styles.

Scott's purposeful community built on foundations of traditional African culture also extends into the community, *integrating parents and community partners into the school community by inviting them to support student growth and expand educational opportunity.* The school affirms the importance of cultivating partnerships with parents and community organizations. Parents are viewed as a core part of the school family. For example, when parents come into school meetings for their child, they are welcomed into the "family circle." In addition, one of the core rites of passage rituals is a "Rites of Transformation" in which parents "hand over" their children to the care of the school. The school also hosts several cultural events during the year including an Umoja Karamu feast around Thanksgiving as well as hosting a variety of Saturday classes for parents and community members, including African doll making, drumming and computer programming.

Scott has extensive networks and partnerships with local churches, neighborhood-based community development groups, and several area colleges and universities. An eleventh grade instructional leader reflects on the strength of Scott's partners: "Any time you get people of like minds together, it fosters growth, it fosters allegiances; we have this huge brain trust in [this quarter] of the city, there's no reason we should be lacking in any way."

School leaders and staff firmly believe that their approach to building a purposeful school community is what helps students succeed academically, even students with weak prior school records. Paying attention to the many challenges faced by young African American males in this community, the Scott Charter School has focused strategies to help these young males overcome the negative stereotypes that surround them. They are especially proud that African American male students from Scott go on to post-secondary education at higher rates than the district average for this group.

Putting It All Together: The Case of Ross High School

School Context: Ross is a citywide admissions school. As with similar schools across the district, applicants attend an interview as part of the application process. They also must meet criteria related to grades, attendance, lateness and behavior. In general, students who attend have actively chosen the school, many because of its theme. Students can be asked to leave the school if there are behavior concerns.

Ross High School has created a purposeful school community in a small school setting that fosters cohesiveness and student ownership. As one teacher explained, "I think this school exemplifies what small school culture really is. . . . I talk to kids all day long. . . I've had the privilege of knowing every child in this school." Comparing it to a comprehensive high school where she taught previously, the teacher adds, "We have a cohesive, more tight-knit sort of relationship with the students."

> **I talk to kids all day long. ...I've had the privilege of knowing every child in this school.   -Teacher**

Ross is a themed school, which helps unite students and staff in a common focus on leadership, citizenship, and college preparation. Administrators and staff use the theme *to encourage students to develop a well-defined academic and social identity*. At a week-long orientation for incoming ninth graders, students learn both the behavioral and academic expectations of the school. Alumni and upperclassmen play leadership roles at orientation by standing up and presenting the school's values to their younger counterparts. This sets a powerful example that helps sustain the school's culture. Researchers observed open communication between staff and the administrative team, as well as school pride exhibited by students, alumni, administrators, and staff.

Throughout the year, teachers hold students accountable to rigorous expectations that connect academic success with the students' future education. For example, when students write at a level that would score them a 3 or 4 on the PSSA, teachers are persistent in pushing them to do even better. One teacher reported that she gives students a professional piece of writing as a model to emulate. When students complain, she reminds them that she is preparing them for college: "Students come to me and say, 'Well, some of us aren't going to college,' and I say, 'No, you're all going to college.' " It is also important that academic supports begin early in the school year. As an administrator reflected, "We start tutoring right away, the first or second week of school."

> **Students come to me and say, 'Well, some of us aren't going to college,' and I say, 'No, you're all going to college.'   -Teacher**

Teachers take a personal interest in students' success and go the extra mile to ensure it, which contributes to students' *personalized, safe and celebratory school experience*. For example, teachers spend time informally with students providing academic reinforcement. As an English teacher explained,

> *I have kids come in here during lunch and come here during my preps, and what we do is we try to work on a portfolio [a collection of a student's best work, particularly writing assignments]. ...I try to make sure they're well-rounded, that they're spending time learning the literature, working on the vocabulary, writing essays and that they revise and revise and revise.*

Collectively, Ross staff has built a "single school culture" that emphasizes caring relationships and supportive school community. Administrators praised the faculty for "genuinely caring about kids," as exemplified, in part, by the school's consistently high teacher attendance. Students, in turn, genuinely care about Ross and *play active roles in improving their school.* This past summer, several students visited the school in August to ask the assistant principal if there was anything they could do to help get Ross ready for opening. Their help was welcomed, and the students spent several hours over two days moving desks and chairs between classrooms. In addition, as mentioned above, students and alumni play important roles in the ninth grade orientation, and generally take on leadership throughout the year. The outcome of fostering this type of student ownership is that district data show Ross has the best attendance rate, lowest lateness rate, and lowest suspension rate in its ninth grade class among SDP schools with the same admissions type.[15]

Investing in Ross's physical space and technology resources has also been a priority for school leaders, who recognize that a positive *physical environment affirms respect for students and adults and communicates school values.* With financial support from the district, school leaders invested needed resources in upgrading the facility, including rewiring the building to be internet-friendly. When a district commitment to providing the school with laptops and a music teacher fell through, the principal tapped other resources to meet what he viewed as necessities, not luxuries.

It has been critical to the success of this school that the principal was a talented leader who had an "open door" policy with students, parents, faculty, and school-based staff, and also actively built positive, supportive relationships with Central Office staff. As the principal explained, "We invite them to visit the school. One reason we have good relations [with Central Office] was because we told them, 'Drop in anytime.'" In turn, the school was able to capitalize on the respect and good will of Central Office to exert more influence in the selection of a new principal than is typically the case in the district. The new principal's continued focus on fostering a "single school culture," the unique pride that students and adults hold in their school, and the small, personalized environment are promising signs that Ross's positive climate will be sustained beyond the leadership transition. For example, school leaders have continued the school's policy of frequent communication with parents as an important element to their student-centered focus.

In sum, school leaders helped staff build a positive school climate by taking advantage of the school's small size to enhance personalization, good attendance, and school safety, setting high expectations for students' academic success, and investing in the physical space and technology of the school. School leaders feel that the attention to school culture has paid off, as 96% of students graduated *and* went on to college in 2008. Both students and adults have played active roles in creating a strong community, one in which all members participate with pride.

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[15] Based on 2006-07 SDP data analyzed for RFA's study, *Going Small: Public/Private Collaboration in Restructuring High School Education in Philadelphia* (forthcoming, 2009).

In Summary

School staff highlighted efforts to build school community that included shaping student identity, building school pride, personalizing the educational experience and creating trusting, respectful relationships among all stakeholders. Small school size contributed to personalization and seemed to make it more possible to establish a collective identity and shared norms for behavior. Themes were another factor that seemed to help schools create a strong student identity, providing staff a language of expectations and a vision of identity that transcended class work and classrooms. For many of the schools, the student identity included ownership in that students were expected to assume greater formal responsibility for the school community and for their own learning. These responsibilities included both academic ownership of test data and opportunities for students to contribute to the rites and rituals of the school.

To establish conditions for student success, school leaders prioritized creating a well-maintained, bright, clean, and modern environment that conveyed an immediate message of respect. They also invited the support of parents and community members, important partners for increasing student accountability and opportunities. These strategies showed a concern for students' needs beyond the immediate field of academic instruction.

During our fieldwork, we heard many school leaders and staff discuss students' academic and social well-being in the same breath. The adults clearly cared for the students beyond their academic performance and acknowledged the relationship between achievement and socio-emotional health. While the focus remained on academic performance and persistent effort towards student growth, recognition of students' full selves allowed adults and students to work together to build a strong student-centered school community.

Sphere C: Instructional Program

Too often, schools take a "Christmas tree" approach to improving teaching and learning (a myriad of programs are adopted haphazardly and added like ornaments on a Christmas tree) (Newmann, et al., 2001). Since the 1990s, research has pointed out the importance of what has come to be known as "instructional coherence." Instructional coherence requires a framework for curriculum and instruction that guides teachers' classroom teaching. The framework then guides resource allocation so that efforts are not diffuse. For example, teaching materials are aligned to a shared curriculum; professional development efforts focus on how to implement the curriculum; and school leaders hold teachers accountable for implementation.

Below, we identify five strategies related to the academic program that were commonly identified by staff at better performing schools as contributing to successful student outcomes. The strategies highlight the importance of coherence through a common curriculum, preparation for the next level of education, use of data about student performance, additional instructional time to master concepts and skills, and integration of test-taking preparation into the regular curriculum. Notably, these strategies offer a window into the relatively early stage of even better performing schools' efforts to provide a rigorous and engaging academic program.

Strategy C1: Staff built instructional program coherence through the use of a common curriculum that includes a scope and sequence and is aligned with state standards as the foundation for classroom teaching.

Strategy C2: The school's instructional program prepared students for the next step in their educational careers – whether it was the transition to high school or the transition to college or career – and staff communicated high expectations about students' futures.

Strategy C3: Staff routinely used student performance data to assess incoming students, to closely monitor individual students' progress (especially struggling students) throughout the school year, and to assess school and classroom interventions.

Strategy C4: School leaders structured the school week to provide additional instructional time for students who were struggling in their coursework or on standardized tests.

Strategy C5: Faculty integrated preparation for standardized tests throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year.

Much of the literature on academics in urban schools focuses on a lack of rigor that disadvantages city youth as they prepare to compete for slots in higher education and jobs in a global, knowledge-based economy (Burd, 2002, Herold, 2009). Helping high-needs students meet proficiency standards is challenging and too often teachers – who want students to feel successful – lower their expectations for learning, water down the curriculum, and do not

press students to exert the effort to achieve at higher levels. Rigor is not the only missing element in creating a strong academic experience. In the past, teachers have frequently relied solely on past experience, intuition, and their beliefs to guide their instruction. The use of data about student performance to guide their planning represents a major shift in most teachers' practice (Boudette, et al., 2006). All of the better performing schools in our sample have exhibited big strides in using data, particularly to identify struggling students. In addition, a not-surprising consequence of the high-stakes accountability environment of NCLB is the sharp increase in time that students spend on test-taking preparation. However, not all test prep is of equal quality. We looked to see if, and how, schools were integrating rigorous test preparation into their curricular, instructional, and assessment practices.

Obstacles to Creating a Strong Instructional Program

Among the schools in our sample, district schools were typically at an advantage over charter schools in having access to a common curriculum provided by the school district. However, EMOs and CMOs (Charter Management Organizations) in Philadelphia have also adopted a shared curriculum for use in their schools, aligned with state standards, and many individual charter schools have done the same. Considering the five strategies, the use of a common curriculum was the area where we saw the least difference between the better performing schools and the lower performing schools.

However, some types of schools struggled more than others in the other strategic areas: establishing high expectations for the next step in students' educational careers; using student data; mandating additional instructional time; and integrating high quality test preparation throughout the curriculum.

At the high school level, schools were more easily able to communicate the expectation that all of their students will go to college when they are able to select better performing and/or higher-aspiring students for admission. This put special admissions and citywide schools at an advantage over non-selective neighborhood high schools, as the two types of selective high schools are able to use students' grades in middle schools among their criteria for admittance. At the same time, selectivity has also put certain charter schools at an advantage over other charters. By law, charter schools may not discriminate in admissions based on students' real or perceived intellectual ability, but they are permitted to seek out students who are the right "match" for the mission of their charter school by communicating the school's mission in an Open House or informational forum. Thus, one better performing charter school includes college-going as part of its mission, while a lower performing charter school in our sample holds as its mission to serve "at risk" youth and willingly accepts students who have been asked to leave their neighborhood high schools for behavioral or academic shortcomings.

With these differences in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that at better performing schools we heard messages at student orientation such as "You will graduate in four years and you will go to college" (at a themed charter school). While at student orientation at a lower performing school we heard a faculty member express doubts to students about whether they would graduate from high school, saying, "You are going to be here for four years…for some of you…I hope." These messages are significant, as previous research has demonstrated that lower performing high schools often set a minimum expectation of high school graduation, while "high impact" high schools (those that are successful with previously underperforming

students) communicate a college-going expectation and provide students with appropriate academic supports. At the high school level, the more selective schools also typically had greater access to data on their incoming students, as these data sets were required for admission. Neighborhood high schools typically struggled to get access to this information, and lower performing neighborhood schools in particular were disadvantaged by high student mobility in the first several months of the school year.

At the middle school level, district schools faced a greater challenge than charter schools in *mandating* additional instructional time. Some charter schools have chosen to mandate Extended Day, while most district middle schools provide "Power Hour," which students attend voluntarily. Administrators at some district schools spoke of wanting more opportunities for additional structured instructional time. However, requiring teachers to take on extra responsibilities was more of a challenge for district schools. As a district administrator of a middle school noted,

> *It would really be nice if we had just one more period of the day that was specifically designed to enrich kids, or remediate kids, instead of this Saturday School that doesn't work. But that means extending the school day, and that means teachers would need to be paid more, so it's never going to happen. But it would be great because then instruction would be personalized. If they want to see something effective, we really should extend the day, have another period, pay teachers extra. You would get a lot more bang for the buck.*

As this quote indicates, most district administrators recognized that improving student performance requires more than implementing only one intervention, such as Extended Day. Instead, a coherent and integrated set of supports are required in order for any one intervention to be successful. For example, although neither charter schools nor district schools can *mandate* that students attend Saturday School, at least one charter school in our sample has successfully created a culture where students feel intrinsically rewarded for attending Saturday School.

Strategy C1: Staff built instructional program coherence through use of a common curriculum that includes a scope and sequence and is aligned with state standards as the foundation for classroom teaching.

Key Practices and School Examples:

- **Teachers used the agreed upon curriculum to plan their lessons.**

  Teachers were required to write the lesson objective and state content standards for each class session. Teachers met with the academic coaches to plan their lessons, established the appropriate state standards and selected from additional resources. For example, explaining a lesson, one seventh grade math teacher shared that "It's Standards-Based and I use the Saxon Textbook. The Saxon builds on a single topic and shows you how to scaffold and differentiate problems and concepts. It might show 20 or 30 things you can do to get a particular concept across." -Charter middle grades

  Teachers displayed each day's standard and objective for all students to view when they come to class. A teacher explained, "In my Algebra 1, 2 and Geometry classes there is a core curriculum mandated

by the School District which is based on state standards. The building administrator insists that all math teachers list the lesson's objective on the board and we are encouraged to make sure that our 'Do Nows' [motivational start-up activities] are aligned with the lesson objective." -District high school

- **Leaders provided staff with time to talk across grades about student performance data and curriculum so that teachers had a common understanding of: (1) patterns of strengths and weaknesses that cut across grades and (2) expectations of what their students should know and be able to do by the time they were promoted to the next grade.**

    "We give teachers the data for every individual classroom in the school, not just their own classroom. We want everyone to know how all our students are doing. Then we can figure out how we all can help them." -District middle grades

    School leaders found the resources to pay teachers to meet afterschool. In this way, teachers had the opportunity to meet by subject area and grade group. The focus of subject area meetings was on coordinating curriculum across the grades. Teachers were able to talk in depth about what should be covered in each grade. -District middle grades

> **Strategy C2:** The school's instructional program prepared students for the next step in their educational careers – whether it was the transition to high school or the transition to college or career – and staff communicated high expectations about students' futures.

Key Practices and School Examples:

- **Middle schools prepared their students for high school.**

    At the end of the year, this school held an assembly for seventh grade students to inform them about the high school selection process. "We talk to them about the importance of seventh grade for opening up choices for high school. . . . And as soon as kids come back we talk to them again in eighth grade." Counselors met with students to assist them in their decision-making process. School leaders "invite people in from the high schools to do assemblies for our seventh and eighth graders." Citywide and special admissions schools in particular were invited to give presentations to the students. The counselor arranged these presentations, and also met with students and parents to talk about the choices for high school. The counselor explained, "It's really helpful for kids when high schools come in. They see it as a reality—it's not foreign; it's around the corner. [Otherwise], kids don't focus on that part of it; they don't really see it coming." -District middle school

    The counselor met weekly with students (divided into large groups) to talk about high school selection. "We tie it in to colleges [because] it's the same kind of process—a transcript and an essay. I took students to three colleges last year. [To prepare them to select a high school], I start by going over the application and the book [the SDP's High School Guide] and we talk about all the requirements. I encourage parents to go to the High School Fair. . . . I also start talking about the importance of the transcript in fourth grade. They've heard it so many times, that their seventh grade June report card will determine what [high] school you'll [sic] go to. Sixth and seventh graders especially hear this. I want them to be prepared; I don't want it to sneak up on anyone." To assist students, the counselor

reports helping the students do a "practice application, and then we discuss it and go over it with them. We have a parent meeting…or if they can't do that then I'll call them. Representatives from area high schools come to talk with students, from special admissions and city-wide admissions high schools, as well as from the neighborhood high school (the default choice, should students not apply or not get in to other schools.)." -District middle school

- **High schools started preparing students for college in ninth grade, both academically and psychologically.**

School leaders recognized that preparing students for college must begin in ninth grade. At this school, students received academic counseling from the start of their ninth grade year, met with a counselor one-on-one throughout the year to discuss their future goals and the courses they were taking and compared them with what was required to build a "college preparatory transcript." Students also started going on day trips to area colleges in ninth grade. A counselor noted, "A lot of the colleges don't want to give tours for ninth graders, but we don't give them a choice because it's important for the kids." Upperclasmen took tours to major colleges and universities across the country. College preparation was also embedded into the curriculum; for example, a school leader explained that, "As part of presenting their senior project, students need to have applied for a certain number of scholarships, have written a number of essays—personal and expository—and have done some research as part of their portfolio." -Charter high school

On the first day of student orientation, the principal went around to each classroom and asked ninth graders, "Where are you going in four years?!" Thus prompted, students answered, "College!" in unison. Similarly, the principal asked students in other grades where they were going in three, two, and one year(s). Every faculty member was required to have a pennant from his or her college alma matter displayed in the classroom. In addition to building a college-going culture, these pennants familiarized students with names of colleges to which they may one day apply, thus expanding their universe of possibilities. -Charter high school

> **Strategy C3:** Staff routinely used student performance data to assess incoming students, closely monitor individual students' progress (especially struggling students) throughout the school year, and assess school and classroom interventions.

Key Practices and School Examples

- **Faculty administer an in-school math and English assessment to students within the first week of school, rather than relying solely on students' most recent PSSA scores to determine students' current proficiency levels.**

Incoming ninth graders were initially tested in June during their first orientation to determine their level of proficiency in math and English. Students were tested again in September to determine what grade level their performance matched. Although students had already been assigned to their classes by the second round of testing, this assessment was used by teachers to better understand how to differentiate instruction in the classroom. Subsequently, students were given interim assessments between report cards to determine whether they would need academic interventions. -Charter high school

A middle school assistant principal worked closely with counselors from the feeder elementary school. The counselors filled out a data sheet he designed so that school leaders could become familiar with incoming sixth graders before the start of the school year. The form included academic data, such as PSSA scores and report card grades in math and reading, as well as behavior comments, the student's individual attendance record, and medical issues. In addition, the form indicated whether students have had previous interventions, with checkboxes for Read 180, First in Math, Fast Forward, Study Island, and TSS Worker [use of a Therapeutic Staff Support Worker]. Administrators have found the form to be so helpful that now, "We do the forms for all students in the school, all grades." - District middle grades

- **Student data are monitored throughout the school year in order to identify students who need extra supports and interventions.**

A grant from an educational reform organization helped the school track students' grades, attendance, and behavior according to Early Warning Indicators (predictive indicators in preceding years of dropping out in high school, including poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures). At this school, the process identified specific "warning flags" in sixth grade: failing math and/or English, poor attendance, one or more out-of-school suspensions, and an unsatisfactory final behavior mark in any subject. Once students were identified, particular interventions were applied school-wide (e.g., positive social incentives for good attendance, and a response to every absence) while others were targeted only to at-risk students (e.g., problem solving by an Attendance Team made up of a teacher, counselor, administrator, and parent). -District middle grades

Benchmark tests were given every six weeks so that teachers could identify any students who were falling behind, in order to direct them to the appropriate intervention early enough for them to still have time to "catch up." Students who were not excelling were assigned to what the school called an "Achievement Class" which met after school—twice a week for math, and twice a week for English. Students had the same teachers in Achievement Class as they had in the regular classroom, in order to build teachers' accountability for students' progress. An administrator noted, "I'm really confident that it's helped [our students] already, and we'll improve it more. . . . Part of the Achievement Class is that it is your students. It is motivation for the teacher to help your own Benchmark scores and averages – they want to help their students to do better." -Charter high school

Eighth grade PSSA scores were used to group ninth grade students by proficiency level. Each administrator led a group, and gave a motivational talk appropriate to that group's level of proficiency, in preparation for the eleventh grade PSSAs. In particular, students who had been only points away from scoring Proficient on the eighth grade PSSA were shown just how close to Proficient they scored, and were told to believe in their ability to score Proficient the next time around, in eleventh grade. These motivational talks were given to tenth graders and ninth graders, so that they could begin to mentally focus on building the skills that would be necessary to succeed on the PSSA test. -District high school

Teachers used PSSA and Study Island data to identify students who needed extra help and to create small groups to work on specific skills. The groups were fluid, changing as students mastered skills and moved on. An administrator explained, "[we do] small group instruction, and the way that works is students are identified through PSSA results, and we adopted Study Island, and that works well with PSSA to be able to identify the students, which is the key. Being able to identify the students, group them accordingly, so having the "Below Basic" [scoring students] move to "Basic" [on their PSSA score] and the Advanced [scoring students] keep shooting for the stars. So they work in

small groups, it is more one on one, with those particular students who need that extra help. So that is our driving force is to use small group instruction." -Charter middle grades

Students' progress was monitored daily and compared with concrete goals. A teacher leader explained, "There is a difference between saying you're data driven and really meaning it. We are 100% data driven. Every possible thing that can be measured is measured. The objectives teachers put on the board have a measure to them. It's not just "today students will be working on fractions," it's "today students will be able to solve [at least] four out of five fraction problems using addition, so we can clearly say at the end of class, [either] yes they were able to do four, or no they weren't, and if not, [the teacher asks himself] What can I do tomorrow to change instruction?"
-Charter high school

- **Ability grouping and other intervention groups are flexible, and students can change groups during the school year based on their performance and motivation.**

"We've always used small group instruction – we've used small groups based on the students' levels to strengthen their skills; we've brought in Study Island, so they practice on the computer; we do a lot more assessment than we did early on. We basically use the assessment to see what skills they need to strengthen; we do them once or twice a month and depending on the weaknesses we regroup the students; we do afterschool and Saturday School that we didn't do in the beginning." -Charter middle grades

Students were placed in classes based on their most recent PSSA scores. For example, ninth graders were placed in strategic math or English if their eighth grade PSSA scores were low. However, school leaders allowed students "to level up or level down at the beginning of school year." In particular, students who were on the cusp of being Proficient in a subject area were encouraged to level up in order to challenge themselves. -District high school

There was a school-wide goal of better than 95% attendance. An administrator explained, "When we are not meeting it, we look at interventions." Students who are chronically late or absent are given individual goals to meet for the next six-week period. "Looking at the data, some students met the goal they had; if they met their goal they were taken off the list [to receive the intervention]." -Charter high school

An administrator explained that monitoring middle school students' progress throughout the school year opened up the option to have flexible ability grouping, where students could progress during the course of a school year. While monitoring student progress had been a long-standing practice, administrators recently added a student assessment at the beginning of the school year. The administrator explained, "This year the goal is to do an assessment right up front and then do formative assessment throughout the year. The groups should be flexible, in the sense that if a kid is improving and doesn't need the extra help, we can pull him out, put him in a regular schedule, and pull someone else in who does need the help. Flexibility of grouping can be an incentive for kids." -District middle school

> **Strategy C4:** School leaders structured the school week to provide additional instructional time for students who were struggling in their coursework and/or on standardized tests.

Key Practices and School Examples:

- **Additional instructional time is provided to students who are not excelling in their coursework.**

  The school created a tutoring center with two full-time tutors. The tutors were responsible for standardized testing and for working with any student who needs extra help. In addition to the full-time tutors, teachers had guaranteed tutoring days twice a week. -Charter high school

  Teachers were required to stay after school once per week for office hours to tutor students who come voluntarily. "Every teacher is required to stay one hour after school for student help. They are required to stay [only] one hour, but most teachers are here up to three days per week [after school] helping students." Student members of the National Honor Society also volunteered their time at teachers' office hours to provide peer tutoring. As stipulated by National Honor Society guidelines, these student tutors earned credits toward becoming an NHS member for doing so. Additional tutoring services were provided by the Beacon Center. -District high school

- **Additional instructional time is provided for students who are not yet Proficient on the PSSA test, and students are given an incentive to attend these lessons.**

  All incoming sixth graders who scored Below Basic on the fifth grade PSSA were invited and encouraged to attend six weeks of summer school. The summer program was designed to appeal to and engage students, as well as to help students enter sixth grade with greater competency with technology. In particular, students learned how to design and present PowerPoint presentations to their peers. Students were given an incentive for attending the summer program--$5 gift cards to Wal-Mart. An administrator explained, "Students received the card the following Saturday, so it actually acted as an incentive for them to come again the next Saturday also." –District middle school

  Saturday School was offered on Saturday mornings for students scoring Basic or Below Basic on the PSSA. During the school day, a four-day seminar of intensive, one-on-one instruction prior to the PSSA was provided for students who needed it most. The principal explained the seminar format: "We started a new thing in January called Seminar – 2 days on math, 2 days on reading – we identified and pulled out children who needed that extra push to go to the next level. We pulled them into the IMC and my two coaches with the support of the counselor, or the school nurse. We'd work with them one-on-one and give them that extra dose of the core curriculum, the standards that would be the focus of the PSSA. This was for children who were Basic and Below Basic." -District middle school

  Teachers worked for 30 minutes during the lunch break with individual students who were struggling to better support students who do not come to Power Hour after school. -District middle grades

> **Strategy C5:** Faculty integrated preparation for standardized tests throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year.

Key Practices and School Examples:

- **Faculty members give students in-class assignments that are modeled after PSSA questions.**

  When asked how faculty members prepare their middle school students for the PSSA, one school leader answered, "We do it from day one. Our gym teachers are now asking questions in the format of the PSSA. Kids are now trained how to prove your answer is right. It's good teaching. How do we prepare them? When they walk in the door, we start." -District middle grades

- **Schools focus on areas of the PSSA where students need particular help.**

  "Our big push last year was open-ended responses. Our feeling was that if we could get the open-ended responses up, that would help our scores. So we targeted specific students [for intervention] and gave professional development to help teachers focus on particular strategies that are most helpful." -District middle grades

  Weekly, all students school-wide were assigned constructivist response questions for homework. Teachers were required to hand in samples to school leaders of constructive response from high-achieving and low-achieving students. These data were reviewed in leadership team meetings. Feedback was given to teachers, who then received modeled lessons and professional development in grade group meetings on how to improve students' work with constructive response questions. In addition, the literacy leader did small group instruction on constructive response questions. -District middle grades

- **Students are taught how to use a rubric, so they can assess their current level of proficiency and have a clear model of what is expected to score Proficient on the PSSA.**

  A school leader explained that they prepared students for the PSSA "starting from day one. We work on constructive responses; it can be as easy as making it a journal topic. We teach students the rubric and have students score each other's work so they know what they're looking for. We talk about test-taking strategies. We pull released items from the web to give kids familiarity with the format and with testing. We are making sure they're aware it's important; not just taking it lightly." -District middle grades

  School staff created a Thursday/Friday routine to aid the test preparation learning process. Students practice answering open-ended questions on Thursdays, and on Friday, have the opportunity to see how their work compares to the rubric. -District middle grades

- **Classes have daily routines designed to ensure that no instructional time is lost and teachers follow these routines.**

  Middle school classes begin with a warm-up activity as soon as students enter class. -District and Charter middle grades

  High school classes start each period with a Do Now activity that students work on as soon as they enter class and end classes with an exit assessment. -District and Charter high schools

Putting It All Together: The Case of Cosby Elementary School

Cosby, an EMO elementary and middle school, accepts students primarily from the surrounding neighborhood. It is a small school, with one class per grade, and is known for its arts programs. Since Cosby has performed well recently, it has seen an increase in students applying to transfer in from outside the neighborhood.

A teacher leader at Cosby Elementary School explained the school's success, "If you notice, we let the kids know where they stand. Most importantly, data, data, and data. The charts are up in every classroom to show just where kids are in their standardized test scores." Teachers and administrators throughout the school echoed the theme. "It's all about using the data!" said a teacher leader. The student data – PSSA and benchmark results, Gates-MacGinitie reading tests, and in-class assessments – are analyzed by the administrators and teachers and used to determine school-wide trends and inform classroom practice, academic interventions, purchasing decisions, and test prep throughout the year. By analyzing and focusing on student data and adjusting the curriculum according to it, the staff *have built a coherent instructional program with state standards as the foundation for classroom teaching.*

Analyzing the connection between data use and making AYP the last five years, the school administrator explained:

> *Teachers all have access to the data but we don't leave it to chance if they use it; we give all the information to them. We have graphs for them. We have to drill down. We look at the analysis and prioritize the needs for each classroom, and analyze trends. We group students, work with small groups. We'll do professional development that the data tells us we need to be focused on. . . .The school's a family, and you don't air your dirty laundry in public, but we have to accept the reality and the responsibility of that's what your score is. Students now want to know how they did and why they did whatever they did.*

> **Teachers all have access to the data but we don't leave it to chance. . . we give all the information to them. . . . We look at the analysis and prioritize the needs for each classroom and analyze trends.**
>
> **-Administrator**

All teachers receive the whole school's PSSA and benchmark data, including kindergarten through second grade teachers, in order to *assess school and classroom interventions*, often aimed at grades before the weaknesses appear in test results. By monitoring student data, teachers are able to arrange students in appropriate differentiated groups, according to skill level. The teachers explained that they create and re-create groups according to the students' abilities in specific skills as indicated by their benchmark results.

Students graph their own results and set goals for the next test. Students are asked to refer back to their results and goals regularly and to take the steps necessary to improve their results. The teachers and administrators *communicate high expectations for their students*. These adults realize that in order for students to meet these expectations, they need to know more material, be familiar and comfortable with the format and procedures of the test, and care about their results. Student data are posted throughout the school as a daily reminder for teachers and students that they must constantly work to improve their results.

Teachers use student data to determine which students need academic interventions and *provide additional instructional time for students who are struggling.* Cosby offers an Extended Day program and Saturday School for students who need additional support. The Saturday School program

It's about making them comfortable, so they're not scared [of the PSSA].

–Teacher Leader

is open to all students, but the staff makes an effort to attract students identified as struggling, according to the previous year's PSSA results, and by benchmarks and other assessments. A teacher leader explained, "We look at the kids who performed Below Basic on the PSSA and offer it to them first. We tell the parents that they should be coming in on Saturdays. Then we offer it to kids who are struggling in the classroom." During the extended day and the Saturday School programs, students receive extra support in areas where the data show they need support.

Cosby staff address weaknesses in their students' standardized test scores by *integrated preparation and practice for the PSSA throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year.* Teachers plan their lessons in ways that prepare students for the PSSA. Students answer PSSA-type questions every day in math and English. Every week, they read passages and write essays similar to those asked in the PSSA. Classes work in "Measuring Up" test-prep books, so that students understand the format of the tests. Students write essays on "ugly paper," the paper that they are given when taking the PSSA because "it's about making them comfortable, so they're not scared" of the PSSA. After each benchmark assessment, student data is posted throughout the school. This is an ongoing process, integrated throughout their classes over the course of the year.

Data are also used by the administrators on a school-wide level to determine what resources they should bring to the school to create a *coherent program that aligns with state standards.* The leadership team examines the PSSA and benchmark data and then searches for ways to improve on the weaknesses or gaps that they find. A teacher leader explained one example of this,

> *We saw that poetry was a big factor on the PSSA test; the kids just didn't understand it. So through the 100 Book Challenge we have purchased poetry baskets. [The baskets contain high interest poetry books for each classroom.] So now kids can see poetry across different levels, different cultures and different languages... and our PSSA scores actually went up in poetry.*

The principal also purchased Quick Reads, a program to increase student literacy. When weaknesses are identified in any grade, the principal proactively works with the teachers and students to find ways to address them.

The expectation at Cosby is that the school will make AYP and provide students with a good education. Teachers are held accountable to meet those standards. Several practices help teachers meet their goal of providing each student with a quality education, including ongoing review and analysis of data, timely data-driven professional learning and involving students in charting their own data to make improvements.

Putting It All Together: The Case of Cassatt Charter High School

Cassatt Charter High School holds an Open House for students and their families as the first step in the application process. After the principal's presentation, current students answer questions from the audience and lead tours of the building. A pre-enrollment meeting occurs two weeks later with each prospective student, a current student, and a faculty member. Students are asked to bring two short essays as well as biographical information. At the meeting and at the Open House, it is emphasized that all Cassatt students will go to college and that the school has high expectations. If the school appeals to the student, they submit their name to the random lottery for admission. The school typically receives twice as many applicants to ninth grade as they are able to admit.

Cassatt Charter High School has established rigorous academic expectations and measures results to improve performance. Instructional leaders have *established instructional coherence* by compiling research findings on best teaching practices and measures of student success to create a *set of instructional standards, aligned with state standards, that all teachers follow.* These standards are "objective-driven" and have been designed to prepare students for higher education. In order to reach these standards and maintain a rigorous curriculum, teachers reported that they are "rigid with grading systems." Students are not permitted to pass a class unless they score 76% or better. A teacher leader noted, "We don't budge on that. That's a message to students that's really powerful. We have high expectations and kids know that."

Cassatt set the tone for *high expectations* during its three-day, school-wide student orientation prior to the first day of school. On the first day of orientation, the principal visited each ninth grade classroom to remind students of *the next step in their educational career* by enthusiastically asking, "Where are you going in four years?!" Students were thus prompted to reply in unison: "College!" Next, instead of an assembly-style orientation, students attended workshops in individual classrooms in groups of twenty. The workshops clearly linked behavioral expectations for students to the school's instructional philosophy and academic expectations. Teachers began their lessons with a Do-Now (a warm-up set of open-ended questions on the lesson topic) and finished each lesson with an exit assessment to gauge students' understanding – procedures students will follow throughout the year. The lessons themselves were interactive and required problem-solving. Students were also required to write responses in an orientation packet teachers collected at the end of the day.

The further they are behind, the smaller the class size.

-Administrator

In addition to engaging students, these packets of student work gave teachers an early start on *using data to assess incoming students.* All ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders also took math and English assessments during orientation to help place them in an appropriately leveled class. School staff continued to *use performance data to monitor students' progress throughout the year.* Cassatt follows a standardized curriculum and utilizes benchmark assessments, based on state standards that school leaders have designed. As a teacher leader explained, "Our classes are skills-based, in six-week chunks. Every six weeks there's a core set of skills, like the state standards, only broken down a little bit more." Thus, student data are monitored every six weeks to identify students who need extra help.

At Cassatt, *students who are not yet excelling are provided with additional instructional time* to help them achieve. All students—unless they are achieving high marks in their classes—are required to

stay until 4 pm for Extended Day. During Extended Day, three things happen. First, teachers hold office hours. Second, students who do not turn in homework are required to stay after school to do it. Third, students who failed any math or English benchmark are rostered into a class where they receive academic support from the same teacher whose class they are failing; assigning them to the same teacher is intended to build teachers' accountability. Finally, during the "regular" part of the school day, the school provides extra supports to students who need the most help. For example, in ninth and tenth grade, "the further they are behind, the smaller the class size." However, it is notable that all classes are relatively small—the average class size is 25 students.

Additional instructional time requires a greater commitment from both students and teachers. To give students the rigor they need, teachers reported working ten-hour days in the building, plus a few hours at home on most school days. Teachers' dedication extends to weekends as well. All teachers are required to teach one Saturday a month. The school also provides incentives for teachers to improve the academic performance of all students. When teachers as a group meet school-wide goals for student performance, all faculty receive a cash bonus at the end of the school year. At Cassatt, human resources policies and collective responsibility among teachers operate in tandem to support instructional goals.

In classrooms, *testing skills are integrated into everyday lessons throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year*, from analyzing a poem to interpreting statistical data. The curriculum includes

We have high expectations and kids know that.

–Teacher Leader

Advanced Placement courses, where test preparation is similarly integrated in an authentic way that focuses on skills while reminding students of the goal for which they are striving. For example, a twelfth grade AP Statistics teacher reminded students of all the elements of a "thorough response" to an AP exam question and taught them to be comfortable using the language of statistics in their verbal and written responses. The class culture is one of rigor and success, as *all* 20 students in the class are prepared to, and will be required to, take the AP test. Finally, consistent with the motivational messages that they provide students throughout their four years of high school, school leaders have recently begun taking freshmen and sophomores as well as juniors and seniors on college visits. School leaders also hold special evening events to assist students with their college applications.

In sum, the school raises student performance by:
- following a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards;
- providing students with both motivation and concrete assistance to gain admittance to college;
- using assessment data to place students in appropriate classes, monitor student progress, and individualize interventions;
- mandating additional instructional time for struggling students; and
- integrating standardized test preparation throughout the curriculum and school year.

The academic core of the school is further strengthened by coherence across key areas of the school; the instructional program, intentional practices to foster quality teaching, and designing a student-centered school community that fosters high expectations, persistence, and high achievement for all its members.

In Summary

The better performing schools in our sample have taken responsibility for providing their students with a rigorous academic curriculum that will prepare them for the next stage of their education, whether this is the transition from middle school to high school, or high school to college. At these better performing schools, all adults in the school assume a collective responsibility for motivating students to achieve, and follow up with them if they are faltering. Faculty use the core curriculum provided to them, but they do not hesitate to use supplementary curricular materials if student performance data is weak in a particular skill area. These schools also provide additional instructional time for students who are not yet excelling in their coursework or on standardized tests. Not all schools were able to mandate Extended Day, but some schools overcame this obstacle by designing opportunities for students to receive one-on-one or small group instruction during the regular school day. At one charter school, for example, the top administrator tutored students individually during lunch-time. In other cases, school leaders made the difficult decision to take students out of "elective" classes in order to provide them with additional instructional time, especially on test preparation for the PSSAs. As a district middle school administrator explained, *"Students [who are not yet Proficient on the PSSA] used to get pulled out from gym or art [to get tutoring], but this year [tutoring] is on their schedule so they have a specific period for it [in lieu of gym or art]. But eventually they will figure out that other kids are going to gym or art while they are not."*

School leaders at all types of schools spoke of the importance of preparing students for standardized tests, which under NCLB have become of high importance for measuring a school's "success." While our interviewees noted the delicate balancing act of not over-prioritizing standardized tests, the general consensus was similar to the sentiments offered by one charter high school administrator: *"It's not that we're geared [only] toward the PSSA and it's just test prep. Instead, we look at it and see it's a pretty basic exam, testing fundamental skills. If that's how the student will be measured, then that's what we need to do."* While both lower performing and better performing schools prioritized test preparation, in many cases the better performing schools were more strategic about planning and implementing specific supports to students that would raise test scores. School leaders, faculty, and even students worked together in order to successfully raise student performance on both standardized tests and in classroom work. The more successful schools took an integrated approach to achieving this goal by prioritizing high quality teaching, school-centered community, and a rigorous instructional program with a coherent set of strategies and a measurable set of objectives.

Concluding Observations

In this study, we focused our attention on finding out what Philadelphia's better performing schools are doing to improve the achievement of young people in grades six through twelve. We did not look at schools where absolute performance might be the highest, but chose schools that served large numbers of students with multiple risk factors and that were achieving better results with those students than other schools serving a similar population. We also looked at lower performing schools in Philadelphia, as contrasting cases. We found that all schools – whether better performing or lower performing – faced obstacles in their efforts to improve student achievement. In Philadelphia's tiered system of schools, some schools work under extreme disadvantage, while others have some advantages, as we have noted in our case studies. Part of the School District of Philadelphia's task will be to figure out how to remove as many obstacles to success as possible, and, most particularly, how to address the needs of schools facing many disadvantages.

Our research identified three spheres where schools' organizational practices made a difference for students' learning and their school experience. Within these spheres, certain strategies, *when used in combination*, contributed meaningfully to the successes of the better performing schools we studied.

In the sphere of *conditions for teaching*, school leaders assembled a strong leadership team that made strategic staffing and scheduling decisions that allowed the faculty to become a community of learners. School leaders also constructed a shared vision of good teaching and provided the professional development teachers needed to realize it. These conditions, in turn, established a respectful collegiality among the adults in the building, which supported quality instruction and encouraged teachers to grow.

In the sphere of *student-centered school community*, staff created an environment that encouraged both students' academic growth and their personal development. They articulated a student identity for students to model, built personal relationships that engaged and celebrated students, and invited students to feel a sense of responsibility and pride in themselves and their school. School leaders also strategically enlisted parents and community members to further support and enrich students. Finally, they prioritized creating a physical environment that gave students a sense of being valued and respected.

In the sphere of *instructional program*, school leaders designed a coherent scope and sequence that rigorously prepared students for the next level and also incorporated standardized test preparation and additional instructional time to provide struggling students with extra support. These programs, while aligned with state standards and internally consistent, were fluid enough to respond to student performance data, which staff continually used to monitor students' progress and adjust their instruction to student needs.

While we saw many of these strategies at work in schools, our research also showed how exceedingly difficult it is for urban schools to be good at all of the many things they need to do in order for students to achieve at high levels. The leaders at the schools in our study would be the first to say that their schools have far to go.

If read as a checklist for school improvement, our report might provoke any principal or teacher to claim, "Our school does this, and this, and this, and this . . . We do almost all of these things." And they might be correct. But in order to make a positive impact on student achievement, such practices need to operate with intensity and depth. Furthermore, individual practices must add up to a coherent strategy to gain the traction needed to achieve sustainable improvement.

Our hope is that Philadelphia's school-based practitioners will use this report to generate discussions about ways to deepen and extend what they are already doing and about what new ideas seem promising for their schools. Such conversations could serve as the basis for short, mid-term, and longer-term planning. For central and regional office leaders, the report could inform conversations about how to organize their work in support of the identified priorities. What obstacles can be removed from schools' efforts? What policies can the district enact and what resources can it deploy to support the practices? Consideration of these questions is an important step to improving Philadelphia's schools and raising student performance across all school types.

Appendix A: Selection process and school profiles for sample schools

Our sample selection of better performing middle grades and high schools followed a two-step process. First, we identified all of the district-managed, EMO-managed, and charter middle grades and high schools that met specific achievement criteria. (The specific criteria for each of these categories are explained in detail below). Applying these criteria did not yield the variation of schools that was needed. In order to achieve this variation, we moved to identifying schools that were highest achieving in their category. For example, of the district large neighborhood high schools, we selected the schools that came closest to meeting the achievement criteria that we had set.

Selection process for middle grades schools.

Our middle grades sample includes both middle schools and K-8 schools. Under the administration of CEO Paul Vallas, the district restructured elementary and middle schools to create K-8 schools. Vallas believed that K-8 schools were more effective than traditional middle schools and a goal of his was to create K-8 schools and eliminate middle schools. There are still a few remaining middle schools in the district but the majority of middle grades schools are K-8 schools. Our sample includes a preponderance of K-8[16] schools and one middle school.

1). Achievement Growth and Achievement Criteria. In order to select the sample of better performing middle grades schools, the first step was to select those schools that are better performing both in terms of achievement growth and achievement level compared to other middle grades schools in the district. To identify each school's achievement growth, we looked to PVAAS data for all of the district schools and charter schools. To identify each school's achievement level, we looked at the percentages of students scoring Proficient and Advanced in both reading and math from 2005-2007 as determined by PSSA scores from all schools.

Using PVAAS data from 2007, we first selected those schools that showed consistent growth across grades (elementary and middle grades in schools that have K-8) and subject areas (reading and math) on the state's standardized test (PSSA).

From this set of schools, we then selected those schools that had at least 45% of students scoring Proficient/Advanced in at least one subject area one of the years. After this first step, we had a total of 13 schools.

2). Exceptions for Variation. As explained in the report, we wanted to have a varied sample of schools in the district, including a range of school management types (district, EMO, and charter) as well as including racially and ethnically diverse schools, schools that are racially isolated, and schools that serve primarily low-income student populations. To be clear, a few of the schools in our original sample of 13 did have one or more of these conditions;

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[16] One school in our sample did not phase in eighth grade until the 2007-2008 school year.

however, we wanted to increase the variation further. Therefore, the second step was to broaden our sample to include a few other schools in the district that have one or more of these conditions as well as eliminate a few of the 13 schools. We selected the schools that came closest to meeting the achievement criteria in their category.

We ended with a total of 11 schools. Our final sample consists of 8 better performing schools because during the first round of data collection, we eliminated 3 schools due to extreme difficulty gaining access to those schools.

Table A1: Better performing middle grades sample schools: number of achievement criteria met by governance type

Governance Type	Number of Criteria Met	
	PVAAS Criteria	PSSA Criteria
District (n=4)	4	3
EMO (n=3)	3	2
Charter (n=1)	1	0

Selection process for high schools

1 Achievement Criteria. The process for selecting our sample of better performing high schools was a little different than the process for selecting our middle grades sample. The first step was to select those schools that are better performing in terms of achievement compared to other high schools in the district. Unlike in the middle grades selection, we could not use PVAAS data to determine achievement growth. At the time that we were constructing our sample, Pennsylvania did not have a growth analysis measure for high schools. Therefore, in order to select our sample of better performing high schools, we looked at the average NCE (Normal Curve Equivalent) scores of each high school in the district including charters. The high schools had to have a mean NCE of 40 or higher.

In addition to the mean NCE achievement criteria, we applied other achievement criteria to select our sample. Specifically, we focused on graduation rate, ninth grade promotion rate, and overall ranking in the district. High schools had to have a >80% graduation rate in 2006, a ninth grade promotion rate >80% as measured from spring 2006 to fall 2007, and have an absolute rank in the top third of all high schools in the district. After this first step, we had a total of 23 schools.

2 Exceptions for Variation. As in the middle grades sample, we wanted to have a sample of high schools that included schools with varying admissions criteria, charter schools, and schools with intense poverty and racial isolation. Therefore, the second step was to broaden the sample of 23 schools to include a few high schools that have these conditions as well as eliminate a few of the 23 schools. Similar to the middle grades sample, we selected those schools that came closest to meeting the achievement criteria in their category.

We ended with a sample of 9 better performing high schools.

Table A2: Better performing high schools sample schools: number of achievement criteria met by governance type

Governance Type	Number of Criteria Met			
	NCE Criteria	Graduation Criteria	Rank Criteria	9th grade Promotion Criteria
District (n=5)	3	3*	5	2**
EMO (n=0)***	-	-	-	-
Charter (n=4)	2	4	4	4

* One school did not have a graduating class in 2006.
** One school is ungraded.
*** There are few EMO high schools in the district and they did not sufficiently meet our criteria for inclusion in the sample.

Table A3: Middle Grades Schools Student Demographic Information

Better performing schools

▉ = Case study schools

School	Race/Ethnicity					% Free/Reduced Lunch
	AA	White	Asian	Latino	Other	
A	30.0%	41.0%	8.4%	18.2%	2.3%	69.1%
B (Calder)	32.0%	3.4%	7.6%	59.4%	2.1%	81.3%
C	83.9%	0.5%	7.2%	8.2%	0.2%	85.4%
D	98.2%	0.4%	0.0%	0.8%	0.6%	86.1%
E	91.1%	0.5%	5.4%	1.4%	1.6%	85.7%
F	95.5%	1.0%	0.3%	2.4%	0.7%	86.4%
G (Malone)	100%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	95.0%
H (Cosby)	93.3%	1.6%	0.5%	4.7%	0.0%	85.7%

Lower performing schools

School	Race/Ethnicity					% Free/Reduced Lunch
	AA	White	Asian	Latino	Other	
I	19.0%	2.6%	1.3%	76.7%	0.2%	82.5%
J	99.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	61.0%

Table A4: Middle Grades Schools PVAAS Value Added Summary Report

Better performing schools

School	2007 Math					Reading				
	4	5	6	7	8	4	5	6	7	8
A	3.6	1	12.6	6.4	4.4	4.1	4.3	8.1	0.1	2.8
B (Calder)	--	--	7.2	3.4	8.7	--	--	4.5	2.5	4.6
C	0.2	0.7	4.3	0.5	6.8	2.9	4.7	3.5	4.7	3.8
D	-2.3	6.4	6.1	6.5	6.7	2.1	17.0	9.0	6.3	10.1
E	4.0	2.2	5.3	2.6	6.1	-0.4	2.6	3.1	2.6	3.2
F	5.7	-2.9	5.0	3.8	3.6	6	4.4	5.2	2.2	12.1
G (Malone)	5.7	1.4	5.0	1.6	-0.2	2.4	1.5	1.2	4.0	1.8
H (Cosby)	0.9	7.4	-4.1	8.4	--	3.3	8.9	-9.4	8.3	--

* In order to meet our achievement growth criteria, schools had to show positive growth (indicated by a positive number) in all but 2 cells.

Lower performing schools

School	2007 Math					Reading				
	4	5	6	7	8	4	5	6	7	8
I	0.2	-0.9	-1.5	-3.8	-0.8	2.9	-1.8	-2.4	-6.4	1.1
J	-7.6	-2.6	4.5	2.9	2.0	-5.1	-5.6	-1.2	0.2	-2.8

Table A5: Middle Grades Schools Percentage Advanced/Proficient Reading and Math

Better performing schools

School	% Advanced/Proficient Reading			% Advanced/Proficient Math		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
A	32.5%	42.7%	48.0%	47.1%	43.3%	52.5%
B (Calder)	47.3%	36.7%	44.5%	61.0%	35.1%	49.7%
C	24.9%	31.7%	32.5%	32.9%	35.9%	31.4%
D	18.6%	39.6%	47.5%	21.3%	39.9%	45.5%
E	35.0%	32.0%	36.4%	37.4%	30.6%	43.0%
F	37.9%	12.5%	30.1%	58.6%	28.6%	36.2%
G (Malone)	31.6%	31.1%	41.1%	36.4%	30.6%	33.6%
H (Cosby)	30.4%	56.1%	51.4%	47.8%	58.5%	58.1%

Lower performing schools

School	% Advanced/Proficient Reading			% Advanced/Proficient Math		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
I	20.6%	28.1%	26.2%	13.9%	21.2%	17.6%
J	23.5%	31.3%	32.6%	27.9%	30.5%	32.4%

Table A6: High Schools Student Demographic Information

Better performing schools

☐ = Case study schools

School	Race/Ethnicity					% Free/Reduced Lunch
	AA	**White**	**Asian**	**Latino**	**Other**	
O	49.6%	28.4%	11.1%	10.6%	0.3%	63.0%
P	84.7%	8.3%	1.0%	5.2%	0.1%	70.0%
Q	37.4%	40.6%	11.8%	9.6%	0.6%	49.6%
R (Ross)	72.8%	9.2%	2.4%	15.3%	0.3%	63.3%
S	98.7%	0.2%	0.0%	1.0%	0.2%	84.5%
T (Scott)	99.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	83.0%
U (Cassatt)	96.0%	0.0%	0.5%	2.0%	0.0%	71.0%
V	98.7%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	75.0%
W	50.9%	13.7%	25.9%	8.2%	1.4%	72.3%

Lower performing schools

School	Race/Ethnicity					% Free/Reduced Lunch
	AA	**White**	**Asian**	**Latino**	**Other**	
X	90.7%	0.5%	3.5%	0.5%	0.3%	84.7%
Y	97.5%	0.4%	0.2%	1.4%	0.4%	80.6%
Z	98.9%	0.2%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	85.9%

Table A7: High Schools Achievement Profile

Better performing schools

School	Mean NCE PSSA	Graduation Rate '06	9th Grade Promotion – Spr '06-Fall '07*	Rank
O	49.9	98.5%	-- (Ungraded)	12
P	44.1	100.0%	100.0%	18
Q	43.0	80.5%	73.3%	20
R (Ross)	40.3	-- (First graduation class '07)	96.7%	27
S	39.8	85.2%	92.3%	28
T (Scott)	36.3	100.0%	92.3%	31
U (Cassatt)	41.9	96.6%	82.9%	23
V	36.1	100.0%	100.0%	32
W	34.8	53.4%	70.6%	33

* Count of students enrolled in 9th grade 4/30/07 and still enrolled 9/30/07.

Lower performing schools

School	Mean NCE PSSA	Graduation Rate '06	9th Grade Promotion – Spr '06-Fall '07*	Rank
X	24.7	55.5%	60.2%	68
Y	21.7	60.6%	59.9%	70
Z	21.5	-- (1st graduating class '07)	87.6%	71

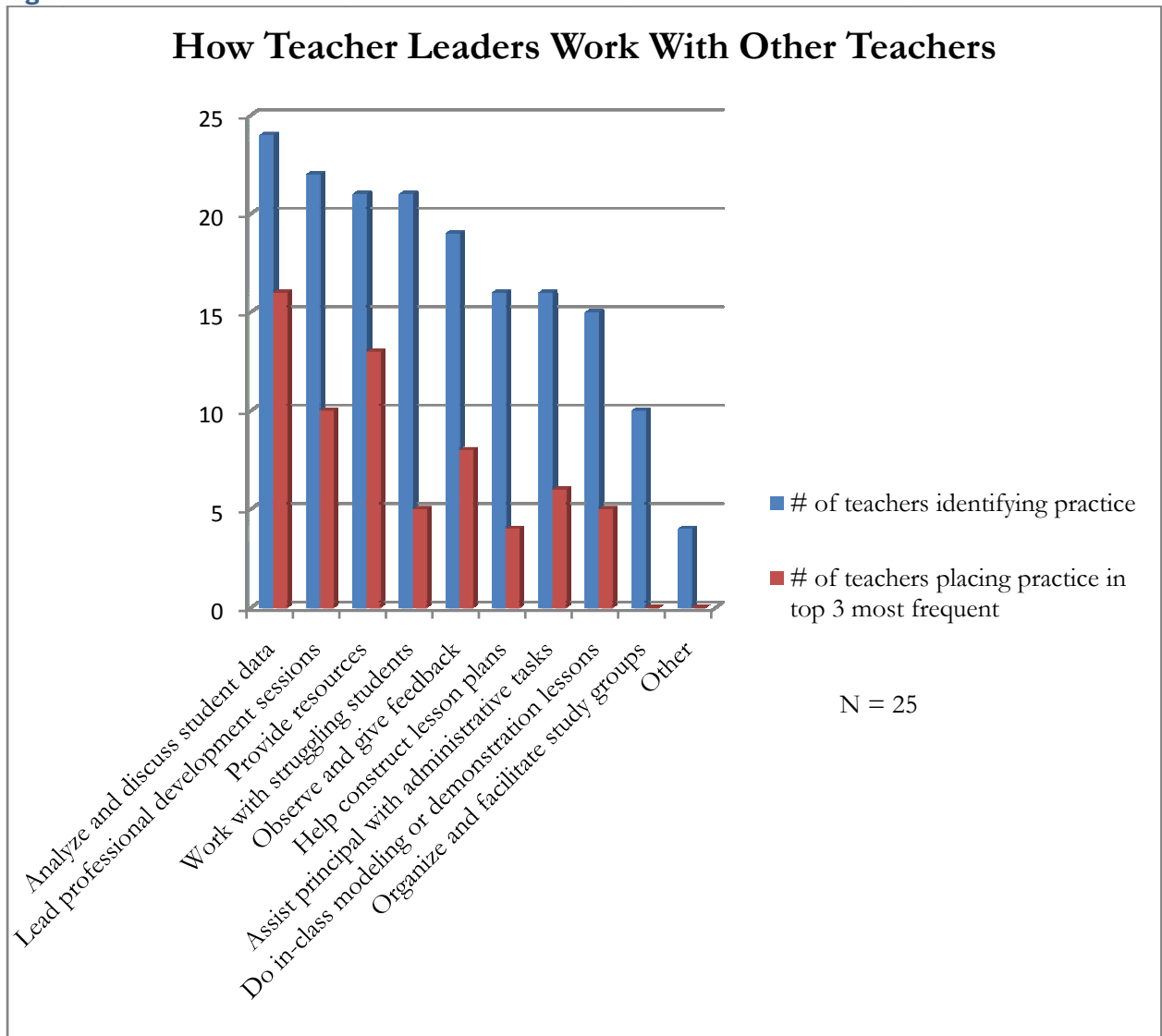# Appendix B: Teacher Leader Time

As part of our teacher leader interview, we asked teacher leaders how they work with other teachers. We gave a list of ways that they could work with other teachers and asked the following question:

> Please put a check mark next to any/all of the ways that you work with teachers in your role as a teacher leader.
>
> Please put a * next to the three most frequent ways that you work with teachers.

Out of 25 teacher leaders, here are the results:

Figure 1:

How Teacher Leaders Work With Other Teachers

■ # of teachers identifying practice

■ # of teachers placing practice in top 3 most frequent

N = 25

Appendix C: Recent studies that provide context to our findings

In order to provide context and contrasts for our study, we examined it in relation to two similar studies from other parts of the country: *Beating the Odds*, released by the Annenberg Institute (Ascher & Maguire, 2007) and *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground* from The Education Trust (Stempel & McCree, 2005).

Beating the Odds by the Annenberg Institute

Beating the Odds focused on thirteen schools in New York City that were determined to be "'beating the odds' in preparing low-performing ninth-grade students for timely high school graduation and college-going."

In this study, data were organized around four areas of best practice:
- Academic Rigor,
- Network of Timely Supports,
- College Expectations and Access, and
- Effective Data Use.

Academic Rigor Schools offered Advanced Placement and other college-prep courses, and developed consistent, rigorous instructional standards across their curricula. Administrators were described as "setting and maintaining high academic standards" and ensuring that the teaching met those standards by using an observational rubric when they visited classrooms. Professional development and staff retreats were used to help the teachers meet the high standards. Administrators used data to "provide feedback to the administration and faculty about how the curriculum could be revised, modified, and reinforced." Grade-groups, departmental meetings, and staff retreats were described as important ways to support teachers and reinforce high standards.

Network of Timely Supports School staff tracked students' progress and provided specific supports and interventions when necessary. Staff attended to academic, behavioral, and personal needs of all the students. These schools provided mentoring, tutoring, and counseling for students to boost their achievement and to build and maintain relationships between teachers and students. In these schools, "No student's academic progress escaped scrutiny." Staff tracked each student's academic progress and provided timely interventions both during and outside of normal school hours.

College Expectations and Access Staff sent the message that all students would go to college. Staff made certain that all students understood that they needed complete "disciplined academic work directed to graduation and college or another form of post-secondary education." These conversations were reinforced through the use of visual and physical space in the schools. The administrators went out of their way to offer college guidance counselors and to expose students to the possibilities of college, through college or

career fairs and college visits. The support of parents and the community were actively sought in order to build on the college-going expectation.

Effective Data Use Staff tracked student data in order to understand students' strengths and weaknesses and to tailor academic programs to them. They examined student-level data, used to shape tutoring and academic interventions for individual students, as well as grade- and school-level data, used to "provide feedback to the administration and faculty about how curriculum could be revised, modified, and reinforced." Staff also kept track of student data after they had graduated, in order to inform students and parents where graduates attended college and how much scholarship support they received.

In addition to explaining what successful schools look like, *Beating the Odds* also describes some of the challenges that schools face in maintaining or increasing their success. *Beating the Odds* concludes with recommendations for how to stabilize the successful schools and create more successes in New York City.

Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground by The Education Trust

Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground examined data from four high schools in California and North Carolina that showed; greater than expected growth, at least average performance, smaller than average achievement gaps, and high graduation rates. Practices in these schools were then compared to those in three schools determined to be average.

Researchers organized their findings into five spheres that influenced school performance:
- Culture
- Academic Core
- Support
- Teachers
- Time and Other Resources

Culture Successful schools focused on preparing students for life beyond graduation by focusing on academic success. Administrators worked to create consistent and coherent goals for their students which were reinforced by teachers throughout the schools. These schools embraced external standards and assessments and used them to improve their teaching.

Academic Core Successful schools offered advanced coursework to all students, not just those with high prior achievement. Staff at high-impact schools used assessment data to plan instruction and academic interventions and to advise students on their course selection. Math assignments were more advanced, students were required to read more, and students participated more in class discussions in high-impact than in average-impact schools.

Supports Successful schools built systems to keep students on track for graduation. The staff took responsibility for ensuring that students receive the support they needed. These supports were offered early and deliberately and were available to all students in order to

help them stay on track to graduate on time. School counselors and outside partners played roles in helping students to achieve their goals.

Teachers High-impact schools assigned teachers more deliberately, according to the needs of the students. Struggling students are placed in smaller classes. Teachers had input in the professional development they received, and support for new teachers focused on instruction and the curriculum. Principals in high-impact schools actively and aggressively recruited teachers that they thought would fit well at their schools.

Time and Other Resources High-impact schools used instructional time in focused and deliberate ways. More time was spent building literacy skills in high-impact schools than in average schools, especially for low-achieving students. Teachers did not allow time to be wasted.

Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground also suggests ways to put these findings into practice. Their recommendations center around ways to support new teachers, using common assessments, strategically assigning teachers and improving the high school transition.

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