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Baltimore Education Research Consortium

Policy Brief

*Informing
Policy and
Practice to
Benefit
Baltimore's
Children*

Pressures of the Season: Classroom Quality in Baltimore Elementary Classes and Implications for Improving Instruction

This brief presents findings from 347 observations conducted in 23 second and third grade classrooms over two years to paint a picture of the in-school experiences of students who had been first graders in eight Baltimore City Public Schools in 2007-08. Using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observation instrument and protocol developed by researchers at the University of Virginia (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre 2008), a rigorously trained team of classroom observers conducted eight observations in each classroom over two days in January and another eight observations over two days in May.

Major Findings

The CLASS allows us to measure classroom quality across three broad domains correlated with various measures of children's academic and social development (Mashburn et al. 2008; Hamre & Pianta 2005; Cadima et. al 2010; Pianta, La Paro & Hamre 2008).

- *Emotional Support* was in the upper half of a moderate range. In the majority of classrooms, affective warmth among teachers and students, teacher sensitivity to student needs and concerns, and attention to students' interests and points of view was evident. This measure of young children's social and emotional development is strongly related to their academic and social development.
- *Classroom Organization* was generally in a moderate to high range. In most classrooms behavioral expectations and routines were made clear by the teacher and respected by students. Teachers were usually proactive and successful in maintaining order, and students were generally working productively and staying on task. Classrooms function best and provide the most opportunities for learning when students are well behaved, consistently have things to do, and are interested and engaged in learning tasks.
- *Instructional Support* was severely lacking in most of the classrooms. There was little evidence of higher-order concept development, high-quality dialogue and feedback to students, or rich language modeling. This measure of *how* children are taught is critical to their academic achievement. It captures the ways teachers implement curriculum and how they support cognitive and language development.
- Deficiencies in the dimensions of instructional and emotional support were especially pronounced during the winter in third grade classrooms, likely linked to observed preparation for the Maryland School Assessment (MSA).

Implications

- If our findings reflect the realities of many other City Schools elementary classrooms, City Schools has considerable building blocks in the emotional support and classroom organization domains. This provides a strong foundation to focus on improving practices of instructional support, specifically, higher-order thinking and concept development,

elaborate feedback between teachers and students about concepts and thought processes, and rich language modeling.

- *Test Prep* must include higher-order concept development, high-quality dialogue and feedback to students, and rich language modeling. Teachers and principals may need to be persuaded that students' critical thinking skills are crucial for their performance on the MSA and overall academic growth. Whole-class or small-group discussions of problem-solving strategies, thought processes, and successful approaches to items such as Brief Constructed Responses should be offered in a conceptually rich, emotionally warm, and interactive manner.

Summary

Examination of the differences in classroom quality by grade and by season contributes to the broader research efforts to understand when, where, and how major policy initiatives and accountability paradigms infiltrate and affect the technical core of curriculum and instruction. While our report is focused specifically on the contexts of Baltimore and Maryland, it is clear that most states, districts, and schools across the United States are facing similar dynamics and decision-points as the technical core of curriculum and instruction encounters shifting assessments and accountability contexts. We intend for our ongoing research to contribute to better understanding the pertinent theoretical and practical issues from both a Baltimore-based and comparative perspective.

A full copy of the full report can be found at baltimore-berc.org

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