EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS, INC.

Research Brief
Self-Contained Classrooms

Question: What does the research say about the effectiveness of self-contained classrooms, for students other than handicapped students, in high schools?

Summary of Findings:
Determining the ideal academic setting in which students can be successful continues to be one of the primary goals of educators. Is there a best classroom structure in which students can be successful? Although there is research on the academic gains in the block schedule and in traditional departmentalized settings, both of which are common in secondary schools, there is little research on the effectiveness of a high school self-contained classroom. Rarely do "high school" and "self-contained classroom" appear together. It is hard to locate examples of self-contained high school classrooms. Thus, little research is available.

Departmentalized Structure
This has been the standard structure of secondary schools since they were initiated. In the 1970s, the departmentalized structure became popular even in elementary schools. It was believed this would contribute to a more successful transition to high school. The departmentalized structure would also allow educators to teach breadth and depth of a subject, rather than teach subjects with which they may lack expertise. The plus in this structure is that students are learning content from someone with a strong background in the particular subject area (Catledge-Howard, Ward, Dilworth, & Mississippi State University, 2003).

Self-Contained Structure
A self-contained classroom generally consists of one instructor who is a generalist and teaches every content area; although in elementary school settings, there are often "specials" that are taught by teachers in a particular field such as music, art and physical education. This setting is still common for students with special needs, students in alternative schools and at the elementary level. On rare occasions, students that are identified as gifted attend self-contained classes (Hayden, 2007). The pluses in this setting are that the teacher has more opportunities to learn the strengths, weaknesses and learning styles of the students; there is more flexibility in the schedule; there is a better chance for integration of the different content areas; and students have more actual time in the classroom because they are not losing time moving to another setting (Catledge-Howard, Ward, Dilworth, & Mississippi State University, 2003; McGrath & Rust, 2002).

Research on Self-Contained Structure
Although the research on the effectiveness of self-contained classrooms is minimal, it is significant.

EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS, INC.

- One study done by McGrath and Rust (2002) of fifth and sixth graders in departmentalized and self-contained classrooms found that students in self-contained classrooms made significant gains on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) in the total battery and language and science subtests. However there were no significant differences in the math, reading and social studies subtests (Catledge-Howard, Ward, Dilworth, & Mississippi State University, 2003; McGrath & Rust, 2002).
- A study conducted by Alspaugh and Harting found that in four out of five groups of students who transitioned from self-contained to a departmentalized structure experienced a significant decline in their reading and math scores (Catledge-Howard, Ward, Dilworth, & Mississippi State University, 2003).
- According to Piirto and Kolloff, students who have been identified as gifted and are in self-contained settings, score higher in this environment than when they are not. Both report that it may be because students are able to be themselves without fear of the social implications associated with their giftedness (Piirto, 2004).

Related Research Briefs:

- Muir, M. (2003). Teaming and achievement. Retrieved online at http://www.principalspartnership.com/teaming.pdf
  This brief discusses team teaching and its impact on student achievement.

- Muir, M. (2006). Self-contained programs. Retrieved online at http://www.principalspartnership.com/selfcontained.pdf
  This brief discusses self-contained classrooms in alternative school settings.

Online Resources:

- Catledge-Howard, S., Ward, C. A., Dilworth, R. E., & Mississippi State University. (2003). Classroom organizational structures and student achievement. Retrieved online http://www.msstate.edu/dept/preps/files/ClassroomOrganizationalStructures.pdf
  This is a summary of some research conducted that examined test scores of elementary students in self-contained and departmental settings.

- Chen, G. (2009). Understanding self-contained classrooms in pubic schools. Retrieved online http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/73
  A definition of self-contained classroom, in particular for students who have special needs and gifted is provided in this piece.

- Hayden, K. (2007). TAG and self-contained classrooms. Retrieved online from http://giftededucation.suite101.com/article.cfm/tag_and_selfcontained_classrooms
  A brief description of the plusses and minuses for a self-contained classrooms for students who are gifted is provided in this article.

- McGrath, J. & Rust, J. O. (2002). Academic achievement and between-class transition time between self-contained and departmental elementary classes. Retrieved online from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCG/is_1_29/ai_84667407/
  A succinct overview of research conducted by the authors regarding test scores of students in self-contained and departmental settings is reported.
- National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. (n.d.). Alternative schooling. Retrieved online http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/alternative_schooling/overview.htm
  This section describes and defines alternative schools.

Submitted Date: 11/14/09 By: Dr. Karen Walker Lebanon Valley College