School Case Studies

Wonder Elementary School
Osceola Middle School
Dollarway High School

Discussion of Findings

The following discussion is informed by the three schools that have been analyzed in the preceding presentation of this report. However, observations and generalizations also draw upon case studies conducted in six schools during 2010 (2 struggling and 2 exemplary schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels).

Results of these 2010 case studies are discussed in the BLR report titled, **Examination of Efficiency and Achievement Gaps in Arkansas School Districts: Case Studies and Statistical Analyses.**

All of these case studies were conducted by two BLR staff with the same interview protocol, which allowed for probing for greater detail and unforeseen issues to arise.

Role of Superintendent

Effective leaders articulate clear, nondiscretionary student achievement goals for the district, schools, and students. The willingness to articulate goals, strategies for achieving goals, and indicators of progress toward goals are crucial to effective school leadership.

Effective leaders identify a **few key priorities** and pursue them relentlessly instead of implementing a large number of initiatives in hopes that some of them are effective in raising student achievement.

Within this framework, substantive school improvement requires a coordinated, systematic, and collective effort from all school staff, rather than isolated individual efforts. Many successful schools have selected Professional Learning Communities as the primary mechanism for decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

Superintendents play a major role in school operations through hiring and overseeing principals and other staff. In struggling schools we visited, principals were being replaced because they had ineffective managerial skills and were unable to hold teachers accountable.

Role of Superintendent

Superintendents also can become disconnected from the operations of schools and concerns of teachers. As a result, school policy and teacher issues can be overlooked or misrepresented to the school board, a recurring complaint at struggling schools.

Teachers become demoralized when they believe their concerns and needs are ignored or misunderstood by the school board. Demoralized teachers, in turn, lose motivation to perform at optimal levels.

The professional literature and our case studies also indicate a strong link between teacher demoralization and absenteeism (teachers and students) – a common complaint among teachers and administrators at struggling schools.

Effective leaders must clearly articulate actionable steps they expect schools to take and what empirical evidence will be used to measure success. Objective evaluation (process & outcome) is critical to making decisions about the integrity of implementation and the effectiveness of steps taken. Often there is a gap between vision and actual implementation.

Role of Superintendent

Effective leaders stress a coherence (or linkage) between the various educational tasks, such as developing an integrated and coordinated curriculum, creating common formative assessments, using data to guide instruction, and teacher evaluation. Coherence is stressed instead of disconnected tasks.

The superintendent also influences the quality of education in a district through hiring, evaluation, retention, and dismissals of faculty and staff. This person also is a key decision-maker in academic programs developed and adopted, and professional development opportunities available.

Because superintendents are major decision-makers in budgetary issues, they exercise considerable influence over factors that are associated with student achievement, such as contracts with supplemental services, availability of technology and library resources, and high quality tutoring.

Role of Principal

The principal also plays a pivotal role in personnel decisions, professional development (PD), and expectations and evaluations of teachers and students. Use of formative assessments and other testing data is heavily influenced by the guidance of principals.

In schools that are in the process of "turning around" student performance in a positive direction, principals have taken an aggressive, "hands-on" approach to shaping curriculum, expectations of students and teachers, school culture, personnel decisions, and absenteeism/discipline.

In the "successful" schools visited, the new principal was clearly establishing high expectations, but not at the expense of creating a culture of mutual support and respect, which is essential in providing authentic feedback and making modifications in practices and processes. Honest dialog is crucial to eliciting teacher commitment and persistence needed to implement major reform in educational policies and practices.

Role of Principal

Rigorous academic expectations are conveyed through "pep rallies," postings on wall boards, banners in hallways, faculty meetings, and feedback sessions with individual teachers. It's a consistent message that permeates all written and oral communication between the principal and teachers and students.

In addition to regularly scheduled classroom observations of teaching, effective principals make a practice of sitting with students on the playground or at lunch and asking them questions about content they are learning in classes.

These first-hand data from students are used, in tandem with classroom observations, in regular feedback sessions with individual teachers.
In successful schools, principals or academic coaches meet regularly with teachers to give them feedback about classroom teaching.

Role of Principal

These more informal (or interim) evaluations are especially useful to new teachers and teachers who have been rated as ineffective. They can provide "real time" specific data on teaching weaknesses and on individual student needs for differentiated instruction.

Informal (formative) evaluations are designed to inform teachers about their progress in professional development, in contrast to the summative evaluation typically conducted at the end of the school year to rate teacher performance.

In schools showing increases in academic performance, teachers are observed in the classroom more often, for longer duration, and get feedback more frequently from the principal or an academic coach.

In successful schools, ineffective teachers are dismissed if they are unable to meet performance expectations after receiving individually-tailored professional development to address their particular deficiencies.

Role of Principal

Struggling schools appear to have a less clearly defined structure of of faculty meetings for making decisions about resource use and designing a coordinated and integrated curriculum, whereas more successful schools seem to have clearly delineated teams of teachers that meet regularly to create a well coordinated and integrated curriculum that links course objectives, pacing, and sequencing of content across courses and grade levels.

Known as Professional Learning Communities (or PLCs) in the professional literature, successful schools tend to view PLCs as the primary mechanism for decision-making, including designing an integrated curriculum, adoption of teaching strategies, and use of technology and test data. PLCs also provide an excellent forum for job-embedded professional development and instruction on use of testing data and technology.

Role of Principal

Successful schools were led by principals and academic coaches that had a missionary, or highly dedicated, zeal for educating students and teachers in how to learn and improve performance. They have strong teaching backgrounds and lead by example, often assuming the role of modeling teaching strategies and instructing teachers on how to teach.

Principals, in tandem, with superintendents have a strong influence on the type and nature of professional development (PD) that is available and taken by teachers and other staff.

In addition to PD received at education cooperatives and from ADE, successful schools reply more heavily on job-embedded PD from academic coaches, who model teaching strategies and provide classroom observational feedback.

Role of Academic Coach

Research indicates single-session PD activities, with no follow-up modeling or practice feedback, are not effective in enhancing teaching skills, nor are workshops and conferences that are unrelated to content areas taught and strategies of teaching. Yet, these PD activities continue to be used in struggling schools.

Several schools seem to use academic coaches from firms like JBHM. Reviews of these services were mixed, ranging from glowing reports to indications of not showing up and offering guidance that contradicted the school's instructional approaches, causing confusion among teachers..

Research and our case studies indicate that academic coaches are critical to improving teaching and increasing student achievement gains. The most useful coaches are highly motivated to acquire knowledge and skills to share with teachers. They are well educated in their subject, and they continue learning through college courses, workshops and seminars.

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Role of Teachers

Research is clear that teaching is one of the strongest predictors of student achievement, and teaching is affected by morale and the respect and appreciation teachers feel that they have from administration.

Open and supportive relationships between the principal and teachers seem to encourage positive and collegial relationships between teachers. In successful schools, teachers appeared to be more supportive and collegial with one another and the principal than in schools that struggle with student performance.

Teachers that enjoy collegial relations are more productive in working in professional learning communities and other faculty meetings. They meet more frequently and are able to plan, implement, and monitor interventions more effectively than faculty bogged down with dissent and interpersonal problems.

Teachers at successful schools, as a whole, seem more motivated and committed to making whatever effort is needed to raise student performance.

Role of Teachers

Teachers at successful schools seem to have greater "tech savvy" and to use technology with students more than teachers at less successful schools. Struggling schools are more likely to report a need for a technology instructor.

Teachers at higher performing schools appear to have spent more time designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating curriculum than teachers at struggling schools. One of the more impressive observations about successful schools was the rigor that goes into making sure that course objectives are integrated across grade levels as well as between courses.

In successful schools, teachers keep portfolios that contain lesson plans, pacing timetables, student projects and exams, test scores, notes on parent interactions, teaching evaluations, and other relevant indicators of teaching responsibilities.   Portfolios are kept from year-to-year to provide a longitudinal record of literal professional development (what deficiencies have been remedied and which ones need to be addressed).

Role of Teachers

The discussion of overarching observations made in the case study can be summed up with a generalized statement that successful schools, in comparison to struggling schools, are explicit and rigorous in their planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of teaching, curriculum, strategic and programmatic interventions, administration, and budget management.
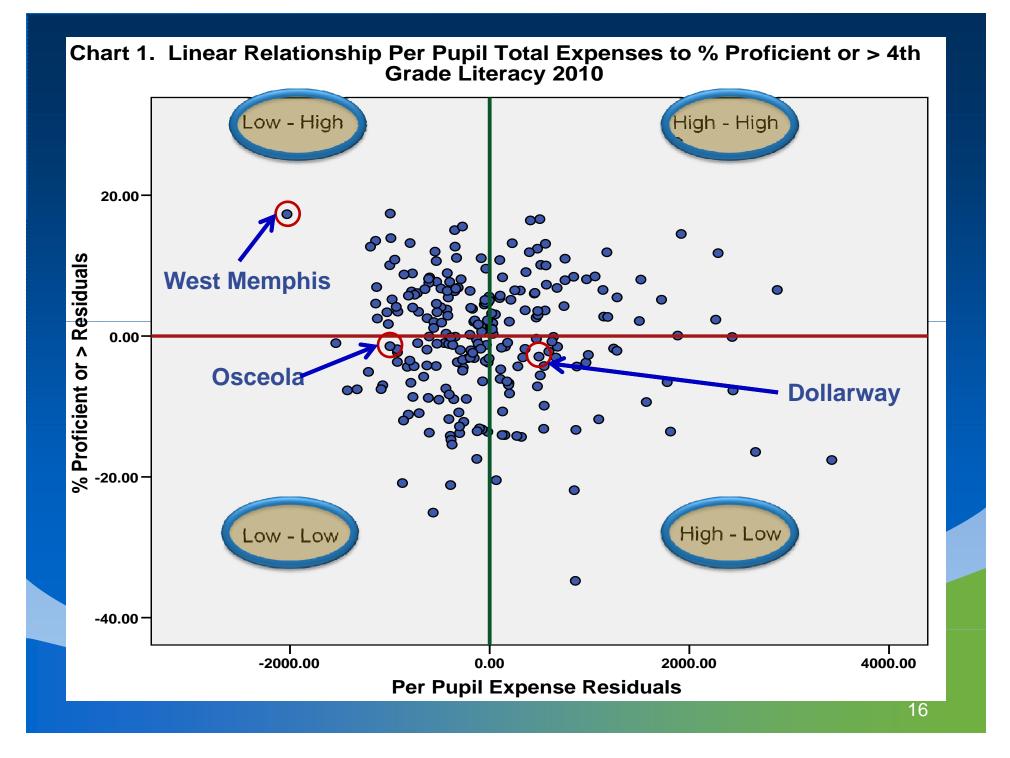
In other words, they are more efficient than schools that show little or no increases in student achievement. In fact, a systematic efficiency analysis conducted with multiple regression procedures, known as quadriform analysis, support this generalization.

Efficiency Analyses

Quadiform analyses are presented in the school finance literature, and they are based on the assumption of a linear relationship between inputs (or instructional costs) and outputs (or student achievement). That is, increases in inputs (funding) are accompanied by increases in outputs (Benchmark scores). If funding is being used efficiently, there should be corresponding increases in achievement with each increase in funding.

The analysis provides predicted values of student performance, based on the linearity assumption, and these predicted values are compared to actual observed values (% Proficient on Benchmark, 4th and 8th math and literacy for 2007 & 2010). So, we had 7 replications of the original analyses of the existing 244 schools districts in 2010. See Chart 1.

A complete discussion of efficiency analyses is found at:
http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/InitiativesDevelopmentsDocs/10-156_Public_EfficiencyAchievementGapsAndCaseStudies_12-20-10.pdf

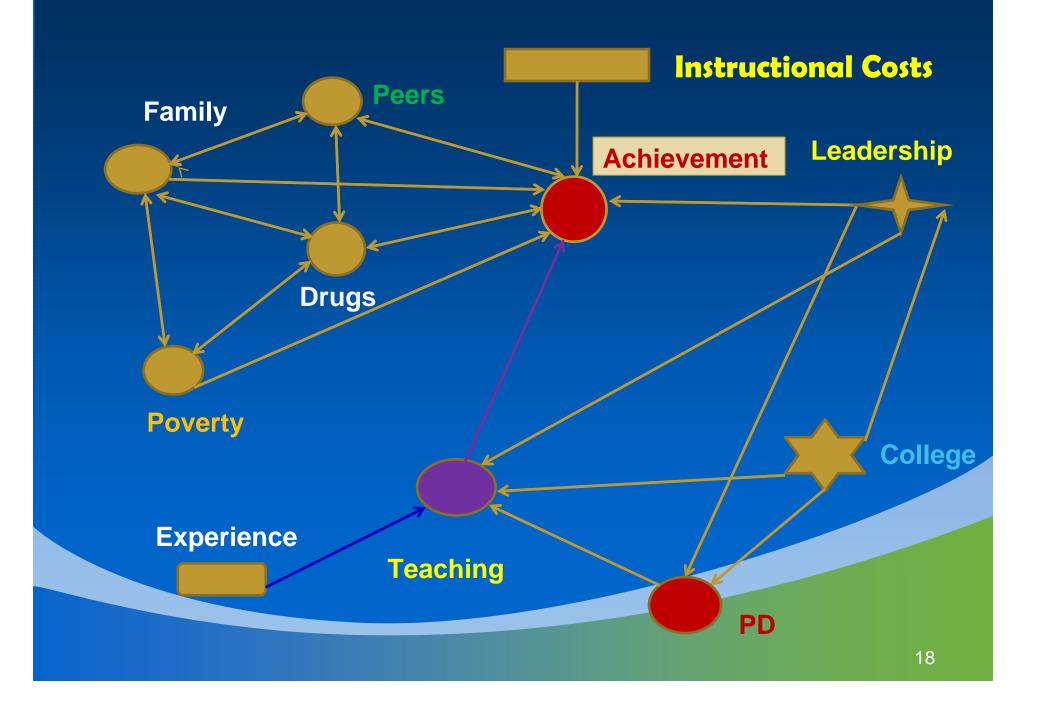Chart 1. Linear Relationship Per Pupil Total Expenses to % Proficient or > 4th Grade Literacy 2010

Results of Efficiency Analyses

The dots represent the intersection of costs and student performance for each district. More specifically, the dots indicate the difference between predicted and observed values of costs and performance. If a district is totally efficient, there should be zero differences between predicted and observed values of total instruction costs **(green line)** and student performance **(red line).**

These zero differences (Red & Green lines) delineate 4 quadrants of efficiency. The top left quadrant shows the districts with low costs and high performance (lower or higher than predicted), and it includes West Memphis. The lower left quadrant shows districts with low costs and low performance, and it includes Osceola, and the lower right quadrant indicates high cost and low performance – it has Dollarway.

These results in Chart 1 are for 4th grade Benchmark literacy in 2010 (% proficient or >). Similar findings are noted for 4th & 8th grade math and Literacy in 2007 and 2010. These results support case studies.

Instructional Costs

Family

Peers

Achievement

Leadership

Drugs

Poverty

College

Experience

Teaching

PD

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