

IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES IN RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the United States entered the “age of high-stakes educational accountability”. According to the United States Department of Education, NCLB is designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works. In a speech made during the 2002 signing of NCLB, President George W. Bush referred to accountability as "an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When scores are known to parents, parents are empowered to push for change. When accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real." Accountability is described in the NCLB act as a comprehensive system developed by state and local education agencies that sets high learning goals for all students, frequently assesses their educational progress and provides focused intervention for those students whose progress is not deemed appropriate.

No Child Left Behind has the rural, small schools pondering several dilemmas. First, due to the small number of students, the data from the test results do not yield statistically reliable data. Second, small, rural schools have difficulty showing adequate yearly progress (AYP) because there are frequently not enough students to make the AYP calculations statistically reliable. In addition, NCLB requires that all teachers must be highly qualified meaning that they must be fully endorsed in all subject areas that they teach. Often small, rural high schools have difficulty finding teachers qualified to teach in all the areas necessary.

Accountability, high-stakes testing, adequate yearly progress (AYP), curriculum mapping, vertical curriculum alignment, state standards, and benchmarks are all catch-phrases that can be heard in classrooms, principal’s offices and school district central offices from New York to Los Angeles and beyond. The accountability issue becomes contentious for many educators when state educational standards are enacted, when assessments like high-stakes tests and adequate yearly progress monitoring systems are instituted and highly scripted, and when skills-based remediation plans are designed and implemented. Educators object to the over-testing that school improvement plans like

NCLB can require, the development of benchmarks and state standards that many teachers view as a national curriculum and the single-minded focus on lower order learning skills targeted by many remediation programs. The increased focus on accountability has certainly made schools examine how they teach, what they teach and how they show that students have actually learned what is being taught. Schools are being required to ensure that what is being taught in classrooms matches curricular benchmarks or state developed educational standards.

In response to the increased accountability, educators find themselves shifting from process-based teaching and assessment systems to a more product oriented, skills-based testing system of education. Often, those skills-based teaching strategies are concentrated in one or two content areas. Those areas under current scrutiny are early literacy skills and early mathematics skills. This concentration on product-oriented education rather than education across a broad curriculum, leaves teachers wondering if they are producing well-rounded students.

In order to meet the NCLB accountability requirements, school systems have had to dramatically increase the number of assessments that are given to all students. The time required to plan, staff, administer, and evaluate the results of those assessments drains valuable instructional time from an already compromised school day. It has also made schools or districts more aware of the need to address the assessment results for all students. These assessments are designed to be disaggregated so that administrators can view the results of instruction for all students even those low-incidence populations who may have fallen through the cracks previously. As a result, we are becoming more aware that we need to develop different teaching strategies to meet the needs of all struggling students.

THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

As teachers address the data from the assessments schools realize that new strategies need to be developed in order to improve the outcomes for students. Schools and/or districts begin to search for techniques that will meet the needs of the students. In many cases, school administrators start to look for ways to help struggling students by purchasing one of the off-the-shelf instructional programs that already qualify as research based. Schools, looking for guidance turn to groups such as the Comprehensive School Reform Program (Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2003). The purpose of the Comprehensive School Reform Program was an effort to provide research-based approaches to enhancing student achievement, particularly in low-performing schools. Schools also may search for answers through direct instruction programs such as the National Institute for Direct Instruction located in Eugene, Oregon, the School Development Program located in New Haven, Connecticut, or Success for All located in Baltimore, Maryland (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

Direct instructional programs, such as “Open Court,” are commercial programs where the lessons are scripted for the teacher. The programs determine what the teacher says during instruction and the pace at which the lessons are taught. Teachers are not allowed to use their professional judgment or match instruction to individual needs. Teachers must follow the plan of instruction.

Many direct instruction and highly scripted instructional programs have track records of increasing student test scores. The National Reading Panel Report: Teaching Children to Read has detailed studies where direct instruction has improved reading abilities in students (NICHHD, 2000). Teachers who have been trained in any of the models have found methods or techniques that help students learn. These direct instruction programs can be very useful for the new teacher looking for immediate ways to help struggling students achieve. Scripted programs leave no doubt about what the teacher will be teaching day-to-day, hour-to-hour, even minute-to-minute. Administrators also find that implementation of this type of program gives them some reason to believe that all students are getting some level of reading skills-building instruction that can be assessed to provide data required by NCLB and help student achievement.

The majority of the scripted programs have been developed and tested in the urban setting. The National Rural Education Association (2004) believes that unless policymakers and technical assistance providers don't become more knowledgeable about the context of educating students in rural communities, much of NCLB will force rural schools to again fit into the urban models of schooling. In addition, NCLB may include the forced consolidation of small schools. Anne Lewis (2003) indicated, "Small, rural schools also do not do well under NCLB's requirements for "adequate yearly progress." Statistically, the small numbers of both classes and subgroups will skew the test results of rural schools, and schools that are making progress will be unfairly labeled as having failed."

Additional pitfalls of scripted programs include the initial cost. Many of the programs initial set up and materials cost are prohibitive for small or rural schools particularly because the schools receive no Federal funding to meet NCLB. The initial startup costs for programs designed to increase student achievement can vary from no cost to as high as \$200,000 or more (Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2003). If you factor in the time for in-service training, teacher time away from students, and administrative time, the total program costs can soar well beyond that.

There are cases where the scripting of programs and curriculum are having negative effects on teaching staff. The strict scripts that are required by direct instruction programs such as reading programs falling within the Reading First realm allow little or no variations of instruction by the teacher. Teachers are not allowed to use professional judgments to alter lessons to suit the ability differences and needs of individual students. Many teachers in situations where the program has been adopted have felt increased frustration, been transferred out of the school and even left the profession entirely. Elizabeth Jaeger, the 2006 winner of the "In Defense of Good Teaching Award" from the University of Arizona College of Education, Department of Language, Reading and Culture, details such a case. In the article, *Silencing Teachers in an Era of Scripted Reading* (Jaeger, 2006), Elizabeth describes the institution of McGraw-Hills Open Court reading program at the school where she was working. Ms. Jaeger, the schools reading coach, outlines a four-year decline in teacher moral and student achievement, culminating in her transfer to another school. Stories like this are not few, as more teachers bristle at the notion of becoming robots slaved to a rigid curriculum.

The major tenets of NCLB that state and federal legislators would like to see are testing outcomes that could be used to compare the achievement level of students from state to state. At the state level, legislators would like to be able to compare the achievement

level of students from school to school. At the present time, a consistent state or national test is not being used to make the comparisons that the legislators would like to be able to make. Administrators, parents and others are looking at alternatives to a national achievement test.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE TO BETTER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In general, administrators and teachers are not against the ideas behind accountability. Nor are they unhappy with the standards that have been developed on the national or state levels. The standards have assisted in the development of a more consistent curriculum throughout the United States. The major drawback for teachers and administrators is the thought of a high stakes testing system that does not take into account the humanistic factors involved with education. They would rather have a system that is developed more locally and yet shows accountability to their constituents.

To increase student achievement, administrators need to develop new cultures in their schools. Lambert (2003) emphasized the idea of schools becoming more collaborative. The author suggests developing professional learning communities in order to increase student achievement. Many in the field of educational leadership, Sergiovani (2006), Glickman, Gordon and Ross-Gordon (2007), Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) indicate that schools need to go beyond being just merely collaborative. Their research indicated that in order to make an effective change in school improvement, schools needed to have a collegial climate and culture. Therefore, the organization was characterized by the collective responsibility shared by each individual within the school. As Michael Fullan (2001) wrote; “Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or ineffective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you produce in others” (p. 137).

To develop an effective school improvement system, administrators in rural schools need to develop a culture of collegiality so that everyone in the school is working together to make sure that all students learn. It may mean that the administrator will need to find innovative ways to provide time for the teachers to meet as a group and discuss the curriculum, instructional process, and assessments to better meet the needs of each individual student and make informed decisions. To make informed decisions, teachers then need to discuss learning styles of the students, instructional strategies that work for their students, and assessment techniques that indicate all students are proficient in the content area.

Administrators in rural schools need to emphasize the community-centered, place-sensitive aspects of schooling in the rural schools where lessons in subjects are taught with compassion, concern, and connectedness to the students and their backgrounds or known knowledge (Smith, 1999). Small or rural schools with fewer levels of bureaucracy have the ability to implement systemic changes that empower teachers to become more involved in the development of programs that they know will assist students within their schools. The knowledge and skills of the teachers becomes paramount to the development on an effective school improvement system. “Rural administrators...should demand that attention once again be paid to place and unique importance of geographic and, consequently, the cultural context in learning” (Smith, 1999, p. 56).

Teachers in small or rural schools have the chance to know the backgrounds, learning styles, and prior knowledge of their students often because of the close-knit community. The teachers have the opportunity to interact with the parents and other community members in an on-going manner whether it be at the grocery store, church, athletic events, or other places where the community and the school have the occasion to meet. In addition, "Teachers must become more involved in the day-to-day decision-making and planning that govern their lives. In collaboration with other teachers, they must create a "place" in schools for the dialogue and sharing that is a prerequisite for a critical examination of teaching and learning communities, and the creation of better teachers, better schools, and better students" (Hilty, 1999, p. 168). This certainly indicates that there needs to be collective efficacy. "Collective efficacy refers to the perceptions of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can execute the courses of action necessary to have positive effects on students" (Goddard, 2001, p.467). Once that positive effect is developed, an effective school improvement system should be in place. Teachers, working together, can develop interventions that will increase the achievement of each child within the school.

The key to the development of an effective school improvement process is to create a communication network that flows from the bottom up as well as top down. Additionally, the communication must centre on what is best for students. Teachers need time for faculty development to learn about the new interventions that various programs offer and the time to share those interventions with their colleagues. A participative approach to the school improvement process will allow the school to serve the varying needs of all students. A participative approach to the school improvement process can keep student achievement levels rising even as the students and culture continue to evolve.

Putnam High School in Milwaukie, Oregon has received honors for its program in school improvement. The basic concept of the school was to develop a collegial school where both teachers and students would get to know each other very well. The second part of their school reform was not the consequence of one practice or another, but instead the gathering of many practices and the interactions among the practices in a shared, collegial manner where communication among the teachers, parents and the students was always open. Staff development was matched to the teachers' desire to succeed and opened the door to new ideas and techniques (Jarrett, 2000). Many of the small schools across America can boast that there is a personalized teacher-student relationship, but not all have developed the collegial atmosphere and open communication lines needed to sustain the change.

CONCLUSIONS

School improvement is an ongoing process. It requires teamwork and clear, concise communication among the members of the school and community. A quick fix may increase student achievement levels in one or more areas, but students deserve and should be provided the best possible education. Given time to work together rural or small schools have the opportunity to develop school improvement programs that meet the individual needs of all students within the school. Working collegially as a community of leaders, rural or small schools have the ability to be on the cutting edge of developing a systematic approach to school improvement developed by teachers for the unique, innate ability of each child. "Instead of searching for models that work

elsewhere, rural educators need to creatively think about the possibilities unique to their location and community. Rural school leaders need to look inward more than outward” (Hurley, 1999, p. 144).

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