The Illinois Best Practice School Study: 2003-2006
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Executive Summary

The Illinois Best Practice School Study is part of a national research study to investigate successful practices in schools. This multi-year study (2003-2006) sought to identify and analyze the best practices of schools that are considered to be consistent high performers despite significant poverty levels. The Illinois study (underwritten by the Illinois Business Round Table and Illinois State University) found common features and best practices among schools with consistently high achievement based on three years of state test scores in all subjects, and a minimum poverty level of 20%.

The Illinois study is organized within six themes: Curriculum; Staffing; Instruction; Monitoring Student Progress; Recognition, Rewards & Interventions; and School Climate & Culture. These themes are based on the large body of effective schools research, and across three levels of organization (district, school and classroom). Interview data and documentation were gathered at all three organizational levels—district, school and classroom—and subsequently analyzed using qualitative data coding methods. Instructional, organizational and cultural practices within the six themes were documented and case studies produced that integrate state School Report Card data with qualitative findings.

The six themes provided a useful framework for probing the workings of the high-performing schools in our study. Investigating these themes at three levels—district, school and classroom—allowed us to document vertical coherence within educational systems. The descriptors for each theme and level provide a detailed picture of the commonalities among successful schools. They have the potential to serve as the basis for a "self-audit" for educators to use when analyzing their own schools' strengths and weaknesses. While leadership is not a separate theme in this study framework, it is most definitely a motif that   pervades all themes and levels.

The first five themes provide the *core technologies or mechanics* of the school. These form a necessary technical core which must exhibit *alignment.* Alignment occurs when the school's curriculum reflects the required learning standards and goals, both state and local; and when teachers are highly qualified to teach the curriculum and assigned appropriately to grade levels and subjects. Alignment tightens when instructional methods are likely to help all learners cquire the knowledge and skills defined within the curriculum; when assessment instruments are used that actually measure what is taught and provide valuable feedback on an ongoing basis, for use by both students and teachers. Alignment becomes even more effective when rewards and interventions match academic goals and expectations.

The attributes of the Climate & Culture theme both wrap around and are embedded within this mechanical vehicle. Trust and a sense of "can do" efficacy pervade the organization. The key cultural attributes of lateral accountability, relational trust and distributed leadership are infused throughout the technical operations of the school.

This study has several key policy implications:
(1) Policymakers need to find ways to assist schools to strengthen their technical core while establishing a solid culture of excellence;
(2) New research in this area should focus on how Illinois best practice schools came to be that way, and how their efforts involved leadership, interaction, adaptation, and many iterations of refinement;
(3) Policy initiatives should increase educator competencies and school leader capacity and foster student-centered instructional methods. This contrasts starkly with policies that underwrite increasing levels of regulation, punitive interventions and sanction enforcement.

Introduction

The Illinois Best Practice School Study is part of a national research study to investigate successful practices in schools with sustained high performance on standardized tests when compared with similar schools. Over three years, College of Education research teams visited a total of 29 schools, conducting in-depth interviews and artifact collection to use in a subsequent analysis to determine effective district, school and classroom practices that consistently appear in these high-performing schools. Among the study schools were several average-performing schools with similar demographics to the higher performers, offering a means of comparison.

The Research Base

For four decades now, scholars have poked and probed at the workings of schools, trying to determine the essential factors that create an effective school. Triggered by the landmark report, *Equality of Opportunity* (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966), which concluded that socioeconomic factors matter more to student outcomes than the work of schools, the search was on for evidence that schools actually do matter in the lives and fortunes of students. For forty years, both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected and dissected, with a wide range of findings and conclusions.

A quarter-century ago, the "effective schools movement" called attention to extraordinary schools in ordinary communities. It set the stage for conducting research that could document effective practices in schools facing learning challenges. Many of the lessons gathered at that time remain viable. The primary components identified in effective schools research may be outlined succinctly as: "(1) principal leadership and attention to the quality of instruction; (2) a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus; (3) an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning; (4) teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; and (5) the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation" (Edmonds, 1982, p. 4). Space limitations here render us unable to cite all the subsequent research that has verified and clarified these essential school components; however, they continue to undergird qualitative research on school success (Taylor, 2002).

One research track was comprised of comparison studies, in which higher-performing schools were compared to lower-performing schools, and the differences noted. Ronald Edmonds reviewed several of these studies in an important article in which he defined effective schools as those that "eliminate the relationship between successful performance and family background" (Edmonds, 1979, p. 21). The concept of achievement gaps and their elimination soon became central to school effectiveness research.

A subset of comparison studies is outlier studies, where researchers seek high performing schools that "beat the odds," meaning that student bodies in these schools consistently outperform student bodies of similar demographic composition in other schools, as measured by standardized tests. The researchers then look for correlations between practices and performance in these high-performing schools. Some have gone so far as to look for extreme outliers, such as "90/90/90" schools, in which 90% of the students are low income, 90% are minority, and 90% are meeting or exceeding standards (Reeves, 2002). Others have broadened the criteria to include schools that have a significant proportion of low income or minority students (e.g., 50 percent), and with high performance (e.g., top one-third) relative to all schools participating in the same reading or mathematics tests (Jerald, 2001). These schools challenge traditional beliefs, such as those bolstered by the Coleman report, that disadvantaged students are permanently hampered in regard to learning. Researchers often enter these schools to document their practices, looking for commonalities among the high performers and differences compared to the low performers.

The Illinois Best Practice School Study can be considered a contemporary version of an outlier study that continues the search for effective school correlates to inform both theory and practice in the ongoing quest for successful school improvement strategies.

Study Description

The National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) began its Best Practice State Studies in 2001, partnering with the University of Texas at Austin and the Education Commission of the States. Additional support came from the Broad Foundation. The Just for the Kids (JFTK) School Reports allowed states to identify consistently high-performing schools and to investigate what worked well in those schools. Investigations in eleven states* or State Best Practice Studies, provide detail about what practices lead to increased achievement for students in high-performing schools in their state. By providing specific examples and stories, the State Studies spotlight success. They also challenge and dispel arguments that some children cannot achieve state learning standards.

The authors of this article currently lead the Illinois Best Practice School Study at Illinois State University. This multi-year study (2003-2006) seeks to identify and analyze the best practices of schools that are considered to be consistent high performers despite significant poverty levels. The Illinois study (underwritten by the Illinois Business Round Table and Illinois State University) identifies common features and best practices of schools with consistently high achievement based on three years of state test scores in all subjects, and a minimum poverty level of 20%.

A rigorous school selection process is the foundation of the National Center for Educational Accountability's research methodology. It uses achievement data and rigorous academic standards to identify those schools working hard to ensure *all* students learn. In addition, the study includes comparison schools with mid-range performance that exemplify specific school improvement scenarios. Each state study entails specific selection criteria. In Illinois, factors such as student distributions of race/ethnicity and English Language Learners (ELL) were also considered in selecting the list of participating schools. The NCEA/JFTK website, with the study framework and school highlights from the participating states, including Illinois, can be accessed at http://www.just4kids.org.

The Illinois study is organized within six themes (Curriculum; Staffing; Instruction; Monitoring Student Progress; Recognition, Rewards & Interventions; and School Climate & Culture) based on the large body of effective schools research, and across three levels of organization (district, school and classroom). The Illinois Best Practice School Study Framework, derived from empirical qualitative analysis, is both a product of the research and the basis for subsequent analysis of new best practice school sites (See Appendix, Figure A). Each of the 18 cells of the Framework is linked to in-depth descriptions of the best practices observed across sites. These were derived through cross-case analysis using established qualitative methods.

Faculty teams conducted on-site visits to the selected schools, using structured interview protocols developed by NCEA, and supplemented with additional Illinois State University protocols. Interview data and documentation were gathered at all three organizational levels—district, school and classroom—and subsequently analyzed using qualitative data coding methods. Instructional, organizational and cultural practices within the six themes were documented and case studies produced that integrate state School Report Card data with qualitative findings.

For each of the six themes, specific findings at the district, school and classroom levels illuminate common best practices among the higher-performing schools.

* The eleven participating states are Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

The Illinois State University team has enhanced the NCEA Best Practice Framework in the following ways:

- **Performing more detailed cross-case analyses, to include factors related to school climate and culture, resource use; and staff/student interactions related to caring, support, motivation and individual attention.**
- **Examining in-depth the mechanisms of successful diffusion, whereby best practices are encountered, adapted and institutionalized in multiple school settings.**

Theme 1: Curriculum

At the district level:
- District policies guide curriculum development, standards alignment, and goal attainment.
- A state standards-based curriculum is used throughout all district schools, ensuring that educators and students focus on the same knowledge and skills system-wide. The district curriculum builds upon and extends the state standards, viewing the state standards as minimum expectations for students.
- Exemplary districts have assessments tied directly to the curriculum that give teachers and students continuous feedback on performance. The district curriculum is continually refined to reflect changing school and student needs, as reflected in assessment data.
- District curricular documents provide educators with detailed information about the district curriculum and associated state standards. Educators utilize curriculum mapping as a method to further refine the curriculum development process with latest research and content.
- The district administration provides continual support to schools to ensure educators are well-prepared to implement the curriculum. District-wide curriculum teams of teachers are involved in developing and reviewing the curriculum. District administrators equip teachers as instructional leaders to help implement the curriculum in each school and to provide the latest in professional development.

At the school level:
- School staff prioritize and address a limited number of clear and measurable academic goals based on student achievement data, curriculum standards, and stakeholder input. Exemplary schools continually assess student progress on these goals and teacher teams meet often to discuss and plan methods to improve student performance.
- Schools have curriculum committees or teams that constantly oversee, evaluate, and revise the curriculum. Building-level leaders serve as curriculum facilitators, constantly working with teachers to assure that the curriculum is aligned, implemented and assessed.
- Principals call school improvement meetings throughout the school year to monitor progress on the school's improvement plan goals.
- Principals provide scheduled opportunities for teachers to work on curriculum planning and alignment with state standards, ensuring that all educators have an intimate familiarity with the curriculum.

At the classroom level:
- Grade-level curriculum objectives aligned with standards drive instruction at the classroom level; teachers support standards-based learning through classroom activities and ongoing monitoring of standards mastery. However, teachers have flexibility and freedom to implement the curriculum using their best professional methodologies to achieve student learning results.
- Teachers keep curriculum guides that clearly state the state and district standards readily available in the classroom.
- Teachers have a clear understanding of the school's academic goals and target instruction to meet goal expectations. Exemplary teachers are constantly going above and beyond the specified curriculum to assure learner success.
- Individual teacher's annual goals for evaluation and improvement are tied directly to the school's academic goals.

Theme 2: Staffing

At the district level:
- District administrators and the school board place an extremely high priority on seeking and hiring highly qualified personnel. Often, student teachers, interns and substitutes with track records of excellence and strong credentials receive preference in the hiring process.
- Mentoring for both teachers and principals is a well-established practice. New teachers receive intensive support from both formal mentors and through informal collegial interactions.

- District adminstrators and the school board support and find resources for ongoing professional development. This does not become a "frill" when budgets are tight. Professional training is based on student needs as determined from detailed and ongoing data analysis.
- The district leadership taps expertise from partners including colleges, universities and regional education offices, seeking both topical training and ongoing consulting relationships.
- In-house experts are highly valued and supported as collegial trainers. Internal advancement to leadership positions is encouraged and supported as appropriate with district funds and other resources.
- As a result of the highly professional staffing practices in these exemplary districts, staff turnover is extremely low and a large pool of applicants is available for any job opening. This is true even if the district does not pay the highest salaries within the geographic region.

At the school level:
- Principals arrange the school schedule to allow for common planning time among staff.
- The principal respects and acknowledges the teachers' and specialists' knowledge and abilities. The principle works to establish a supportive teaching environment, removing barriers so that teachers can concentrate on teaching and learning in their classrooms.
- Professional development at the school stems from needs and goals identified in the annual School Improvement Plan. Special attention is paid to providing mentors for new teachers for up to two years. New teachers are immediately welcomed into school improvement teams, curriculum committees, and student support teams. New teachers are not burdened with many extra duties.
- Principals employ a well-defined teacher evaluation process geared to continuous feedback and improvement. Teacher evaluation criteria are mutually agreed upon by administrators and the teachers' union.
- Poor performers are first supported and remediated. However, those that cannot adjust to the school's high expectations and energy level are let go before attaining tenure. As one administrator stated, "It would be a big mistake not to eliminate the non-performers. It would not be fair to our students."

At the classroom level:
- Teachers (using the shared time provided for them) collaborate many times each day, discussing lesson plans, student work and student needs.
- Peer networking serves a variety of purposes: planning, organizing, keeping track of student progress, problem-solving, or simply sharing what works.
- Individual teachers make many of their own professional development choices, in addition to those offered by the school and district. Many pursue advanced degrees, National Board certification, or additional specialty endorsements.
- The teachers in exemplary schools focus as a group on teaching and learning as their primary mission. They organize their interactions to maximize their classroom effectiveness. They view their annual evaluations as an opportunity for feedback and growth.
- Teacher-to-teacher support and the time to collaborate are valued as a strong indicator of excellent working conditions.

Theme 3: Instruction

At the district level:
- District leadership places a high priority on assuring that teachers have the resources they need for instruction. These include research-based instructional programs, best practice references for each subject and grade, and optional supplemental and enrichment programs.
- The school board places a policy emphasis on meeting the needs of all students. To implement this policy, the district administration devotes resources to lowering the student/adult ratios, assuring that sufficient knowledgeable specialists and aides are available, and coordinating with social and health service agencies.
- The school board sets policies for curriculum, instruction, assessment, promotion and grading, but does not dictate methods to classroom teachers. Flexibility is granted to school staff to use appropriate instructional arrangements and methods to meet student needs and maximize learning.

At the school level:
- The school staff, led by the principal, fosters an atmosphere of "no excuses, no escape" for student learning. Each and every student is held to high learning expectations; each and every teacher and specialist uses a wide array of instructional methods.
- Differentiated instruction is the norm, not the exception. The principal encourages and supports teachers to use multiple classroom configurations, materials and methods to help students meet learning objectives.
- Teachers monitor student progress through many forms of assessment on a continuous basis. Teachers are highly "assessment literate."
- Teachers confer often with each other about instructional techniques, sharing successes and jointly solving problems. The principal serves as a facilitator of instruction, delegating responsibilities and enabling faculty to do their primary jobs. In many ways, the principal "clears the path," removing barriers to high quality instruction.
- Many aides and specialists work in tandem with classroom teachers in exemplary schools. Principals strive to create smaller class sizes, flexible groupings and lower student/adult ratios. These are often attributed by the educators in these schools as primary factors contributing to student success .

At the classroom level:
- Teachers differentiate instruction for groups and for individuals, while continually focusing on uniform performance objectives. They constantly modify and enhance their lesson plans based on student progress and feedback.
- Teachers use flexible classroom structures that may include multi-grade or multi-subject configurations, extended class periods, and fluid student groupings.
- Student work is prominently displayed in classrooms, and is studied and analyzed by both teachers and students. Students are familiar with scoring rubrics and grading criteria. Teachers serve as both motivators and purveyors of learning.

Theme 4: Monitoring Student Progress

At the district level:
- The school board and superintendent place strong emphasis on school and student performance and progress, paying close attention to detailed data. Central office administrators develop, manage and maintain strong data management systems for multiple measures of student performance.
- Data collection and analysis is not limited to test scores. District leaders also monitor many other types of data, including behavior, attendance, participation, course-taking, grades and performance demonstrations.
- District administrators provide longitudinal data analysis to the school principals and faculty. Educators are taught how to use the data to make adjustments in teaching and learning. Administrators prepare a wealth of student data reports, enabling educators and parents to gain a comprehensive understanding of student achievement, including both student strengths and areas needing additional support.
- Data drives curriculum and instructional changes that are closely monitored through board policies and processes.
- Benchmark testing (e.g., grade-level, end-of-course) and other assessments are closely tied to curriculum standards and fill gaps left by state assessments.

At the school level:
- Principals use multiple observations (formal and informal) and student achievement data to inform teacher evaluations. Teachers view the evaluation process as important and helpful to their professional growth and continued development.
- Faculty supplements state and district assessments with local benchmark testing to closely monitor student progress. Teachers use common assessments across grades and subjects, to be able to analyze comparative data.
- Principals set assessment expectations/strategies and leave the specifics of implementation to the professional staff.

- School administrators and teachers track student progress on an ongoing basis, using data to identify standards mastery as well as any knowledge and skill deficiencies.
- Educational management software is utilized to inform teachers, students, and parents of student progress and grades.

At the classroom level:
- Teachers use multiple standards-based assessment measures on an ongoing basis to identify student strengths and needs. Classroom teachers maintain data for every individual student, using and maintaining those data for instructional purposes.
- Teachers are adequately prepared to examine and analyze student data and use data to inform instructional practices. They are "assessment literate."
- Teachers participate in collegial discussions and share the responsibility for grading, testing, and data analysis.
- Teachers closely monitor student learning progress and send student performance information home often.

Theme 5: Recognition, Rewards & Interventions

At the district level:
- Rewarding student achievement and recognizing positive behavior are important priorities for the school board and district administration.
- District leaders actively highlight school success using the local media, websites, newsletters, personal contacts and other resources.
- Continuous review of data allows the school board and administration to identify student performance problems, set appropriate policies and provide appropriate resources for intervention.

At the school level:
- Principals and teachers recognize and celebrate students' academic and positive behavioral successes. Recognition activities integrate ongoing rewards that students accumulate over time.
- Multiple methods are used to award and motivate students, building on their individual strengths.
- Adults serve as student advocates and meet regularly to monitor student progress. Schools have adequate instructional support staff to provide one-on-one and small group instruction when necessary.
- Schools provide students with additional time before, during and after school to focus on improving performance.
- Educators monitor the effectiveness of student interventions regularly throughout the school year.
- Principals provide common planning time for staff to problem-solve regarding appropriate student interventions.
- Principals use individualized support and specific performance-oriented activities to intervene with struggling teachers.
- Teachers feel comfortable seeking assistance, resulting in access to both formal and informal support.

At the classroom level:
- Adults use rewards and interventions as opportunities for making personal connections with students.
- Teachers use both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to recognize students' academic and behavioral successes.
- Teachers use results from benchmark assessments, standardized tests, and classroom observations to quickly identify students needing additional assistance.
- Educators keep individual educational plans for all students and plan instruction and interventions accordingly.
- Teachers communicate with colleagues, parents and external service providers (e.g., health, social services) to design intervention approaches and strategies that effectively meet student needs and improve performance.
- Intervention plans provide students and parents with options for enhancing learning outside the regular school day.

Theme 6: School Climate & Culture

At the district level:
- District mission and vision statements are strong and truly "alive", being used by staff as measures of effort and attainment.
- Both at the district level and the school level, *relational trust* is present. Relational trust is a successful school attribute elucidated by Bryk & Schneider (2000). Trying new methods, proposing different solutions, or asking for help become group norms when people trust each other. In turn, trust thus increases the likelihood of finding successful methods to enhance learning.
- High expectations are not only stated, but also they are embedded in all policies, decisions and activities.

At the school level:
- Each school is learning-centered, which means that everyone (students, teachers, staff and administrators) is expected to be a serious learner and contribute positively to the learning environment.
- Collegiality and collaboration are watchwords among staff.
- The principal respects and acknowledges the teachers' and specialists' knowledge and abilities.
- *Distributed leadership* blurs the traditional lines between administrators and teachers. Teachers lead work groups and serve as mentors for each other, playing to their various strengths. Given both individual and collective expertise, leadership rotates among group members as appropriate. The principal is less of a manager and more of a catalyst, acting to remove barriers, find resources and orchestrate the learning environment. The principal also acts as a buffer from excess external pressure, helping the school to remain focused on its learning agenda.
- The educators practice a no-blame outlook, in which they do not make excuses and blame others for learning difficulties. In other words, poverty, lack of parental support or lack of resources are not considered viable reasons for learning failures.
- The internalized belief system is one of *collective efficacy,* resulting in a "we can do it" spirit that pervades the school.
- In contrast to schools and districts that exhibit hierarchical accountability, in which progress and problems are "reported up," these schools have developed *lateral accountability*, in which peers (including students) hold each other to high expectations.

At the classroom level:
- A collegial problem-solving mindset is the norm; teachers rarely retire to their classrooms to tackle issues alone.
- Teachers comment often that they feel they work in a special, collaborative environment, and that they work with "the best teachers in the world."
- A shared knowledge base grows through peer exchanges, professional development and self-study.
- Teachers in these schools thrive in a busy learning environment. They value the trust their administrators have placed in their expertise. They are "in charge" of the learning process, and rise to the challenge daily with both high energy and tangible evidence of progress.
- Adults are committed to doing everything possible to help students succeed.

Discussion

The six themes, based on decades of effective school research, provided a useful framework for probing the workings of the high-performing schools in our study. Investigating these themes at three levels—district, school and classroom—allowed us to document vertical coherence within educational systems. The descriptors for each theme and level provide a detailed picture of the commonalities among successful schools. They have the potential to serve as the basis for a "self-audit" for educators to use when analyzing their own schools' strengths and weaknesses.

After in-depth analysis, we consider the first five themes of the NCEA framework (Curriculum; Staffing; Instruction; Monitoring Student Progress; and Recognition, Rewards & Interventions) to provide the *core technologies or mechanics* of the school. We consider these to form a necessary technical core of effective school correlates, a useful framework to establish the mechanics of an effective school. An essential attribute of these core components is that they must exhibit *alignment*. Alignment occurs when the school's curriculum reflects the required learning standards and goals, both state and local; and when teachers are highly qualified to teach the curriculum and assigned appropriately to grade levels and subjects. Alignment tightens when instructional methods are likely to help all learners acquire the knowledge and skills defined within the curriculum; when assessment instruments are used that actually measure what is taught and provide valuable feedback on an ongoing basis, for use by both student and teacher. Alignment becomes even more effective when rewards and interventions match academic goals and expectations.

Our study schools were exemplars of alignment. While teachers had varying degrees of freedom to design their lessons and make adjustments according to their professional judgments, they also recognized the importance of teaching to specific curriculum goals, assessing progress often and giving frequent feedback to students and to their study groups. In fact, study of student work and near-constant analysis of performance are deeply ingrained practices in these schools.

However, it is our contention that while the five core technologies or mechanics of schooling, as described above, must be fully aligned and operational, these alone are not sufficient to create the types of exceptional schools we studied. We have studied schools where the mechanics were good—high

quality and even well-aligned—but which were not performing consistently well. We might describe these aligned effective school themes as creating a *vehicle* for improvement. But a vehicle without a map to its destination and without the necessary fuel does not get where it needs to go.

We found that the attributes of the Climate & Culture theme both envelop and are embedded within this mechanical vehicle. These consistently high performing schools "keep the main thing the main thing" (Cottrell, 2002). Student learning and serving student needs are always first and foremost, so that there is never any question about purpose or direction. In schools with a strong, positive culture focused on student learning, energy seems to spontaneously generate among staff and students. The committed adults attain great internal motivation from helping students succeed. In turn, students develop their own intrinsic motivations to succeed. In addition, school leaders that have developed a culture of excellence understand the need for providing a reliable supply of necessary resources to keep the vehicle moving. Trust and a sense of "can do" efficacy pervade the organization. The key cultural attributes of lateral accountability, relational trust and distributed leadership are infused throughout the technical operations of the school (see Figure 1 on p. 11).

While leadership is not a separate theme in this study framework, it is most definitely a motif that pervades all themes and levels. We found competent, caring and committed leaders at all three levels—district, school and classroom. At any given time, staff were called upon or volunteered to serve in leadership roles within the school. Roles evolved based on expertise, interest and need. Distributed leadership was evident throughout our study sample. However, we also found that the school principal played the pivotal role in fostering and maintaining the essential culture that provided the "direction and fuel" for excellence within these schools.

> *The values, beliefs, norms and behaviors of the school participants, as elements of a student-centered culture of excellence, provide essential components for the vehicle: the direction and the fuel to enhance learning in a sustained way.*

Perhaps one of the most intriguing findings, though it does not fit neatly into the framework, was the fact that these schools were attaining sustained good performance results with little or no supplementary funding, and in fact, were often spending below the state average per pupil. It seems that they have discovered strategies for success that cost very little or nothing to implement, yet return great dividends in terms of student learning. Eliciting these from the study framework and findings, we can summarize these strategies as follows:

Foster and maintain a culture of student-centered excellence. The focus is always on student learning and meeting student needs. It involves not only setting high expectations for students, but also holding high expectations for the adults in the school. The principal "walks the talk" all day, every day, leading by example. All discussions and decisions are student-focused. Team problem-solving is the norm, not the exception. The growth and maintenance of the culture does not occur spontaneously, but rather is developed deliberately and with great care. Just as agriculture and horticulture are about seeding and nurturing developing crops, these schools have created an "educulture," growing and nurturing an ethos of student-centered excellence over time.

Dividends for this investment: internal motivation, energy, trust, a sense of efficacy and a clear understanding of direction and purpose.

Strengthen the technical core. Teachers continuously develop curriculum and instructional expertise. They become strongly "assessment literate." They join together to develop a repertoire of instructional strategies that can be tailored to individuals and groups. They serve as their own in-house resources, rather than always relying on outside assistance. When outside help is needed, partnerships with colleges, universities, regional education offices, and local health/social services provide low-cost expertise and resources.

Dividends for this investment: continuous learning, staff expertise in many instructional methods, in-house problem-solving, and strong external partnerships.

Attain alignment within the technical core. The principal and the district leaders assure that curriculum, staffing, instruction, monitoring and rewards/interventions are continuously examined for coherence. They eliminate extraneous policies and activities that do not align with student needs and/or academic goals. They nurture their own internal expertise among staff to analyze and revise instructional materials and assessments, continuously improving alignment with standards.

Dividends for this investment: maximized use of teaching and learning time, a better match to state standards and district curriculum objectives, and growing internal expertise.

Strengthen the human capacity of the school. The school is, after all, a collection of people (educators, students, parents) doing important work. These schools recruit, hire and retain only high quality staff, staff that shares the cultural mindset of excellence. Teachers that prove unable or unwilling to perform at high levels are terminated and others recruited. The schools place a high priority on establishing shared work time for teachers. They use creative logistics to accomplish this, while requiring that the time then be spent collaboratively and productively. Principals and teachers accept student teachers and interns, nurturing them as potential exemplary employees. Principals share leadership roles among the entire staff, based on expertise and interest.

Dividend for this investment: a cohesive, committed and competent staff that shares expertise and leadership for the ultimate benefit of students.

> *Of course, the ultimate dividend for these investments is high levels of student achievement. While these strategies are modest in cost, they pay disproportionately large returns on investment.*

Based on this knowledge, how can the state foster the development of schools with this successful combination of aligned core practices?

Figure 1. Aligned core technologies and pervasive student-centered culture of excellence.
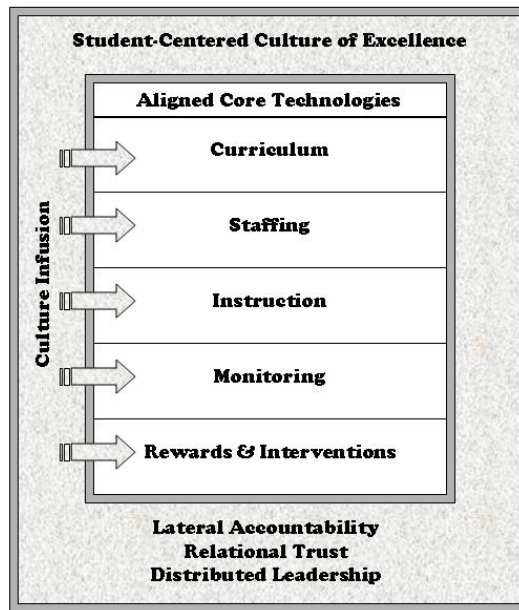
Policy Implications

Specific core practices are present and highly functional in all high-performing study schools. Findings based on qualitative data collection and analysis indicate that the NCEA framework themes, with the important addition of the climate/culture theme, are indeed core practices in Illinois' high-performing, high-poverty schools. These practices were either absent or fragmented (e.g., out of alignment, incomplete) in the comparison schools in the study. However, some of the practices were present in all study schools, including the lower performing schools. This implies that many schools know the right core practices, but struggle with the quality of their practices, their technical core alignment and the establishment of a solid and pervasive culture of excellence.

The scaling-up question is not trivial. Once we have amassed a body of knowledge regarding best educational practices, who will benefit, and how? Once we have identified and documented the "victory gardens," how can we convert this knowledge to create "amber waves of grain"? A recent Rand study (Vernez, Karam, Mariano & DeMartini, 2006) emphasized that past diffusion efforts have been characterized by one-way interventions from external providers,

with fidelity of implementation being the key indicator of success. Too many of these dissemination efforts have failed. The model schools approach supported by Title I through its Comprehensive School Reform effort (CSR) provided many lessons about what *not* to do: it exhibited incoherence, in which its mechanics are aligned, but not the culture of the organization; it endorsed external "experts" over internal leaders; it was sold as a silver bullet to fix a school's shortcomings; it valued external evaluation more than internal motivation; and it was non-indigenous to the school's culture and context (Vernez et al., 2006). The consequence has been the abandonment of the models in many schools that continue to struggle, despite long and costly investments of time, money and energy.

More effective diffusion mechanisms are needed. New research in this area should focus on how our best practice schools came to be that way, and how their efforts involved leadership, interaction, adaptation, and many iterations of refinement. Through our state's many networks of teacher and administrator education students, professional organizations, practicing professionals and alumni, we recommend

creating a variety of diffusion mechanisms to increase the likelihood that Illinois schools will be able to benefit on a large scale from the best practice knowledge we are acquiring. Diffusion researchers agree that "interpersonal communication with near peers about an innovation drives the diffusion process" (Rogers, 2003, p. 342). Such mechanisms can include self-audits based on the best practice school study findings; professional development opportunities; school networking and joint problem-solving among high-performers and schools needing improvement; symposia for school leaders and those who teach   leadership at the university level; and replication grants for districts willing to foster core practice alignment and coherence.

A key concept arising from this study is that of lateral accountability. In an atmosphere of strong state and federal accountability mandates, complete with punitive sanctions for non-performance, many schools may choose the path of narrowing the curriculum, drilling for tests, and generally being reactive or resistant to external, hierarchical pressures. In our Best Practice Study schools, the educators and students most certainly do not ignore external mandates. In fact, they fully embrace state

standards and align their technical core accordingly. However, the focus is most definitely on students and their learning needs, day in and day out; not on their performance at annual testing time. As some inter-viewees noted, when their school became fully student-centered, "the test scores took care of them-selves." Implications for educational policy initiatives include those that increase educator competencies and school leader capacity and that foster student-centered methods such as differentiated instruction. This contrasts starkly with policies that underwrite increasing levels of regulation, punitive interventions and sanction enforcement.

Continuing work is needed to better understand resource utilization in these schools, especially as compared to lower performing schools. Anecdotal evidence to date indicates that these schools and districts are especially frugal and tend to allocate money, time and people in ways that maximize educational returns. They make a firm commitment to find and provide reliable resources for getting the work accomplished. Further research can elucidate those areas of investment and those fiscal strategies that pay strong dividends in terms of student achievement.

Conclusion

The Illinois Best Practice Study confirms, once again, that school does matter in the lives of students. The findings to some extent validate previous research on effective school practices, while adding the important and sometimes overlooked variable of effective school culture. Five NCEA themes illuminate the core technologies of successful schools: Curriculum; Staffing; Instruction; Monitoring Student Progress; and Recognition, Rewards & Interventions. A sixth theme, emerging from the Illinois study, describes attributes of a student-centered Climate & Culture of excellence that pervades all aspects of the work performed by educators and students.

In order that more schools create strong core technologies and cultures of excellence, we recommend specific diffusion strategies that nurture growth in knowledge and competencies among educators regarding these best practices and how they are established and sustained.

We also recommend further research into how successful schools allocate resources strategically to attain high returns in student achievement.

It is our hope and expectation that this research can benefit schools serving all students in a climate of strong educational accountability.

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Illinois Best Practice Study Framework

	Organizing Themes	District Level	School Level	Classroom Level
NCEA Theme 1	**Curriculum** -Presence and development of a written curriculum and academic goals -Alignment with state standards	Adopt standards, align curriculum and assessments, and set goals for improving student performance.	Foster collaborative efforts to prioritize implement and revise curriculum and assessments.	Design classroom practices which customize curriculum and assessments for each student.
NCEA Theme 2	**Staffing** -Recruitment, selection & allocation of staff -Staff retention -Professional development	Recruit, develop and support strong instructional leaders and highly capable teachers.	Mentor new teachers; continuously support and develop teacher effectiveness.	Collaborate to increase knowledge and improve instructional practice.
NCEA Theme 3	**Instruction** -Providing sound instructional programs -Using effective instructional practices -Modifying instruction	Provide research-based instructional programs that reflect best practice.	Select instructional programs and methods that recognize the unique nature of each student.	Modify programs, practices and arrangements to maximize student achievement.
NCEA Theme 4	**Monitoring Student Progress** Compiling, Analyzing & Using Data -Monitoring performance against district and school goals -Monitoring individual students	Develop student assessment and data monitoring systems to support educational decisions.	Utilize data to revise curriculum and improve instructional methods.	Use a variety of assessment tools to measure student learning and inform practice.
NCEA Theme 5	**Recognition, Rewards & Interventions** -Recognizing academic success -Recognizing other accomplishments -Interventions for groups -Individual interventions	Provide numerous opportunities to celebrate student success and provide student support as needed.	Recognize positive student performance and intervene based on identified student needs.	Recognize, intervene and adjust practice based on student attitudes, behaviors and performance.
Illinois Best Practice Study Theme 6	**School Climate & Culture** -Context of the school -School climate -Learning environment -Relationships within district (administrators, teachers, students) and with stakeholders	Create district vision for continuous improvement supported by all stakeholders and provide a reliable support system for all participants.	Create opportunities for teachers and students to become capable, positive and productive through relational trust, lateral accountability and distributed leadership.	Use collaboration and collegial problem-solving to maximize student achievement in a committed and caring environment.

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Additional Resources

NCEA/Just for the Kids Website: http://www.just4kids.org.

Illinois State University College of Education, Center for the Study of Education Policy: http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/eafdept/centerforedpolicy/