Lessons Learned about Effective School Management Strategies

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SCHOOL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

**A "Best Practices" Literature Review Prepared for
Achievement Plus, A Partnership for Community Schools**

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The purpose of this review is to identify effective school management strategies for increased student achievement. We found in our review no consistent research evidence for a relationship between school management strategies and student achievement. However, within schools and model programs that do have success in increasing achievement of lower income, minority or at-risk primary students, some common management practices exist. This review describes the lessons learned and management practices common to these school models. The models are often referred to as high performance schools. A description of these models starts on page 7. Effective schools is also a term for schools whose students have higher academic achievement than students in most other schools with student bodies of a similar socioeconomic composition.

Several key sources were used for the information reported in this review. Levine and Lezotte (1995) identified the characteristics (or "correlates") of mostly elementary schools that are unusually effective, in the sense that their students have higher academic achievement compared to students of similar socioeconomic status attending other schools. Teddlie and Stringfield (1993) report on their 10 year study of factors that affect the academic success of poor, minority students. Mohrman et al (1994) and Odden and Wohlstetter (1995) in their reviews described important lessons learned about implementing site-based management and decentralizing decision-making power in schools.

Site or school-based management gives local school participants—educators, parents, students and the community at large –the power to improve their school. It modifies the governance structure by moving authority to the local school. By moving governance and management decisions to local stakeholders, those with the most at stake are empowered to do something about how the school is performing (Mohrman et al 1994). David (1991) provides a similar rational, "Districts are implementing school-based management today to bring about significant change in educational practice: to empower school staff to create conditions in schools that facilitate improvement, innovation, and continuous professional growth." Levine and Lezotte (1995) suggest caution when implementing site-based management, "Some form of site-based management is an important and perhaps even indispensable component of plans to improve school effectiveness, but it must not be viewed or treated as a substitute for the larger instructional improvement process."

Below management strategies in effective schools and models for high performance schools are described.

Management Strategies in Effective Schools

Schools that employ the following strategies have been shown to be successful at increasing student achievement for poor, urban or minority students.

- Commonly Shared Mission and Goals

- Strong Teacher Professional Culture and Collaborative Planning

- Problem-Solving Orientation

- Ongoing Practice Oriented Training and Development

- Decentralized Decision-Making Power

- A Variety of Mechanisms for Involving Different Stakeholder Groups

- Strong Leadership by the Principal

- Available and Accessible Information

- School Environment Conducive to Learning

- Encouragement by District Offices

These strategies and accompanying practices are described below.

Commonly Shared Mission and Goals

- The model schools create schoolwide goals that plainly establish the direction of the school (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Everyone interested in the success of the school is involved in writing the mission statement and goals (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Mission statements contain core values, such as treating each student as an individual, and the goals for the school related to student performance (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

- The process for developing goals is data-driven, using information about schools, such as school district demographics and student achievement test scores, and relevant research about what works in school (Mohrman et al, 1994).

Strong Teacher Professional Culture and Collaborative Planning

▪ Faculty members are highly cohesive, good communicators, able to develop consensus and have a strong spirit of collegiality (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Teachers have high commitment to improved student achievement (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Teachers and administrators work together to develop training that fits the specific needs of the campus (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Teachers share information about teaching practices and student performance (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ A spirit of collaboration exists between school personnel and district level administration (Mohrman et al, 1994).

Problem -Solving Orientation

▪ Staff have an attitude that if what they are doing with students isn't working they identify obstacles and try something else to overcome them (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Staff are willing to modify current practices and other approaches to reach students (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

Ongoing Practice Oriented Training and Development

▪ Training is provided for all stakeholders to gain new skills needed for increased decision-making authority in areas such as hiring, budgeting, meeting facilitation, and consensus building (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ In-service training and other forms of staff development are ongoing activities carried out at the school site and focused on practical considerations in improving implementation of the instructional program. It takes the form of intragrade and cross-grade level meetings and planning sessions at which teachers work together to improve coordination of instruction, develop learning objectives or work on other school wide objectives (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995)**.**

▪ Time is spent on acclimating new staff to the school culture and trying to influence teacher performance (Mohrman et al, 1994).

▪ Staff training is tailored for the school situation, reflects school needs and is offered in a collaborative manner (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Parents receive training and development to increase the effectiveness of their role in helping their children (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Training and development is needed to help stakeholders deal with different management responsibilities and perceived loss of power by some stakeholders (Mohrman et al, 1994).

Decentralized Decision-Making Power

- If site based management is initiated, people at the school site must have genuine authority over budget, personnel, and curriculum (Odden and Wohlstetter, 1995).

- The changes around decentralized decision-making are more effective when connected to the main purpose or goal which is to enhance student achievement (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995, Odden and Wohlstetter, 1995).

- Staff are encouraged to be innovative, creative, and able to take quick action (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Management teams or the principals have hiring and firing power (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995, Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

- School staff, parents, and teachers create a unique, defining school climate (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Schools have the increased and sustained organizational capacity and resources to cope with decision-making and increased authority (time, technical assistance, independent sources of information, funds to assess current program or funds to develop additional programs) (Mohrman et al, 1994).

A Variety of Mechanisms for Involving Different Stakeholder Groups (parents, teachers, community members)

- Many schools create school councils or decision-making bodies as a way to involve stakeholders. Schools delegate decision-making responsibilities into subcommittees to involve more people (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Schools create different kinds of opportunities for different groups depending on their abilities, time available and role in order to get them involved in school management and improvement. A variety of mechanisms for involving stakeholders reduces burnout and keeps people actively involved (Mohrman et al, 1994).

Strong Leadership by the Principal

▪ Principals assume a major role in selecting teachers who will serve on the their faculty and transferring out those perceived as detracting from the effectiveness of the school (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Principals are mavericks who are willing to bend rules and challenge or even disregard pressures or directives from the central office or other outside forces perceived as interfering with the effective operation of their schools (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ The principal serves as the instructional leader for the school. In that role he or she communicates goals, reviews test scores, identifies problems and motivates both teachers and students. The principal makes frequent visits to classrooms and consistently monitors activities taking place in the school (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Principals provide abundant support for their teachers both in the form of emotional encouragement and practical assistance in acquiring materials, handling difficult teaching assignments, and functioning successfully (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ The principal has a strong belief that students in his or her school can succeed (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

▪ Principals practice a formal sharing of leadership responsibilities. For example, in a successful inner-city school, teachers made decisions about assigning students to classes and about whether grouping would be homogeneous (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

▪ Principals provide meaningful monitoring and evaluation of classrooms (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

▪ Principals are motivated by the developmental needs of children when involved in political situations, and set cultural values in the school that focus clearly on children as clients of the school (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

▪ Principals create norms of interactive professional relationships among staff (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

▪ Principals spend time developing and maintaining a student reward system (Teddlie and Stringfield 1993).

Available and Accessible Information

- Communication with parents is consistent and helps to bond parents to the school (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Student performance is closely monitored and the information is communicated regularly to all stakeholders (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Information is available to school staff on measurements of goal attainment, trend data to measure progress, and benchmark data to know how well the school is doing compared to similar schools (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

- Schools perform a contextual analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. (What are the characteristics of the students? Is the school equally effective with all students? What does the school do to maximize learning? What are the major historical or sociological factors that affect how the school functions?) This analysis is used to design better ways to manage the school. This may best be conducted by someone from outside the school (Mohrman et al, 1994).

School Environment Conducive to Learning

- Special efforts are made to create an environment of orderliness, mutual respect, and success. For example: 1) establishment of a "mental health team" to bolster services for disruptive or maladjusted students; 2) development and implementation of rigorous discipline policies (Mohrman et al, 1994, Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

- Schools tend to be predictable and certain although not rigid (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

- Schools implement a reward system for high achieving students (Teddlie and Stringfield 1993, Levine and Lezotte 1995).

- Maximum availability and use of time for learning is a priority (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

Encouragement by District Offices

- The district office assigns active and innovative principals who want to make changes (Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993).

- The district office works collaboratively with school sites to provide information and resources (Mohrman et al, 1994).

- Direction and support is provided from district offices while allowing individual schools flexibility and independence in making decisions about instruction and other educational practices (Levine and Lezotte, 1995).

Models for High Performance Schools:

The following are descriptions of models of high performing schools that have been successful at improving student achievement, particularly with low income, urban and minority students

The School Development Program

The School Development Program is a school-based decision-making model developed by James Comer as a joint effort between the Yale University Child Development Center and the New Haven Public Schools (Comer, 1980, 1988). The plan was developed originally as a way to improve the education of lower-income students.

Comer's model is a shared-governance approach that seeks to "develop patterns of shared responsibility and decision making among parents and staff" (Comer, 1980, p.68). The model requires that three structures, or teams, be established at the school site: a school planning and management team, which is primarily responsible for development of a school improvement plan with input from the whole school community; a mental health team, which works to prevent behavior problems and to create an environment of orderliness, mutual respect, and success; and a parent program team, which works to involve parents actively in the school. The membership of each team includes both school staff and parents. The three teams working together are intended to promote a school-based community focused on continuous improvement. The three teams contribute by providing a sense of direction to the school; by helping to create feelings of shared ownership and responsibility; by promoting implementation of the improvement plan; and by helping to create a cohesiveness within the community. The community feeling is promoted further by how teams conduct business and how the school functions in general. Three primary principles, advocated by Comer, are "no fault" problem solving, collaboration, and decisions by consensus rather than vote. This decision making process, according to Comer, helps reduce feelings of distrust, conflict, and alienation that center on power.

Accelerated Schools

Henry Levin of Stanford University, who created the Accelerated Schools Model, also was concerned about fostering high performance among disadvantaged, at-risk students. Schools are encouraged to pay special attention to developing students' language skills, both reading and writing (Levin, 1987). Like Effective Schools and the School Development Program, Accelerated Schools strive to define a new culture and a new set of practices for schools. All three models also advocate creating a schoolwide goal that plainly establishes the direction of the school—what Levin calls "unity of purpose"—and the pursuit of constant improvement.

According to Levin, there are two important principles of Accelerated Schools. First, empowerment must be coupled with responsibility: school staff are able to effect school change but also are held accountable for results. Each school chooses its own curriculum and instructional strategies; those who will provide the instruction make the decisions. Second, schools must base improvements on the existing strengths that students and teachers bring to the classroom.

Parents are deeply involved in two ways. First, school representatives ask parents to sign a written agreement that clarifies the obligations of parents, school staff, and students. Second, the school provides opportunities for parents to interact with the school program and actively assist their children. Parents are also asked to set high educational expectations for the children, to encourage reading, and to support their success.

Essential Schools

Not all models of high-performance schools target the needs of at-risk or low-performing students. Theodore Sizer of Brown University has designed a model, called Essential Schools, that offers a set of common principles to guide change at individual sites (Sizer, 1992). The Essential Schools place greater emphasis on the relationship between staff and students, and devise structures that allow teachers to get to know students as individuals, rather than as members of a large group. In the Essential Schools, a common change is to divide a single grade level of students into small cohorts, called houses, and then to have them instructed by a team of teachers. Teachers work together and are given autonomy in selecting teaching techniques and at the same time, teachers assume greater responsibility and accountability for the success of the students.

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