

NCEA's Best Practice Framework: A platform to examine school and system practices

An Outside Compass

Extensive investigations of the factors influencing student achievement over the last three decades have produced results that are often inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Few consistent answers on improving learning for all students—particularly those students with the greatest learning challenges—have been available to us to ensure that “no child is left behind.” The call for clear and consistent information about educational practices linked to increased student achievement is being heard around the nation.

While educators often have rich information on the strategies used in their own school, they may have little information about the strategies or practices in other schools—particularly the specific practices of consistently high-performing schools.

To provide an outside compass for those seeking to improve, we have researched the practices of 479 school systems chosen based on a careful analysis that identifies consistent school performance over at least three years in multiple subjects. We have also studied the findings of experts in effective schools research—most notably, Dr. Larry Lezotte of Effective Schools in Okemos, Michigan. Lezotte and Levine's

*Unusually Effective Schools*¹ monograph (1990) remains a classic in the review and analysis of research related to effective school practices.

Themes of the Framework

Our best practice findings are drawn from the case studies of the schools we have visited. We have structured our findings into five broad themes further defined by practices related to those themes at three school levels—district, school, and classroom.

- Curriculum and academic goals;
- Staff selection, leadership, and capacity building;
- Instructional programs, practices, and arrangements;
- Monitoring progress: compilation, analysis, and use of data; and
- Recognition, intervention, and adjustments

¹ Levine, D.U. and Lezotte, L.W. (1990) *Unusually effective Schools: A review and analysis of research and practice*. Madison, WI: National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development.

This structure, the *Best Practice Framework*, attempts to capture the general principles we found operational in organizations marked by sustained high performance. Equally important, we have provided information on contextual variables that define how any particular practice appears at a given school.

Given our qualitative findings, we want to remind the reader that we have established no “causal” link between the practices and increased student achievement. We would also, without exception, bow to findings that establish any causal link between practice and achievement. We are strong advocates that educators must use scientific evidence when and where it exists. Using this type of data for decision making is the mark of a mature profession.

“Breakthrough Improvement”

In *Why Education Experts Resist Effective Practices (And What it Would Take to Make Education More like Medicine)*, Doug Carnine (2000)² cites Theodore M. Porter’s definition of a mature profession.

“An immature profession is characterized by expertise based on the subjective judgments of the individual professional, trust based on personal contact rather than quantification, and autonomy allowed by expertise and trust, which staves off standardized procedures based on research findings that use control groups. A mature profession, by contrast, is characterized by a shift from judgments of individual experts to judgments constrained by quantified data that can be inspected by a broad audience, less emphasis on personal trust and more on objectivity, and a greater role for standardized measures and procedures informed by scientific investigations that use control groups.”

Slavin and Fashola (1998) encourage educators to begin to demand “Show me the evidence!”

² <http://www.edexcellence.net/library/carnine.html>

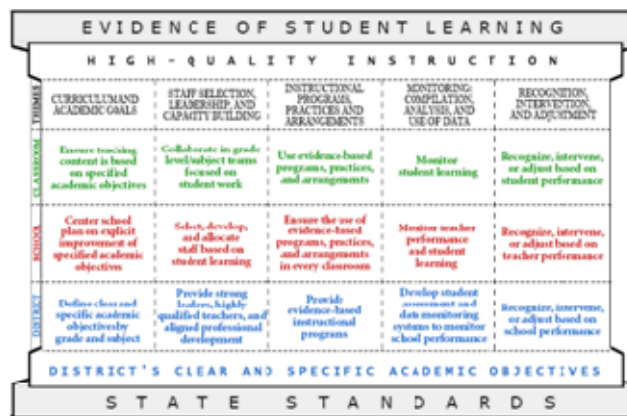
before adopting any program so that education will “begin to build the scientific basis that is critical to forward progress in any field.”³

Our *Best Practice Framework* provides a strong organizational tool to interactively consider all of your current school improvement efforts in light of the practices of “the best” in our industry. We do not offer you yet another activity, program, or training to add to your already overfilled agenda of improvement efforts. We do offer you a method for organizing all of your current improvement activities and programs and to measure the extent to which they mirror the practices of high-performing schools that are comparable to yours.

By benchmarking your results and practices against the highest performing schools that are comparable to yours, you are preparing for “breakthrough improvement!”

NCEA Best Practice Framework

Framing Organizational Structures and Functions that most directly impact the Improvement of Instruction - Featuring the Practices more often found in Consistently High-Performing School Systems.



³ Slavin, R.E. and Fashola, O.S. (1998). Show me the evidence! Proven and promising programs for America’s schools. CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Why the Framework is a Valuable Tool

Provides a structure for organizational functions most directly impacting the improvement of instruction. NCEA's organizational/management system, i.e., "The Framework" is the most comprehensive and thorough system related to those issues that most directly involve the improvement of instruction. There may be other organizational or management systems that are more comprehensive in their study of district structures and functions.

Features those observable, interdependent practices found to be present in different quantity or quality in consistently high-performing systems. Factors that influence the development or delivery of the practices contained in The Framework must be considered but are not studied in detail in our writing. Other studies conducted by NCEA may deal more directly with a number of these variables. These factors include functions such as resource allocation; local influences, relationships, and communications; teacher pre-service experiences; and, core beliefs about teaching and learning. While we recognize that these are important and influential variables, they were not the practices that differentiated high-performing schools from average-performing schools in our study.

Is a composite picture built from many individual cases. Without the context of the great numbers of consistently high-performers provided by the Framework, information from individual schools should be considered carefully. Certainly, the stories from each high-performing school can be interesting, but readers are cautioned against focusing too intently on the details of an individual case to the exclusion of the bigger picture. In fact, the power and usefulness of individual examples comes through their illustration of broader principles. The Framework provides important context so that

inspirational stories become more meaningful.

Contains findings that emanate from schools with somewhat varied demographics and in a number of states. The school identification methodology points to schools that are "beating the odds" based on their student demographics. In each study, an effort is made to study primarily schools with higher levels of student poverty (using percent eligible for free and/or reduced price lunch) and with larger numbers of English language learners. In some state contexts, the distribution of schools relative to these variables coupled with consistent performance prevents strict adherence to this standard. As a result, readers are cautioned against viewing The Framework as a prescription for working with particular student populations.

Is not a compendium of programs and strategies to adopt. At a certain point in the school improvement process, educators need to know "Do we use Success for All or Everyday Math?" The Framework does not provide the type of information that would inform those sorts of decisions. Instead, experimental evaluation research is needed to answer those questions and to draw causal links between particular activities and higher student achievement levels.

Is designed to paint a picture of high-performing schools. The best practice studies were designed to study schools at a static point for three years—consistently average- or consistently high-performing over that time. Other researchers may look into schools "on the move," but NCEA has elected to study schools that sustained their performance for three years in order to describe a clear vision of high-performing systemic practice.

Is continually updated with visits to high- and average-performing schools. The standards and accountability environment is now about 15 years old. With federal and state policies continually evolving, schools are constantly changing, too. The Framework is built on five years of study in commonly identified high-performing schools. As the standards movement ages, average-performing schools are beginning to adopt many of the approaches that distinguished high-performers five years ago. At the same time, high-performers are becoming more sophisticated in their programs and processes. Continual study of these schools enables NCEA to enrich and refine our descriptions of high performing school systems.

Promoting successful practices

The *NCEA-JFTK Framework of School System Practices*, developed from five years of qualitative study, is used to organize and present the district, school and classroom practices found in consistently high-performing systems that distinguish them from their average-performing counterparts. (See www.just4kids.org) Additionally, the website presents actual examples of tools that support each practice taken from specific schools and districts in order to motivate and equip educators to replicate their success.

A critical goal of NCEA is to expand best practice studies into more states to strengthen the content and range of practices, enhance scientific reliability, and to distill consistent characteristics of best practice across states. States that have completed best practice studies include: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois,

Massachusetts, New Jersey, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. In 2005, NCEA will establish best practice studies in another 10 states and fortify the foundation for school improvement plans.

Implementing improvement tools and services

Schools and districts in need of improvement can immediately use the *Framework of School System Practices* and *Self-Audit* tools online as a starting point to structure plans and improvement strategies.

By the fall of 2005, NCEA plans to pilot a *School Improvement Services* implementation kit incorporating *Just for the Kids* school reports, best practice tools and a network of high-performing mentors to serve as a bridge between standards and accountability for schools and districts in need of improvement.

Contact us

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