

'Best Practices' Distilled From Studies of More Than 250 Schools

By Debra Viadero

A national nonprofit group released a report today that distills the "best practices" used by elementary and secondary schools in 20 states that have proven track records of success.

Researchers at the National Center for Educational Accountability at the University of Texas in Austin based their findings on studies over the last six years of more than 250 schools across the country. The researchers singled out 140 schools that consistently outperformed demographically similar schools for at least three consecutive years and across several grades, on state exams.

To identify their success secrets, the researchers visited the schools, interviewed educators, and held focus groups. They also compared the educational practices identified in those high-performing schools with those used at similar schools in the same states where students performed closer to average levels year after year.

"We were attempting to respond to what seems to be the most common questions that educators and policymakers are asking, and that is: What's working and how do you transfer those practices to schools in need of assistance?" said Mike Hudson, the president of the national center, which was formed in 2001 as a partnership between two other nonprofit groups, the Austin-based Just for the Kids and the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

Establishing Clear Goals

The researchers found, for instance, that from Rhode Island to California, successful schools anchor their instruction to the curriculum standards in their states—sometimes even developing pacing guides and curriculum maps to make sure that all teachers are clear about what to teach and when to teach it.

"Once those goals are clear, leaders and teachers must be selected and developed," said Jean Rutherford, the center's director of educational initiatives and the report's primary author.

She said the most successful schools tend to accomplish those goals through collaboration. Selma High School in Selma, Calif., for instance, holds "focus lesson meetings," in

which educators from different departments meet and share lessons based on a particular state standard. Another school the investigators visited holds monthly "scoring parties" to help teachers develop common ideas about what constitutes high-quality student work.

The report also found that successful schools tend to differentiate instruction, tailoring lessons to the needs of individual children, and to use practices such as "looping," in which teachers stay with the same group of students for two or more years.

Beyond those traits, the high-performing schools used testing data and other statistics to track educational progress and adjust instruction accordingly. And they tended to have systems in place to provide extra help for struggling learners or high-achieving students undertaking challenging coursework.

The report is the latest in a growing number of studies looking to distill lessons from schools that "beat the odds" or demonstrate higher-than-average test scores. It was funded primarily by the Broad Foundation, a Los Angeles-based philanthropy, but the center also solicited grants and recruited research help from universities and nonprofit organizations in the states that were studied.

The center has packaged its findings in case studies for each of the 20 states involved. Those states are: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

For More Info

Further information on the Best Practices framework, including the recently released report, "Just for the Kids' Best Practice Studies and Institutes: Findings from 20 States," is available from Just for the Kids, a program of the National Center for Educational Accountability.

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