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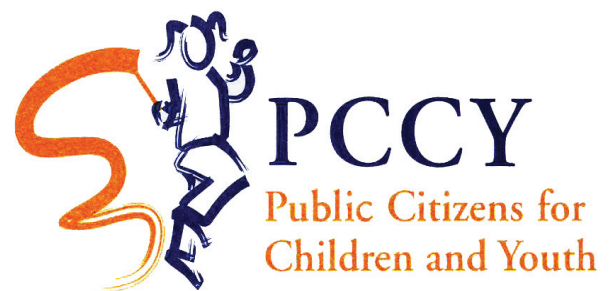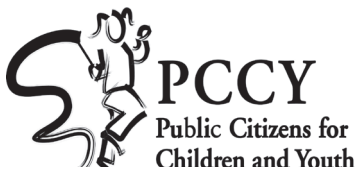
Lessons from Philadelphia Schools that Beat The Odds

PCCY
Public Citizens for
Children and Youth

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About PCCY

Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children.

Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families. PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare.

Founded in 1980 as Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth we changed our name in 2007 to better reflect our expanded work in the counties surrounding Philadelphia. PCCY remains a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.

Special Thanks

Background

In 2008, a group of educators and researchers, working together under the auspices of Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) asked the following questions:

What makes for a successful school located in areas of high poverty?

How do effective schools manage to overcome the difficulties of poverty and urban ills?

Can the District learn from these success stories?

In order to answer these questions, we visited K-5/K-8 schools with poverty rates between 85% and 95% that have significantly improved Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test scores over the last several years and/or demonstrated significantly high achievement levels on recent PSSA tests. We identified seven schools, five of which are managed by the School District. Two of the seven schools are governed by Education Management Organizations (EMO) under contract with the District. Four of the schools are located in North Philadelphia neighborhoods, one in South Philadelphia and one in West Philadelphia. Four of them have African-American populations ranging from 92%-99%, while three have a majority Latino population, ranging from 65%-79%. One school was extremely small, with 200 students, while the others ranged from 400-600 students. The schools demonstrated varying degrees of success, but all showed significant progress. Many of them had no students scoring at advanced or proficient levels in 2001. By 2007, test scores at six of the schools ranged from 60%-95% advanced and proficient in math and 50%-65% in reading, while the one remaining school had 38% of its students at advanced or proficient levels in math and 30% in reading. The test results of some of these school exceeded the state average - of 68% for reading and 69% for math - and outpaced citywide averages of 41% for reading and 35% for math.
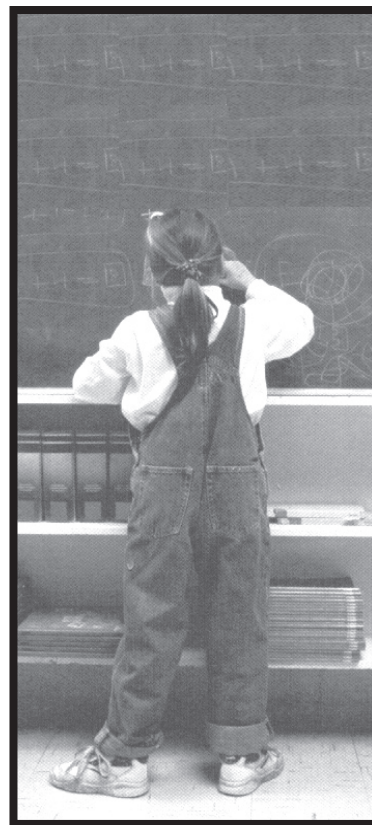
Our goals were to try to discern what characteristics of these schools led to improvements and/or high achievement levels at the schools, and to determine the role of the District in supporting this success. We also tried to determine how well the District succeeds in creating a collaborative culture that enables schools to share the positive efforts they are doing and how to replicate these achievements.

In order to accomplish this, we talked at length with the principal or other school leaders, individual teachers as well as teams. We visited classrooms, walked the halls and talked with students.

Characteristics of Beating the Odds

We found a surprising similarity of characteristics and patterns between and among these seven successful schools.

Leadership

One key ingredient of success is built around the leadership of both the principal and other staffers in the building. All seven schools had sustained, long term, success-oriented leadership in place for more than four years, some for as long as eighteen years. In most schools, it was the principal along with a leadership team that had provided this direction. In one school, leadership was sustained over many years by a "teacher leader" – a reading specialist – who transferred this approach through several principal changes.
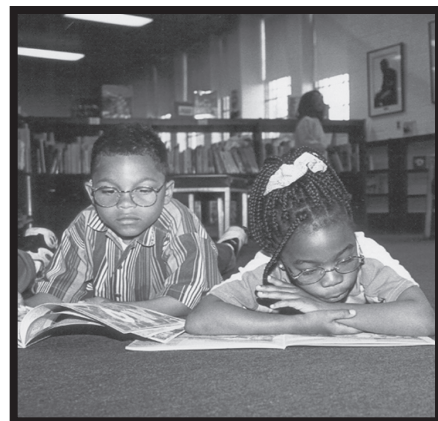
While the principals had different personalities, they possessed common qualities; all of the leaders expected a lot from staff, communicated regularly with them, and supported high quality educational programs. They were also committed to maintaining a successful school climate and school program. The leaders in these schools were problem-solvers – they were committed to figuring out solutions to difficult school problems. They tended to be upbeat and positive, considering how to solve problems in a positive, not punitive manner and not engaging in a culture of blame. They spoke of having grown over time, improving both their own management styles while maintaining the good things that were happening in the school and striving to make continuous improvements.

All of the principals seemed to work from their own perception of a "school improvement strategy" – a concrete plan to improve instruction and student achievement. In some cases, the same plan was continued across several principals in the same school, and helped the school stay on track through many waves of reform efforts in the District. They also used budgets creatively in order to secure resources their schools needed and to keep class sizes relatively low: "We devote everything we have to making sure teachers have what they need. You can't teach without the materials." As the schools became more successful they were often given more leeway and were allowed to maintain their own approaches and solutions to problems.

The principals seem to have created what we call a "give-and-take" philosophy with their teachers. They sought extra time and dedication from their teachers, but gave their teachers a lot in return: smaller classes, materials they needed to do the job, coverage when they had personal emergencies, a respectful teaching environment. The leadership commitment was reflected, in turn, by the staff's commitment to do what needed to be done; duties often required volunteered time before and after school. The teachers seemed willing to participate in this give-and-take because it benefited them and ultimately their students. The efforts of the principal, other leaders and school staff seemed to revolve around improving and sustaining a set of school characteristics tied to instruction and learning. At these schools most of these characteristics were observed to be in place and operating at a high level and included the following:

A Climate of Collaboration, Trust, Respect, Pride and Expectations of Academic Success

At these schools, there was very open and comfortable communication between the principal, staff, and members of the community. We were welcomed first into the office and then into any and all classrooms we visited. Teachers were willing, even eager, to share their thoughts about the school with us. We were introduced to the class by the principal, who sometimes even began to conduct a lesson with the students. There were strong efforts made to communicate to the students that high expectations and helping each other achieve was the norm.

The schools had similar ways of handling discipline problems. There was a common concern for the few students with difficult behaviors: "They can be so little and so full of anger. It is sometimes hard to know what to do." However, along with developing clear rules with agreed-upon consequences for repeated student infractions, there was an emphasis on creating a positive and friendly school environment. This attitude was reflected in the calm and engaged atmosphere found in nearly every classroom. "A nurturing climate means learning can take place. We try to create a strong 'culture of support'." This meant everything from a well-run breakfast and lunch program to opportunities for students to talk about their "issues", to providing support for parents. "Our students need to know they are loved."

Smaller class sizes enabled many teachers to handle discipline problems more easily. Teachers commonly used "accommodation rooms" that were available all day for "time outs" and sent students there for ten minutes or longer. All schools developed schedules supporting collaboration among grade level teachers. Teachers at each grade level were provided with common prep time at least once a week so collaborative discussions could take place.

Most of these schools had developed symbols of success. The students were proud of their schools and shared their pride with teachers, parents and the community at large. Hallways and classrooms were full of student work, displays, learning tools and added elements – rocking chairs, aquariums, plants and lamps – to make the buildings feel welcoming. One principal made a video of the school to share with others. The teachers were able to teach their students well and seemed to enjoy being at the school. "Teachers aren't going to let anything go wrong here. They feel privileged to be here." Parents wanted to send their kids to the school. Students enjoyed being at the school.

Strong Instructional Programs

Over the years, all of the schools have developed strong instructional programs. The recent emphasis on the use of a few core curricular programs across the District, especially in reading/language arts and mathematics, seems to have helped each school strengthen its instructional programs, although there was concern about the large amount of material that needed to be covered. As we walked through all of the schools, we noticed high levels of instruction with students "on task", with less emphasis on worksheets and more emphasis on writing, reading literature and mathematical problem solving.

We observed students engaged in small group work, including the use of student leaders to allow teachers the time to support more individual learning. In one school, for example, a second grader sat in front of a group of her fellow students leading a reading lesson, pointing out word endings on a large chart paper.

Student work was in evidence in the hallways of most schools. The programs were varied in levels and subject area using strong writing activities from a very early age, and included reading literature, "word walls" and other devices to heighten student interest in reading and learning vocabulary. Special programs such as 100 Book Challenge were integrated into the teaching, and the math programs were built around the District's adopted program, 'Everyday Math'. Each of the schools also incorporated social studies, science and programs in the arts on a regular basis. The arts were most prominent through the use of art and music prep teachers and through partnerships with outside programs.

These schools recognized the importance of PSSA tests and did not ignore special preparation for them. They also worked hard at preparing students through a strong curricular and instructional program and not just drills and practice for the test. For example, one school with very high test scores had examined the PSSA test in mathematics, noting that the pacing guide for the District did not always align with what is expected of students on the test. The school adapted its pacing schedule so that students learned key ideas and procedures that would be on the test *before* the test was given. This change helped to improve PSSA test scores.

High Attendance and Stability

There appeared to be little staff turnover at these schools. We got the clear impression that staff members enjoyed working at the school and had little desire to leave. This enabled the school to maintain a teaching staff that continued to improve their teaching, learn the idiosyncrasies of the school program, work with the school's systems, and build collaboration. "We all help each other out," was often heard.

Staff at one of the highest achieving schools we visited made a point of showing us its programs to assure high student attendance. The principal indicated that before these programs were put into place students would stay out of school for a variety of reasons. Since the principal strongly believed that not being in school meant not learning, he implemented strategies for improving attendance, including providing special recognition and awards for perfect attendance. Another school had a school-community coordinator working with parents and students to increase attendance levels, helping to resolve problems that prevented good attendance.

Use of Data to Improve Achievement

All schools used a variety of classroom and District data to monitor achievement and help determine whether or not they were being successful with students. At almost all of these schools, the principal and staff continuously and regularly examine data to determine how well students were doing and what were the needs of students. Some schools had impressive "data rooms" which visually showed the progress of each student.

All schools emphasized trying to follow the achievement of each individual child to identify students who were having difficulties and devise a plan to help them. The schools embedded Comprehensive Student Assistance Process (CSAP) in the day to assess student behavioral and academic difficulties. Principals or instructional leaders met with teachers on a regular basis to review individual student progress and discuss teaching and re-teaching strategies. The data was used to help shape staff development and supplemental programs. New students were assessed early through a variety of data and teachers were able to help provide them with work at their levels of learning. Benchmark results were shared with students and reviewed to share success and help them understand weaknesses.

Although the schools were stable in faculty, student populations in these, as in all of Philadelphia schools, is often transient. Thus, even these stable schools struggle with student turnover. For example, at one school, there was a huge turnover among students, grades K-4. This situation made it difficult to utilize test scores to validate the success of the school program over time. These schools used individual student data to mitigate the impact of student turnover and develop appropriate interventions and monitor school progress.

Smaller Class Size

All of these schools made a concerted effort to maintain relatively small numbers of students in each class. All schools used their budgets and any extra funding to buy extra positions for the school in order to reduce class sizes and eliminate split classes.

Continuous Growth: On-going, Meaningful Professional Development and Collaboration

These schools appear to have committed themselves to the concept of building a professional learning community. Every effort was made to develop relevant and meaningful professional development sessions tied to their ongoing curricular and instructional programs. Several schools had teacher leaders with instructional expertise in either reading/ language arts or mathematics, who made a point to share their expertise with the staff on a regular basis. The schools also made time for teachers to meet regularly at their grade levels and work together to improve instruction and approaches in order to help individual students. There was an overall sense of the need to maximize limited time for meaningful use to improve instruction, not to do "unnecessary tasks". "If teachers know they are coming to meetings to address and solve problems they are anxious to be there".

Outside Partnerships and Parental Involvement

All schools involved parents in training programs and evening programs, actively seeking their input. While one school considered parental partnerships as a primary element for success, the others attributed their multiple partnerships with outside organizations and cited additional supplemental support through extra materials and computer instruction as impactful. Outside initiatives included work with Children's Literacy Initiative, 100 Book Challenge, the Math Forum at Drexel University, Philadelphia Reads, the Philadelphia Orchestra and PA Ballet, Arthur Ashe Foundation, St. Joseph's University, GEO Kids, Interfaith Initiative and Mural Arts Program, The Picasso Project, other arts programs, and mentoring programs sponsored by local corporations.

The Schools' Relationship with the District

These schools have learned to navigate the sometimes rough waters of the District, but the District could do much more to support them, to recognize their individual challenges and successes, and to strengthen their leadership. The schools' leadership supported some of the recent policies of the District, especially the development of a core curriculum, the adoption of 'Everyday Math' and a reading/language arts curriculum. Whenever they could, they used their school budgets to reduce class size and order their own supplies.

But they were concerned about a tendency on the part of the District to reduce resources to those schools considered successful, diverting them to less successful schools. Some regional superintendents were viewed as being very supportive, while others felt the regions did not provide enough support. Most of the people with whom we spoke felt there were few opportunities provided by the District for schools to share good ideas and practices, to learn from each other, and to try approaches that were different from District prescriptions.

Thus, while we heard some compliments about the District's support, we also heard suggestions about ways the District could positively build upon the schools' successes and achievements. We heard ideas for improvement of the relationship between the schools and the District that are embedded in the recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

Recommendations

Spreading the word...
    learning the lessons...
        increasing school success against the odds.

In addition to finding what we had expected – good staff development, strong leadership, smaller class sizes, and a commitment to collaboration – we also found that these schools emphasize the effective use of data to inform their approach to individual student learning and the value of strong and varied partnerships.

In order to multiply the number of schools and children experiencing success, we urge the District to focus on:

1. ***Strengthening the characteristics that define successful schools***

   a. Use District resources to help create schools with positive, success-oriented climate and smaller class size; build strong instructional programs; effectively use a variety of data to individualize instruction; provide relevant professional development and staff collaboration; and develop partnerships with outside organizations.

2. ***Training, nurturing and supporting leadership***

   a. Create more opportunities for school leaders to share successful practices and problem-solve together through informal and formal networks.

   b. Encourage school leaders who have found ways of developing successful programs and practices (positive climates, small class sizes, parental involvement, partnerships) to share their work.

   c. Explore opportunities to study, learn and share how schools develop successful characteristics: e.g. utilize effective principals in the training of new principals; develop a cadre of principals and other school leaders to advise the District on best practices.

3. ***Supporting successful schools***

   a. Help schools that are showing success maintain and increase their resources, and sustain and improve their successes.

4. Developing relevant and customized professional development and collaboration

    a. Support schools that wish to customize professional development in response to their identified needs.

    b. Support schools that wish to create more time for staff collaboration and effective review of data.

    c. Make sure staff development on the core curriculum takes place as early as possible for new teachers.

    d. Design more ways to encourage teachers to share successful practices across schools.

5. Maximizing the use of data to review student progress and curriculum review

    a. Continue to review and revise the elementary and middle school curriculum to insure that each subject has a viable, rigorous and "doable" program. Use surveys to collect data about the curriculum from teachers and principals.

    b. Encourage every school to develop a strong data collection and review process that focuses on the achievement of each student and provides opportunities for individualized learning experiences.

    c. Insure that the curriculum is aligned with PSSA testing.

6. Encouraging and supporting outside partnerships that enrich learning and provide supports and valuable experiences for the schools' student body and community

    a. Provide District support to help schools form outside partnerships to enrich the student experience and support individualization of learning.

    We encourage the District to recognize successful schools by their achievements and ability to instill these characteristics in their schools, reward them with flexibility and additional resources, and provide other schools the opportunity to replicate these successes by:

Spreading the word...
learning the lessons...
increasing school success against the odds

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