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Roots of Success
Effective Practices In Vermont Schools
Introduction

Demographics are not destiny

It’s true. While research has established the strong link between students’ socioeconomic status and achievement, a school’s demographic profile does not necessarily predict performance. In fact, there are examples of schools across the country whose students excel academically even though many of them come from low-income families. The challenge to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is to identify such success stories, learn from them, and establish similar systems in other schools. What makes these schools more successful than others, particularly with students from low-income backgrounds? How did they beat the odds with children who are more likely to struggle than their advantaged peers? How can we help other schools improve outcomes for students?

Fortunately such success stories are not only evident across the country but right here in our own backyard. The Vermont Department of Education, with the help of an advisory panel representing K-12 schools and higher education, studied what it takes for schools—and therefore students—to succeed (see figure 1). A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed to identify the characteristics common to effective schools. Through a large-scale survey of more than 2000 Vermont teachers in 87 schools across the state as well as intensive site visits to three schools that are “beating the odds” (schools whose Reading and Mathematics scores on state assessments defy expectations and exceed those of other schools with similar demographics), we discovered a set of attitudes and beliefs as well as specific school practices that are associated with student, particularly low-income, success. These characteristics form the foundation for school effectiveness and are essential to ensuring that all children, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, reach their full potential.

In addition to these core characteristics, the effective schools studied also benefited from two distinct types of external resources: supervisory union/district office and local school board support as well as assistance from the larger community.

The results of this study do not differ from the large body of national research on effective schools (for a full literature review see www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com). However, the value of this work is that it confirms the existing body of knowledge on effective schools but applies it to a Vermont context. We now have state-specific information, aligned to national research, on how to improve outcomes for students. And perhaps more importantly, we have a chorus of Vermont teacher, administrator, and parent voices telling us what it takes to meet the needs of all students.

Overwhelmingly, what their experience teaches us is that schools matter. While student characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, undeniably affect academic achievement, our survey and site visit findings demonstrate that schools are capable of altering that relationship through the development of an effective, cohesive, responsive education system. Not only must we hold students to high expectations, we must hold ourselves to the creation of effective educational systems that support students to meet these high expectations in each of our schools.

For more information on this report, visit www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com
High expectations
Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.

Continuous improvement
Effective systems take responsibility for students’ achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.

Leadership
Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.

Use of data
Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.

Professional teaching culture
Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction.

Student supports
Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students’ academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.

School climate
Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.

Family engagement
Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child’s learning.
Summary of Findings

Internal and External Factors

Internal Factors

1. Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.
   1.1. Every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, is held to high standards.
   1.2. Poverty is never used as an excuse for low student performance.
   1.3. Staff have realistic understandings about the challenges of life in poverty.
   1.4. Teacher candidates’ beliefs about student potential are considered when making hiring decisions.
   1.5. Student supports are not based on socioeconomic status; the needs of all students are addressed, regardless of subgroup category.
   1.6. Staff strives to give students a vision for the future and help them see beyond high school.

2. Effective systems take responsibility for students’ achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.
   2.1. Staff feels responsible for students’ success and failure.
   2.2. Staff are committed to ensuring that all students excel.
   2.3. There is a school-wide culture of continuous improvement; entire staff are always asking, “How can we do better?”
   2.4. Staff are never satisfied with the status quo.

3. Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.
   3.1. Effective leaders are compassionate and supportive of staff, both professionally and personally.
   3.2. Effective leaders are accessible, visible, and approachable.
   3.3. Effective leaders prioritize three primary responsibilities: setting a vision for the school; creating a safe, positive school climate; and hiring, supervising, and evaluating staff.
   3.4. Effective leaders set visions that are measurable and attainable. They do not jump on bandwagons.
   3.5. Effective leaders hold tightly to their vision but allow staff flexibility in determining how best to achieve it.
   3.6. Effective leaders ensure that all staff have access to the training and professional development required to implement any reform or initiative.
   3.7. Effective leaders build a sense of community in their buildings and stay in their positions long enough to create a stable school culture.
   3.8. Effective leaders recognize the criticalness of hiring the right people and implement hiring practices that fully and effectively screen candidates.
   3.9. Effective leaders conduct frequent classroom observations and/or hire coaches who provide teachers with feedback on their instruction.
   3.10. Effective leaders use a formal teacher evaluation system to identify teacher weaknesses, support improvement, and remove ineffective staff when necessary.

4. Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.
   4.1. Staff collect and analyze data, at the building and classroom level, to continually refine their practice.
   4.2. Faculty engages in analysis of results from school-wide assessments like NECAP to determine where they need to improve.
   4.3. Schools take specific actions (including changes to curriculum and instruction) based on what they learn from data analysis.
   4.4. Students are provided optimal testing conditions for the NECAP including appropriate accommodations. Instructional decisions made by teachers at the classroom level are data-driven.
   4.5. Teachers assess continuously and formatively to inform their instruction.
   4.6. Teachers assess to guide decisions about student groupings as well as to identify appropriate interventions (both for students who struggle and those who need enrichment).
   4.7. Teachers use a variety of assessment strategies and approaches to address a range of student learning styles.
   4.8. Instruction and classroom assessments are fully aligned to the state standards (Grade Expectations).

5. Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction.
   5.1. Staff are dedicated to their jobs and do whatever it takes to meet the needs of students.
   5.2. Teachers respect and trust one another.
   5.3. Teachers do not work in isolation but collaborate regularly to share instructional strategies and refine their practice.
   5.4. Formal structures, like extended time in the school day, are provided for teachers to collaborate.
   5.5. Teachers seek out time informally, such as the lunch hour or after school, to work together.
   5.6. Teachers observe each others’ classrooms and offer feedback and advice.
   5.7. Teachers align their curriculum and instruction vertically and horizontally (within grades and across grades) to ensure there are no gaps in skills or content.
   5.8. Teachers use consistent terminology and language across classrooms and grades so that students are not confused.
5.9. Paraprofessionals are highly trained and given access to the same professional development and resources as classroom teachers.
5.10. Schools use paraprofessionals strategically to support students and teachers.

6. Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students’ academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.

6.1. Schools prioritize students’ academic needs but recognize it is also necessary to address other needs (emotional, social, physical).
6.2. Educational Support Teams (ESTs) have clearly established norms, roles, and responsibilities.
6.3. ESTs respond quickly and thoroughly to any identified student need.
6.4. Schools stress early literacy skills and have a variety of early interventions to detect and support young students who struggle.
6.5. Schools understand the importance of early educational experiences and either offer pre-kindergarten or are considering offering it in the future.
6.6. Schools extend students’ learning opportunities through after school and summer school programs.
6.7. After school and summer school programs include a mix of academic support (e.g. homework help) as well as general enrichment activities.
6.8. Schools establish a safe place for children with emotional or behavioral problems to go during the day to process with the help of professionals.
6.9. Schools hire a cadre of support professionals to work with students and families.
6.10. Students are provided access to healthy and nutritious food throughout the day, including before, during, and after school.

7. Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.

7.1. The culture of the school is caring and supportive.
7.2. Students feel safe, protected, and secure at school and have trusting relationships with adults.
7.3. Schools are clear in their behavioral expectations for students and consistent in their response to infractions.
7.4. Teachers work to build community in their classrooms (e.g. through programs like Responsive Classroom”).
7.5. The school’s positive climate attracts and retains teachers.

8. Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child’s learning.

8.1. Schools believe it is their responsibility to engage parents in their child’s learning and publicly state their commitment to involving families.
8.2. Parents are seen as partners with the school in their child’s education.

8.3. Schools make their building a welcoming place for families and reach out with empathy and compassion to all parents, paying particular attention to the needs of low-income families.
8.4. Schools hire liaisons (e.g. a home-school coordinator) to engage families, communicate information and volunteer opportunities, make home visits, and provide other support as needed like transportation to/from meetings.
8.5. Teachers regularly communicate with parents about classroom activities and their child’s progress using a variety of communication strategies (e.g. newsletters, email, phone calls, and homework folders).
8.6. Parents are provided multiple opportunities and venues to be involved in school activities.

External Factors

Effective systems receive support from their supervisory union/district office and local school board.

a. The supervisory union/district office supports schools to align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the state standards (Grade Expectations).
b. The supervisory union/district office provides resources and support for the development of such tools as aligned curriculum guidance, common assessments, and standards-based report cards.
c. The supervisory union/district office provides needs-based professional development to teachers.
d. The supervisory union/district office researches and chooses a teacher evaluation model for administrators.
e. School boards are supportive and child-centered.
f. School boards trust the professional expertise of staff and do not try to micro-manage school activities.
g. School boards do not advocate for particular agendas.

Effective systems actively reach out to their communities and benefit, in return, from community support and resources.

a. Schools have a positive relationship with their surrounding community.
b. Schools actively reach out to their community and serve as a hub for community activities.
c. Towns are supportive of education and consistently pass school budgets.
d. Families, particularly those living below the poverty line, depend on community-based resources such as health services, food shelves, and mental health facilities. ▲