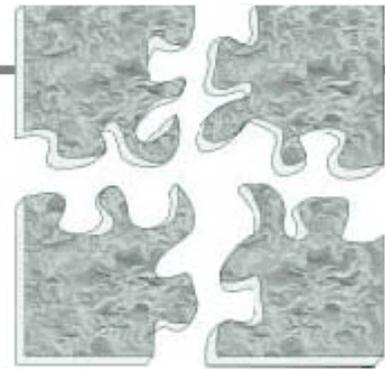


# BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS



No. 29  
February 2004

## PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

### *Effective Elementary Schools*

- Characteristics of School Leadership..... 1
- Relationships ..... 2

### *Effective Teachers*

- Characteristics of Teachers ..... 2
- Approach to Literacy ..... 3

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN POVERTY AREAS

*This BRIEF summarizes various educational studies beginning in the 1970s that sought to understand the characteristics of elementary schools in poverty areas that were effective in teaching children to read. Some studies looked at the differences between effective schools and ineffective schools defined in terms of assessment scores. Other studies analyzed the effectiveness of various teaching strategies in reading reform.*

## EFFECTIVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Educational performance, particularly in poverty area schools, has become a primary issue for state and national politicians, school districts and communities. This concern has been fueled by high dropout rates, literacy and math incompetence of graduates, and comparisons with the high scores of students in other countries. Over the decades, various remedies have been tried to improve student performance. These have included more equitable financing formulas, reform of central administrations, decentralized governance, site-based management, parent involvement, and competition through charter schools. Most recently, school reform has been redefined in terms of accountability through test scores and imposing financial consequences for poor performance (No Child Left Behind Act, P.L.107-110, 2001).

The issue of accountability for acceptable test scores necessitates a greater focus on what actually transpires within a school building and a

classroom that facilitates children's learning. The summary below comes from a review of 12 studies that compared effective schools in poverty areas with similarly situated ineffective schools. While not all of the studies looked at the same aspects of school effectiveness, there is considerable agreement in their findings.

The summary is organized according to the characteristics of school building leadership, relationship of the school with various stakeholders, and characteristics of effective teachers including their approach to teaching literacy.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERSHIP

- **Strong effective instructional leadership**
  - Directing school staff time and energy to instructional issues

- Developing a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement among staff
- Securing resources and training for teachers
- Providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate on instructional improvement
- Creating additional time for instruction
- Helping staff persist in spite of difficulties
- **Clear school mission**
  - Defining student learning as an overriding priority
  - School staff having a sense of community and collective responsibility for school improvement
- **Ongoing, yearlong staff development for curriculum improvement**  
Teachers learning together within a building and collaborating to improve their instruction
- **Communication and collaboration among teachers**
  - Working together within and across grades to align instruction to state standards and assessments, and to create program consistency
  - Collaborating on instruction between classroom teacher and specialists

- Peer coaching
- Teachers and staff working together to help all students

- **More experienced principal**

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

### Relationship of School with Parents

- **Greater parent involvement**  
Parent input through such mechanisms as an annual focus group, written or telephone survey, an active site council<sup>1</sup>
- **Positive home-school relationship**  
Concerted effort to reach out to parents, e.g., teacher communication; monthly telephone call from principal to parents with positive comments; books sent to parents for home reading partnerships

### Relationship with Central Administration and Community

- **Good working relationships** with central school administration
- **Community agencies** providing services to school in accordance with school's overall plan

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## EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

### CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS

Effective schools have a greater number of effective teachers<sup>2</sup> whose practice is characterized by the following:

- **Awareness of purpose**  
Clear understanding of intent of practices; strong sense of task and direction
- **Task orientation**  
Conveying the goal of every lesson and why the lesson is important to students; introducing lessons with an overview
- **High expectations for students**  
Expecting that every child can improve and move forward
- **Enthusiasm**
- **Clarity, directness**
- **Positive classroom climate**
  - *Strong classroom management skills.* Proactive in preventing disruptions; skilled in managing behavior
  - *Lessons consistently well prepared.* Materials ready and close at hand

- *Predictable routines.* Predictable patterns of activities and expectations; structured, but with flexibility to pursue topics that arise in discussions or to insert mini-lessons when the need becomes apparent
- *Effective use of praise.* Praise used in moderation; praise of thinking and effort rather than just getting the correct answer; avoidance of negative criticism
- *Students on task*
- **Systematic curriculum-based assessment to monitor student progress**  
Conducted 3-5 times a year, providing benchmarks and internal accountability; information is shared with principal and other teachers and used to determine changes for program refinement

## APPROACH TO TEACHING LITERACY

- **Strong emphasis on reading**
- **Skillful management and allocation of time for reading**
  - *Efficient/ short transitions.* Getting and maintaining students' attention; spending less time in transitions and more time in lessons
  - *Maximum use of instructional time for reading.* 2½-3½ hours per day on reading/ language arts
  - *More time spent on other than whole group instruction, including small group and individualized instruction.* Twice as much small group instruction as whole class instruction in grades one and two
  - *More time spent on independent reading*
  - *Opportunity to learn material.* Frequent instruction in skills and strategies
- **Effective instructional strategies**
  - *Redoubling teaching efforts when student has difficulties*
  - *Emphasis placed on both basic skills and higher order comprehension skills.* Higher-level questioning about content (more effective than heavy reliance on telling and recitation); meaning-oriented rather than skills-oriented instruction
  - *Teaching strategies, not skills.* Coaching on how to apply word recognition strategies to real reading
  - *Instructional balance.* Integrating skills instruction and whole language practices; meaning-oriented rather than skills-oriented approaches to reading instruction
  - *Integration of reading and writing activities.* Students frequently writing about what they are reading and using books to develop further topics they chose for writing; writing is used to teach specific reading and writing skills as well as being a means of expression for students
  - *Instructional density.* Literacy instruction integrated with the rest of the curriculum; reading as part of science instruction, social studies and math
  - *Encouragement of self regulation.* Encouraging students to monitor their progress, quality of work and use of work time
  - *Ability-based group assignments.* Change as assessment shows improvement
  - *Use of coaching and scaffolding<sup>3</sup>.* Probing students who give incorrect answers; use of structuring comments; multiple levels of questions; coaching students in use of a range of word recognition strategies
  - *Activities appropriate, meaningful and challenging.* Linked to theme, purpose and skills; more active instruction; providing academic tasks that ask more of children

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## NOTES

1. BRIEF No. 30 will review the various levels of parent involvement.
2. Found to be as low as 52 percent (Taylor et al).
3. Coaching and scaffolding: Teacher supports, prompts, coaches child as he/she tries to perform task; intervenes with just enough help to facilitate learning; provides framework to move child to next level of understanding.

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