

Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why do some California elementary schools serving largely low-income students score as much as 250 points higher on the state's academic performance index (API) than other schools with very similar students? This study sought answers to that question by surveying principals and teachers in 257 California elementary schools serving similar student populations and analyzing the results to determine which current K-5 practices and policies are most strongly associated with higher levels of student achievement.

Our study differs from previous effective-schools studies primarily in its scale, standards-based content, and targeted yet comprehensive approach. Strong participation rates within schools provided extensive data from approximately 5,500 teachers and 257 principals across the state. We examined statewide implementation of California's standards-based reforms, yet focused on schools serving large numbers of low-income students. Using the API as our measure, we included high-, medium-, and low-scoring schools, which gave us a basis for comparing practices.

The policy context for the study is California's standards-based accountability system. Many experts consider this state's K-12 academic content standards, adopted in the late 1990s, to be among the nation's most challenging. School APIs are based on student test scores on the California Standards Tests, which measure how well students at each school are mastering grade-level academic standards. Given this context, we used each school's most current (2005) API score as the primary performance outcome.

The sample of schools was drawn from the 25th to 35th percentile band of the state's 2003–04 School Characteristics Index where student demographic challenge factors are substantial, but not the most severe.

After reviewing the effective schools literature, we developed and field tested the principal and teacher surveys, which were designed to explore school qualities, policies, and practices related to school success. Specific domains explored were: implementing a coherent, standards-based instructional program; involving and supporting parents; using assessment data to improve student achievement and instruction; encouraging teacher collaboration and professional development; ensuring instructional resources; enforcing high expectations for student behavior; and prioritizing student achievement.

Extensive analysis of the survey findings used regression analysis to determine which activities more common at high-performing than at low-performing schools were correlated with higher API scores. The practices found to be associated with high performance were:

- **Prioritizing Student Achievement.** Where teacher and principal answers to multiple survey questions indicated higher expectations for students, their schools had, on average, higher API scores than schools whose staffs indicated lower expectations. In more-successful schools, both teachers and principals reported that their school has well defined plans for instructional improvement and that they put priority on meeting the state's API goals and the federal adequate yearly progress goals. Teachers and principals also report that their schools set measurable goals for exceeding the mandated API student subgroup growth targets for improved achievement.
- **Implementing a Coherent, Standards-based Curriculum and Instructional Program.** Teachers who report the following were more likely to be in higher performing schools: schoolwide instructional consistency within grades; curricular alignment from grade-to-grade; classroom instruction guided by state academic standards; curriculum materials in math and language arts aligned with the state's standards; in a district that addresses the instructional needs

of English learners at their school. Principals were more likely to be in higher performing schools if they reported that: the district has clear expectations for student performance aligned with the district's adopted curriculum, and the district evaluates the principal based on the extent to which instruction in the school aligns with the curriculum.

- **Using Assessment Data to Improve Student Achievement and Instruction.** Strongly correlated with a higher API was the extensive use of student assessment data by the district and the principal in an effort to improve instruction and student learning. For example, principals more often reported that they and the district use assessment data from multiple sources (curriculum program and other commercial assessments; district-developed assessments; the California Standards Tests and the CAT/6) to evaluate teachers' practices and to identify teachers who need instructional improvement. Principals report using this data to develop strategies to follow up on the progress of selected students and help them reach goals. According to these principals, the district expects all of its schools to improve achievement, evaluates principals based on student achievement, and provides support for site-level planning related to improving achievement.
- **Ensuring Availability of Instructional Resources.** Where more teachers reported having regular or standard certification for teaching in California, schools had, on average, higher API scores. The same was true of schools where principals more often reported that their districts provide sufficient and up-to-date instructional materials as well as support for supplementary instruction for struggling students and for facilities management. Teachers with at least five years of full time teaching experience were more likely, on average, to be from schools with higher APIs. Principal experience was also correlated with higher school achievement.

Besides signaling critical, interrelated practices of more-effective schools, these findings indicate that the principal and the district play key roles in school success. Specifically, it appears that:

- **Principal leadership in the context of accountability-driven reform is being redefined to focus on effective management of the school improvement process.** In general, API scores were higher in schools with principals whose responses indicate that they act as managers of school improvement, driving the reform process, cultivating the school vision, and extensively using student assessment data for a wide variety of school improvement areas of focus, including evaluation of teacher practice and assistance to struggling students.
- **District leadership, accountability, and support appear to influence student achievement.** Principals' responses indicate that district practices may contribute to a higher API in a variety of ways. These include setting clear expectations that schools meet API and AYP growth targets, including for subgroups, as well as providing schools with achievement data and evaluating principal performance and teacher practices based on that data. They also include ensuring: that math and language arts curricula are aligned with state standards; that instruction is focused on achievement; that schools have adequate facilities and textbooks as well as resources for struggling students.

Across California, schools serving similar types of student populations can vary widely in how well they score on the API. The 257 elementary schools studied were drawn from a fairly narrow student demographic band. Yet their 2005 Growth API scores varied by about 250 points. This range of scores suggests that while student socioeconomic background is one predictor of academic achievement, it is not the sole predictor. What schools do—and what resources they have to do it with—can make a difference. With that in mind, the interrelated practices identified in this study may help schools in their efforts to improve student achievement.

From: Williams, T., Kirst, M., Haertel, E., et al. (2005). *Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better? A large-scale survey of California elementary schools serving low-income students.* Mountain View, CA: EdSource.