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RESEARCH BRIEF

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HIGH-ACHIEVING *Middle Schools for* **Latino Students** *in Poverty*

What are the characteristics of middle schools in which Latino students from low-income families make substantial achievement gains?

The Study

Jesse, D., Davis, A., & Pokorny, N. (2004, January). High-achieving middle schools for Latino students in poverty. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk 9*(1), 23–45. Retrieved September 14, 2005, from http://www.leaonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1207/S15327671ESPR0901_2

Methodology

Nine middle schools were selected from different regions of Texas. The schools serve predominantly Latino students from low-income families, where Latino students had shown a consistent trend of improvement on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). In addition to TAAS reading and math scores, data from onsite interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents were reviewed for evidence of 57 characteristics of effective schools. Researchers interviewed the school principal and at least six teachers at each site and observed in at least six classrooms. Focus groups were conducted with between seven and 12 students at each school. Documents—including school improvement plans, staff and student handbooks, and curriculum frameworks—were collected and analyzed.

In Brief

The study investigates what practitioners are doing to create effective middle schools for Latino students (the Latino student population in seven of the nine schools was more than 90 percent). The study includes a literature review that places itself within the larger

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context of research literature. The study's research findings are organized into six areas that encompass the 57 characteristics of effective schools identified by the study's authors: school leadership, teacher expertise and relationships, Latino culture and second language issues, organizational structure, curriculum and instruction, and community and parent involvement. This research brief describes the study's findings in each of the six areas and indicates how the success of these schools can be replicated. In addition, the authors identify a seventh area that is arguably more difficult to replicate: coherence.

School Leadership

The study finds that having a principal as instructional leader is of prime importance. The principal brings the goals of learning and instruction to the forefront, coordinates the activities of students and teachers, and integrates the other components of effective schools. The authors claim "support for teachers and a climate of mutual respect between principals and teachers existed at all sites" (p. 33). Such support was identified in principals with diverse leadership styles—some were hierarchical in their approach while others had a more collaborative style—indicating that no one style is "the right one" to emulate. Principals were key to maintaining focus and pulling school staff together through the priorities they maintained, their comments at staff meetings, and their daily behavior.

Teacher Expertise and Relationships

Almost all of the teachers in the study schools regularly participated in professional development activities (including attending college courses) to improve their teaching. In addition, they cultivated and maintained positive relationships with their students, showing concern for their welfare and displaying student work in school hallways. The teachers seemed to know their students well, demonstrating both respect and high expectations for them all. These teachers were successful in maintaining both a high level of discipline and a caring culture.

Organizational Structure

The authors clarify the characteristics of grouping and scheduling practices that seem to have been helpful for students in the study schools. For example, almost all of the schools were organized by core teacher teams, where each team shared a planning period and had the same students for science, math, language arts, and social studies. In addition, five of the nine schools had a form of block scheduling. The researchers also note the absence of some common strategies: The schools did not consistently observe looping (teachers advancing from grade to grade with the same students), cross-age peer tutoring, or the grouping of students across grades. Also rare were advisory programs where students were assigned to an advisor who maintained contact throughout the middle school experience.

Curriculum and Instruction

The authors note that there was little evidence of the use of interdisciplinary curriculum or a focus on higher-order thinking skills. The focus of the instruction in each school was on the domains measured by TAAS. The schools used direct instruction and made extensive use of worksheets and textbook exercises to supplement instruction.

Latino Culture and Second Language Acquisition

Many of the teachers in the study schools had special training in working with English language learner (ELL) populations. Six of the nine schools had Latino principals, and 68 percent of the teachers were Latino. Many were members of the community in which they taught. Although Spanish was often spoken in the hallways, main office, and playgrounds, none of the schools offered bilingual classes.

After sixth grade, ELL students were served in English as a second language classes where they were taught primarily in English, not Spanish. A key feature of the study schools was that they employed "advocacy-oriented assessment practices." Such practices reduced the likelihood that ELL students would be identified as deficient and subject to lower expectations. Lastly, the researchers observed that few of the school's offerings reflected the Mexican heritage of the students, although some music programs did have a mariachi band.

Community and Parent Involvement

The study notes that the bilingualism of the staff in these schools allowed for easy communication with parents and built bridges between home and school. Indeed, the study schools emphasized communication with parents. School staff kept parents informed about school events and policies as well as the progress of their children through telephone calls and written communication such as newsletters available in both English and Spanish. Parents indicated that they knew what was expected of their children and when those expectations were not met. On the whole, however, parents did not volunteer or participate in decision making at the schools, so communication tended to be one way: school to home.

Coherence

In addition to those six categories, the researchers also discuss coherence in the schools. Coherence in this context essentially means that everyone is unified in the direction the school is taking. For this study, the researchers were "struck by the very strong unity of purpose, cohesive sense of school identity, and joint effort exhibited by educators and students in the nine schools" (p. 36). The authors attribute this to several key core values echoed time and again by principals, teachers, parents, and students. Chief among these values was student achievement. Students saw achievement as an end in itself, teachers cared about it and worked to make it happen, and it was central to the mission of schools. Other values that had been internalized by teachers and students alike included "reaching one's potential, caring about students, and expressing high expectations" (p. 36).

How was such coherence accomplished? The authors suggest the following:

- Strong and consistent messages from principals starting at the beginning of the year.
- The echoing of these messages by other leaders.
- School mission-building exercises for the entire staff.
- Identification of local priorities.
- Professional development aligned with these priorities.
- Formal data-driven planning activities.
- Data-driven resource allocations.
- Development of school improvement plans with large numbers of staff participating.
- Continual evaluation and adjustment of activities to stay on mission.

Furthermore, the authors observe that "when schools took on a collective challenge as a team and successfully met the challenge, a contagious sense of pride became evident" (p. 37).

Suggestions for School Improvement

The schools in the Texas study were unusual because they did the following:

- Established relationships with parents and the community.
- Included faculty as collaborators in school governance.
- Developed caring and consistent interactions with students.
- Employed "advocacy-oriented assessment practices" that reduced the likelihood that ELL students would be subject to lower expectations.

RESEARCH BRIEF

To improve further upon the success of these schools, the authors suggest that actively building on the students' Latino heritage also would add to coherence and build upon the cultural aspects of their home life. The authors are quick to point out that such coherence should create a unity of purpose within the school and community, not a cultural uniformity. The authors express concern that the schools they visited did not emphasize the home heritage of the students. Rather than build upon their social, cultural, and linguistic competencies, the schools largely ignored the Latino culture. They also express concern that "the implication [of ignoring Latino culture], even in schools in which most administrators and teachers are themselves Latino, is that Latino cultural knowledge is inferior and low-status" (p. 39).

Challenges

The challenges to the approaches suggested in this study of the characteristics of middle schools in which poor and Latino students make substantial achievement gains are many. From the political debates about bilingual classrooms to the resources necessary to create the nurturing environments in middle schools, it is plain that there are no easy solutions.

Bottom Line

The creation of a positive learning environment—where academics are emphasized and teachers and students alike thrive—contributes significantly to improved student performance. The power of the seven areas mentioned in this report to transform a school is apparent. As the nine Texas schools in this study have shown, it is possible to create schools where Latino students from low-income families can succeed.

Other Resources

Brewster A. B., & Bowen G. L. (2004, February). Teacher support and the school engagement of Latino middle and high school students at risk of school failure. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal 21*(1), 47–67.

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