

Driven to Succeed: High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools

Volume I: Cross-Case Analysis of High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools

Executive Summary

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Funding provided by
The U.S. Department of Education
Office of the Undersecretary

Funding for this research study has been provided by U.S. Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary via Subcontract Agreement No. s9844 from WESTAT, Inc. under their Prime U.S. Department of Education Contract No. EA96008001.

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The STAR (Support for Texas Academic Renewal) Center is a comprehensive regional center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance to Texas educators. It is a partnership between the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, the Intercultural Development Research Association (San Antonio, Texas), and RMC Research Corporation (Denver, Colorado). The STAR Center funded printing of this report.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is based on a study of the following seven middle level schools:

Hambrick Middle School

Aldine Independent School District
Houston, Texas

Inman Middle School

Atlanta Public School System
Atlanta, Georgia

John F. Kennedy Middle School

Utica City School District
Utica, New York

Memorial Junior High School

Eagle Pass Independent School District
Eagle Pass, Texas

Pocomoke Middle School

Pocomoke School District
Pocomoke City, Maryland

Rockcastle County Middle School

Rockcastle County School District
Mount Vernon, Kentucky

Tonasket Middle School

Tonasket Public School District
Tonasket, Washington

The research team is deeply grateful to the school personnel, students, parents, community members, and central office staff who gave generously of their time and welcomed us to their campuses.

We also wish to express our appreciation for the support and assistance provided by:

Francy Entz, Kathie Holiman, Vicki Pursch, Mary Ragland, Toni Riestler, Cindy Schneider, Stephanie Surles, and Jeff Swan for research assistance during the site visits.

Sondra Cooney, Director of the Middle Grades Education Initiative Southern Regional Education Board, Nancy Mizelle, Assistant Professor at Georgia College and State University, and Jim Scheurich, Associate Professor at The University of Texas at Austin, for consultation and document reviews.

Driven to Succeed:

High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement so that they were performing at levels consistent with, and in many cases better than, higher-income schools in their states. The *Improving America's Schools Act* (IASA) of 1994 lowered the poverty threshold to 50 percent for schools to operate schoolwide programs that benefit all students. More recently, Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001; which mandates that all children receive the “opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” (Section 1001). A key goal of the reauthorization is to close the achievement gap between subpopulations of students. To this end, the legislation mandates more district and school accountability by implementing annual state tests for grades 3–8, and mandates that states provide disaggregated student performance data already required under *IASA* for the subjects and grades tested.

The U.S. Department of Education has funded best practice studies examining how low-income schools have improved their student performance. The purpose of these studies has been to improve public education by identifying effective practices and areas for appropriate legislative change.¹ Because most of the previous work in the area of best practices has focused on elementary schools, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a larger body of work examining high-poverty, high-performing schools with an emphasis on the middle grades.

This work seeks to capture procedural knowledge that will be useful to other schools with similar student populations, school sizes, and community types. This report focuses on what practices, policies, and belief systems enhanced teaching and learning in these schools; attempts to explain how these schools improved student performance; and provides recommendations suggested by the findings.

the existing body of research with additional practice wisdom and experiences from the field, the seven public middle schools selected had the following characteristics:

- The school was a middle grades configuration, typically serving grades 5–8.² No K–12, K–8, or 7–12 schools were included.
- At least 50 percent of the school's students participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program for the most recent year for which data were available.³
- The school's average achievement scores were at or above the state average on state mathematics and reading exams for the grade level tested in the most recent year for which data were available.
- The school showed a strong growth rate in reading and mathematics performance for at least the three-year period between 1997–98 and 1999–2000.
- The school was a public, non-charter, and non-magnet school so that only open enrollment schools were included.

- The school had a reputation among educational leaders for using effective practices and for having made reforms that led to improved academic performance, especially among students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.
- The school represented typical high-poverty schools in terms of the economic characteristics of their school communities and the challenges they had to face.

The high-performing, high-poverty, turnaround middle schools selected for this study were Hambrick Middle School, Houston, Texas; Inman Middle School, Atlanta, Georgia; John F. Kennedy Middle School, Utica, New York; Memorial Junior High School, Eagle Pass, Texas; Pocomoke Middle School, Pocomoke City, Maryland; Rockcastle County Middle School, Mount Vernon, Kentucky; and Tonasket Middle School, Tonasket, Washington.

These schools represented a variety of school sizes, community types, geographic locales, and student populations. This variability implies that improving student performance is not dependent on any one given set of criteria or circumstances.

Teams of three trained staff members made one four-day visit to each site between November 2001 and March 2002. During each visit, team members interviewed administrators, teachers, other school staff, program staff, and when appropriate, community members, parents, and central office staff. Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers, students, and parents. In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, a variety of observations were conducted to get a sense of school climate. These included a minimum of four classes at each school, school transition times, and staff meetings. School documentation, such as lesson plans, student work, school-disseminated information, and school improvement plans, were collected as evidence of embedded practices. Finally, all teachers at each school were invited to complete a survey.⁴

The study design limited findings on several topics important to middle school improvement. Topics beyond the scope of this study include observable changes to classroom practices, teacher certification issues, and school improvement sustainability. Additionally, several elements, such as high expectations for all, strong leadership, thoughtful organizational structures, and attention to individual students, separate these schools from other demographically similar schools, but do not make them outliers. Rather these same elements can and should be replicated in other high-poverty schools.

This summary is organized into two parts. The first section details the findings of this study—the characteristics that people at these school communities interpreted as essential to supporting teaching and learning and the approaches to school improvement these schools took. The second section provides recommendations that the findings suggest for policymakers and practitioners.

Findings of This Study

Findings from this study indicate that the seven study schools have challenged the low performance trend established by high-poverty middle schools and can therefore provide insight into the policies, practices, programs, and strategies that are necessary to attain high levels of academic achievement for their students.

Although the performance these schools exhibit is rare for middle schools, especially those with a

concentration of students who live in poverty, the schools themselves are not unique. They have comparable student and teacher populations to many middle schools across the country. They have equal access to fiscal and human resources. They have structures and processes that determine how decisions are made and how people interact.

What differentiates these schools from other demographically similar schools are the conscious efforts staff made to understand the schools' contexts and to work proactively to raise the performance of each and every student. Because these schools are representative of middle schools across the country, they can illuminate how they support teaching and learning at the middle school level as well as how middle schools can improve.

Schools That Support Teaching and Learning

Four characteristics emerged as essential to supporting teaching and learning at these schools. First, these schools had a focus on high expectations for all students. Entire school communities shared a common purpose to hold every student to high standards and to work hard to reach this goal. Second, study schools intentionally built collaborative relationships between school staff, with district offices, and with outside agencies. Third, staff in these schools increased the capacity of the system by focusing on human and non-human resources and by thoughtfully implementing organizational structures. Finally, staff in these schools focused on the individual student and provided targeted interventions and extra services to ensure that no child became invisible. These four key findings are presented along with the factors that are integral to sustaining them.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed hold high expectations for all students.

High expectations for all students moved people at these schools in a shared direction and helped eliminate distractions. This common purpose was sustained through

- Making intentional choices to care about individual students by giving them opportunities to build meaningful relationships with adults. These relationships motivated students academically. Additionally, staff at these schools cared about each other as professionals.
- Instilling pride and recognition for student and staff commitment to improved academic performance. Internal and external recognition validated staff and students and motivated them to excel.
- Being committed and staying focused on high expectations for all. Hard work and visible results created an achievement momentum that inspired the staff to continue their efforts.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed are dedicated to collaborative environments.

These school built collaborative environments through

- Creating a democratic environment in schools where staff input was valued and staff had considerable decision making responsibility in their areas of expertise, as well as control over their professional growth.
- Redefining relationships with districts so that districts supported schools and provided them

with independence and decision making authority over issues affecting campuses, such as curricular decisions and resource management.

- Seeking relationships with outside entities such as community organizations and universities. These outside entities provided additional student services and support beyond the capacity of the school.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed are committed to supporting teaching and learning through implementing thoughtful organizational structures and building the capacity of the system.

These schools supported teaching and learning through

- Implementing organizational structures such as student teaming, common planning time for teachers, block scheduling, and appropriate student behavior programs in ways that respected the unique situations and circumstances of each school context.
- Building the capacity of the school system by using data to make informed decisions and determine areas of need. Staff were trained in how to understand data and use data to create systematic processes for targeting improvement areas.
- Building the capacity of the school system by providing staff the flexibility to choose what professional development opportunities were most useful, then providing professional development that was ongoing and in-depth. Professional development was expanded to include working with curriculum lead teachers, peer observation and coaching, and teaming.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed pay attention to individual students and provide extra services and support beyond those traditionally offered by schools.

Being attentive to individual students required providing resources such as time and money that could be used for

- Creating structured programs that allowed all students to be known by an adult and prevented students from being invisible.
- Extending the school day so that students had additional access to academic support as well as access to meaningful activities that gave students a sense of belonging.
- Expanding academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes and more academically oriented electives, and by providing more access to academic supports, such as in-school tutoring.
- Helping elementary students transition into the middle school setting through structured programs such as study skills workshops, buddy programs, and ongoing transition teams.

Understanding How Schools Improved

The schools in this study set high expectations for all as a common purpose, created collaborative environments, thoughtfully implemented practices and strategies, and attended to individual students. While it is important to understand what these high-performing schools are doing, it is also important to understand how they arrived at this point. Before their turnarounds, many of these schools had a history of low student and staff morale; low student performance; chaotic and, in some instances, unsafe environments; and poor reputations. Yet these schools were able to improve. Why were staff willing to change their behaviors? What motivated them and supported them in these efforts? Understanding how critical events and key people led to change as well as how school staff became involved in the change process is useful to other schools wanting to improve student performance.

Three factors were significant in these schools' improvement efforts. First, each school recognized their unique contexts and the challenges they faced, and they reacted positively and productively to changes in their environments. Second, the study schools used common elements that led to change, including building a shared purpose; reflecting on the existing setting before implementing change; planning and implementing improvement strategies; and re-evaluating their efforts. Finally, these schools used different approaches to school improvement. Some used a whole school approach while others enacted strategies and programs incrementally.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed understand how their school improvement efforts are affected by the larger context surrounding them.

Understanding the broader context surrounding these schools depended on

- Recognizing the challenges, such as poverty, low student performance, poor reputations, and defeatist attitudes, as well as the strengths, such as a stable teaching core and the availability of additional resources that these schools faced as they began the improvement process.
- Understanding how changes in environments, such as at the state and local level, affected the improvement process. These changes served as catalysts for action. Contextual changes that these schools faced include changes in state standards and accountability systems, new leadership at the district and school level, and changes in facilities.
- Choosing to react positively and proactively to the changes in the environment by looking at critical events as motivators and opportunities for improvement rather than being passive or reacting negatively to these events.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed intentionally and thoughtfully implement elements which lead to school improvement.

Improving these schools required that key elements be put into place. This happened in these schools by

- Building a shared purpose of high expectations for all students through strong leadership. These leaders envisioned and communicated a clear purpose. They shared leadership and led by example in order to develop consensus. They reduced distractions to teaching. Finally,

these leaders took primary responsibility for maintaining vigilance over the school's purpose.

- Shaping a culture that supported high expectations for all students through leaders and staff taking responsibility for embedding their shared purpose in daily activities, language, and interactions.
- Reflecting on schools' current situations and systematically identifying areas needing improvement. Most notably, schools used student performance data to identify weaknesses in instruction and curriculum.
- Planning and implementing appropriate and well-supported strategies to address targeted needs. Staff informed their planning through research, professional development, and outside technical assistance. Planning resulted in horizontal and vertical curricular alignment to standards, eliminating duplicate services, and aligning professional development with identified needs.
- Re-evaluating if targeted goals were met, then planning for how to move forward in the improvement process.

Key Finding:

Schools that are driven to succeed use different approaches to school improvement.

Implementing school improvements occurred in one of two ways

- Applying a whole school improvement model where many areas of the school were affected simultaneously; for example, changes were made to curriculum, school organization, and professional development at the same time.
- Making changes to the school incrementally and basing changes on needs rather than a whole school improvement model. These approaches included piloting programs in one grade level before implementing schoolwide, introducing one change at a time, or dealing with the most pressing issues first, such as improving student behavior.

Recommendations of This Study

The findings discussed above imply numerous policy and practice actions that states, districts, and schools can take to improve student performance. These recommendations follow from the findings and are framed around how the seven study schools invested in increasing the capacity of the school, the staff, and the students in order to improve student performance. Each general recommendation is supported by specific action steps leaders can take to affect school improvement. These recommendations are not meant to serve as a laundry list of how to improve student performance. Rather, these are starting points to be pursued thoughtfully and critically by whole staffs committed to and hungry for student improvement.

Building the Capacity of the School

One implication from the findings was that the staff at the seven study schools viewed increasing the capacity of the entire school as an important step in their school improvement efforts. They realized that knowledge, ideas, and inspiration could not be held in the hands of only a few if their efforts were to succeed. This section outlines recommendations and examples of action steps that these schools used.

Recommendation:	Maintain high expectations for all students.
Action Step:	Define expectations that are in line with state standards and frequently communicate these expectations to students, families, and staff.
Action Step:	Align curriculum vertically and horizontally with state standards so that students are exposed to the material they are expected to master.
Action Step:	Reward students and teachers for commitment to high expectations by recognizing their efforts and embedding this recognition in the daily practices of the schools.

Recommendation:	Ensure all students are provided a quality education.
Action Step:	Incorporate all students, including those receiving special education and English as a Second Language services, in mainstream classrooms and provide them with the same content received by other students.
Action Step:	Increase the enrollment of traditionally underserved students in advanced-level classes, such as Algebra I in the eighth grade and gifted and talented programs.
Action Step:	Implement a “no-failure policy” that ensures struggling students are identified early and receive supports, such as additional tutoring, to help them succeed.

Recommendation:	Train and recruit leaders to guide school improvement efforts.
Action Step:	Identify leaders with a definite vision for school improvement who are not paralyzed by obstacles facing high-poverty schools and who are willing to make changes that respect a school's unique context.
Action Step:	Advocate for leaders who value building consensus and sharing decision making authority.
Action Step:	Provide leaders with time to introduce staff to change, create a shared purpose, and plan for progress.

Recommendation:	Provide data that schools and staff can use to make curricular and instructional decisions.
Action Step:	Ensure staff have training in how to make data meaningful and useful to school improvement efforts.
Action Step:	Use data to identify areas of weakness in school performance by disaggregating data by grade level, subject area, learning strand, gender, ethnicity, and income levels.
Action Step:	Use student-level performance data to target struggling students for additional academic support.

Recommendation:	Expand current ideas of what resources are and how to use resources to affect school improvement.
Action Step:	Expose staff to views of resources that go beyond money to include time, space, and relationships.
Action Step:	Provide school staff with training on how to access more human and non-human resources, such as through building partnerships with outside organizations and applying for grants.
Action Step:	Redistribute space, time, and money on campuses to better support schoolwide learning goals through compensating teachers for tutoring and professional development, creating additional academic programs, and providing teachers with needed materials.

Recommendation:	Create more intimate school settings that focus on improving student learning.
Action Step:	Train staff on how to implement elements of the middle school concept, such as teaming and block scheduling, that increase the amount of time and intensity students have with a smaller group of teachers.
Action Step:	Provide students with opportunities to build relationships with adults through small groupings and mentoring programs.
Action Step:	Eliminate distractions to teaching through organizational changes, such as eliminating bells and grouping grade-level teams in the same area of the buildings.

Building the Capacity of Teachers

The second implication from the findings was that study schools made large investments in increasing the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality curriculum and instruction. Improving student performance would have been impossible if teachers were not effectively supported. This section discusses the recommendations the study results imply and the action steps to achieve those recommendations.

Recommendation:	Provide school staff with meaningful professional development closely aligned with individual and schoolwide needs.
Action Step:	Offer professional development opportunities that address specifically defined student learning goals and that are ongoing and in-depth, such as university courses and workshops with intensive follow-up sessions.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with alternative forms of professional development, such as peer coaching and curriculum lead teachers, which allow them to create shared professional knowledge with their school colleagues.

Recommendation:	Treat staff as professionals whose input and expertise are valued.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with more authority to make decisions about areas that most affect their work, such as professional growth, curricular and instructional choices, and school organization.
Action Step:	Compensate teachers for the time they spend in additional activities, such as curriculum alignment, professional development, and student tutoring, through stipends or by providing substitutes teachers so that these activities could take place during regular working hours.
Action Step:	Ask teachers what resources, materials, and supplies they need to be effective in their classrooms and then provide it.

Recommendation:	Ensure staff have opportunities for collaboration.
Action Step:	Guarantee structured opportunities, such as common planning time and faculty or department meetings, for teachers to work together and discuss curricular and instructional issues.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with training on how to most effectively use collaborative time to improve student learning.
Action Step:	Allow teachers time to experiment and learn how this collaborative process operates in their unique settings.

Building the Capacity of Students

Finally, the seven study schools focused on increasing the capacity of students by providing them with the academic and developmental support necessary to reach high expectations. Students were active participants in this process and worked to improve their achievement. They understood the supports and services available to them and made use of them. This section offers recommendations for ways to increase the capacity of students and action steps to support this goal.

Recommendation:	Ensure all students are provided a supportive school environment.
Action Step:	Educate staff about the unique developmental needs of middle-grade students.
Action Step:	Create formal and structured programs that guarantee that each student is known by an adult.
Action Step:	Encourage a strong, positive adult daily presence in the school so that students see adults as allies.
Action Step:	Educate students about how to approach adults for assistance and support.

Recommendation:	Provide extensive in-school academic support.
Action Step:	Expand academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes.
Action Step:	Reduce the amount of non-academic electives and provide more academically oriented electives for students to take.
Action Step:	Create formal structures to provide in-school academic support such as individual tutoring and homework assistance centers.

Recommendation:	Extend the school day to offer academic and non-academic after-school services.
Action Step:	Create structured and ongoing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful after-school activities, such as project-based learning, academic clubs, and non-academic activities, with adults.
Action Step:	Partner with community organizations, universities, and volunteers to increase the potential for offering services.
Action Step:	Eliminate obstacles to student participation in after-school programs such as cost, transportation, and food, by redistributing resources or bringing in additional resources.

Conclusion

The teachers, support staff, administrators, students, parents, district personnel, and representatives from outside agencies who shared their stories for this study were able to eloquently and enthusiastically describe why their particular schools were successful and how these schools were able to improve. Equally as impressive was what they did not say—virtually none of the participants in this study made excuses for not holding all students to high expectations. They did not complain about a lack of time or resources. They did not disparage their administration or district. They did not protest against state standards and accountability systems. They did not place blame on their colleagues. Most notably, they did not use the students' and their families' home and community situations as an excuse for poor student academic performance.

All seven of these schools showed impressive student performance improvement in a relatively short period of time. Most moved from below average on state (and in some cases, national) assessments to above average. These schools accomplished this inspiring achievement through a belief that each and every student could achieve at high levels and that each student deserved to achieve at high levels. The staff in these schools took responsibility for student learning and found ways to provide staff and students with the support they needed to reach their goals. This responsibility required a commitment to hard work and a no-excuses attitude toward identifying and solving problems. By working together, individuals helped turn these schools around.

The seven schools in this study do not purport to have achieved their goals. Rather, the staff at these schools insist they have much more work to do. Some still wrestle with helping all students meet the state standards. Some schools struggle to provide more students with advanced-level courses that emphasize critical thinking and applied knowledge. Others see balancing between students' academic and developmental needs as a challenge. The staff at these schools are in the habit of looking ahead to identify problems. They are also in the habit of taking the responsibility to identify solutions to these problems and feel it is their duty to follow through with collective action.

Those who work in similar settings understand what these schools have accomplished. Not only are these schools performing better than schools with similar demographics, but they are performing as well as and often better than more affluent schools. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these schools are inimitable—that what they have accomplished cannot be accomplished elsewhere. These schools are like hundreds across the country. They serve a high proportion of students living in poverty; they have a range of teaching and leadership expertise; and they have a range of access to resources. Their successes stem from the commonality of purpose and their willingness to work hard together to achieve their goals. They provide valuable lessons for other school communities taking on the difficult challenge of setting high expectations for all students. These seven middle schools have proved that it can be done because they were driven to succeed.

Endnotes

¹ The U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service describes the purposes of their best practices studies at www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/aboutus.html, accessed August 5, 2002.

² One school, Pocomoke Middle School, served grades 4–8 and another, JFK Middle School, served grades 7–9.

³ The Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. Schools are required to serve meals at no charge to children whose household income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. Children are entitled to pay a reduced price if their household income is above 130 percent but at or below 185 percent of these guidelines. For more information see www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Default.htm. The percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches is commonly used as a measure of poverty in public schools

⁴ The response rate for the surveys was 52 percent.