

# NEWSLETTER

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## SUBGROUP PERFORMANCE and School Reform

### *The Importance of a Comprehensive Approach*

**A**SK EDUCATORS TO EXPLAIN WHERE they are directing their school improvement efforts these days and chances are they will answer, “at subgroups—especially special education students and English language learners.” It’s not difficult to understand why. Many schools and districts cite the performance of students in these subgroups as the reason they did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as required by federal law.

*Identifying subgroup performance is one of the most significant accountability components of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The law requires that state assessment scores of English language learners and special education students, among others, be disaggregated and publicly reported. Meeting this requirement has exposed achievement gaps that are sometimes disguised when state scores are reported in the aggregate and has highlighted student needs that have not been met.*

## A Narrow Approach Is Not the Answer

Unfortunately, some schools respond to these needs by equating “school improvement” with “improving subgroup performance” and decide to focus their improvement strategies solely on improving the test scores of students in these special populations. This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, it ignores the fact that student performance is an outcome, not a cause, of school success or failure. Poor student performance is symptomatic of school issues that need to be addressed, just as high student achievement reflects a school’s health and vitality.

Second, this decision does not acknowledge that schools are systems made up of many interrelated and interdependent parts. Although strength in each part is important, even essential, no one part causes a school to succeed or fail. So even if it were possible to “fix” the English language learner or special education “problem” (i.e., raise assessment scores in these areas), that approach would have only limited and likely short-term effectiveness in helping schools sustain success.

This month’s newsletter highlights recent research that suggests a different approach. It looks at three studies in which schools that succeed—and all of them serve high percentages of at-risk students—take a more comprehensive approach to improvement.

## Evidence That a Comprehensive Approach Works

*Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*, published by the Education Trust (2005), identifies the common characteristics of

“high-impact” high schools and highlights some that have met the goal of educating all of their students at high levels. High-impact schools are defined as those that “produced unusually large growth among students who entered significantly behind” (p. 4). These schools all serve students who are primarily poor and nonwhite.

Each of the schools identified in this report approached reform comprehensively rather than taking a one-issue-at-a-time approach. They chose to address multiple factors, such as school culture, academic rigor, academic support, teacher preparedness, and time-on-learning. The results show that a higher percentage of students in these schools achieved proficiency than students in comparison schools. Students in some of the schools, like Farmville Central and Jack Britt High Schools in North Carolina, far outperformed the state averages on standardized tests. Of particular note is the fact that the accomplishments of these “high-impact” schools came without “pushing out” any groups of students by allowing them to drop out or otherwise leave the school community. Each school in the study had a graduation rate at or above its state’s average. These “high-impact” schools did not focus exclusively on special populations, but neither did they succeed at the expense of a particular subgroup. All groups were taught, all groups were tested, and all groups made AYP.

In another study, California researchers posed the question, “Why do some schools serving largely low-income students score as much as 250 points higher on the state’s academic performance index than other schools with very similar students?” The answers reflected a comprehensive approach to improvement that is summarized in a report titled *Similar Students, Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?* (Williams et al., 2005). After surveying more than 250 schools where the median school population was 40

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percent English language learners, researchers cite the “interrelated practices” that distinguish these successful schools from similar, low-performing schools. These practices include prioritizing student achievement for all students; implementing a coherent curriculum and instructional program; using assessment data to improve student achievement and instruction; ensuring availability of instructional resources; and principal leadership. Focusing on student subgroups was not identified as a successful strategy. The researchers conclude that “what schools do—and what resources they have to do it with—can make a difference” (p. 2).

These findings echo those from an earlier study titled *Inside the Black Box of High-Performing High-Poverty Schools* (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Researchers investigated how the practices of high-performing, high-poverty schools differed from those of low-performing, high-poverty schools. They identified seven common approaches, all of which reflect a comprehensive approach to improvement. These include high expectations for *all* students, an emphasis on academics and instruction for *all* students, and systems for regularly assessing *all* students. In addition, these schools focused on collaborative decision making, developing and maintaining a strong work ethic and high morale, and the purposeful recruitment, hiring, and assignment of teachers. “The study schools did not talk about the kinds of kids they had. They saw the problem ... as how to help each student in the school,” says researcher/author Patricia Kannapel.

## What Can Be Learned From Successful Schools

Schools that hope to improve by focusing on—or blaming—the performance of students in certain subgroups for their failure to meet achievement

targets should think again. Schools are complex organizations with many components, a fact that is clearly illustrated in the schools cited here. Each of the components is relevant, important, and contributes significantly to a school’s success. If any one of them falters—poor-quality professional development, inadequate leadership, lack of alignment between the written and taught curriculum, an insufficient number of highly qualified teachers—that faltering will contribute to the school’s failure but not be the sole cause of that failure. Even a school reform novice would not suggest that focusing only on professional development or teacher quality or leadership will “fix” a school that is identified for improvement.

So why is it that some schools continue to say, “Everything would be fine if we could just improve our special education scores”? Why don’t they say “Our only problem is professional development” or “We didn’t make AYP because we don’t have a strong principal”?

Low student achievement scores, whether in the aggregate or in particular subgroups, are results, not causes. They can precipitate successful school reform efforts or start the blame game. It’s up to the adults. The schools highlighted in this newsletter have much to offer those who are facing school improvement sanctions. They are unwilling—indeed even uninterested—in making excuses. Instead, their energy is directed toward creating schools that are tightly knit, resilient, and single-mindedly focused on the success of all students.

There is no magic formula for improving schools. Improvement requires a critical self-evaluation of current practices, in each area and in all areas. It requires an understanding that all the parts need to work, and they all need to work together. And it requires a tireless commitment to the success of all students.

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