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Focusing on the Basics in Beat-the-Odds Schools

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Focusing on the Basics in Beat-the-Odds Schools

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Introduction

State and local education officials across the country feel a sense of urgency about reducing achievement gaps and raising the level of knowledge and skills of all children ("McREL Study Examines How High-needs Schools Beat the Odds," 2005). To realize the intent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by 2014, education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need solutions to the problem of persistently low achievement in many of our nation's schools. Previous research has revealed a number of key influences that make a difference in student achievement (see Marzano, 2000, for a synthesis). But why do these influences work in some schools and not in others? Why do students in some schools that lack certain key influences, such as student tutoring and computer-aided instruction, succeed nonetheless? What is the relationship among these influences, and which are the most essential?

Researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) recently completed a study of "beat-the-odds" schools—high-needs schools (as defined by percentage of student poverty) that demonstrated atypically high student achievement. The study showed that high-performing schools have a more supportive school environment; teachers use more structured instructional practices; and there is stronger school leadership than in low-performing schools.

This policy brief draws from the technical report of the study's findings, *High-Needs Schools—What Does It Take to Beat the Odds?* (McREL, 2005). In the report, the authors focus on four key components they identified as broadly contributing to school success and examine how the components interact to contribute to success in high-needs schools.

The four components are

- **Leadership:** Leading organizational change, providing instructional guidance, and establishing shared mission and goals;

- **Professional Community:** Teachers collaborating, receiving professional development, and being encouraged to have influence in school matters;

- **School Environment:** Parents involved meaningfully, the school culture focused on academic achievement, a safe and orderly climate, and attention to assessment and monitoring; and

- **Instruction:** Individualized learning, structured instruction with feedback to meet student needs, and challenging opportunities to learn.

McREL Insights: Schools that "Beat the Odds" and McREL's *High-Performing, High-Needs Schools Resource Guide* are two resources that McREL has prepared to help further the application of this important research in the field. This brief extends this work and offers guidance to local school board members and other policy makers who seek to support their district's school improvement efforts by providing effective policy derived from research-based evidence. These policy suggestions can become part of a system-wide effort to improve student achievement.

Important Findings For Moderate- to High-Poverty Schools

McREL's initial study compared two groups of similar high-needs elementary schools in 10 states. To qualify as high-need, schools were defined as having 50 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced price lunch. High- or low-performing status was based on state assessment results in reading and mathematics over a three-year period. HPHN schools scored above the level predicted by their demographics, and LPHN schools performed below the predicted level.

Once schools were identified and assigned to a study group, a teacher survey was designed to measure their perceptions of the four components. McREL researchers analyzed survey data using structural equation modeling, a statistical technique which enabled them to examine relationships among key components in high-needs schools. Additionally, analyses were conducted that accounted for the fact that individual teacher data were not independent of other data collected in a school. Finally, analyses were conducted to identify which of the components characterized the largest difference between high-and low-performing schools.

Researchers found that the largest differences between the HPHN schools and the LPHN schools, as measured by teacher perceptions, occurred in the set of school environment influences. These differences were followed by differences in instruction influences and leadership influences. In other words, what emerged as being *most* different between the high-performing and the low-performing schools were teachers' perceptions of their schools' *environment*, *instruction*, and *leadership*. Teachers in the high-performing schools felt more positive about these influences than those in the low-performing schools.

Translating Research into Policy

NCLB requires school districts to take "corrective action" if a school fails to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for four consecutive years. The law identifies corrective actions including replacing school staff, implementing a new curriculum, decreasing management authority at the school level, appointing an outside expert to advise the school, extending the school day

or year, or reorganizing the school internally. Ultimately, if these sanctions are unsuccessful and the school still fails to improve, the state must take more intensive corrective action that can include reducing funding to the school, placing the school in receivership, or closing the school altogether.

School boards wishing to avoid imposing such sanctions on schools that have not made adequate yearly progress would do well to launch remedial interventions as soon as a school appears on the district's "watch list."

Specifically, McREL's findings point to three fundamental areas of school systems related to higher student achievement. The influences that most differentiate high-performing from low-performing high-needs schools are school *environment*, *instruction*, and *leadership*. Although the school effectiveness research literature has long included these among many factors shown to be important in improving schools, McREL's study identified these three areas as those that most clearly differentiate high-performing from low-performing high-needs schools. This is important because these results provide more targeted guidance about how to assist low-performing schools, based on the successful practices used in *high-needs* schools.

Armed with this research-based understanding of what it takes to succeed, what can a school board do to better prevent its schools from becoming candidates for "corrective action?" First, school boards can look closely at school environment. McREL's study demonstrated three subcomponents of this factor with the strongest relationship to student achievement outcomes: 1) orderly climate, 2) parent involvement, and 3) academic press for achievement. Guidance about each of these subcomponents that is especially relevant to district policymakers is presented in the following section.

Guidance for District Policymakers

Designating those schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years as "high priority" schools and establishing a monitoring system for these schools should be the first step a school board takes. The board might ask the superintendent to create measures of the factors that the research indicates are critical and to report progress at each regularly scheduled school board meeting throughout the school year. In this way, attention remains focused on those schools with the greatest need all year long, not just when test scores are published. By gathering and reporting data on a regular basis, these school principals will have an opportunity to make adjustments in their academic program as the year proceeds. Acknowledging incremental improvements during the course of the year is an important benefit for those schools that may not reach the AYP bar but are making measurable progress nonetheless.

Safe and Orderly Climate. Orderly climate in an effective school is most frequently characterized as one that supports school safety. A school with a safe and orderly climate has policies in place that clearly articulate rules and codes of behavior, along with associated rewards and punishments. In such a setting, students, faculty, and staff understand the policies and consistently follow them. In addition, an effective school encourages the "thoughtful prevention" of disruptions, and ensures that enforcement and punishment are dealt with consistently (McCollum, 1995). The literature

on school climate clearly stipulates that this does not mean that the school has a strictly negative or severe environment; rather, the climate encourages positive and open interactions among staff and students (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimer, & Ouston, 1979; Creemers, 1994; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Heck, 2000; Marzano, 2000). It follows that a school with an orderly environment would promote a more academic atmosphere and thus increased student achievement because, with fewer disruptions, students could be more productive, and teachers could focus on monitoring students' progress and working on academics.

School boards should require all schools to have clearly articulated and widely communicated rules and codes of behavior, including a system of rewards and sanctions, as many schools have already. In addition, schools should be required to monitor the effectiveness of their disciplinary system by keeping accurate and up-to-date records of referrals, suspensions, acts of violence, vandalism, and other disruptive activities. Although there are many different approaches to discipline in schools, ranging from peer-to-peer conflict mediation to zero-tolerance methods, most educators concur that school personnel should agree on the approach to use in their school and enforce that approach consistently. There must be agreement among faculty, staff, students, and parents about the rules of conduct in each building and the consequences students will face when the rules are broken. According to Boynton and Boynton (2005), "Most students will behave appropriately when each and every staff member hold expectations for appropriate behaviors, when effective discipline systems are in place, when these systems are taught to students, and when students are held accountable for their actions" (p. v.). School boards should expect their superintendents to hold principals accountable for implementing such policies.

> ### *Environmental Factors Subcomponent 1: Orderly Climate*
>
> *To what extent does the school board help the district with*
>
> - *Engage a wide range of participants in collaborative inquiry and develop solutions that represent their best thinking;*
>
> - *Foster an exchange of information and ideas among educators and stakeholders from across the nation on issues related to standards-based education; and*
>
> - *Help all stakeholders reach a shared understanding of how best to implement standards-based reforms.*

In addition to establishing and monitoring the effectiveness of the discipline code, schools should also be required to monitor the overall school climate. There are several survey instruments developed for this purpose (see Resources for a sampling.) These surveys allow school staff to collect data on student perceptions of the school climate and consider that information when making data-driven decisions about appropriate changes. Gathering and responding to these data is a requirement that the board can establish, thus sending the message that this is an expectation of all schools.

Not everything can be solved by the imposition of policy, of course. Sometimes, a school community needs to discuss its problems. For instance, in a school with significant numbers of referrals and suspensions, it would be important for school leaders to understand why so many discipline problems are occurring. What is causing the bad behavior? Is there a way to address the cause, rather than just the symptoms? Are adults modeling the behavior they want to see in their students? Are students given attention for the behaviors you want them to exhibit or are they

disengaged and bored, getting the one-on-one attention they crave only when they've been sent to the principal's office? These are important discussions that must occur at the school level and that, in some cases, can be sparked by the policy and the requirement that data be collected.

Parent Involvement. Parent involvement in an effective school should be viewed in terms of the degree to which there is a positive and productive relationship between the school's staff and students' parents (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). This includes determining not only how involved parents are in the school but also how much their voices are represented in the school culture and operating principles. In order to accomplish significant involvement, there must be good communication, including written exchanges between schools and parents, a parent involvement policy, and ready access to administrators and teachers, including those able to communicate with non-English speaking families and community members.

School boards should require all schools to have a written parent involvement policy. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) suggest a policy that addresses communication, participation, and governance. School boards should require high-priority schools to explicitly describe their avenues of communication to and from parents (e.g., newsletters, phone calls, home visits, conferences), their efforts to involve parents as active participants in the school (e.g., by volunteering or sharing expertise), and their efforts to include parents in school-level decision-making activities are robust and ongoing.

Academic Press for Achievement. Academic press for achievement asserts that all students will achieve at a high level and is cited consistently in the school effectiveness literature as being critical to overall success (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Creemers, 1994; Marzano, 2000). This component most closely aligns with the nature of effective schools because it is necessary in helping low-achieving students perform to standards. Researchers Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) found that the ability to instill in students a belief that they could learn was critical to the success of effective schools with large percentages of low-income students. The underlying components of this factor include a clear focus on mastering basic skills, high expectations for all students, the use of records to monitor student progress, and a clear, school-wide emphasis on high achievement (Marzano, 2000). Pressing for achievement includes assigning homework, setting clear academic goals, and having high expectations for performance.

> *Environmental Factors Subcomponent 2: Parental Involvement*
>
> *To what extent does the school board help the district with*
>
> - *Developing positive and productive relationships between school staff and parents*
> - *Integrating parental "voice" in the school culture and operating principles*
> - *Providing good written exchanges between schools and parents*
> - *Training parents to work with children at home*
> - *Ensuring frequent teacher outreach*
> - *Linking parent involvement programs to student learning*
> - *Ensuring ready access to administrators and teachers*

Environmental Factors Subcomponent 3: Academic Press for Achievement

To what extent does the school board help the district with

- *Instilling the belief that learning is possible*

- *Establishing a clear focus on mastering basic skills and setting clear academic goals*

- *Establishing high expectations for all students*

- *Establishing a school-wide emphasis on high academic achievement*

- *Using records to monitor student progress*

- *Using homework to create pressure to achieve*

School boards should require schools to show evidence of a school-wide emphasis on high student achievement. This can be done by requiring principals of the identified high-priority schools to report on their school goals and the progress they are making toward meeting them during regularly scheduled board meetings. The board's responsibility is to ensure that the goals are sufficiently challenging, that there is evidence that the school is consistently working toward those goals, and that the necessary resources and supports are in place to assist the school as it provides the particular program of instruction that each student needs to reach high levels of achievement. As important, principals should be given an opportunity to identify for the board any barriers or hindrances to their potential success, so that the board can remove them, if possible. As always, the role of the board is to set clear expectations, hold the superintendent accountable for results, and then get out of the way so the staff can implement the instructional programs that help students achieve academic success.

The Role of School Leaders

A key finding of the *Beat the Odds* study is that school leadership influences other elements of school improvement. School boards should resist taking on leadership tasks best left to superintendents and school-level leaders and should instead nurture and support the skills of school and district leaders. Leadership research, including that conducted by McREL (Marzano et al., 2005), provides specific recommendations for effective school-level leadership responsibilities and practices that influence student achievement. Using this research base, it is possible to develop the leadership capacities of the front-line leaders—those leaders whose behaviors have a demonstrated impact on student achievement.

To help leaders develop this capacity, McREL has developed the Balanced Leadership Profile 360™, an online subscription-based survey that, when used as a professional development tool, helps principals assess their leadership ability. For example, assessing and developing the leadership responsibility of culture (one of the 21 responsibilities in McREL's analysis of the literature) has a direct impact on a leader's ability to improve the school environment. Districts could use this tool as a way to assess and develop school leadership to promote improved performance (see Resources).

Conclusion

Schools at risk of sanction need research-based, focused direction from school boards. Research affirms that paying attention to a few fundamental issues is time (and money) well spent. In this brief, we have described some steps a school board might take to improve the environment of a low-performing, high-needs school and ultimately improve school performance.

Constantly monitoring these key factors need not be an overwhelming task. It may be as simple as creating a reporting structure that includes reviewing goals, progress, and achievement of identified schools at each board meeting. Such deliberate actions will help put the focus on relatively straightforward, yet important fundamentals that are needed for improved student performance. Furthermore, developing the capacity of school and district leaders to carry out the direction provided by the board ultimately will serve to improve the achievement of the students, the schools, and the district.

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Resources

- **McREL Insights: Schools that "Beat the Odds."(2006). McREL: Aurora, CO**. Available for download at www.mcrel.org.

- **McREL's High Performing/High Needs Schools Resource Guide. McREL: Aurora, CO**. Available for download at www.mcrel.org.

- **The Balanced Leadership Profile 360™. McREL: Aurora, CO**. Access at www.mcrel.org, click on Balanced Leadership Profile 360™.

- **The school climate survey. (2003). Learning Point Associates. Naperville, IL**. Available at http://www.ncrel.org/datause/css/results.php

  The survey allows school staff to collect data on student perceptions of the school climate.

- **School safety audit protocol. (2000). J. L. DeMary, M. Owens and A. K. Ramnarain. Virginia Department of Education**. Available at http://www.pen.k12.va.us/go/VDOE/Instruction/schoolsafety/safetyaudit.pdf

  This protocol allows building and district administrators to assess components of school safety.

- **National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools Web site**. Available at http://www.sedl.org/connections/

  This Web site offers research-based information to help schools and communities build meaningful relationships to improve student learning.

- **School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, 2nd ed. (2002). Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press**. Available for purchase at http://www.corwinpress.com/author.aspx?aid=504229

  This handbook can be used by school and district personnel to develop comprehensive programs to increase and sustain parent and community partnerships.

- **Noteworthy Perspectives on Excellence in the Central Region. (2000). Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning**. Available at http://www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?productID=98

Each year, schools and districts across the nation acknowledge the contributions of exceptional educators by nominating them for nationally recognized award programs. This Noteworthy looks at the commonalities shared by award winners in the Central Region.

- **Keys to Learning: Using Standards to Improve Curriculum and Instruction. (2005). Aurora, CO: Mid-continent research for education and learning**. Available at http://www.mcrel.org/keystolearning/Default.aspx

  This micro site provides comprehensive online tools for helping schools establish high standards and determine essential standards-based content.

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