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Examining the Exceptions: Beyond the Excuses, What Successful Urban Schools are Doing to Close the Achievement Gap

Lauren Poinier
Trinity College

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Lauren Poinier

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Professor Sandler

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Doing to Close the Achievement Gap

TOPIC

In order to close the achievement gap and improve urban schools, I hope to stop explaining failure and start explaining success amongst urban minority students. Beyond the excuses, what can schools do to close the achievement gap, and when and how have they overcome the odds?

RESEARCH QUESTION

What factors are enabling certain urban, low-income, non-white schools to close the achievement gap and succeed academically despite facing the same environmental factors that are typically barriers to high achievement at similar schools?

BACKGROUND

The focus of much of the literature on the achievement gap focuses on why upper class, white students consistently outperform non-white urban students. They explain the achievement gap as arising from environmental factors. Based off of the differences between these two groups, educators attempt to improve the consistently lower achievement of urban youth. There have been studies explaining why the achievement gap exists, studies analyzing short-lived successes in school-reform, and even studies examining specific examples of high performing urban schools, known as high flying schools or high flyers. They all reinforce the idea that high-achieving urban schools (high flyers) are the rare, exceptions to the norm, an

exception that is either impossible or infeasible to replicate on a large scale. These studies, however informative, allow the exceptions to remain exceptions by framing environmental barriers as insurmountable. They permit apathy by presenting the achievement gap as a fixed reality.

RESEARCH FOCUS

I hope to explore exceptional schools that despite their high-minority, high-poverty, urban communities, outperform schools with similar demographics, and successfully raise achievement. This study looks at high-achieving urban schools not as rare and non-replicable but as a standard that all other schools can and should meet. My focus is on the factors that high achieving urban schools share that sets them apart from low-achieving schools. My qualitative research examines what is fundamentally similar amongst Hartford's three highest performing schools that are vital to allowing them to educate students despite environmental factors. By comparing key features of these schools, I aim disseminate the literature's equation for urban school success, and determine if they are capable of ensuring high-achievement in any urban school. Through my readings and my fieldwork and interviews, I explain what factors are key to enabling urban schools to raise student performance despite the odds. The goal is to determine if even one school in a low-income, non-white urban community can foster high achievement with a specific set of characteristics, then can all urban schools foster these characteristics to raise achievement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Achievement Gap

The most significant problem facing the United States educational system today is the achievement gap. There are two overlapping test score gaps, a racial gap and a socioeconomic

one. The achievement gap is blamed on cultural difference and deficit theories claiming that urban minority student failure arises from negative influences within differing parenting practices and community cultures. The qualities that middle-class children develop are valued over the ones that lower-class children develop. Students who qualify for free lunches are two years behind their better off peers, and whites significantly outperform blacks and Latinos at each income level (Tough, McKinsey & Company). Attempted solutions to the achievement gap have failed. Title I is regressive because students living in lower socioeconomic areas have less education funding, creating an "education apartheid" (Tough). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) failed in its goal to have all students reach 100% proficiency in math and reading because NCLB requires states to achieve proficiency, but allows each state to define proficiency for itself. Without state-to-state standards and tests, and feasible methods put in place to master state standards there will never be educational equality (McKinsey & Company). Many say that the only solution to the achievement gap in schools is to correct the overall deep inequities that divide the races and classes, but education is at the foundation of these deep inequities. These explanations all take the blame off of schools, giving them the right to allow the achievement gap to persist (Tough).

High Flyers Replicable or Not Replicable

The achievement gap has been overcome in some areas (McKinsey & Company). These high poverty or high minority schools that are in the top third of all schools on their state are called high flying schools (Tough). Even studies of these rare exceptions are critiqued for misidentifying and overestimating high flyers, giving the impression that overcoming poverty is easy (Harris). Many claim that these highflying schools are merely exceptions to the norm that are not replicable because they require extraordinary principals

and teachers whose performance cannot possibly be held as a national standard (Harris). Even some administrators of high flyers claim it is unreasonable to believe that an adequate amount of such dedicated educators exists (Biddle & Bracey 2000). According to the founder of KIPP, a nation wide network of charter schools: "To replicate KIPP on a national scale, would require a pool of educators that does not exist today. We need to find a way to make this level of commitment the standard. Then we need to make it attractive, livable, and affordable for teachers" (Carter 2000). Many theorists and educators reiterate the point that while schools must take some responsibility, they do not have the power to overcome the achievement gap, and should not be blamed. According to (Harris), the notion that schools are solely responsible for educational inequity is an entirely misguided assumption. He asserts that educational inequity is caused by problems in both schools and communities. Evidence shows that students start school almost as far behind as when they finish school. A low-poverty-low minority school is 89 times more likely to be high performing than one that is high-poverty-high-minority. Harris asserts that the inequalities lie in overall inequities of poverty, in the home and community. Since schools are not the primary source of the problem, they cannot possibly be the sole solution (Harris).

Other theorists refuse to accept that the achievement gap as insurmountable. Edmonds (1979) asserts that all children are educable, and pupil family background cannot determine school instructional effectiveness. He affirms that inequality in education is a product of political inequality not sociocultural explanations. Though poverty and dysfunctional families are barriers, they are no excuse for widespread, chronic education failure. Though highflying schools are not the norm, the existence of any highflying schools proves that pupil performance does not result from students' family background but from school response to

family background. Contrary to theorists' claims that high flyers are not replicable, highflying schools do succeed despite differences in communities, access to resources, size and principals (Henderson & Serpell 2001, Hughes, Thayer, Tough). Highflying schools take a systematic approach to success, integrating every single component of the education system in the improvement process (Blair). Highflying schools take it upon themselves to be instructionally effective for all students, attributing student failure to factors under the school's control (Edmonds 1979). A KIPP administrator asks, "If poor kids can't achieve at high levels, why are there top performing high poverty schools? If KIPP can successfully educate these kids…why can't every school?" (Tough). According to Schmoker (2002), schools and teachers have between six and ten times as much influence on learning as do all socioeconomic factors combined. When educators study effective teaching in unique classrooms and schools, and replicate and implement what works, it substantially raises performance (Schmoker 2002, McKinsey & Company).

Outstanding Principals

One factor seen in all high performing schools is strong leadership in the form of outstanding principals (National Council of Professors & Henderson & Serpell 2001, Edmonds 1979). Since principals are the instructional leaders of their schools, setting a clear vision for the school and teachers, recruiting excellent principals, who in turn find the right teachers, is crucial to improving schools (Carter 2000). Edmonds (1979) describes principals at high flyers as assertive, disciplinarian, instructional and institutional leaders, who "go the extra mile." They bypass regulations, locate funds in extraordinary places, expect, demand and support the best from their teachers. High performing principals need freedom to make their school successful. Charter school principals have this freedom but public school

principals find a way to free themselves from budget and curricular requirements. Principals are very involved in student learning; visiting every classroom almost daily. They not only have high expectations in their students' ability to succeed, but also in their teachers' ability to teach. They use measurable, tangible and unyielding goals to relentlessly pursue excellence (Biddle & Bracey 2000, Carter 2000, Henderson & Serpell 2001).

Effective Spending

All of the principals are skilled in using funds creatively and effectively, often bending the rules and manipulating budget constraints to eliminate real or imagined barriers. They produce dramatically different results with no greater resources, not by spending more money, but by readjusting spending, prioritizing improved student performance, curriculum and teachers. They buy curriculum materials that foster mastery. They do not spend money on staff not directly involved with teaching, and have internal professional development to inexpensively improve instruction (Carter 2000; Biddle & Bracey 2000; Henderson & Serpell 2001).

Teaching Quality

The fact that there is more variation in student achievement within schools than between schools proves that teaching quality is a key determinant of student achievement (McKinsey & Company). Teachers are expected to be committed and determined. They are task-oriented and apply appropriate principles of learning to allow vast amounts of information to quickly penetrate poorly educated brains (Hughes). They only use teacher aides for nonteaching tasks like maintaining discipline. Teachers work extra hours. Many are available to their students 24/7 through toll-free cell phones. Aside from teaching the formal curriculum, teachers hold high expectations, and are caring and respectful of students and

their parents. In a school atmosphere that is more conducive to learning, students are happier and give more effort (Carter 2000; Edmonds 1979; Henderson & Serpell 2001; Tough; Biddle & Bracey 2000). Where as ineffective teachers are apathetic and complacent to the low achievement of their students, teachers at highflying schools are dissatisfied with anything less than perfection (Edmonds 1979). These successful schools view effective, targeted teaching as vital for student success.

While the best teachers usually teach where they are paid the most and needed least, highflying schools are highly selective about teachers. Some schools spend over half a year recruiting the very best teachers (McKinsey & Company; Carter 2000; Biddle & Bracey 2000). Highflying schools spend more of their funds on professional development focused on teaching to standards and modeling classroom assessment. They are trained and retrained, encouraged to pursue further education, and observe and peer review other classroom teachers to improve their own skills. Ongoing professional development promotes effective teaching practices, a strong, collective school attitude and a staff mentality that they can raise student achievement (Barth et. Al., Henderson & Serpell 2001, Tough). They make it a priority to provide teachers with ongoing teacher training and support to create, refine and assess lessons (McKinsey & Company; Tough; Schmoker 2002). There is collaborative decision making between the teacher and the principal to set common goals, coordinate improved instruction and resolve problems. Faculty openly communicates and supports one another, while maintaining respect for individual teaching styles. While no one teaching method is responsible for school achievement, maximizing teaching time and accountability is essential (Carter 2000; Hughes; Henderson & Serpell 2001). Most effective schools identify "master teachers" with the best results that mentor and bring out the best in faculty by guaranteeing

quality training and uniformity of practice (Henderson & Serpell 2001; Carter 2000). According to one highflying principal, "Master Teachers are the key to improved teacher quality. They head peer evaluations. Lead team teaching, devise internal assessment measure and keep the mission of the school focused on academic achievement. Teamwork, with a keen focus on master teachers, is the key to ongoing staff development" (Carter 2000). Many high flying charter schools train their own well-educated, non-teacher certified adults to teach in their schools because they believe education schools and teacher certification requirements are inadequate in preparing teachers for effective urban classroom instruction (Carter 2000). All of the highflying schools have positive teaching conditions where teachers are supported and empowered (National Council of Professors). Necessary for replicating effective teaching across all schools is legislation that mandates a shift in how teaching is conceptualized and regarded. Teachers must be compensated monetarily and granted more authority to coincide with their excessive responsibility to make the profession more desirable. Money and time must be focused on long-term strategies that are known to work, such as mentoring and professional development that is directly linked to what goes on in the classroom (Dahlkemper 2002).

Affirming Diversity & Cultural Differences

In order for highflying schools to teach students from low-income, non-white communities successfully, it is important that they affirm diversity. Teachers at highflying schools understand that cultural differences can influence how children and their parents view and interact with in schools. They incorporate an affirmation of diversity throughout the curriculum, school activities and atmosphere. Teachers get to know their students as individuals, and learn about their experiences and cultures. They act as supportive, positive

role models and mentors, forming caring, accepting relationships with students. While there is no single teaching strategy, that will make all students succeed, there are a variety of programs that affirm diversity and define success differently (Dahlkemper 2002).

Effort Creates Ability

Students are taught that failure in school is due to a lack of hard work, not a lack of natural ability. This instills the idea that, in order to succeed in life, they must work hard in school (Carter 2000). Teachers and administrators share the ideology that their collective effort will ensure increased student achievement (Tough). Since effort creates ability, educators, administrators, stakeholders, parents and students in highflying schools go beyond ordinary expectations, putting in the extra effort to ensure increased student performance. (Biddle & Bracey 2000; Henderson & Serpell 2001).

High Expectations & Discipline lead to Achievement

Principals at highflying schools relentlessly pursue excellence, using measurable, tangible and unyielding goals to establish high expectations and a culture of achievement (Carter 2000; Biddle & Bracey 2000). They not only set explicitly coherent goals for each year, but for every month and day of every class (Tough). Highflying schools reject cultural deficit excuses that low income and minority students cannot achieve. They respect their students as intellectual equals, moving away from low level, rote instruction, towards higher-order interactive knowledge and skill building. They hold all students to high standards and expectations, and then make sure that all children succeed, believing that the more challenging the curriculum, the more likely students will succeed because they internalize high expectations.

Teachers demand more of their students while providing them with the structure and discipline to meet those demands. They believe that discipline leads to achievement, never excusing student failure. Highflying schools not only expect good grades, they expect students to act and look like individuals that are on the road to graduating from college. These expectations are guided by clear, strict standards for student and parent behavior and attitude. Students and parents often sign contracts to pledge their adherence to these expectations. One highflying principal asserts: "Self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem anchored in achievement are the means to success, inspiring confidence, order, and discipline in its students. The demands of achievement provide children clear and conspicuous reasons to flee from error and run toward success" (Carter 2000). These non-cognitive abilities of self-control, self-discipline, adaptability, patience and openness more accurately predict G.P.A. and student success than I.Q. scores. If nothing else is similar between these highflying schools, they all share high expectations that students can and will learn through discipline that fosters achievement. High expectations and a positive school climate are maintained by mixing idealism with discipline focused on academics (Carter 2000; Edmonds 1979; Henderson & Serpell 2001; Schemo 2001; Tough; Barth et. Al.).

School Climate

A positive school climate is essential to successful schools and student reading achievement. There is a positive relationship between teacher morale and expectations, and student achievement (National Council of Professors). Highflying schools' atmospheres are orderly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive and conducive to instruction and learning (Edmonds 1979; Biddle & Bracey 2000). Successful schools have clean, properly maintained and welcoming schools that are pleasantly decorated with student work. They

foster a climate that is not only disciplined and safe but also caring and accepting. Students exhibit pride in themselves and their schools because schools utilize the personal and cultural assets that students bring from outside of school (Henderson & Serpell 2001). Highflying schools nurture a school climate in which high academic achievement and teamwork earn respect (Thernstrom 71). This fosters proud, motivated, respectful students that create their own success (Hughes).

Parental Involvement

Highflying schools show a great respect for parents, and their children's ability to learn, which promotes strong parental involvement. They earn parental support by educating their children (Carter 2000). Teachers and parents participate together in the decision-making process of the school. The principals know every student in their school and have a great understanding of their students' home lives. All the highflying schools keep close ties with the home through daily news, student report letters and calls home (Henderson & Serpell 2001). Principals work actively with parents to make the home a center of learning, teaching them to read to their children, check their homework, and ask after their assignments (Biddle & Bracey 2000; Edmonds 1979). Effective schools overcome the cultural difference and deficit excuses by extending the educational effort into the home. Parents and students sign contracts to support and abide by school's expectations regarding parental responsibilities (Carter 2000).

METHODOLOGY:

For the qualitative portion of my research, I investigated the themes from my literature review by focusing on three "high-flying" middle schools in Hartford. All three schools serve a predominately non-white, low-income population; 93-100% are black and Latino, and 65-100% are low-income. I chose these schools precisely because while they served a high-need

population, those typically at the bottom end of the achievement gap, they had the highest CMT scores in the district. The three schools will be addressed as follows; school # 1, the network affiliated charter school; school # 2, an independent charter school; and school # 3, a traditional public school. I spent a full school day in each of these schools, observing the school layout, resources, and governance as a whole. I sat in on a variety of 5th and 6th grade classes, taught by different teachers in all of the offered subject areas through out the day. I observed educators to see the hidden curriculum along with specific methods and implementation strategies that the high performing schools share that are meaningfully causing high achievement. My classroom observations and interviews allowed me to analyze the specific characteristics these schools share that seem to be linked to student success. I interviewed at least one teacher and one administrator at each school to obtain their perspective on what distinguishes them from other urban schools, and enables them to "defy the odds" to achieve such great success. I constructed my interviews to examine high-performing school educators' own perspectives on why there is a predominance of academic failure among urban, impoverished, non-white populations, and how they manage to succeed, overcoming their socially constructed tendency to fail.

DATA ANALYSIS

Though my observations are in dialogue with the literature, unlike the literature, I did not formulate an extensive formula or checklist of characteristics necessary for building a successful school and solving the flaws of urban schools. I examined traits of the school's teaching and leadership qualities that are fundamental to student achievement. What I did find is that it is up to teachers and administrators to foster student engagement in learning, through their attitudes, interactions and effort. There is a coherence between principals and teachers,

all sharing a philosophy that students can and will succeed as long as teachers work together and with students in an atmosphere of mutual respect and collaboration of knowledge. After my observations, I found that while many differing factors go into fostering high achieving schools, what really matters is a school's effective comprehensive collaboration to support teachers in sharing best teaching practices, forming standards-based curriculum and assessment, and demanding that all educators provide a consistent education, respecting and caring for every single student.

LITERATURE-CONSISTENT FINDINGS

Efficient use of Time on Task

In regards to the long list of traits described by the literature, my observations confirm that all three schools share just two traits consistent with the literature's findings, not deviating in any way. According to the literature and my qualitative research, highflying schools are more time-oriented, using their time effectively to increase student achievement and to surmount the barriers most other high poverty, high minority schools view as insurmountable. No time is wasted. Students carry work with them to do whenever they have a free minute. Students in some of these highflying schools spend 67 percent more time in the classroom than the average public school student (Biddle & Bracey 2000; Carter 2000; Tough).

My qualitative research confirms this literature as all three schools are extremely efficient with their use of class time and take full advantage of extended days and years to teach students as much as possible. At all three schools, there is quick succession through classroom tasks and activities with out wasting any time. Teachers actually time tasks and transitions between tasks with music to stay on schedule. Students are given work to do

during free moments through out the day, and every student is tutored or takes something to work on or study for at lunch. Their school day is nearly two hours longer than the traditional public school. School # 1 provides three-and-a-half hours of literacy instruction, while School # 2 similarly spends 2 hours on reading and writing. They have extra instruction time during Saturday classes, and in before- and after-school programs. Both charter schools have required Summer Academy, while school # 3 has a mandatory summer school for students who are below proficient, and a limited amount of openings available for above proficient students who are surprisingly eager to fill them. School # 2's administrator said: "I like to jokingly say, we've kidnapped their kids. We have them from 7am until 6pm. We have them on Friday nights, we have them on weekends." There is a clear sense of enthusiasm and urgency when it comes to using time efficiently and being productive 100% of the time. Since this rigorously efficient use of time is consistent in every single classroom, students are accustomed to a fast pace that wastes no time, devoting 100% of the focus on uninterrupted learning.

Focus on College & the Values of Success

My observations also confirmed the literatures findings that high flying schools overcome typical environmental factors, and accommodate for the lack of college-graduate role models by providing an intense, pervasive college focus and teaching the values of a success. At school # 1, every class is named for a college and every grade is named for the class year that they will graduate college. All three schools label high scores as college bound scores. They ingrain the idea of college into students as an unquestioned certainty, just as parents and communities do in upper class communities. The entire school consistently provides all students with the academic and character skills they need to graduate from

college. As the literature first revealed, the schools I observed act as students' future employers; rewarding successful behavior with redeemable paychecks, offering classroom jobs, some more demanding and better paying than others; and selling classroom seats as real estate, some more expensive than others. They teach students that social mobility and the road to greater affluence is possible despite the influences and lack of role models around them (Thernstrom). As the Founder of KIPP explained: "We are giving the kids the skills and confidence to take them to someplace better" (Thernstrom). Despite supposed barriers and cultural difference excuses, teachers care and respect students enough to believe that they can succeed with discipline and dedication. Students are taught the values of hard work ethic, respect for authority, willingness to listen to teachers, the importance of speaking proper English, and adhering to the dress code of most well-paying jobs. These schools become highflyers because students not only learn how to take tests, they acquire the culture of success (Thernstrom; Tough). All three schools have consistent, school-wide values, posters on perseverance and effort, celebrity role models and college memorabilia strewn across the walls. A poster at school #2 reads: "We know how important our education is. We will graduate from college in the year 2020 with a four year degree!!" This ideology of college as an indisputable aspect of their destiny is seen in a school # 2 student's proclamation: "I want to go to Trinity College or UConn but my mom wants me to go somewhere out of Connecticut." Again a school # 3 student declares: "I am going to College too! University of Miami!" Students are literally bombarded with examples of and guides to career success, and images of themselves as successful college graduates. They are taught that the road to success and college begins with the effort they put into academics now. Teachers collaborate to ensure

that students are consistently motivated to learn and achieve despite a lack of role models and a seeming lack of possibilities.

LITERATURE-INCONSISTENT FINDINGS

Dedicated Educators are Replicable

The rest of my findings address the traits in the literature, but deviate from the literature's findings in really significant ways. Every single teacher and administrator that I interviewed agrees with the literature that dedicated teachers are vital to high achievement. Contrary to the literature, they believe that finding and fostering dedicated educators is replicable and feasible in any school. Extremely talented administrators recruit, develop and retain a team of talented educators. According to school # 3's administrator: "Schools are all about the teachers and students. They give extraordinary effort. They are the power that moves kids and changes lives." Similarly, school 1's administrator asserts: "teachers that are totally committed, willing to go the extra mile, and always looking to improve their practice." School # 1 has a specialized talent recruiter who explained their intensive recruitment process of the best teachers:

> We recruit nationally, identifying hot talent and kind of head hunting and going after them. The key components of what we are looking for in a teacher are mission alignment, people that believe that all these students can and will be successful, people that have a track record of student achievement. We look for people that are extremely data driven and have a real grasp on where their kids are academically and where they need to be and what is going to be done to push them. Hard working people, who are going to be able to maintain high expectations for our kids and not make excuses for them.

This emphasis on fostering talented and dedicated educators is the backbone to all three successful schools because they make it possible for the best teaching practices and assessment styles to be successfully collaborated and instituted. This notion of replicability was reaffirmed again and again in every one of my interviews with highflying educators. A

teacher from school # 1 expressed this shared belief: "The methods or factors that are raising achievement can absolutely be replicated in other public schools across Hartford. All the reasons you may hear are just excuses. There really is no reason that other schools can't achieve." All three schools share the belief that finding and nurturing successful educators is replicable in all schools.

Schools Reach out to Parents (NOT the other way around)

The second discrepancy between the literature and my personal findings concerns parental involvement. All three school's defy the widespread complaints that parents are uninvolved and unmotivated when it comes to their child's education. Unlike the literature that frames parental involvement as an outside factor necessary for high achieving schools, the three high flyers of my study are unconcerned if parents are uninvolved. For these schools, parental involvement consists of schools reaching out to parents to keep them informed of their child's education, not the other way around. School # 2's administrator explained this school-driven parental-involvement:

> I make phone calls every single night, not just for concerns but also for improvements, if I just want to say good job. It's motivating to the parents letting them know that I really appreciate their support. We let the parents know that they are a big part of what we are doing here. I think it has contributed majorly to our success…A lot of parents don't visit their principals because they feel intimidated by what takes place. They feel talked down to. You have to make sure parents know that their kids are the most important part of the school.

These schools do not view parental involvement as an environmental factor, outside of the school's control. Their idea of parental-involvement is their own outreach to parents. School # 3's administrator acknowledges that "parents and families are as involved as they can be. They work two to three jobs." Successful schools are aware that although parents have busy lives and may be unable to exhibit their investment in their child's academics in obvious ways,

they are still an active part of their child's education. Faculty know the community and communicate with all of the families but know that ultimately know that it is up to schools, not parents, to maintain positive parental engagement and student achievement. They let parents know that they care how their children are performing, and that they care that parents know what is going on in the classroom. At school # 1 and # 2, parents, students and school leaders all sign a contract that outlines their shared commitment to hard work and consistent support of one another. Teachers view parents as resources for their students' education, and so they communicate with, relate, and reach out to parents to involve them in the educational process, not the other way around. Even so, my study coincides with formerly studied highflying schools that agree that a lack of parental involvement is no excuse for a school's poor performance. Each student, not their parents or community, is held accountable for their own success (Carter 2000).

Clear & Consistent Expectations

In contrast to the literature that reiterates again and again the importance of *high* expectations, my study reveals a different trend. Rather than high expectations, all three schools set extremely *clear* academic and behavioral expectations that are *consistent* across the school, so students can effortlessly fulfill these expectations. Teachers constantly reiterate academic and behavioral expectations verbally and through visually displayed guides. School # 2 clarifies standards by displaying "professional codes" and "zero tolerance boards." Academic expectations are also clear since the CMT style scoring is the walls. Every school has a discipline committee that implements consistent discipline across the school. It is not the fact that these expectations are high that motivates students, it is the fact that expectations are clear, so that students can easily follow the necessary guidelines to raise achievement. The

administrator at school # 2 explains the importance of providing students with clear expectations:

> I think if your students know that there are clear expectations, and those expectations are being communicated to students. If you are doing fair, credible evaluations, if you put the bar really high, it gives them something to jump to. That's my philosophy of how to raise scores and raise student achievement.

A very important aspect of all three schools is that teachers continuously vocalize expectations by telling them what they want them to do, and reinforcing good behavior that meets these expectations. Rather than simply telling students that they have high expectations, expecting them to live up to them, teachers clarify specifically what students need to do to succeed.

FINDINGS

Teaching to the Test with Caring and Respect

While highflying schools do share many traits, some of which coincide with the literature, I found that there are more significant, important factors, vital to high-flyers success. One of the most fundamentally important facets of instruction that I observed is that teachers are not authoritative or condescending disciplinarians; dictating lessons, giving answers and mandating rote memorization. Students are not inferior, passive receptors, absorbing and memorizing the knowledge their teacher dictates. Rather, students are treated as equal producers of their own knowledge. While every school in the country strives to teach to the test because they are mandated to do so, highflying schools genuinely care about giving students the critical thinking skills necessary for anyone to succeed in the world.

In accordance with the literature on high flyers, all three schools use state standards to guide curriculum and instruction. They commit the majority of time on the basics of reading

and math instruction to prepare for standardized tests. The schools in my study confirm the literature that teachers frequently test student mastery of state standards, and then analyze the assessment, using the data to plan instruction. (Biddle & Bracey 2000, Barth et. Al., Edmonds, Hughes & Tough). By emphasizing teaching basic skills, and frequently testing and assessing the acquisition of these skills, they can monitor and support student progress and evaluate teachers. Effective schools create, share and refine instruction methods, deliberately aligning the real, taught curriculum with assessed standards, to promote success on standardized tests (Henderson & Serpell 2001 & Carter 2000). According to school # 3's administrator, teachers use data to shape instruction and form best teaching practices. Classrooms know week by week where they are for proficiency, and set daily, weekly, monthly and yearlong measurable, standards-aligned classroom objectives that are clearly posted on the walls (Dahlkemper 2002, Schmoker 2002). At school # 2 and # 3, the CMT-aligned-skills each student has mastered are tracked and displayed on the wall as well. All three schools directly teach students easy to remember criteria and guidelines to prepare students to get high scores on the CMT.

Successful schools view testing as an instrument of diagnosis, not of discrimination. If children's fail tests, it is the schools that have failed. The racial disparity or discrimination is in the teaching and not the testing. The more students are tested, the better they do (Henderson & Serpell 2001 & Carter 2000). Gains in test scores arise from the dreaded "teaching to the test". A large part of raising test scores is strengthening reading comprehension. Teachers accomplish this by defining new words through out the course of the lesson, and demanding extensive independent reading. The administrator at school # 3 asserts: "All teachers need to know that it is all about reading. Reading will break the bonds of poverty." In one highflying school principal's words:

Reading is not developmental or natural. Reading is learned. Children are knowingly left behind. All children require a basic set of skills in order to succeed in school. They need to listen attentively, speak persuasively, read with understanding, and write with command. An emphasis on basic skills can guarantee that all children get what they need to succeed, regardless of family background (Carter 2000).

All three schools have a rigorous curriculum that focuses on students mastering the standards at each grade level. A teacher at School # 3 acknowledges: "CMT strands are our Bible." Although they get criticized for teaching to the test, they are really just providing students with the skills that good readers need, the skills that are necessary to succeed academically and in life.

Although there is a sense of urgency in regards to preparing students for CMT, they do not condescendingly dictate information from standardized tests, expecting students to passively memorize and regurgitate in the hopes of learning enough to reach proficiency on standardized test. Teachers facilitate discussion, asking questions, engaging students in constructing, producing and gaining their own knowledge. A teacher at school # 1 tells a student: "See, you don't need me, I'm just here for moral support." Teachers do not act as condescending disciplinarians, morally and intellectually superior to their students but as compassionate, respectful facilitators of knowledge. They actively engage them in the process of learning. In turn students are respectful of their teachers and their active engagement in the learning process so they readily master the skills.

Teachers not only care about their students' academic success, they genuinely care about every single one of there students' academic and non-academic lives, maintaining an atmosphere of trust and compassion. A school # 2 teacher says: "Everyone is familiar with every child, and everyone plays a part in making sure everyone gets what they need." They develop meaningful relationships with them, treating them respectfully as equals and valuable

individuals. School # 2's administrator explains the manifestation of this respect: "Everyone genuinely cares about the kids and its contagious. We try to get the very best teachers that are dedicated [and] want to make a difference in the lives of their students." This care and respect is seen repeatedly in teacher and student interaction. At all three schools, instead of reprimanding distracted, unresponsive students, teachers ask them if everything is okay at home and tell them that if they need anything, they are there for them. In one case, instead of disciplining an over active child, the teacher brings him in to the hall to do jumping jacks. When one child complains that he cannot focus due to a headache, rather than reprimanding him, the teacher gives him a head rub while the class silently reads. Teachers at all three schools walk around the classroom to check up on students and make jokes. They ask students what is going on in their lives, and to share their opinions and feelings. A veteran teacher at school # 3 explains:

> The students need coping skills and strategies. We teach them to leave whatever is bothering them out in the hallway. Life happens to them exponentially differently than what happens to us. But they can learn, and you have to keep telling them that. I don't believe in excuses and no teachers here do. They are going to step up and learn despite it or because of it. They don't have a choice.

All of the teachers seem to adhere to this philosophy. Teacher behavior sets a tone of equality, comfort and trust that is vital to students' ability to learn. The administrator at school # 2 explains the importance of these caring relationships:

We do things that you might do at home if the parents weren't working 2 or 3 jobs. Since we have started implementing these warm, fuzzy things, scores have gone from 70% below basic to 70% at or above proficient. You have to find out what the shortcomings are that your kids are walking through the door with, you have got to fill that gap. You have to make sure the child is whole. If you get that child whole, then they will learn.

The philosophy is that in order for students to learn, teachers must first treat them as individuals and then as students. Teaching to the test is actually combined with very

progressive, caring pedagogies that are respectful of students as knowledge-producers. While these two practices don't usually go together in the literature, or in most people's minds, these schools foster academic success by integrating both.

100% of Students Engaged

Equally important to this style of teaching is that teachers demand that 100% of students master the skills so no one can slip between the cracks. All three schools demand that 100% of students pay attention, show respect, stay focused and show that they have mastered the skills of the lesson. Teachers call on students randomly and have every student take a turn reading aloud, while other students follow along on their papers. This ensures that no student can hide or fall behind because every single student is engaged, paying attention and comprehending. As the administrator of school # 2 stated" There's no, ' the class got it', it is, 'why did this student get it and this student not get it.'" A teacher at school # 1 exhibits this expectation directly to her class: "It is so important for you to have your eyes on me to pay attention…Let's try again with 100%! 100% isn't everyone but one person. It is every single person." This is an explicit example of the demand that all students are mastering the material. The success of the schools depends on teachers demanding the success of every single student.

Collaboration and Consistency amongst Teachers and Administrators

All of these traits are founded on one thing what I find to be the most fundamentally necessary for the success of schools and their students. All three schools have comprehensive collaboration amongst teachers and administrators that demand school-wide consistency of best teaching practices that teach to the test to ensure mastery of academic skills for every single student. Principals stop in on nearly every classroom during every period to ensure that teachers are conforming to expectations and fostering high achievement. When I asked school

1's administrator what he felt enabled his school's academic success, he articulates his belief that collaboration enables students to attain high achievement:

> Professional development, administration support and feedback, and aligned curriculum developed by staff…grade level team meetings, subject team meetings, inquiry groups, check in meetings with administration, school wide behavior system, interim assessments, data days, the list goes on.

All three schools demand school-wide collaboration and sharing of best teaching practices by providing every single teacher with ongoing, weekly and monthly professional development and mentoring from master teachers through out their career. As the teacher from school # 3 asserts: "Usually teachers are not prepared for urban areas from their teacher training. New teachers are incorporated into a team of teachers, and are given materials and support." School # 1 defines their "coaching model where everyone in the building, whether they are a new teacher or a veteran teacher have a coach. This idea of feedback, one it being a gift and two it being everyone can grow and get better" (School 1 Talent Recruiter). This level of support and collaboration is seen at all three schools. The importance of collaboration is apparent in the consistency of teaching strategies and learning outcomes across every single classroom. The administrator at school # 2 illustrates how collaboration allows for consistency: "The same lessons are taught in all of the classes so there is consistency across the entire grade. There is a commitment on the part of the staff to make sure that every child can learn." This idea that any school can foster high achievement through comprehensive collaboration between teachers and administration is shared and practiced by all three schools. School # 3's administrator best sums up how vital collaboration and consistency are for fostering academic success:

> We build in a systematic time for collaboration. There is support and intervention to ensure that teachers are consistent with instruction and curriculum. Then they can collaborate to analyze assessments and share successful teaching strategies and agree on

best practices. The emphasis on common assessment is non-negotiable. Teachers are micromanaged to ensure consistency. All students are guaranteed a specific curriculum. High achieving schools can be replicated. Schools need to forget about things out of the school's control. Successful schools stay focused on what they have control over. That is replicable, that empowers and is transformative if done well.

Unlike the literature, these schools believe that every school can cultivate great teachers and leaders simply by working together, utilizing best teaching practices that align with the mastery of academic standards.

IMPLICATIONS

The significance of this research is that it reveals that the literature's supposed traits of high-flyers are not absolutely vital to foster high achievement. Looking at what is fundamentally similar amongst Hartford's highest performing schools reveals that schools do become high flyers without adhering to a broad list of traits. Since collaboration, consistency and relationships between educators and students is key, this has significant implications for education reform, policy and practice in urban school districts. Since no other studies have reexamined the success of these three Hartford middle schools amongst the many failing schools that surround them, the implications are especially pertinent to Hartford. If the same demographic of students is succeeding in one school, and failing in other schools, it is the school that needs to change in order to raise student achievement. If one urban school, given the same resources as other urban schools, can transform low performing students into high performing students, all urban schools can foster high achievement. If high flyers are replicable, how do we begin to replicate them? What policies are appropriate for replicating the traits that are so successful in high flyers, and how are these policies get turned into practice?

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the many characteristics that high-flying schools share, what is absolutely critical is that high-flying schools are founded on school-wide collaboration that demands a consistent education for all students through an adherence to best teaching practices that foster a caring respect of students as equals, while teaching to the test. Comprehensive, school-wide collaboration demands consistency amongst teaching practices and maintains high achievement by ensuring that teachers facilitate student acquisition of knowledge, rather than condescendingly providing knowledge. This collaboration allows teachers to simply teach what needs to be taught rather than wasting their energy experimenting with best teaching practices. These schools have already mastered the best teaching methods through continual collaboration and now they simply have to continue to share and build on this excellence. The reason teachers are able to foster caring, respectful teaching interactions is because they regularly collaborate and share the most effective methods of teaching to the test. What allows them to maintain a consistent level of excellence and demand that all of the traits that foster high achievement that I detailed above are being carried out is through regular, comprehensive collaboration. Students are acing standardized tests because their school's system of collaboration that ensures consistency is allowing teachers to teach to the test in meaningful, genuinely caring ways. Beyond the excuses, building successful schools does not start with an extensive list of necessary traits, but with a basic commitment to building respectful relationships, in terms of sharing best teaching practices and interacting with students.

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