

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL RESEARCH: TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF ITS EXISTENCE ON CAMPUS

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Abstract

Effective school research focuses school improvement on the variables that are within the control of educators and have the greatest potential to impact student achievement: 1) instructional leadership, 2) instructional personnel, 3) instructional environment, and 4) instructional programming. In an era of high accountability with many initiatives being proposed for school reform, effective school research continues to provide valuable research-based information to the school principal, superintendent and larger educational community. By examining the school in relation to this research-based information, educational leaders are informed about factors that promote student achievement. This study surveyed teachers and administrators on eight middle school campuses in East Texas public schools serving students in grades 6-8. Surveying teachers and administrators about the perceived

presence or absence of effective school research indicators serve as an impetus to engage in dialogue about school improvement as results suggest teachers and administrators who perceived effective school research variables on their campuses were more likely to receive Exemplary or Recognized ratings from the Texas Education Agency.

Introduction

A few years ago a cartoon in an educational journal had a picture of a high school with a marquee out front. The marquee read, "Lincoln Standardized Test Center, formerly, Lincoln High School".

In Texas this standardized achievement odyssey began in the 1979-80 school year with the implementation of the first state mandated test, the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS). Subsequently, this journey continued through an evolution of tests including the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

To complement this process in 1994, the state implemented an accountability rating system for public and charter schools, which designated schools as Exemplary, Recognized, Accredited, or Accredited-Warning based on student performance on these assessments. Anxious to receive the highest ratings, superintendents, principals, and teachers engaged in countless hours of staff development, expended great amounts of their instructional budgets on resources, programs and additional personnel in an attempt to boost student achievement. Currently, public and charter schools can earn ratings of Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, or Academically Unacceptable. For the 2007-08 school year, 651 out of 8,063 campuses were rated Exemplary under the State Accountability Rating System.

Through fads, vagaries, and vicissitudes, superintendents, principals, and teachers have strived to achieve Exemplary status for their schools. They have searched for the silver bullet that cures the ills associated with student achievement. However, frequently overlooked in this process is a rich data source of research that has been collected over the past 30 years and supports strategies for improving student achievement.

Ron Edmonds (1979) in his seminal research found that effective schools possessed certain characteristics that enable students to perform at high levels of achievement. These characteristics became known as the Effective School Correlates. The Effective School Correlates are only a small subset of Effective School Research. Subsequently, many educational researchers have contributed to this body of knowledge by identifying other strategies that promote student achievement. The Effective School Research focuses on variables that are within the control of educators and have the greatest impact on student achievement. Therefore, it might be time for school personnel to revisit the Effective School Research, especially since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires educators to utilize research-based initiatives in fostering student achievement.

The purpose of this study was to examine a series of middle school campuses to determine if a correlation exists between principals' and teachers' perceptions of

the presence of Effective School Research principles on their campus and the school's accountability rating.

What is Effective School Research?

Effective School Research represents a body of research accumulated over the past 30 years. Numerous educational researchers have identified a variety of factors that promote student achievement. These factors can be categorized under the following areas: 1) leadership, 2) instructional personnel, 3) environment, 4) overall program, 5) low socio-economic schools and 6) Limited English Proficient schools.

The principal's leadership is the key in promoting student achievement; therefore, he/she is the lynch pin to an effective school. Effective principals assume an assertive instructional role (Edmonds, 1979; Austin and Reynolds, 1990). Assuming an assertive instructional role involves engaging in tasks such as: conducting consistent walk-throughs with teacher follow-up, providing staff development for all teachers, engaging in dialogue with teachers about instructional strategies, and recognizing and rewarding excellent teaching and student academic performance (Rutter, 1979; Edmonds, 1979). While the principal's leadership in instruction is crucial it is not enough to assure an effective school (Shields, 1997).

In addition, research suggests that the quality of education a child receives is a function of the effectiveness of the teacher during the instructional process (Haycock, 2005). Effective teachers have high expectations for students and take full responsibility for student learning (Cawelti, 1999). They are confident students can reach their full potential, and reach the goals teachers set for them. Effective teachers are prepared for classroom instruction. They teach students as opposed to subject matter. They recognize the cognitive level of the student and are able to provide instruction at that level. Effective teachers are capable of adapting to the learning style of the student (Cawelti, 1999). Finally, effective teachers maximize time-on-task (McLeod, 2003).

If the school has a strong instructional leader and effective instructional personnel, then the third critical component is creating an environment in the school that is conducive to learning. Students and teachers must feel safe at school in order to concentrate on teaching and learning. The physical plant must be well kept. Effective schools are characterized by high academic emphasis (Edmonds, 1979). Disruptions are minimized in effective schools and an efficient system of discipline management is in place (Walberg, 1995).

In effective schools the educational program is characterized by a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus and parents are viewed as partners in their children's education (Marzano, 2003). There is an understanding that decision-making is participatory. Stakeholders not only understand the vision, but also are strongly encouraged to participate in the school (Edmonds, 1979).

In low-socioeconomic schools that are high performing, the schools recognize and emphasize ethnic and racial pluralism (Wang, 1998). Pluralism is defined as a condition of society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious or cultural groups coexist within one nation. Low-socioeconomic schools that are high performing provide students with rich academic programs that meet the needs of the students,

and teachers, accept the economic challenges usually associated with low-socioeconomic students, and are able to relate productively with the students. Parents are encouraged to participate in decision-making concerning their student's education (Marzano, 2003).

Effective schools that have a high percentage of language minority students foster a healthy respect for cultural pluralism. In language minority schools, teachers receive staff development to address the special needs of linguistically and culturally different children. Teachers utilize a curriculum that integrates academic skills into the content areas. Teachers collaborate and coordinate lesson planning and preparation between teachers serving these students (Pierce, 1991).

Method

This descriptive research study is part of a larger study that surveyed teachers and administrators in elementary, middle, and high schools. For this study only the data from the eight public schools serving students in grades 6-8 is reported. Surveys were distributed and collected during the spring semester of the 2006–2007 school year. They were analyzed during the summer and fall of 2007. The research team included eight student interns enrolled in a yearlong principal internship. This internship is the culminating experience in the principal preparation program at a regional university in the southwestern United States. Each student distributed, collected and analyzed a campus set of surveys as part of a class assignment as the first level of analysis. The researchers analyzed the surveys as a set utilizing the SPSS program to represent the second level of analysis.

Survey research is an appropriate method to collect information that cannot be directly observed (Babbie, 1990). The survey was designed to examine teacher and administrator perception of the presence or absence of factors associated with high performing schools and Effective School Research.

Instrumentation

The survey was designed by the researchers and subsequently presented and distributed at the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration Conference in August 2007 in Chicago, Illinois (Sherman, Vaughn, and Gill, 2007). The factors associated with Effective School Research and high performing schools were grouped into six subsections including: principal leadership, instructional personnel, environment, overall program, low socioeconomic, and language minority factors. Each subsection contained between five and nine statements. All schools in the research study contained a large number of students who qualified as low socioeconomic status and/or English as a second language. Participants were given two choices for each question to indicate whether the practice was present (a "yes" response), or absent (a "no" response) from the school. (See Appendix A)

Demographic data collected included the current state rating for each campus and the respondent's current position (teacher or administrator). The data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0. Crosstabs analysis correlated the school accountability

rating, respondent assignment, and perceived presence or absence of the research factors. Factors found to be significant at the .05 level or higher are reported.

Findings

The findings of this study were when teachers and administrators perceived Effective School Research factors were prevalent on their campuses, their Texas state accountability ratings were either Recognized or Exemplary. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Factors Identified as Significant

Area and Indicator	Teacher	Principal
Leadership		
1. The school leader assumes an assertive instructional role.	X	
2. The school leader provides a vision of excellence that is translated into goals and objectives.	X	
Instructional Personnel		
1. Teachers believe in their own efficacy.	X	
Environment		
1. The school environment is orderly.	X	
2. The school fosters parental involvement in student learning.	X	
3. The school provides a well-kept school plant.	X	
4. The school uses site-based decision-making.	X	
Overall Program		
1. The school emphasizes high academic achievement for all students.	X	
2. The school assesses and monitors student progress systematically.	X	
3. The school assigns meaningful homework.	X	
4. The school adjusts lessons to student needs.	X	
5. The school uses effective grouping for instruction.	X	
Low Socio-Economic Schools		
1. The school fosters parent participation.	X	
2. The school shares governance with teachers and parents.	X	
3. The school provides academically rich programs.	X	
4. The school provides personal attention to students.	X	
5. The school creates an accepting and supportive environment.	X	
6. The school teaches with the aim of preventing academic problems.	X	

Language Minority Schools

1. The school develops a curriculum that integrates the academic skills into the content areas. X
2. The school shares governance between students, parents and teachers. X X

Implications of the Findings

Middle School teachers and administrators can use the results of this study as they strive to improve their students' academic achievement. As schools seek to achieve an exemplary or recognized campus rating, knowing that schools that are rated as Exemplary or Recognized are more likely to be viewed as having these variables identified by Effective School Research is meaningful information. Principals and teachers should be wary of programs that seem too good to be true, claim to guarantee success, or are marketed aggressively. Additionally, examining the Effective School Research opens campus level discussions about effective practice that will lead to high student achievement.

Conclusion

The conundrum in some minds might be if administrators and teachers perceive Effective School Research is prevalent on their campuses then their state accountability rating will be Exemplary or Recognized. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived perceptions of public school principals and teachers as to the existence of the Effective School Research attributes on their campuses, and compare those perceived perceptions to the state accountability rating of their campuses. Findings were that those teachers who perceived the Effective School Research attributes were prevalent on their campuses worked on campuses that tended to have Exemplary and Recognized ratings under the Texas Accountability Rating System. It is hoped these findings will begin the dialogue on campuses to determine if teachers' and principals' perceptions of the Effective School Research principles exist on their campuses.

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Appendix A EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS CHECKLIST

Place a check mark in the appropriate column for each of the statements as it pertains to your current campus.

Leadership

YES NO

- | | | |
|-------|-------|---|
| _____ | _____ | The school leader assumes an assertive instructional role. |
| _____ | _____ | The school leader provides a vision of excellence that is translated into goals and objectives. |
| _____ | _____ | The school leader monitors classrooms frequently. |
| _____ | _____ | The school leader intervenes in a supportive manner when necessary. |
| _____ | _____ | The school leader conveys high expectations for students, faculty and staff. |

Instructional Personnel

YES NO

- ___ ___ Teachers plan smooth transitions between activities.
- ___ ___ Teachers state rules and procedures.
- ___ ___ Teachers project a vision of excellence.
- ___ ___ Teachers believe in their own efficacy.
- ___ ___ Teachers hold students accountable for their own learning.
- ___ ___ Teachers provide opportunities for achievement.
- ___ ___ Teachers believe students can reach their potential.
- ___ ___ Teachers use a student-centered style.
- ___ ___ Teachers innovate with a zest for learning.

Environment

YES NO

- ___ ___ The school environment promotes a high academic emphasis.
- ___ ___ The school environment is orderly.
- ___ ___ The school fosters parental involvement in student learning.
- ___ ___ The school maximizes time on task with success.
- ___ ___ The school provides a well-kept school plant.
- ___ ___ The school uses site-based decision making.

Overall Program

YES NO

- ___ ___ The school emphasizes high academic achievement for all students.

___ ___ The school assesses and monitors student progress systematically.

___ ___ The school assigns meaningful homework.

___ ___ The school provides regular, meaningful staff development for teachers.

___ ___ The school adjust lessons to student needs.

___ ___ The school manages instructional time appropriately.

___ ___ The school uses effective grouping for instruction.

Low Socioeconomic Factors

___ ___ The school emphasizes ethnic and racial pluralism.

___ ___ The school fosters parent participation.

___ ___ The school shares governance with teachers and parents.

___ ___ The school provides academically rich programs.

___ ___ The school provides staff development to address the special needs of low socio-economic children.

___ ___ The school provides personal attention to students.

___ ___ The school creates an accepting and supportive environment.

___ ___ The school teaches with the aim of preventing academic problems.

Language Minority Schools

___ ___ The school fosters a healthy respect for cultural pluralism.

___ ___ The school provides staff development for teachers to address the special needs of linguistically and culturally different children.

_____ The school develops a curriculum that integrates the academic skills
into the content areas

_____ The school shares school governance between students, parents and
teachers.

_____ The school collaborates and coordinates lesson planning and
preparation between teachers.

About the Authors

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