

Introduction

As part of the Independent Comprehensive Study of New Mexico Public School Funding, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) identified and examined schools that were identified as ‘beating-the-odds.’ In short, these schools were identified as performing better than expected on standardized tests given their demographic composition (i.e., based on student poverty, mobility, and English language proficiency) of the students they serve.

In an attempt to identify common themes from the factors that principals and staff deemed integral to their schools’ success, the AIR research team conducted a series of interviews and focus groups at several school sites. Out of these conversations, several themes emerged. It is our hope that these ‘lessons learned’ will shed some light on what these schools feel are the best practices for using limited resources, and that these will be of use to practitioners.

Findings from the Field

Below are several key findings from visits to three beating-the-odds schools. These schools were from districts of varying size (urban, suburban-small town and rural-remote) and represented a range of grade levels and demographic compositions. Given the small sample size and limitations, these results are in no way conclusive but instead should be seen as simply an exploration into the practices of successful schools.

There is no single factor to school success...

Similar to findings presented in other studies,¹ there is no one key factor to school success. Instead, successful schools employ a combination of techniques and practices that they find best meet the needs of their specific populations. Some of these identified factors of success were specific to the school sites and resulted from unique circumstances associated with student or staff characteristics. For example, one very small school noted that their ability to provide individualized, personal instruction contributed to their academic success, while another school with a large Native American population mentioned that the ability to hire instructional aides fluent in the native language was important. These factors and actions were associated with success in a unique school and community context.

... but there are some common themes, including:

While there was no single factor behind school success, several common themes emerged during staff and principal interviews. These themes are described below.

a highly-qualified, dedicated and collaborative teaching staff;

All principals and focus groups attributed their success in part to a highly qualified and dedicated teaching staff. One participant likened their staff to “a family that shares the same vision” and noted that teachers worked very hard to move students and the school toward common goals. Teachers often went above and beyond their teaching responsibilities and were committed to their students and the goals set forth by the school.

Also, teacher collaboration was key. Teachers often met both formally and informally to discuss student performance and instructional practices, and to refine focus areas. In some schools, this collaboration time took the form of ‘goals teams’ that worked to address specific issues in both content and operations areas. In other schools, namely the high school, teachers frequently collaborated across subject areas in order to provide an interdisciplinary approach to instruction.

¹ For a more in-depth review of studies related to school success please see *Successful California Schools in the Context of Educational Adequacy* (Perez, Anand, Speroni, Parrish, et. al.), 2006.

vertically aligned instruction tied to state standards and goals; and

An important component of success was a vertically aligned instructional system. Most often, principals and staff noted that instruction was directly aligned with both state standards and the goals set forth in the school's Educational Plan for Student Success (EPSS). In one elementary school, staff had adopted a comprehensive reading program that provided consistency not only vertically across grades, but also horizontally across classrooms within a grade. In another school with a dual-immersion program, instruction was not only tied to state standards, but the school also worked toward the goal of achieving a completely bilingual student population. Finally, a small rural high school noted that all instruction was aligned with the goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014, and noted that the school was well on its way to achieving this goal.

sensitivity to the cultural and community context.

Each of the visited schools had very different cultural and community contexts, but all worked creatively to meet the unique needs of their respective populations. For example, one school serving 100 percent Native American students made a conscious effort to hire instructional aides fluent in the native languages to act as language assistants. In addition, the school used after-school programming funds to provide access to and support for activities led by community elders. Another school noted that their dual-language program and community activities led to a general sense of cultural appreciation, thus increasing parental and community support. At the rural high school, staff were aware of kids' responsibilities to local ranches and created a school class schedule that supported these.

While these schools are successful, they still face challenges...

All three schools noted that finding, hiring, and retaining highly qualified teachers was a challenge. In the urban area, leadership noted that it was especially hard to find bilingually certified and special education teachers and reported that they have responded by providing financial incentives for teachers to go back to school or receive professional development. In the rural areas, leadership noted that it was not only difficult to attract and retain teachers, it was also extremely important to ensure that teachers were not becoming overburdened with the multiple roles that they were required to assume.

... and feel that additional resources would help them continue their successes.

As mentioned above, these schools can be considered among the highest-performing schools in the state with respect to producing high student achievement outcomes given the needs of the students they serve. However, most staff felt that additional resources were needed for continued success. The nature of these additional resources varied by school site and were unique to the current resources and school context. These resource needs and their corresponding costs are further examined in a separate brief.

Lessons Learned

In short, while there is no one single set of factors that led to school success, each of the schools in the sample attributed their success to a combination of factors that were unique to their specific school and community context. While a dedicated and experienced staff that made a conscious effort to align instruction with state standards was instrumental in each of the schools' success, these efforts looked very different in each of the schools.

In addition, there was little difference between the factors identified by either school leadership or by the staff within the same school—if the leadership team identified something as a factor of success, staff members were likely to identify the same factor. The one resounding difference was that school staff members were much more likely than the principal, understandably, to note that strong leadership was a major contributor to their schools' success.

It is also important to reiterate that these findings and themes were derived from a limited study sample and are not conclusive. We sincerely hope that these findings be seen as an exploration into the practices of successful schools in New Mexico.