

Applying Research on Effective Schooling at the District Level

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Abstract

The power to transform schools lies with classroom teachers who work with students every day. While multiple strategies for improving schools have positive intentions, few are research-based and focused on the goal of fostering critical, independent thinkers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the application of research on effective school reform to the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Research on Effective Schooling

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) stated, "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (sec.1001). However, in the city of Los Angeles, California, 41% of all students who start high school will never finish, let alone enter a university (Strategic Data Project, 2013). The city of Los Angeles is not living up to the promise of Title I when every year at graduation, only 16% of the students who graduate have completed the necessary requirements to attend a university (Strategic Data Project, 2013). Change is needed in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD); however, the power to transform student outcomes partially lies with the teachers who work with students every day at school. The purpose of this paper is to recommend research-based strategies for teachers to implement in their classrooms that have been shown to lead to increased student achievement.

Context and Role

For the purpose of this assignment, I am fulfilling the role of a university professor charged with recommending strategies to ensure students of LAUSD are better prepared for success in college. Findings from the Strategic Data Project (2013) indicated there is a significant gap between LAUSD students graduating and those who are deemed college-ready. The district instituted a college-preparatory curriculum to help ensure student readiness for college by requiring all graduates to complete the A-G sequence prior to graduation. By completing the A-G requirements with a "C" or better, students would meet basic curricular requirements to attend California State University or University of California. While this

proactive response is encouraging, the results thus far are dismal. According to the Strategic Data Project report, after four years of high school in an LAUSD district, only 59% of students graduated and then only 16% met the A-G requirements. This means that only one out of four graduates from the class of 2011 completed the A-G requirements upon graduation (Strategic Data Project, 2013).

In addition, the Strategic Data Project (2013) analyzed the 2011 graduating class from 2007 until 2011 and found that out of all the students who started high school in 2007, 24% had dropped out by 2011. A drop out for the purpose of the study was defined as a student who left the district without providing evidence of a transfer. Further analysis of the data indicated an opportunity gap for Black and Latino students. Black, Latino, White, and Asian students had on time graduation rates of 51%, 57%, 70%, and 77%, respectively. In an effort to increase student on-time graduation rates for all students, and to work toward completion of college-preparatory curriculum, LAUSD has contracted with me as a higher-education consultant to recommend an action plan to increase graduation rates and completion of the A-G requirements.

Recommendations

An important component of effective reform efforts is a focus on the day-to-day happenings in the classroom (Hattie, 2003). Rather than painting broad strokes of reform, targeted trainings designed to increase student achievement will be utilized. Using Hattie's meta-analysis review (as cited in Huitt, Huitt, Monetti, & Hummel, 2009) indicators for school improvement with effect sizes greater than 0.7 ($d < 0.70$) will be implemented. For the purpose of this action plan, only three indicators will be addressed; however, this does not mean that school reform efforts can be neatly tailored and only focus on a few indicators. School-family-

community partnerships are a needed aspect of effective school reform; however, strategies to address effective partnerships lie outside the scope of this action plan. It is recommended that effective partnership strategies are investigated to support the efforts noted in the action plan.

Teacher-student Relationships

The main focus for reform are teacher-student relationships ($d = .72$), teacher clarity ($d=.75$), and reciprocal teaching ($d=.74$) (Hattie, as cited in Huitt, et al., 2009). Because LAUSD has a 24% drop out rate, and a graduation rate of only 59%, teacher-student relationships will be a key focus with the hope that by improving relationships, student retention and graduation might increase. A study by Foley, Klinge, and Reisner (2007) indicated that close teacher-student relationships are an influential factor in overall student outcomes. The teacher-student relationships that were analyzed were personal in nature, in that each student in the study had one teacher with whom to coordinate educational goals and to find support. In addition, positive teacher-student relationships support students' adjustment to school, promote development of social skills, promote academic performance, and foster students' resiliency in academic performance (Rimm-Kaufman, 2013). Using the data gathered by Rimm-Kaufman (2013), a teacher training on fostering teacher-student relationships will be conducted. Data demonstrating the connection between relationships and student success will help establish a rationale for the importance of developing relationships. Also, because effective professional development is often led at a building or school-level (Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2010), I will work in partnership with the building administrator to develop the training with effective teacher-leaders within each school. In addition, each student will be part of a smaller cohort group of 10-15 students assigned to one teacher. Each week, a 15-minute activity period will be set aside in

order to foster open communication and support for students. Teachers will utilize that time to apply the strategies from the in-service to foster positive student-teacher relationships.

At the beginning, middle, and end of each school year for the next three consecutive school years, students will complete a Likert scale survey indicating their attitude toward teacher-student relationships. The study will utilize the same Likert items from the Foley, Linge, and Reisner (2007) study measuring students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships. The data from the student surveys will be compared to yearly graduation rates to see if there is a correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and graduation. Although correlation may not prove causation, it is an important assessment measure to see whether positive student-teacher relationships increase at the school after training and then to see whether those relationships correlate with graduation rates.

Teacher Clarity

Hattie's (as cited in Huitt et al., 2009) meta-analysis demonstrated the importance of teacher clarity in effective reform efforts. Further studies indicated that teacher clarity can be taught and fostered through appropriate training. In order to foster teacher clarity, a one-day in service training conducted with master teachers at the building level will focus on characteristics of clear instruction utilizing the work of Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower (2008) to guide teachers through activities and scenarios designed to increase clarity and develop cognitive empathy for students. Teachers will videotape a lesson and share that lesson with a colleague to analyze from the perspective of clarity. Teachers will work in small groups to share the results of their analysis and develop strategies to ensure clarity in future lessons. Videotaping lessons is an effective method for helping teachers evaluate lessons and reflect on strategies they might use

to improve (Song & Catapano, 2007). Teachers will engage in peer-review of lessons to analyze for clarity. In addition, a research associate will view the lessons to help provide strategies for each teacher to improve clarity.

As teachers develop clarity, classroom assessment data, both formative and summative will be analyzed to determine whether increased teacher clarity has helped promote higher scores from students. Data will be collected at the start of the first year, prior to the training, and will be collected again at the end of each academic year. An analysis of classroom assessment data and state standardized content-area exams will provide insights as to whether teacher clarity is correlated to student achievement.

Reciprocal Teaching

Finally, reciprocal teaching strategies will be utilized in classrooms to help ensure student success. According to a report from the National Institute of Literacy (2007), adolescents are in need of direct instruction in reading and writing skills in order to perform complex literacy tasks. However, many educators are not well-versed in direct instructional methods like reciprocal teaching in the content areas. Reciprocal teaching is an instructional tool that promotes four key learning strategies as students engage in instructing others: questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting. After teacher-training in reciprocal teaching strategies, teachers will model questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting with the end goal of students internalizing the strategies and utilizing them on their own to complete literacy tasks. Teachers will engage in direct instruction regarding the strategies and when appropriate, student volunteers will lead the class in reciprocal teaching strategies. Eventually, all students in a classroom will lead a small group in reciprocal teaching. Reciprocal teaching has been shown to improve student reading

and writing across the curriculum (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002), which in turn will aid in completion of a college preparatory curriculum for students within LAUSD. Assessment data will be collected along with a survey measuring students' perceptions of their own literacy growth and development will be completed at the end of each school year.

Conclusion

Effective school reform efforts must be research based and serve the needs of students. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to school reform. In LAUSD, where abysmal graduation rates abound and very few students even attend college, classroom-based reform efforts should be utilized, particularly at the secondary level. As teachers are on the front lines, interacting with students every day, they might make the difference between student persistence or student drop outs and student failure versus student success. By investing professional development time that directly impacts daily content-area instruction and establishing a culture of respectful relationships between students, teachers and professional colleagues, students attending LAUSD will have a better opportunity for success both in the classroom and outside the school walls.

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