

IN FACT

Best Urban Practices Identified for MPS Consideration

The Forum has completed a project on best practices in urban school districts to support Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) in promoting student achievement. MPS has a number of schools with high populations of at-risk students that are achieving above state standards. Moreover, MPS has dozens of schools implementing innovative and effective programs to increase student achievement.

This report is intended to help expand the number of innovative and high achieving schools by identifying best practices in scholarly research on education reform and on programs implemented in ten comparable urban districts in the United States.

The Forum has analyzed and chosen specific, successful educational programs in urban districts that we feel merit further attention by those who are in the position to improve MPS.

Possible Best Practices for MPS

- **Adoption of Whole-School Reform Programs**
These programs are intended to affect just about everything schools do, from curriculum to instruction to professional development to school organization. There are dozens of whole-school reform models, and many of these have proven to increase student achievement for at-risk students. Memphis City School District and San Antonio Independent School District require all the schools to adopt a model of whole-school reform. While it is difficult to isolate the direct relationship between the

The information on best practices was obtained from several sources including telephone conversations with district personnel and an extensive search of the education literature about what programs are successful for increasing student achievement for students identified as at-risk.

whole-school reform program and achievement, there is specific evidence of increases in student achievement in these districts.

- **Reducing Dropout Rates** - The reporting of high dropout rates is a consistent common thread in urban public schools across the country. In our research, we found that schools in the Denver School District were allowed to independently implement programs to reduce dropout rates. One particularly successful high school has implemented a system of literacy and student dropout prevention and assistance that has resulted in reducing the dropout rate from one of the highest in the state to its current rate of 6.8%.
- **Minimizing Discipline Problems** - Recent research suggests that school discipline problems have a clear, negative impact on academic achievement. Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline (CMCD) is a whole-school reform program designed to improve the discipline in inner-city schools at all grade levels. Several schools in the Houston Public School District have implemented CMCD. Evaluations of this program have found significant positive effects on standardized achievement tests, especially for students who remained in the program for six years. One study found that teachers were able to gain 36 minutes of teaching time a day.
- **Professional Development** - There is growing recognition that teachers should receive continuous and focused professional development training. Comprehensive professional development efforts in several urban schools, such as Memphis City School District, San Antonio Independent School

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District and Community School District 2 in New York have brought needed focus to these urban school districts while emphasizing continuous improvement in teaching. In San Antonio, many schools have seen double-digit gains in the percentage of students mastering the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Tests.

- **School Report Cards** - MPS is at the cutting edge of data reporting and in developing multiple tiers of accountability. However, MPS could also learn from and thereby include aspects from successful accountability reports in comparable districts. Texas requires that each school be given an accountability rating based on performance indicators. These indicators are the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), attendance rates and dropout rates. The four possible classifications for a school are exemplary, recognized, acceptable or low-performing. Policy makers and residents of Milwaukee may be interested in such an accountability system because of the clarity it provides in identifying the performance of schools.
- **Peer Review and Performance Based Evaluations** – Contending that it can be the teacher’s rather than the student’s fault if the student fails to learn, many districts have effectively implemented peer review methods and performance based evaluations for teachers.

In researching best practices there is some risk that readers may assume that there are not any best practices currently going on in MPS. This assumption, of course, is neither true nor the intention of this report. Currently, MPS schools that participate in programs that reduce class size, increase the school day, use extended year calendars, use particular programs for math and science instruction and implement whole-school reform programs are implementing best practices.

Replication of these kinds of Best Practices is essential for increases in student achievement. However, as stated by Thomas McGinnity, Deputy Superintendent of MPS in a recent Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel article, “Spreading success is the \$64,000 question.... Unfortunately, it spreads too slowly.”

Such measures hold teachers and administrators accountable for teaching and student achievement. The Minneapolis Public School teachers’ contract includes a professional support process that directly links teachers’ performance with the meeting of school and district goals. This contract offers a different way of linking accountability with a teacher’s contract.

Additional Findings

In addition to the identification of several best practices in urban school districts, it is important to emphasize three other findings from this study:

- Scholarly research emphasizes the need for proof that a program improves the achievement of all students in the school. Therefore, the success of the program cannot be based merely on average school test scores.
- Our review of the research has shown that a school that wants to successfully implement a whole-school reform model must have the support of its teachers and principal in order to effectively implement such a large-scale program.
- Reforms such as district governance and school reconstitution, although widely popular, do not seem to be consistent best practices. Such methods maybe effective as threats to failing schools and school districts in order to bring about reform; however, when actually implemented, they do not seem to result in broad-based improvement.

If you would like a copy of the full report:

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