

# Test Scores Rise, Enthusiasm Abounds

RESEARCHERS FROM Johns Hopkins University and the University of Memphis are conducting a multi-year study of a number of Core Knowledge schools. That study has not been completed, and the quantitative test score results are not yet available. However, a first-year "qualitative report" is in circulation; it is based on school and classroom observations, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires.

Regarding the benefits of the Core Knowledge program, this qualitative report is decidedly positive. The common curriculum is working as it should: "Core Knowledge appears to lessen the need for reteaching concepts at the beginning of the school year." Teachers report that students are more interested in learning: "Over and over again, educators told us that their students are much more excited about learning since they began teaching Core Knowledge." In addition, the report concludes, the children are also reading more, especially non-fiction.

Core Knowledge also seems to invigorate teachers. The Hopkins study found a significant increase in teacher interaction: "We probably have at least one formal meeting a week, and maybe five or six other informal meetings in the hallways, talking about where we are.... We share our resources, and we share ideas." Teachers also reported that Core Knowledge made their own work lives "more interesting and exciting," and rather than waning—as often happens with new programs—this enthusiasm "increases over time as

teachers attain mastery of the curriculum."

Although no large-scale quantitative results are yet available, studies have been conducted of achievement outcomes, as measured by standardized test scores, at individual Core Knowledge schools. One of the most interesting studies centers on the Paul H. Cale Elementary School in Albemarle County, Virginia. Bearing out E.D. Hirsch's prediction that a common, rigorous curriculum would be especially beneficial for disadvantaged students, a statistical analysis shows that the gap between students of low socio-economic status and others is narrowing. Approximately forty percent of Cale's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The diagonal lines in Figure 1 represent the best prediction of the percentage of low-income students who would score above the 50th national percentile on standardized tests (in this case, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills).<sup>1</sup> As the dots on the graph indicate, most of the district's elementary schools performed within their predicted range. Only one school—Cale—stood out dramatically from the rest, far above what would be predicted by the socioeconomic composition of its students. "We can show that over the last four years, which happens to be when we implemented Core Knowledge," says Cale principal Gerald L. Terrell, "our scores for all students have consistently gone up, especially in social studies, science, and math.... We are scoring well above the national norms in social studies, above the

75th percentile.... Our scores defy what you might expect."

Figure 2 shows how students at Hawthorne Elementary School in San Antonio, Texas compare to students in the other 65 elementary schools in the San Antonio district on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Reading Performance (TASS).<sup>2</sup> [For a broader discussion of the Core Knowledge program at Hawthorne, see pages 9-16.] As the author of the Hawthorne study commented, "[The graph] illustrates that although district reading performance is generally consistent across grade levels with a student pass rate of about 55%, Hawthorne's results show a steep increase in the reading pass rate at consecutive grade levels. At Grade 3, Hawthorne's pass rate of 34% is well below that of the district. By Grade 5, however, Hawthorne's 67% pass rate far exceeds the district's 56% pass rate.... Although Hawthorne students tend to be more at risk of failing academically than are students in the district as a whole, because of the larger percentages of economically disadvantaged and LEP students, snapshots indicate that the school has succeeded in raising achievement levels beyond the aggregate performance of all other elementary schools in the district." —EDITOR

<sup>1</sup> "Core Knowledge Sequence Credited in Test Score Boosts," by Michael Marshall. *Common Knowledge* (Fall 1996). The Core Knowledge Foundation: Charlottesville, VA.

<sup>2</sup> "Hawthorne Elementary School: The Evaluator's Perspective," by Gail Owen Schubnell. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* (JESPAR), Vol. 1, No.1, 1996. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Mahwah, NJ.

