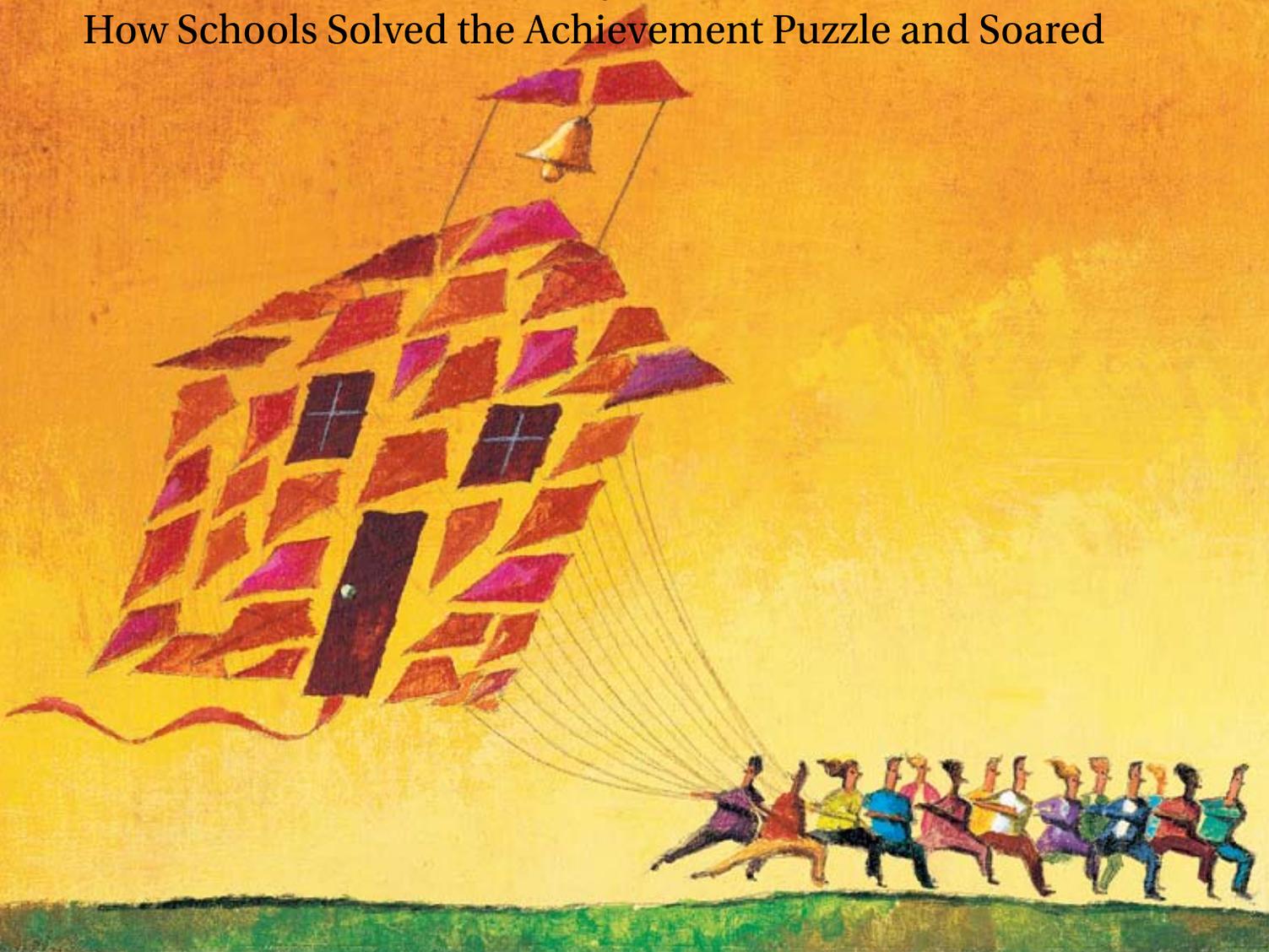


Piece by Piece

How Schools Solved the Achievement Puzzle and Soared



BY KARIN CHENOWETH

Most schools have traditionally been organized so that individual teachers operate in isolation, with no recognized standards for what or how to teach, and with only an occasional supervisor wandering through to criticize kids' behavior or teachers' bulletin boards.¹ Good principals have taken great care in hiring teachers, but traditionally, a principal's job has been widely understood within

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the education world to be handling and preventing crises, staving off parents by keeping them busy raising money for the school, and—at the high school level—producing winning sports teams. Superintendents are pretty much expected to do the same thing on a larger scale, which means they try to keep their school boards mostly focused on athletic fields and bond referenda instead of what and whether kids are learning.

That all sounds grim, but it gets worse. In general, teachers pretty much sink or swim—that is, become bad or good teachers—on their own, with very little help from their colleges' teacher preparation programs, little help from principals and colleagues, and shockingly little guidance on what they are actually supposed to teach.² "Teachers are born, not made," the old saw goes, implying that there is not really a body of knowledge and skill teachers need to master. Many a social studies teacher has been assigned to teach high school algebra with little more help than the airy sentiment, "A good teacher can teach anything."

As far as what they are supposed to teach, teachers have pretty

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL ZWOLAK

much had to make it up. They have rarely been provided a systematic plan of instruction that allows them to know what a student should have learned before getting to their classroom, what each student needs to learn in their classroom, and what the student will learn once he or she leaves their classroom. If they're lucky, they have colleagues who take pity on them and help out, but even then, the solutions are idiosyncratic, leaving far too many kids studying the rain forest and *Charlotte's Web* multiple times in their school careers without ever studying animal classification and *Tom Sawyer*.

By operating without clear standards for what they are supposed to teach or good information about how to ensure students learn, teachers—particularly inexperienced ones—are left to hope their kids arrive knowledgeable, disciplined, organized, and able to understand material the first time it is presented. Kids, being kids, rarely come in pre-educated, and children who grow up in poverty or isolation often arrive significantly behind in vocabulary, background knowledge, and organizational wherewithal. When kids arrive behind, they need much more skilled instruction than most middle-class kids require. The resulting disconnect between teacher hopes and reality leads to endless teacher frustration and is at least part of the reason so many young teachers flee high-poverty, high-minority schools in search of “better” kids or abandon the profession altogether.³

The sense that low student achievement in high-poverty and high-minority schools is the fault of the students themselves—and their families—has permeated the education profession. As a result, not only many teachers but also many principals, superintendents, academics, and even much of the public have come to think that there is little schools can do to help low-income students and students of color achieve at levels comparable to their more privileged peers. I disagree.

For the past five years, I have been visiting high-poverty and high-minority schools that have demonstrated success through their student achievement data.

Each school's reading, math, and science achievement data have been thoroughly examined to ensure that not only are the schools doing well in the aggregate, but that each group of students is also doing well. In these schools, achievement gaps are narrow or, in some cases, nonexistent. Aside from a few rudimentary checks to ensure that they have achieved their success legitimately, I simply ask the educators in those schools to describe what they do to achieve their success. My assumption is that they are the experts in their success, and that we need to learn what they have to teach. So it is all the more significant that I saw and heard about the same essential elements again and again.

Different principals and teachers list those elements in a different order and might use different words, but Molly Bensinger-Lacy, principal of Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia,* was particularly succinct: “The strategies for educating students to high standards are pretty much the same for all kids: teacher collaboration; a laserlike focus on what we

want kids to learn; formative assessment to see if they learned it; data-driven instruction; personal relationship building.”

In my new book, *How It's Being Done*, from which this article is drawn, I explore those essential elements and how I saw them play out in different schools and different contexts.

Anyone looking for simple answers will not find them here. As many of the teachers and administrators in these schools, which I call “It's Being Done” schools, have told me, there is no magic bullet—there is no single program, policy, or practice that will ensure all schools and all students will be successful. Educating children is a complex task, and when children live in poverty or isolation, the task is even more complex. If our nation is to have

Children who grow up in poverty or isolation often arrive significantly behind in vocabulary, background knowledge, and organizational wherewithal.



an educated citizenry, we must be very thoughtful and deliberate about the way we structure all children's educational experiences.

All the elements described below work together to fundamentally change how we go about educating all students.

Teacher Collaboration

Many teachers, reading Bensinger-Lacy's recommendations for high standards of education, may say something along the lines of, “When are we supposed to collaborate? I teach all day, and during my planning times, I plan lessons and grade papers.” Others may say, “We ‘collaborate’ [imagine air quotes and sarcastic tone], and it is such a waste of time. Then I have to go home and prepare lessons and grade papers until late at night.” Both reactions are understandable in schools that do not provide the structures to make sure teacher collaboration is both possible and productive.

So let's begin at the beginning. The point of teacher collaboration is to improve instruction for students and to ensure that all students learn. No one teacher can be an expert in all aspects of the curriculum, all possible ways to teach it, and every child who sits in his or her class. But every teacher should have expertise that can be tapped by other teachers to improve their knowledge of their subject, their teaching skill, and their knowledge of their students.

It should be said, however, that learning from colleagues is not

*All of the schools mentioned in this article are profiled in either my new book, *How It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2009), or in my 2007 book, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Harvard Education Press).

something that is built into the field of American teaching. It sometimes springs up because teachers organize themselves to work together, but it has not been integral to teacher professional development or school organization. When teachers advise each other, consult with experts, think deeply about new ways to teach the material, and examine existing research in a systematic way in order to help all their students learn the material, they are working in sharp contrast to the way teachers have traditionally been expected to work. They are working in schools that have the structures and systems in place that make collaboration meaningful.

Let's examine the conditions necessary for the kind of collaboration I saw in It's Being Done schools.

Time

I'm starting with the obvious, but that doesn't make it any less important. To make their time with students effective and worthwhile, teachers must have time to think about their lessons, observe each others' classes, examine student work, learn from colleagues and outside experts, and do all the other things that are subsumed under the term *collaboration*.

It's Being Done schools make sure that teachers have regular meeting times, usually during the course of the school day. The schools squeeze in the time where they can. Elementary schools generally schedule "specials"—that is, art, music, counseling, and physical education—so that all the students from a particular grade have them at one time, permitting the grade-level teachers time to meet. Some schools close early once a week to permit cross-grade collaborations. Others have aides start the school day, supervising the putting away of coats and boots, collecting homework and lunch money, and distributing backpack notices while teachers meet together. Many secondary schools schedule planning time so that the teachers can meet with their departments or teams. If possible, schools find money to pay teachers to stay after school or come in on Saturdays.

At Ware Elementary School in Fort Riley, Kansas, principal Deb Gustafson told me that when she speaks to other educators, the lack of available time to meet "is usually one of the biggest excuses." Since all schools have roughly the same amount of time, "The message needs to be that it has to be captured; creativity must be employed," she said.

The schools I visit are, for the most part, Title I schools, meaning that they receive federal funds aimed at high-poverty schools. As a result, they often have a bit more resources than non-Title I schools have to pay teachers to meet outside school hours or hire substitute teachers to allow for classroom observations. Not coincidentally, It's Being Done schools work hard to make sure that time with substitutes is not a waste of time for children. In Steubenville, Ohio, substitutes must get a minimum of one day of training in reading instruction and one day in math. In addition, each elementary school in the district is allocated 100 days of a substitute teacher; Wells Elementary hired a recently retired teacher for that part-time position.

One way or another, all of the schools carefully carve out time for teacher collaboration. But time is not enough. The time has to be well spent.

Rules of Engagement

To make teacher collaboration time productive, cultural norms

about how that time will be spent must be established.

- *If you don't say it in the meeting, don't say it in the parking lot.* At Oakland Heights Elementary in Russellville, Arkansas, principal Sheri Shirley made this an explicit rule. Shirley wasn't looking to quell disagreements, but to ensure that they saw the light of day and didn't fester. Note, however, that this must be matched with openness on the part of the leader to hear things he or she might not want to hear.
- *Focus discussions on the things the school can control rather than what it can't.* Molly Bensinger-Lacy of Graham Road uses a graphic organizer for teachers to fill out all the causes

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—MOLLY BENSINGER-LACY,
Principal of Graham Road Elementary School

of a given problem—and then together they cross out anything they don't have control over, from the poverty of the kids to the testing schedule of the district.

- *Focus on specific objectives related to instruction.* According to Ware Elementary's principal, Deb Gustafson, "meetings and requirements must be well organized, focused, agenda-driven, and contain specific expectations." Meetings should not be filled with the administrative trivia of new roll-call systems, hall-duty assignments, or anything else that could be handled by e-mail.

At the beginning of the school improvement process, principals often will sit in on the teacher collaboration meetings to make sure the sessions are productive; once teachers have begun to internalize the norms, teachers usually meet on their own. Often principals will require that specific products result from these meetings, such as a curriculum map, formative assessment, or group of lesson plans complete with assignments.

And when teachers observe other classrooms, it is often with a specific aim in mind. In Elmont, New York, I learned about Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School's evaluation process, in which an "action plan" is formulated to help teachers improve. Here's one example: "By observing Ms. McDonnell, you will take note of smooth transitions between lesson activities that will enable you to maintain student attention. From Ms. Smith, you will see the perfect implementation and enforcement of sound opening strategies. Finally, from Mr. Schuler you will observe the benefits reaped from a well-structured activity." This is not simply sending teachers off to wander and possibly pick up some tips

from more experienced teachers, but rather a highly structured way of making sure teachers learn from each other.

Good Teachers Willing to Collaborate to Improve Student Achievement

Again, so obvious you want to say, “Duh.” But that doesn’t make this an unimportant point. “You’ve got to have master teachers,” said Susan Brooks, the principal who led the improvement of Lockhart Junior High School, in Lockhart, Texas. “It’s all about teachers.”

It’s Being Done principals warn prospective teachers that they will be expected to work collaboratively. “Our interviews take a really long time,” Bensinger-Lacy says, because she lays out in great detail the collaborative environment teachers will be

teachers) is assigned to teach the “lowest” class of struggling first-graders. This is in direct contrast to ordinary schools, where the best teachers are often rewarded with the “best” students, who are usually defined as those students who easily master new material with or without expert teachers.

While It’s Being Done schools seek out accomplished teachers for tough assignments, they also recognize that someone just entering the profession, whether from a traditional or an alternative certification program, needs a great deal of support. “We got him as a baby, first rattle out,” is the way Lockhart Junior High’s Brooks described Jeffrey Knickerbocker, who came into teaching after working as a geophysicist. He himself said that when he first started, he was a “terrible teacher.” But he got the help and support he needed and is now widely acknowledged both by his colleagues and by students to be among the best teachers in the school.

Common Goals

Meaningful collaboration requires teachers to have meaningful things to collaborate about, and that is the subject of the next section. But even before that, teachers need to share the goal that every student be successful. Sometimes this means having the vision to see past their students’ childhood and adolescent goofiness. English teacher José Maldonado at Granger High School in Granger, Washington, said this about his students, many of whom are tempted by the gangs that dominate the Yakima Valley: “I try to look beyond where they are now and see them for who they will be.”

A Laserlike Focus on What We Want Kids to Learn

For generations, teaching has been an isolated activity, and teachers pretty much decided what they would teach. At the same time, teachers have long been whipsawed from one fad to another about *how* to teach. Teachers were told to keep their students seated in neat rows and columns, then they were told to have them sit in circles, and then in cooperative learning groups. They were told to have quiet classrooms, and then they were told to have lively yet controlled classrooms. And so on. Yet through all that, most teachers were still allowed to decide whether kids would learn about dinosaurs *or* the Bill of Rights. This is exactly backward. Teachers should be the experts in *how* to teach, but on their own, they should not be deciding *what* to teach.

After all, the reason we have schools is to impart the knowledge and skills that our society as a whole has deemed important. This means that decisions about what knowledge and skills children learn are of concern to all of us. That doesn’t mean that there shouldn’t always be room in a school day or year for teachers to share their passion for the more obscure plays of William Shakespeare. But the bulk of the curriculum should be devoted to the knowledge and skills that we as a society have decided are essential for students to become educated citizens.

Today, we are converging on the idea that every high school graduate should be ready for college or the workplace. The more we study what this actually means, the more we realize that the two are pretty much the same. To be ready for, say, a plumbing apprenticeship or to get a job on an automobile assembly line or as a sales representative requires that students have fairly high reading and writing levels and have mastered math at least

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expected to participate in. This has not made it difficult to recruit; on the contrary, as word gets around and success builds, most It’s Being Done schools have found it easier to find applicants.

Although It’s Being Done schools hire carefully—and occasionally counsel out teachers unwilling or unable to work collaboratively—they also give good, experienced teachers time to get used to working in the kind of public way these schools require. One of the difficult issues involved in school improvement is that many veteran teachers are used to seeing a parade of one unsuccessful principal after another (not to mention superintendents), many of whom talk big before fizzling out. Those teachers need to be convinced that changing will be meaningful and not just another heartbreaking waste of time. That means there needs to be a commitment on the part of school leaders—who need the support of their superintendents—to stay in place for the improvement process. How long that takes depends on the school, but It’s Being Done principals have told me that although there should be some signs of improvement, particularly in the school atmosphere, almost immediately, improvements in instruction might take as long as two or three years to be reflected in state test scores. To go from being the first school in Kansas to be put “on improvement” to one of the best schools in the state took Ware about six years; to go from being in the bottom third to the top third of schools in California took Imperial High School about as long.

Because the point of teacher collaboration is to improve student achievement, teachers in It’s Being Done schools recognize that the students who struggle the most need the best teachers. At Wells Elementary, for example, one of the most accomplished reading teachers (in a building full of accomplished reading

through Algebra II. In other words, students who are entering the workforce after high school require the same educational level as students who are ready for credit-bearing classes in college—at least if they want the kind of job that has traditionally offered paid vacation and health insurance.

The last 20 years has seen the beginning of agreement about what should be taught. For the most part, this has taken the form of states bringing together groups of teachers and content experts to set standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do by the time they graduate; then the groups work backward through the grades. The real problem is that too few states have done the hard job of developing clear, teachable standards. Some states have shied away from paring down what they want students to learn, so their standards tend to be impossibly large compendia of knowledge and skills. Other states have stuck with incredibly vague standards that do not offer any real guidance. Even in a field as seemingly definite as mathematics, the lack of clarity in standards has led to math curricula that are, as scholar William Schmidt says, “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

By being too broad and expecting too much, many states essentially push the decisions of what to teach back onto individual teachers, who find themselves picking and choosing among standards rather than trying to teach all of them—because teaching all of them is impossible. (In contrast, by paring down the vast array of human knowledge into a relatively manageable yet ambitious set of standards, Massachusetts made a real contribution, and it did so long enough ago that those standards have really started permeating Massachusetts schools. Massachusetts now has the highest overall performance in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.)

Many It’s Being Done educators hope that all states and schools will eventually share the same ambitious national standards. As Ware’s Gustafson told me in an e-mail: “National standards would help the students most in need, those with the highest mobility.” She added that the difficulties of moving from school to school are compounded “by making the requirements different everywhere a student lands.”

Even once common standards are embraced, however, teachers still have a lot of work to do. It’s Being Done schools often have to build their own curriculum from scratch, and most spend quite a lot of time building “curriculum maps” or other documents that clearly delineate what each grade will study when. Roxbury Prep in Roxbury, Massachusetts, has teachers come in three weeks ahead of the students, in part to build that year’s curriculum map. Graham Road Elementary School has daylong teacher retreats while students are taught by substitutes so that teachers can build their curriculum map, and Imperial High School has slowly built its curriculum map, subject by subject, over the years.

Once that initial planning is done, teachers don’t have to start from scratch in subsequent years, but can work on improvements

and refinements each year. For this, they will often use the results on state tests. If their students didn’t do well on measurement, for example, the teachers will revise their instructional strategies and may add time to that subject. If all the students have mastered standard punctuation, the teachers might decide to spend a little less time on that subject so they can add time to teaching students how to write research papers.

Teachers then work on how students should demonstrate their knowledge of the curriculum. To make this effective, teachers need to agree on a good assessment, what constitutes meeting standards, and what constitutes exceeding standards. Teachers often need help in learning how to do this work—which is known as proficiency setting or range finding—and in making sure that they are aiming at high standards (more on this topic in the next section, “Formative Assessments”).



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Even now, teachers are not yet ready to walk into the classroom. A curriculum with assessments still isn’t sufficient guidance for a teacher to know what he or she is doing tomorrow. Teachers in It’s Being Done schools work together on lesson plans. This is where all their hard work in collaborating pays off for teachers. Because they work together so closely and because they are working on the same things at the same times, they are able to share the work of developing individual lessons. Outside the teaching profession, not everyone understands what a huge and complex burden lesson planning is—particularly for new teachers. At Lockhart Junior High School, new teachers are handed their entire first year of lessons so that they don’t have to worry about planning. As Susan Brooks, the former principal, said, it takes so much effort to learn about the school’s routines, culture, colleagues, and students—as well as to establish good classroom management and build relationships with their students—that new teachers simply don’t have the time and energy to plan lessons. After their first year, they are welcomed into the collaborative process of lesson development. Far from feeling undermined, the new teachers I spoke to said they felt supported by this system.

Formative Assessments

Students have always had regular assessments—I had weekly spelling and arithmetic tests all through my elementary school years, in addition to the big chapter tests, unit tests, and, of course,

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A Model Solution

For some schools, the smartest thing to do is adopt a school improvement model that has been demonstrated effective and then work hard to make it successful. No one should ever think this means those schools are not being creative. Symphony violinists do not compose their own music, but no one calls them uncreative. Ensuring that all children in a school are learning—particularly when the children live in poverty or isolation—requires creativity and thought at every juncture.

Today, we have quite a few successful, replicable models. In my 2007 book, *It's Being Done*, and in my new book, *How It's Being Done* (from which this sidebar is drawn), I profiled schools that have successfully used the Core Knowledge, Success for All, and Uncommon Schools models. The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and Green Dot charter schools, which I have not visited but other authors have, appear to have developed still other successful school models.

But success is not guaranteed. Ware Elementary in Fort Riley, Texas, is an example of a school that used Success for All but was still unsuccessful until a real leader, Deb Gustafson, and her team arrived. So it is perfectly reasonable to want to save some trouble by adopting a carefully researched model, but making it work still requires energy, creativity, and knowledge.

In the brief excerpt below, we learn how P.S./M.S. 124, a K–8 school in Queens, New York, used the Core Knowledge model to move from an underperforming school to one in which seventh-graders sound like college students.

* * *

Did Shakespeare hate women?

The seventh-graders wondered. They had finished reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and they couldn't agree. Heated arguments inspired the students to read more of Shakespeare's plays to try to answer the question. Some ended up answering yes, some no, depending on which plays they relied on, but the result was that the seventh grade of P.S./M.S. 124, otherwise known as Osmond A. Church School in Queens, New York, or just "P.S. 124," spent a lot longer on the Shakespeare unit than had been planned by their teachers. "It took on a life of its own," said principal Valarie Lewis.

To interest 12-year-olds in formulating such a question, and then allow them to push their teachers for more time to read and use primary documents as evidence, is a worthy feat for any school. But P.S. 124 is a school that would be written off by some as incapable of nurturing such intellectual discourse because the vast majority of the students are minorities who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. And yet, as a result of steady improvement over a number of years, the school posts higher proficiency rates than the state as a whole and much higher than New York

City. P.S. 124 began its improvement journey in 1999, when it received a three-year \$784,000 Comprehensive School Reform grant from the New York State Department of Education and the teachers and administrators agreed to adopt Core Knowledge, which was then a relatively new program.

Core Knowledge, conceived and developed by author and scholar E. D. Hirsch Jr., begins with the idea that it is the job of schools to produce educated citizens. To be educated means knowing a large body of content as preparation for being able to read, understand, and evaluate newspaper and magazine articles, election materials, jury instructions, scientific research, literature,

and anything else educated citizens might be called upon to read and evaluate. The Core Knowledge Foundation has a plan for instruction that focuses on building a knowledge base about world history, geography, civics, literature, science, mathematics, art, and music.

The federal grant paid for teachers to come in during the summer to learn the program. Core Knowledge gave a framework for teaching much more content than teachers had ever taught before. The teachers developed a three-month scope and sequence of what they would teach in the fall. It was too overwhelming to begin teaching the entire Core Knowledge program all at once, so the school phased it in—about half the first year, three-quarters the second year. Now the school aims to

teach the entire program. The process of working to master a rich, content-oriented curriculum brought the teachers together as a team, Lewis said. "They were good teachers, but we were all isolated." The first day of the summer institute, Lewis said, "was group therapy. As an educator, what are your strengths, weaknesses, goals? They had never talked before."

The seventh-grade class of 2006—the class that became interested in Shakespeare's attitude toward women—was the first class to receive the benefit of the school's curricular improvements throughout its schooling. Four years before, Lewis said, 60 percent of the children were failing in third grade—"they were six months behind where they needed to be to be promoted." But by seventh grade, she said, they had written 10-page papers on such subjects as Sudan, Nazism, and the hardships faced by immigrants to America, and "will debate you on democracy and imperialism. They've really grown." Because of Core Knowledge, Lewis said, students "are really thinking critically. But it took seven years." She added that "everybody's looking for a quick fix," but real improvement takes time.

One of the jobs the school took on was to educate parents about the curriculum, in part because many of the parents didn't know the material and were upset that they couldn't talk with their children about what they were learning in school. "Teachers became teachers of the parents," Lewis said. All parents now



receive a copy of E. D. Hirsch's book, *What Your First Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good First-Grade Education*, or the equivalent book for their children's grade level. Every six weeks, the school holds a Saturday workshop where parents learn about the curriculum and the tests their children are preparing for. While parents are in their classes, their children are off learning other material. In addition, there is a curriculum night every six weeks. There, parents learn about the curriculum in addition to learning how to help their children academically. "Some parents don't know how to color with children or how to read a book to their children," Lewis said. "So we teach them those skills." Before Core Knowledge was adopted, the school only attracted 10 or 12 parents to meetings, Lewis said; now, hundreds attend the workshops.

Lewis said that students at P.S. 124 bring to school all the issues of any large school. "We have lots of kids who have been hospitalized, who are suicidal, bipolar, schizophrenic, ADHD." The school provides a support system when things don't go well, providing referrals to social workers, health services, and housing services in addition to having a counselor, a half-time social worker, and a half-time school psychologist on staff. "We're a total-care facility," Lewis said, only half joking. "We get them bereavement groups, AA, drug rehab."

Content Rich

In general, New York City is considered to have more of a skill-based curriculum than a content-based curriculum. Through the content provided by Core Knowledge, P.S. 124 works hard to make sure students learn the skills New York City wants taught. "Core Knowledge has really given us a focus. It really gives teachers the meat. But teachers still need to teach the skills," said Judy Lefante, the school's Core Knowledge coordinator. "You can't have one without the other, but we've worked hard through professional development to make sure they teach skills through

content." So, for example, skills such as making inferences, drawing conclusions, and separating facts from opinion are all worked on within the science and social studies content areas. In addition, Lefante said, "We try to integrate everything as much as possible so we don't have fragmented learning and children really build their background knowledge." If the children are studying Europe during the medieval period, for example, they read Robin Hood as well as nonfiction, Lefante said.

Lewis and assistant principal Linda Molloy are continually in classrooms, observing instruction and making sure that teachers and students are on track. "They want to do a good job," Lewis said. "My belief is that new teachers need time to grow." She has two or three teachers she considers marginal, so she sends in the literacy coach, the math coach, and the Core Knowledge facilitator to teach model lessons and help the teachers develop their skills. In addition, she said, she sends those marginal teachers into the classrooms of stronger teachers, arranges for professional development, and celebrates improvements. "The community needs to make each educator better," Lewis said.

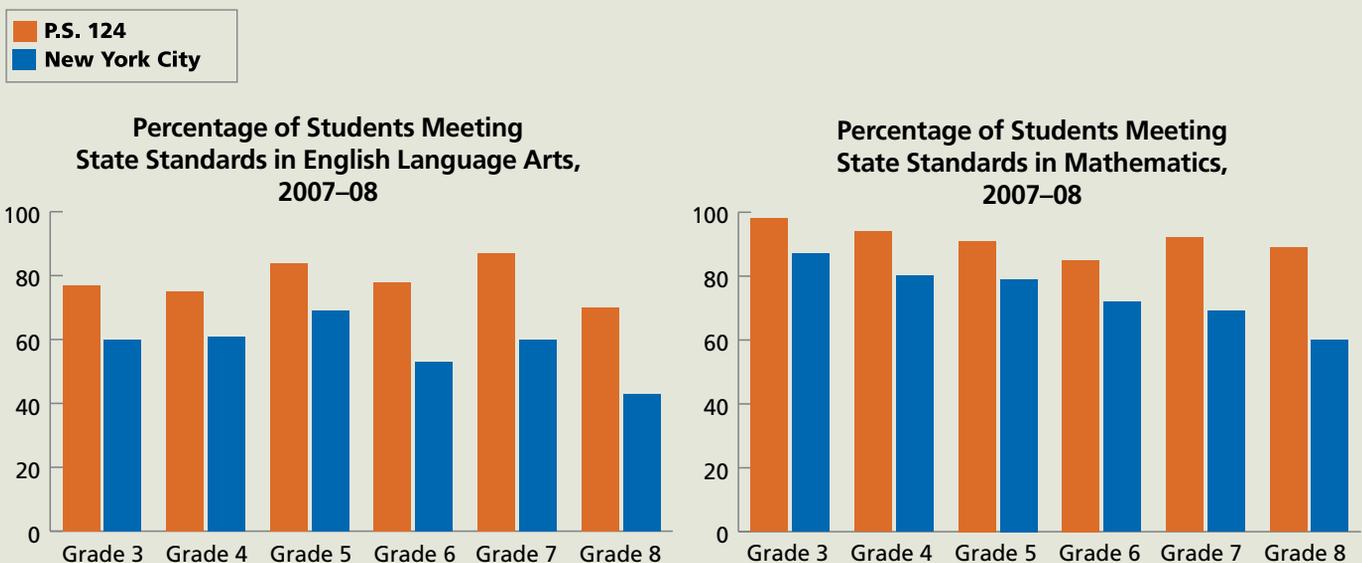
To ensure that the school is on track, teachers and administrators monitor individual student growth on several measures, including unit tests. By studying the data, school staff members have identified the weakest area in the school to be grammar. Students often don't understand issues such as verb agreement and verb conjugation. To address the weakness, Lewis has purchased grammar textbooks and arranged for professional development for teachers on the subject.

"The expectations are always high," Lewis said. "It's about the belief."

Students appear to appreciate the expectations and the level of instruction. As one student, who came to P.S. 124 after being in another school, said, "I like this school better because you learn more things."

-K.C.

Students at P.S. 124 in Queens Outperform Their Peers Citywide



SOURCES: NEW YORK STATE AND NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION

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the norm-referenced standardized tests most of us took growing up. But for the most part, those assessments were used as “summative assessments.” That is, they were used to gauge what students knew, assign grades, and ultimately, sort kids into “high,” “middle,” and “low” reading or math groups in elementary school and tracks in secondary school.

Formative assessments are not designed to assign a grade but to gauge what students know about a particular topic or what they are able to do. In this way, teachers can understand where students are, what weaknesses or misunderstandings the students have, or whether they need additional enrichment or extension.

Some teachers may say, “We already have the state tests—

These schools have a respectful way of being honest about shortcomings. Failure merely means that students—and teachers—have more work to do before they can be successful.

don’t need more assessments.” But that’s not how the educators in It’s Being Done schools think. They see state tests as useful end-of-year or midyear assessments that make sure schools and students are on track. But most state tests, for a variety of reasons, are not sufficient to guide day-to-day instruction. For one thing, results usually don’t come back in anything under a couple of months. And, of course, most state tests are pretty low level. It’s Being Done schools are aiming high, and they need to be able to see whether their students understand the material they are presenting and are meeting rigorous standards. For that, the schools need their own formative assessments. At Lockhart Junior High, teachers give quizzes in each core academic class once a week—students who score below 75 percent are immediately scheduled into “rescue classes” so that master teachers can figure out where the misunderstandings lie. At Graham Road, teachers go over every wrong test answer with every student so that they, too, can understand what led to the wrong answer. Sometimes it is just inattention; sometimes it is a misunderstanding of a word or a lack of background knowledge. In this way, teachers catch small problems before they grow.

It’s Being Done schools also often use the formative tests as a way to ensure that their students are ready for both the format and the content of state tests. This is not the same as “teaching to the test.” It is more along the lines of teaching students “test sophistication,” as Valarie Lewis, principal of Osmond A. Church School in Queens, New York, calls it. Graham Road’s Bensinger-Lacy is forthright about saying that children need help acculturating themselves to state tests. “I have no apologies for doing for our kids what middle-class families do for their kids. I’m hoping that when SATs come around, they’ll understand how to take that kind of test.” But the emphasis in all these schools is not on test-taking

strategies but on ensuring that students understand the material represented in high-level standards.

Data-Driven Instruction

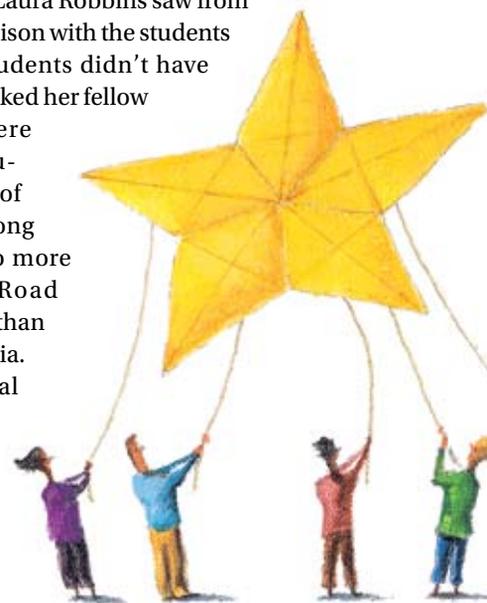
In It’s Being Done schools, data are certainly used to identify which students need help and which need greater challenges. But there is another, more profound, way data are used as well: to see patterns that aren’t always visible to teachers in their day-to-day teaching. So, for example, kindergarten teachers at Graham Road pore over color-coded charts to try to see patterns of achievement. In her first year, teacher Laura Robbins saw from the charts that in comparison with the students in other classes, her students didn’t have many sight words. She asked her fellow teachers what they were doing to help their students. This is the kind of crucial interaction among teachers that has led to more students at Graham Road achieving at high levels than in most schools in Virginia.

Similarly, at Imperial High School, teachers spend a day before each school year looking for such patterns. One year they found that vocabulary was the weakest area for all groups of students—not just the English language learners. Once they identified that pattern, they were able to address the issue of vocabulary acquisition in a schoolwide way. Had the teachers simply been focused on their own students, they might never have noticed that even the highest-achieving students in the school still had weaknesses in their vocabularies.

Personal Relationship Building

It’s hard for me to fully convey the atmosphere in It’s Being Done schools and how different it is from ordinary schools. In essence, It’s Being Done schools have an atmosphere of respect and caring that emanates from the teachers and principals. As Ware Elementary teacher Lisa Akard said, “We’re a kind school. We really care about each other. The teachers care about the children.” That caring is reciprocated by the students. So, for example, I could not find a student at Imperial High School who did not have good things to say about the school and his or her teachers. In comparing Imperial to his previous school, student Israel Ramos said, “The teachers there were just getting through the year—here they really care if you do your work and do well.” Imperial’s principal, Lisa Tabarez, expressed it this way: “It’s not just about being successful in high school. We work for a greater accomplishment. We work for students to be successful, to take care of themselves and take part in society.” Students respond powerfully to that commitment to their overall well-being.

When I say that It’s Being Done schools are respectful, that doesn’t mean that they put up with disruptive behavior on the



part of students—they do not. They do not let the learning of their students be disrupted for any reason, even another student. But they remain respectful, even of disruptive students. When John Capozzi, who is now principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School, was assistant principal, he was in charge of discipline. His then-principal, Al Harper, said, “I’ve seen John suspend a student [and then] the student thanks him.” That’s how respectful the atmosphere is.

At Imperial High School, staff often have to explicitly train students, particularly new students, in the Imperial way of operating. “We start with where they are,” assistant principal Aimee Queen says. One student, who had just transferred in and was completely unused to an orderly school, was given the initial goal of not get-

Marginal readers in a special class were building genuine self-esteem based on the hard work of accomplishment.



ting thrown out of class. When he managed a whole day without disruption, Queen celebrated with him and gave him a pencil. They then started working on his being prepared for class with a notebook and pencil, until finally, the expectation was that he was doing his work well and competently, complete with good grades in a college-preparatory curriculum. As in just about everything in It’s Being Done schools, the ultimate standard was kept well in view, even as students and teachers worked on the many necessary interim steps.

These schools also have a respectful way of being honest about shortcomings without allowing them to be debilitating. Teachers work with administrators on improvement plans. And they speak candidly with students about their reading levels and academic accomplishments—or lack thereof—without the demeaning sense that if the students have failed at a task, it means they are and always will be failures. Failure merely means that students—and teachers—have more work to do before they can be successful.

So, for example, at Norfolk Elementary in Norfolk, Arkansas, third-grade students who were very marginal readers were told that they needed to improve dramatically to be promoted to fourth grade, and they were given a special reading class dedicated to improving their decoding, fluency, and vocabulary. In the spring, when it was clear all of them would be prepared to move to the next grade, the teacher brought the principal in to celebrate. They were celebrating very real accomplishments by the students, who could feel genuine satisfaction that they had met a tough standard. The children weren’t being pumped up with phony self-esteem-building exercises—they were building genuine self-esteem based on the hard work of accomplishment.

It takes a great deal of work to establish the right kind of tone and atmosphere in It’s Being Done schools. But once it is established, students feel safe and able to learn; teachers feel safe and

able to teach; and, not incidentally, administrators who in ordinary schools would spend all their time on discipline are able to turn their attention to other issues, such as improving instruction.

I have described at some length the five elements of school reform as listed by Molly Bensinger-Lacy: teacher collaboration; a laserlike focus on what we want kids to learn; formative assessment to see if they learned it; data-driven instruction; and personal relationship building, all within the context of outside assessment.

There is something else that she didn’t mention—something that I hope to explore more fully in future work—and that is leadership. Principals of It’s Being Done schools set a vision for their schools and then helped teachers work toward it. And teachers set another version of that vision in their individual classrooms and then help their students work toward it.

All those leaders have embraced as a goal something that American public schools never before were asked to do: to educate all students to a meaningful standard. They all understand that to make that goal anything more than a pipe dream requires an enormous shift in how schools are organized and how they operate.

By making sure that everyone understands what children need to learn and then figuring out how to teach them, teachers and principals in It’s Being Done schools have gone a long way toward devising the organizational structures that can help all students become educated citizens.

In contrast, the tradition of isolation that has characterized school organization has meant that too many children have gone to schools where there are no systems to ensure that they learn what they need. Affluent children, many of whom can draw on outside resources ranging from family dinner conversations to individual private tutoring, are often able to compensate for weaknesses in their school experiences. But children who live in poverty or isolation have fewer such resources to draw on, making them more dependent on schools and more dependent on educators figuring out how to ensure they learn.

It goes without saying that no school is perfect. Even the most successful have their mistakes, failures, and weaknesses. All have ways they can improve. This is, after all, difficult work requiring a lot of thought, skill, and effort—but educating all students can be done, and successful schools are showing us the way. □

Endnotes

1. Probably the best description of how schools are organized is by Harvard University’s Richard F. Elmore, “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” *American Educator* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1999–2000): 6–13, 42–44, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/winter99-00/NewStructureWint99_00.pdf.
2. On teacher preparation programs, see, for example, the indictment by Art Levine (former president of Teachers College at Columbia University) of just about all such programs in *Educating School Teachers* (Washington, DC: Education Schools Project, 2006), www.edschools.org/teacher_report.htm. On colleague support, see, for example, Richard Kahlenberg’s description of Albert Shanker’s first year as a teacher in *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). On teaching standards, see, for example, “There’s a Hole in State Standards: And New Teachers Like Me Are Falling Through,” by an anonymous second-year teacher, *American Educator* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 6–7, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring2008/newteacher.htm.
3. For some insight into the disconnect between teacher hopes and reality, see “Pursuing a Sense of Success: New Teachers Explain Their Career Decisions,” *American Education Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003), which contains the results of a survey of 50 Massachusetts teachers.