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Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment with New English Learners at International High School

**Jacqueline Aness
Linda Darling-Hammond**

A Series on Authentic Assessment and Accountability

NCREST

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***An Inquiry High School:
Learner-Centered Accountability
at the Urban Academy***

Jacqueline Ancess

Foreword by Linda Darling-Hammond

NCREST

"Christianity is a big problem. It says 'God loves us all.'"

After an unremarkable stint as a marginal figure in the hate movement, Hale today boasts followers in 40 states and 22 countries—30,000 total adherents, he claims. Civil rights groups put the number in the low thousands but say the group has targeted younger, more educated recruits, like Smith, who grew up in a wealthy suburb and got into a good college. After expressing regret that Smith was dead—"and that other people are, too"—Hale added: "But we can also reach people now through this unfortunate incident."

"The hate movement is more sophisticated today than two decades ago," says Brian Levin, a hate crimes expert at California State University-San Bernardino. "They want more upwardly mobile, young people who are computer literate and disenfranchised. Matt Hale is a microcosm of the future of this movement."

Hate-group explosion. The resurgence of the World Church of the Creator reflects an alarming trend in the shadowy world of right-wing extremists: The "Patriot," or militia, movement is declining, but the number of white supremacists is increasing. "Hate groups, neo-Nazi, and Klan groups have been rising markedly for two years," says Mark Potok, who tracks such groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center. "At the same time, weekend warriors who wanted to defend the Second Amendment have gotten sick of waiting for the revolution that never came." He points to more than 500 hate groups operating in the United States last year, notably the National Alliance, the Ku Klux Klan, and the National Socialist White People's Party. A neo-Nazi group, the Knights of Freedom Nationalist Party, recently was given permission to march in downtown Washington, D.C., next month.

One reason the groups are rising: the Internet. At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, there was one Web site with a hate message, according to the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In February, there were 1,400. Today, there are 2,000. The World Church of the Creator has a women's Web page featuring a diet and jewelry, and a kids' page offering crossword puzzles, comics, and coloring books. White-power music—with unprintable lyrics—also trumpets the message. Some 50,000 CDs by bands with gruesome names like White Terror, Aggravated Assault and Nordic Thunder are sold annually. These sorts of messages empower fearful, hate-filled people, like gun-toting Benjamin Smith, who once might have felt like part of society's margins but who suddenly feel part of a big movement. ■

When Johnny can't read—try tough love

Waging war against "social promotions"

BY BEN WILDAVSKY

WACO, TEXAS—On a stifling morning here 10 eighth graders sit in silence behind their desks at the G. W. Carver Academy, staring intently at the math problems that stand between them and high school. Today's fill-in-the-bubble test is only a practice session for the teenagers attending summer classes at this magnet public school. But the pressure is on nonetheless. If they can't pass their final tests when summer school ends, students like Vanessa Balderas and

Taurean Pullen will face another year in eighth grade.

This is raising the bar, Waco-style. Like many other school districts with high percentages of poor, minority students, Waco has struggled for years with dismal academic performance. Now it's trying to jump-start student achievement with a controversial crackdown on "social promotion," the long-entrenched practice of advancing students to the next grade even if they haven't learned what they should have. To be promoted under the district's two-year-old policy, kids in grades



Kimbra Talley, 7, is among the 15,000 children in Waco schools who will have to pass muster

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DAVID BUTOW—SABA FOR US&W



Bush, joking with a reporter in California, has displayed a touch that's common but confident.

Is it wrong to call him George Dumbya Bush?

He's no genius, but presidents often aren't

BY ROGER SIMON

Is Dubya dumb? Is George W. Bush not the sharpest knife in the drawer? We know he doesn't know Slovakia from Slovenia, Greeks from "Grecians," or that there is no "standard" version of the Ten Commandments. And we also know that the big bookshelf in his Austin office contains baseballs and not books. But this begs the question: How bright do you have to be to be president?

"Well, you certainly don't have to be brilliant in an academic sense," says presidential scholar Allan Lichtman. "You just have to have a certain basic level of intelligence." True, Bush attended Andover, Yale, and Harvard—but that doesn't *prove* he's dumb. For much of American history, too much intelligence has been a potential problem for presidential candidates. William Henry Harrison's advisers worked to take off his patrician edge when he ran for president in 1840. When Bill Clinton's campaign staff found out that people associated him with Georgetown, Yale, and

Oxford, it took great pains to "dumb down" Clinton and stress his roots in tiny Hope, Ark., and his love for Big Macs, Ray-Ban sunglasses, and the AstroTurf he had in the back of his pickup truck as a youth.

That won't be Bush's problem. The Democratic National Committee has sent out a series of withering "blast faxes" dubbing the Texas governor "Bush-Lite" and claiming: "Bush has a long way to go and

a lot of learning to do . . . having already demonstrated his tenuous grasp of foreign affairs, geography, comparative religion, and . . . the Constitution." The Gore campaign is even less charitable. "When people say George

W. is all hat and no cattle, they're not referring just to his lack of positions but to the lack of gray matter filling that hat," a Gore aide says.

Typically, however, Bush is unfazed. "Just because I happen to mispronounce the name of a country doesn't mean that I don't understand how to lead," he says. "What matters is do I know how to see clear goals? Do I know how to lead? Do I shoot

straight? And that's all I know to do." Ronald Reagan made dozens of misstatements both as a candidate and as a president, and the public never seemed to mind much. Reagan's Gary Cooperesque aw-shucks attitude (which Bush has cultivated) got him through many a scrape. "The press just never got the point, which is that people look for leadership and character and principles and they don't expect complete mastery of every detail," says Bush spokesman David Beckwith. "In fact, the public knows that sometimes if you are worried about tiny details, you are not looking at the big picture."

School's out. No, say the Democrats, it's more serious than that. "Bush seems to have a cavalier attitude toward whether it's important for him to have information in the first place," says Pat Ewing, senior adviser to the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "Where other presidential candidates are studying, knowing, researching vital issues, Bush is saying: 'Hey, I'll call someone.'"

Some Republicans agree. Dan Quayle may not know how to spell potato, but he knows that Bush is getting breaks from the media that Quayle never got. "Use your wildest imagination and multiple it by a factor of three and then you'd come close to what would be happening to me if I had made similar gaffes," says Quayle.

Multiple it?

Another Republican presidential hopeful, Lamar Alexander, is even more scathing, worrying that Bush could be torn apart by Gore in head-to-head debates. "We need to know going into the general election that we have a candidate who's ready to be president."

It is revealing that the Bush campaign does not make any great claims as to Bush's intellect. "When you are out taking questions from reporters, the public realizes that it's stressful and somewhat risky," Beckwith says. "If someone handles it with aplomb, the voters care about that more than the precise answers."

"We're going to make mistakes," says Karl Rove, Bush's chief strategist. "But we need to avoid the biggest mistake of all, and that is to be tepid."

Tepid they are leaving to Al Gore.

"Gore is very smart, but he is almost too smart," says Jim Hightower, a radio commentator and former Democratic official from Texas. "He's too controlled. He sits around planning on how not to make mistakes, and so he will never make a bold stroke. Let's face it, Gore vs. Bush is going to be a race between Dull and Dullard."

But after seven action-packed years of Bill Clinton, that may be exactly the kind of race the public wants.



three through eight must pass their classes, have a 90 percent attendance record, and pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The standardized test, known as the TAAS, is the backbone of the state's rigorous educational accountability system.

The new requirements put pressure on kids. Balderas cried when she first heard she might be held back. She'd failed the reading and math sections of the TAAS by just a few points. "I was, like, real mad," the 14-year-old says. "I wanted to be with my right grade." Pullen, who went through summer school last year under the new policy and barely squeaked into eighth grade, was equally dismayed when he flunked the spring exam for the second year running. Still, he's buckling down under his mother's watchful eye. "She don't let me go nowhere," he says, "till I finish my homework."

CHRIS ANDERSON—AURORA FOR USMWA (2)



Vanessa Balderas feared being held back: "I was, like, real mad."

Waco's policy is part of a broader national trend. It's also the toughest in Texas, where it is being watched as a harbinger of a statewide plan championed by Gov. George W. Bush. The GOP presidential front-runner has praised the Waco policy on two separate visits, calling himself "a strong believer" in the tough-love approach of a district where 4 of 5 pupils are poor. Bush's plan, somewhat kinder and gentler than Waco's, will take effect when this fall's incoming kindergarteners reach third grade. "What Waco did," says Texas Education Commissioner Mike Moses, "is what we're trying to do." By many measures, Waco's assault on social promotion has been a success. At the end of the 1997-98 school year, more than 19 percent of students in third through eighth grade, or 1,350 pupils, failed the TAAS. Along with students who had bombed their coursework or had too many absences, they were urged to attend summer school. Then they had to retake and pass an old version of the test to move on to the next grade. This spring, after students, parents, and teachers had seen the district make good on its pledge to retain students who didn't measure up, scores rose to all-time highs. The TAAS failure rate dropped to 9 percent following two rounds of testing. By the time students are retested at the end of summer school, district officials hope to lower that figure still further. This year's summer school head count of 1,202 kids in grades one through eight is one third lower than last year's record enrollment of 1,810.

TAAS buddies. Rising test scores and falling retention rates demonstrate that setting higher standards works, many Waco educators say. "We've found here the kids will rise to the occasion," says fourth-grade teacher Sherry Johnson, an eight-year veteran of Kendrick Elementary School, a

modest structure in a poor and mostly Hispanic section of South Waco that stands next to one of the numerous churches that dot this town of 110,000 people. Kendrick has gone through a dramatic turnaround under the new policy. An intense focus on test preparation includes lots of practice exams, bar charts on classroom walls that record each student's progress, and a system of "TAAS buddies" that pairs school staff—including custodians and cafeteria workers—with students to offer test-taking encouragement. Skyrocketing scores have moved it off the state's low-performing list and are likely to earn it a top rating this year.

But Waco's experience also shows that a crash program to bring pupils up to par quickly can be painful for some kids and their families. About 44 percent of last year's summer-school students still weren't able to meet the new promotion standards by summer's end. Other kids didn't even attend summer classes. When the new school year began last August, over 1,000 children were set to be retained. More than 500 balked and left the district. Of the 523 students who ended up repeating a grade, more than half were promoted at the end of the school year. But that still leaves over 200 who face the harsh prospect of being retained for the second year in a row. "They're punishing the children," complains Arnita Scott, whose son Michael attended summer school last year and went on to pass the TAAS. "When a child has really applied himself" and passed his coursework, "then I don't think a state test should punish him and keep him from going to the next grade. It's not fair." McLennan County Commissioner Lester Gibson, who spearheaded a lawsuit against the district last year in an unsuccessful effort to strike down the new promotion rules, calls the new approach "a racist policy" and predicts it will lead more minority kids to quit school. There's plenty of evidence to support that. Most educational research has found that kids forced to repeat a grade don't necessarily improve their academic skills and are more likely to drop out.

Others dispute that. "What was really punitive was the system we had in place," says District Court Judge Ralph Strother, who served on the school board from 1992 until Bush appointed him to the bench earlier this year. "If I were a racist and wanted to devise an educational system that oppressed minorities, I would have continued with the one we had."

the district's tough new testing policy.

March 22, 1998

Change That Works

A School Can Overcome a Legacy of Failure

Bob Chase
President, NEA



Those who would have us believe that public education is "an ossified government monopoly," incapable of change, ought to visit one of the many "turnaround" schools across America.

Visit, for example, Martin Luther King Elementary in San Diego, California. Talk with faculty members who remember when the school was a shambles, completely isolated from its surrounding community, and failing by any measure. Today, King is a very different place--hopeful and spruced up. The drug dealers are gone from the sidewalk outside the school, test scores are up, and a community-based Friends of King Foundation supports the school's music and arts programs.

The Alamo Middle School in Alamo, Texas has re-energized itself by reconnecting with its community. Parents are now deeply involved in their children's school. Teachers visit students' homes, and parents take evening courses at the school. Twice as many of Alamo's middle schoolers now meet Texas academic standards as did before the community reinvolvement.

Today, Willow Bend Elementary school in Palatine, Illinois, enjoys an attendance rate of 97 percent, and student test scores have gone from the bottom third to the top third in the district. What happened? Three years ago the educators at Willow Bend took a hard look at what they were doing and how they were doing it, and they reinvented the school. They came up with a team-teaching approach that transformed the way students learn, and they retooled the curriculum.

Besides renewal, King, Alamo, and Willow Bend have one other notable thing in common: they serve a high number of students from low income families.

School redemption begins with a leap of faith. You have to believe that change is possible. You have to believe in your ability to change. And you have to believe in the school's children, seeing them as thinkers, problem solvers, and truth seekers, not as "students at risk."

More and more, individual public schools around the country are making that leap of faith.

In Seattle, Washington, over the last three years, 10 city schools have worked their way off a list of the lowest performing schools, with joint management-union support. In New York City, 15 schools have improved sufficiently to be removed from the state's dreaded Schools Under Registration Review.

What can we learn from these and other successful school turnaround efforts?

Raising the bar works. Set clear, high expectations for all students. That is what El Paso, Texas, has done. The majority of students in the three school districts that serve El Paso, the fifth-poorest metropolitan area in the country, now pass the state achievement test.

Downsizing works. Research now shows, conclusively, that students in smaller classes (13 to 17 students per teacher) consistently score higher on achievement and basic skills tests than students in regular classes (22-25). Reducing class size, especially at the elementary and intermediate levels, pays dividends. In addition, student learning improves when very large high schools are broken down into smaller learning units, because students no longer get lost in the system.

Professional development works. University of Wisconsin professor Jennifer O'Day, who has studied school turnarounds, notes that successful school reform efforts invariably include a strong program of learning for teachers and support staff. This enables educators to continue to improve their skills much as physicians do.

Off the shelf can work. Fortunately, not every school has to reinvent the wheel. Models have been developed and demonstrated to help schools improve student achievement. These models come with curricula and instructional guides and trainers. They include Johns Hopkins' Success for All program, E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Sequence, and others. The challenge for school administrators and faculty is to find the program that best fits their local circumstances. (NEA now has a website for those seeking more information about reform programs: <http://www.nea.org/reform>.)

School renewal is gathering speed and gaining ground. However, those of us who believe in public education must remain impatient-there is so much still to do.

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A School is Reborn

by AFT President Sandra Feldman
December 1997

*Two years ago,
children in PS 154
were among
the lowest-achieving
students in the city.*

A critical question in American education is how to provide poor children in failing and mostly urban schools with a good education. Voucher advocates have given up and argue that we should just rescue a few children by subsidizing their tuition at private schools. But how can we have a public policy of saving a few kids and ignoring the rest? If a school is that bad, no one should be stuck there.

Instead, we must--and can--educate all the children by turning around schools that are disorderly and unsafe and where kids are not learning. Close them if necessary; rethink everything about them--and do it fast.

This is not just talk. It's what Chancellor Rudy Crew, with the support and collaboration of the United Federation of Teachers, is doing in New York City. Schools that were performing so poorly the state threatened to take them over are being redesigned. Most are starting to improve, and some have made remarkable progress.

I recently visited PS 154 in central Harlem, where scores in a state-wide reading exam have risen 19.5 percent since the redesigned school opened in September 1996. (This figure is solidly documented, unlike the claims made for some private school voucher programs.)

PS 154 looks the way a good school should. The hallways are bright and clean and filled with the terrific work of children. There are no graffiti, no torn-up bulletin boards. Classroom doors stand open, and you can hear the sounds of children and teachers working together. They look busy and intent on what they're doing.

Most of the students are poor. They come from a public housing project across the street, and nearly 95 percent are eligible for Title I funds. Some have very serious problems, but the majority are average, normal-to-bright, big-city kids--and they are thriving.

A Dirty, Disorderly Place

Two years ago, the children in PS 154 were among the lowest-achieving students in the city. The school they attended, this same school, was dirty and disorderly. It was always short of books and supplies, and the adults--teachers and administrators--were frequently at odds with one another. There was no vision of what the school should be like--or any hope of making it different and better.

How did all this change? First, PS 154, which had been neglected and starved for support and resources by its local sub-district, was taken over by the chancellor. The chancellor's office, together with the United Federation of Teachers, assisted PS 154's administrators, parents, teachers, and other staff in redesigning the school. The idea was to draw up a plan whose every part would contribute to improving student learning. Ultimately PS 154 chose, as a centerpiece, "Success for All," a

reading program that has proven very effective in inner-city schools, and they organized the rest of the education plan around that program.

Teachers who wanted to be part of the new PS 154 were invited to apply; others transferred to schools elsewhere in the district. In all, 50 percent of the teachers stayed on. The rest were mostly new, young teachers who were eager to work in the redesigned school. All of the teachers--both new and experienced--got extra training to prepare them for putting the education plan into action.

Working Together

As for the leadership, the final and all-important piece, the school got an excellent new principal. She and the school's talented union building rep were able to work together and help teachers and parents follow through on every detail of the redesign.

This is a story about one school--and it's only the first chapter. But there are many stories like it, and more to come. In fact, as I was writing this column, the state education department and the Chancellor announced that PS 154, along with 14 other schools, was being removed from the state's list of low-performing schools--a major accomplishment in a relatively short period of time.

But there's another angle--an important one: Vouchers divide a community; they pit the few families who "win" the voucher lottery against the many who do not. They encourage people to give up on neighborhood schools and take scarce resources out of these schools. The rebuilding of PS 154 demonstrates something very different. Many groups made a commitment to fix this school so all the kids in the neighborhood could get a good education. Together, they achieved what none of them could have done alone. And in helping a community get back its neighborhood school, they made the community stronger.

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO - 555 New Jersey Ave, NW - Washington, DC 20001

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Three Proven Programs

Among the many school improvement programs in America's schools are three that have proven effective, especially in schools that enroll a high percentage of underachieving low-income students. Research has shown that each of these programs increases student achievement, attendance and family and community involvement and improves the school climate. The three programs are:

- [Accelerated Schools Project](#)
- [School Development Program](#)
- [Success for All](#)

All three approaches use staff collaboration, parent/community involvement, and expectations of high student achievement to improve school. The Accelerated Schools Project, associated with Stanford University, focuses on providing an enriched and accelerated curriculum. The School Development Program, associated with Yale University, emphasizes improved school climate and home-school partnerships. And Success for All, associated with Johns Hopkins University, stresses cognitive practices that increase learning. Each of these programs implement schoolwide change, and each has demonstrated success improving student achievement and attendance and increasing parent involvement.

Each of the three programs has been adopted, replicated, and implemented in up to 700 schools (elementary through high school) in as many as 70 school districts in more than 30 states. The districts range from some of the largest cities in the country (e.g., Houston, Philadelphia, Baltimore) to such middle-sized districts as Montgomery, AL, Rockford, IL, and Modesto and Riverside, CA, to tiny rural districts including tow Navaho reservations in Arizona. In addition, Accelerated Schools has a national network with ten regional centers across the country.

It should be noted that the cost of transforming existing schools into, for example, an Accelerated School is generally less than 1 percent of the school budget, about \$30-40 per student year. Success for All is funded by reallocating Title I funds plus an additional \$20,000 for start-up costs. The

schools remain public schools with no profits or fees going to for-profit companies.

The programs can be reached at the following addresses:

Accelerated Schools Project
School of Education, CERAS 109
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-3084
415-725-1676

Success for All
Johns Hopkins University
3505 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218
800-548-4998

School Development Program
Yale Child Study Center
55 College Street
New Haven, CT 06510
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School-Based Reform

Lessons from a National Study

A Guide for School Reform Teams

1995

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Tried and True

Tested Ideas for Teaching and Learning from the Regional Educational Laboratories

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School Improvement Program

Catalog of School Reform Models



National Specialty in School Change

**Catalog of
School Reform Models**

First Edition



The *Catalog of School Reform Models: First Edition* was developed to support schools, school districts, states, and others as they proceed with their work under the Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program (CSRD) passed by the U.S. Congress in 1997. It provides information on 26 entire-school, or whole-school, reform models and 18 skill- and content-based models. An Addendum comprising an additional 4 models (1 whole school model and 3 skill- and content-based models) also has been published.

The catalog was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) with assistance from the Education Commission of the States. It presents information as prescribed by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), the funding agency. The addendum was developed by NWREL with assistance from representatives of the other nine regional labs, who helped (a) structure the review process for models, (b) develop criteria for inclusion, (c) conduct reviews, and (d) write descriptions of included models.

This page contains the full text of the catalog and the addendum in two forms: first, a hypertext version with links to Web sites maintained by each model; and second, a Portable Document Format (PDF) version that preserves the original formatting of the catalog to make printing and photocopying as easy as possible.

Catalog of School Reform Models: First Edition

Hypertext version

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

ENTIRE-SCHOOL REFORM MODELS

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Catalog of School Reform Models: First Edition

(Portable Document Format version)

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► **Catalog of School Reform Models, Part 1**

Preface, introduction, and other front matter (pp. 1-6).



► **Catalog of School Reform Models, Part 2**

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► **Catalog of School Reform Models, Part 3**

Descriptions of Skill- and Content-Based Reform Models and Appendices (pp. 119-234).



► **Catalog of School Reform Models: Addendum**

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No Excuses

by Tyce Palmaffy

Houston educator Thaddeus Lott puts failing schools to shame

Gayle Fallon wanted to give her 10-year-old godson a measure of stability in life. With a father who had compiled a long record of felony convictions and a mother imprisoned for shoplifting after two prior convictions for drug possession, the boy had shuffled in and out of foster care since birth. To worsen matters, he was languishing in the chaotic environment of a dismal urban school. Fallon, the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, knew that without a decent education, her godson might stumble along the same destructive path his parents had followed. So in 1994 she secured him a spot at Mabel B. Wesley Elementary, an innovative public charter school on the outskirts of Houston.

"I love that program," Fallon says. "I wouldn't invest my godson in it if I didn't."

Fallon's praise evokes a sun-dappled public school set against a leafy suburban backdrop. And so would Wesley's manicured lawn, pristine brick facade, and buffed floors—if you ignored the barbed-wire fencing and boarded-up houses encircling the school. In fact, Wesley Elementary serves the violent, drug-infested Acres Homes section of Houston. All of its students qualify for federal Title I education funds earmarked for disadvantaged children, and its student body is 99 percent minority (93 percent black, 6 percent Hispanic). The lives of many closely mirror that of Fallon's godson.

We have come to expect mediocrity from schools whose students are saddled with such tragic circumstances. But since Thaddeus Lott became its principal in 1975, Wesley has graduated thousands of children whose reading and math scores rival those of their suburban peers. Before Lott introduced his educational philosophy, only 18 percent of Wesley's third-graders were scoring at or above grade level in reading comprehension on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. By 1980, 85 percent were achieving at or above grade level. In 1996, 100 percent of Wesley's third-graders passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in reading. Statewide, fewer than 70 percent of third-graders in schools with similar demographics passed.

To achieve this astounding turnaround, Lott eschewed popular nostrums—computers, school-to-work initiatives, parental involvement—for the basics: a proven curriculum, rigorous teacher training, strict discipline, high expectations of teachers and students, and a fervent belief that any child can learn.

"It's a myth," says Lott, "that if you're born in a poor community and your skin is a certain color that you can't achieve on a higher level."

Having succeeded at Wesley, Lott wanted to vindicate his beliefs at other troubled schools.

In this desire the community saw an opportunity to have every Acres Homes child schooled by Lott. So its residents petitioned the Houston school board to allow Lott to manage Wesley and three neighboring schools as a separate district of charter schools. The contract was signed in spring 1995, making Lott's district the first charter-school arrangement of its kind in Texas, predating even the state law encouraging communities to establish charter schools. The charter's goal: To have 70 percent of all children who have spent three years in the charter system scoring at or above grade level.

The charter gives Lott total freedom to train staff, develop a curriculum, and make hiring, firing, and promotion decisions at the four schools. The charter "allows us to feel like we're not committing a crime by doing things differently," says Lott. "It does not release us from accountability, though. We have a three-year contract, and the community expects results." As the equivalent of a district superintendent, Lott reports directly to the superintendent of Houston schools, enabling him to sidestep several layers of bureaucracy.

Only \$2,500 Per Child

It is 8 a.m. at Wesley, and Mary O'Connor's third-graders are in a hurry. They are leaving on a field trip at 9, and there's plenty of learning to do before then. Not a moment is wasted as they correct their math homework, recite vocabulary lists, and read from a novel, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. By 9 a.m., they have accomplished more than many classes do all morning.

This is the typical classroom at Wesley: The pace is quick, the goals are set high, and no disruptions are tolerated. "We have a lot of ground to cover," says Lott. "The success of these kids depends on the percentage of time they are on task. We can't let one or two students disrupt the educational experience." The first lesson Wesley kids learn is how to walk through the halls quietly, single-file with hands folded. Fighting is forbidden.

The pace is rooted in the curriculum. Upon entering Wesley as principal, Lott purchased the Direct Instructional System for Teaching and Remediation (DISTAR), a program developed at the University of Illinois during the 1960s. Known now as Reading Mastery and Connecting Math Concepts, it is based on the direct-instruction model of teaching, in which students and teachers engage in a lively, interactive regimen of structured drills and sequential lessons, each building on the last. DISTAR's phonics-based reading lessons are literally scripted for the teacher, who is required to ask 200-300 questions per day, often in rapid-fire sequence. The children's high-decibel choral responses may sound like a high-school cheerleading squad hopped up on No-Doz, but they are learning the relationships between the sounds and the letters that constitute the English language. And there's no quibbling with the results at Wesley.

During Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," the federal government began Project Follow Through, which spent \$500 million and many years investigating the most effective pedagogy for disadvantaged students. It concluded that direct instruction was the only method that even came close to elevating poor readers to the 50th percentile in achievement. Child-centered approaches that diminish the teacher's role in the classroom and reject the teaching of basic skills finished in the cellar. Ironically, researchers also found that direct instruction elevated students' self-esteem far more than the child-centered methods that ascribe a central role to high self-esteem and maintain that self-esteem suffers in heavily controlled, teacher-directed environments. Disadvantaged students succeed more often with direct instruction, however, and Lott knows that achievement builds self-esteem, not the other way around.

Direct instruction works so well that Lott steers just 3 percent of Wesley students into special-education classes. By comparison, 10 percent of all Houston schoolchildren are labeled special ed.

Houston schools can mask poor achievement by inflating their special-ed ranks because special-education children do not count toward a school's average TAAS scores. Lott refuses to engage in such subterfuge. By exempting only 3 percent of its students for special ed, Wesley's TAAS scores represent more than 90 percent of the student body (a small percentage of Hispanic children are exempted for taking the test in Spanish). Only five of 242 other Houston schools test more children; most test well below 70 percent.

"Other principals hire remedial teachers," says Phyllis Hunter, manager of reading instruction for the Houston school district. "Thaddeus hires teachers who keep kids out of remedial classes." In fact, Wesley retains just one special-ed teacher, which helps to trim its costs to an average of \$2,500 per child—nearly \$1,000 less than the district average. "We've always done more with less," boasts Lott.

Lott held to his faith in basic skills while his counterparts swooned over the now-discredited "whole-language" theory of reading, which disavows explicit phonics instruction and views teachers more as "learning facilitators" than instructors. "People started teaching without ever giving kids any decoding skills," Lott says. "They gave them a bunch of books and said, 'Read.' That was the fallacy of the whole-language bandwagon."

So many educators jumped on this bandwagon that Lott, in the pre-charter era, had to run candy sales and forgo technology upgrades to purchase DISTAR because it was not on the state's list of approved curricula. Now the charter allows him to spend his precious curriculum dollars on whichever program he deems best.

Holding Teachers Accountable

In fact, Lott defies convention at every turn. Tracking—the practice of grouping students by skill level—has been accused of pigeonholing students into rigid categories. The first action Lott took as principal was to test his students, rank them by instructional level, and place the top 22 students in one class, the next 22 in another, and so on. The students in each class comprise, at most, three skill levels, making it easier for teachers to tailor their lesson plans to the individual needs of their students.

"If you don't teach a child on his instructional level," Lott says, "you will teach him at his frustration level. A child's self-esteem and success at learning are determined by his having an opportunity to be taught at the rate and level that he is capable of being taught."

Moreover, few school districts rate teachers based on performance, yet Lott demands accountability. Early in his career he began testing children at the beginning and end of each school year. By breaking the scores down by classroom, he knows which teachers are succeeding. His personnel decisions and merit bonuses are based on the results. Often he will even post the average student scores achieved by each teacher. "Now that's peer pressure," says Karen Anastasio, a reading specialist at Wesley.

Teachers are also subject to unscheduled visits from Lott and current Wesley principal Suzie Rimes, who checks on each classroom at least once a day. On one of the days I spent at Wesley, Rimes found a teacher who had not checked her students' homework. "She's got a short-lived existence here," Rimes said. "If she can find a place to pay her to do what she wants to do, more power to her." New teachers, in particular, can expect to be observed two to three times a day.

"New teachers don't come equipped to teach" upon graduation from education schools, says Lott. "So we have a lot of training focused on teaching teachers how to teach. They get so little field practice in college."

Underlying these policies is Lott's conviction that if a child does not learn, it is the teacher's fault. "I'm in the education business," says Osborne Elementary principal Ann Davis,

another of the Lott disciples in charge of the four charter schools under his management. "If I'm not doing my job, I need to be put out of business."

These lofty expectations would merely provoke resentment among teachers if Lott did not equip them with proven strategies. New teachers attend several days of training before school begins, and Lott will release them from classes for a week to observe an experienced teacher if they need to. "Teachers need to be trained," Lott insists. "They need to know that they are supported." The school year is replete with opportunities for further training and time to share strategies with colleagues. "You can't as a teacher fail at Wesley unless you don't want to do the program," says Gayle Fallon, the head of the teachers union.

But Fallon warns prospective teachers that if they want to interpret their contracts literally, Wesley is not the place for them. "I tell them, 'You're going to work through lunch, past 5 p.m., and on Saturdays. But you're also going to get disciplinary support, the materials you need, and all the training you require,'" Fallon says. Wesley typically loses four to six teachers at the beginning of each year because they dislike the program or fail to meet Lott's standards of competence.

The workload is heavy because students must be graded in five subjects each day. And a linchpin of direct instruction is that students are tested often to ensure they have mastered the material before moving on. These measures enable teachers to give students feedback on their mistakes. It's no use, Lott says, to have kids practicing bad habits. Or to have them turning the page without having learned the previous lesson. But it also makes the job of teaching that much harder.

The demanding hours and pressure to perform take their toll. The majority of Wesley teachers have fewer than five years of teaching experience, while the average Houston teacher has spent 12 years in the same school. According to Lott, the problem is competition: "We're surrounded by plenty of less rigorous schools that love to take the teachers we've already trained." Several observers say this is integral to Lott's success: He trains young teachers his way before they become entrenched in another philosophy.

Franchising Success

In terms of education policy, the key question is: Can the Wesley way become a model for widespread education reform? Can Lott succeed without devoting the amount of time to each of his four charter schools that he has always given to Wesley? Which is indispensable, the visionary leader or the approach he has championed?

It's too early to render a verdict on the charter experiment, but the initial signs are promising. Lott's first step at Highland Heights was to replace the principal (a power the charter gives him) with Sandra Cornelius, a former Wesley assistant principal. "The last principal was a joke," says Lott. "The place was a mess, and she wouldn't even show up on time." Cornelius shares his philosophy, and she began by beautifying the school, imposing a sense of order, and adopting the direct-instruction programs.

The results have been remarkable. In 1994-95, the year before Lott assumed responsibility for Highland Heights (where 94 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches), 37 percent of its fourth graders had passed the TAAS in reading. Last spring, a whopping 100 percent passed. In math, 94 percent of the school's fourth graders passed the TAAS this year. Two years ago, the passage rate was 30 percent among fourth graders.

Osborne Elementary, the third elementary school now under Lott's management, has been improving steadily ever since Davis was hired as principal in 1993, several years before Lott took over. Fewer than 40 percent of its students had passed the TAAS in reading and math in 1993. Nowadays, more than 80 percent pass. Instead of DISTAR, Davis has chosen to use Success For All, a teaching model developed at Johns Hopkins University that

incorporates direct-instruction techniques. Lott, for the most part, has left well enough alone. "All of [the principals] are free to do their own thing as long as they get results," Lott says.

Lott's most daunting challenge is to revamp M.C. Williams, the lone middle school (grades six through eight) in his care. He spent the first year of the charter battling the old principal, who disagreed with Lott philosophically and has since been replaced. This year the school has a new principal and a new look. Formerly dark hallways now have fluorescent lighting; a once perpetually dirty floor is swept and waxed daily; graffiti is cleaned up immediately; and new principal Roy Morgan himself donned an old sweatshirt one Saturday and painted the front doors bright blue.

Morgan is a constant presence in the hallways and classrooms, and teachers are assigned posts at high-traffic areas during breaks. Their mission: Maintain order. "The teachers and administrators have finally gotten control," says assistant principal Sylvia Jones. These initial renovations are revealing, for they reflect Lott's priorities. Before attending to academics, Lott says, you must create an environment for learning. That means a clean school with cheery colors, a staff of professionals who treat students with respect, and students who understand what type of behavior is expected of them.

Test scores, however, have only seen minor improvements. Besides the turnover in leadership and the wasted year with an ineffective principal, Williams suffers from a more serious problem: Cherry-picking. Wesley graduates are technically zoned to attend Williams, but few actually enter. Most are accepted by magnet schools throughout Houston or wooed by private schools seeking high-achieving minority students. So Williams is left with hundreds of graduates of other local elementary schools starting well below grade level.

Lott's solution is to bring textbooks from Wesley into the middle school. "These kids don't know how to decode a word," he says. "Now we're having to do what the elementary schools didn't do." The charter arrangement exempts Williams from regulations forbidding the use of below-level textbooks.

A Failure To Replicate

Lott's devotion springs from his deep roots in the community. His boyhood home stands just five blocks from Wesley, and as a child he attended Highland Heights. Back then Acres Homes was largely rural; his parents raised livestock and pumped water from a well. It was a different kind of community, too, "There were more families and they looked out for each other's children," Lott laments. "My neighbor was as much a guardian as my parents. Now we have drugs, violence, babies having babies—the whole nine yards."

Soon after graduating from Texas Southern University and becoming an educator, Lott and his wife built a home near Wesley. "I wanted my children to know their heritage," Lott says. "I wanted them to sit in their grandmother's rocking chair."

Even though Lott was told that he would never recoup the house's full value, it was important to him that Acres Homes kids hold high aspirations. "Children would pass the house and admire it," Lott says, "and say, 'You can come from Acres Homes and make a difference in the world.'"

But living in Acres Homes meant his children had to attend Wesley. Finding the education lacking, he sent them to private school and vowed to take the job as principal at Wesley if it ever opened. "I knew what it was like to be a parent looking for a school that taught my kids as well as I was taught," Lott says. "For them to do less is criminal."

Opportunity knocked in 1975, and the swift and dramatic improvements at Wesley soon

attracted notice. In 1980, the school district conducted a study of Wesley and 10 other schools with similar demographics. It attributed the sudden uptick in Wesley's scores to the use of DISTAR.

With these results in hand and a supportive superintendent, more than 300 Texas schools adopted DISTAR in the early 1980s. But since DISTAR had still not been approved by the state education board, public schools had to divert discretionary funds away from other endeavors to afford the program. When classroom computers became the latest rage, these schools largely abandoned DISTAR to purchase computer hardware.

The next superintendent, Joan Raymond, was an ardent whole-language acolyte. Lott's philosophy was anathema to her, and, according to Gayle Fallon, his success prompted many Houston school district administrators to question the validity of Wesley's scores. "They assumed that if minority kids were doing well on tests, they had to be cheating," Lott says. The district sent a pair of investigators into the school to look for evidence of foul play, but they came away empty-handed.

The baseless charges provoked an indignant backlash. "[Raymond] got to meet the entire Acres Homes community at the next school board meeting," says Fallon, smiling. The pivotal moment came when ABC's *PrimeTime Live* broadcast scenes of Lott's children reading two and three years above grade level. Raymond squirmed as reporter Chris Wallace questioned the district's lack of support for Lott and her own prejudices. It had all the elements of a juicy story—a crusading hero, an intransigent bureaucracy, and children's education in the balance—and ABC ran it twice. Ultimately, it gave Lott an aura of invincibility and forced Raymond out of office.

It also brought a wave of requests from parents throughout the city desperate to enroll their children at Wesley. Some resorted to lying about where their children lived, providing the address of a vacant lot or of a relative within Lott's district. While most schools take pains to expose such fraud, Lott does not. If they want to come and don't cause any trouble, he is glad to educate them.

Now Lott has a supportive superintendent in Rod Paige (the two are good friends) along with an adoring community and a national reputation. When Paige impaneled a blue-ribbon commission to settle the reading-instruction debate in Houston, Lott was one of the experts called to serve. The charter-school arrangement sprung from Paige's desire to "create an environment in which a renegade principal like Lott could flourish," he says. Observers visit Wesley from across the country. And despite the pressures Lott places on his teachers, even the national office of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has published approving stories on direct instruction and Wesley in its journal *American Teacher*.

The most important lessons, however, have yet to be learned. Lott's direct-instruction programs are still not a part of Texas's approved curriculum; schools that want to use the programs must either gain charter status or use precious discretionary funds to buy the textbooks. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is contributing \$4.4 million over the next three years to bring Reading Mastery (formerly DISTAR) into six low-performing Houston schools, but the school district has made little effort to find out what makes Lott's program work and encourage other schools to follow it.

The resistance to adopting direct instruction is an apt metaphor for the problems and promise of our decentralized system of public education. Current thought in education circles emphasizes "child-centered" classrooms and collaborative learning groups, values the learning "process" over correct answers, and disavows the teaching of basic skills in math and reading (although phonics has experienced a resurgence as of late). These trends place control over curriculum content largely in teachers' hands.

Direct-instruction programs do the opposite. Their scripted lessons leave the teacher with

little freedom, although Wesley teachers say that having ready-made lesson plans leaves them more time to develop creative supplements. In direct instruction, the teacher runs the classroom and the students focus initially on acquiring basic skills; the primary goal is measurable student achievement. How much a teacher likes the program is of little concern. Most teachers blanch at having their instructional methods dictated so heavily by the curriculum.

Moreover, longstanding traditions of local control in education prevent any superintendent from imposing a curriculum like direct instruction on an entire district. Although that means not everyone will adopt misguided reforms (as happened in California when the state education board mandated whole language statewide and repealed it several years later after a fierce public outcry), it also means not everyone will adopt the right ones. Lott has the pleasure of managing only four schools whose principals were either trained by him or believe in his approach. Imagine attempting to impose a curriculum on 242 Houston principals and their staff, all of whom possess their own educational philosophies.

The failure to replicate Lott's program reveals another vexing matter in education: Hero worship. Whether it's Thaddeus Lott, Joe Clark of New Jersey, or Jaime Escalante of California, the latter two made famous by popular Hollywood films, when we elevate educators to the height of myth we place their achievements seemingly beyond reach. For example, when asked why the school district had not tried to replicate direct instruction in other schools, Paige answered, "The error in your premise is that it's the methodology that makes [Lott] succeed. If I had to choose any single foundation of his success, it is his intense desire to cause children to learn."

Yet Thaddeus Lott spends most of his day in meetings. Although he should be applauded for ensuring that teachers have a well-designed curriculum and the training they need, they ultimately bear the responsibility for whether the children learn. "That's what bothers me," Lott says, "the people who say you need to have a Thaddeus Lott to change things. No, you don't."

To prove that there's nothing unique about direct instruction, Paige's office provided TAAS scores from 22 Houston schools with demographics and achievement levels comparable to Wesley's, only a few of which use direct instruction. The office neglected to supply—until asked—a list including the percentage of children in each school who actually took the test.

Of the 22 schools, only two tested more than 70 percent of their kids—and one of the two was Highland Heights, which uses direct instruction. Ten of the 22 actually tested less than 50 percent of their students. No schools had tested more than 80 percent of their students, while Wesley tested 93 percent. Lott does not need to hide low-performing students to prove that direct instruction works.

To be sure, Houston has made great strides in the area of reading—the blue-ribbon committee overhauled the district's curriculum to include a focus on early systematic phonics, and TAAS passage rates are way up under Paige's watch. The school district's accountability system, in which each school is given a grade for its TAAS passage rate, has forced principals to show marked improvement or risk losing their jobs. But schools are also exempting more and more of their students from the TAAS by labeling them special education or giving them the test in Spanish.

The district's policy of benign neglect toward a man like Thaddeus Lott may allow him to "flourish," in Paige's words, but education reform demands replicable models for improving entire districts, not just a tiny subset of schools. Lott's success with direct instruction, and even Davis's record with Success For All, suggest effective reforms. "Direct instruction will certainly give us a lot more success than we have right now," says Lovely Billups, the director of field services for educational issues at the AFT.

It's a measure of how low our expectations in education have sunk when a sense of mystique surrounds a man who brought in common-sense reforms such as choosing a research-based curriculum, measuring teacher performance, conducting an on-going effort to train those teachers, and expecting children to master subjects before moving on. Should we really expect anything less?

Tyce Palmaffy is the assistant editor of Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship.

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Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion: A Guide for Educators and State and Local Leaders

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Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion: A Guide for Educators and State and Local Leaders
— May 1999

Holding Schools Accountable for Performance and Helping Them Improve

Ending social promotion requires attention to the systemic issues that reduce the capacity of our schools to educate our children, along with the political will to make changes and an understanding of the long-term benefits of those changes.

To achieve the goal of ending social promotion, states and districts will have to allocate the resources to help all students meet high standards. School administrators and teachers will then face the challenge of dealing with students who cannot make the grade. Ending social promotion involves taking risks and holding firm to the commitment to help all students reach their full potential. It requires holding stakeholders accountable for helping students reach high standards.

This section discusses the lessons to be learned from the experiences of districts that have made the effort to hold schools accountable for students' performance.

Require public reporting of school performance

Public reporting of school performance is playing an important role in holding schools more accountable and is an important tool for communicating to parents and the public about the quality of schools. To date, 36 states issue school-level report cards. An analysis of early report cards indicates that no two states report the exact same information, and the reports tended to be heavy on "input measures" that described the characteristics of schools rather than focusing on quality or performance.⁽⁴⁵⁾

School Report Cards: What Do Parents Really Want to Know?

A recent special study on school report cards by Education Week reveals what parents, taxpayers, and educators feel they need to know about schools in order to make schools more accountable for results. Parents rated the following as the top ten indicators that could be reported to hold schools accountable:

- school safety
- teacher qualifications
- class sizes
- graduation rates
- dropout rates
- statewide test scores
- parent survey data
- SAT scores
- percent of students promoted to the next grade
- attendance rates

—Quality Counts, 1999

To be useful, report cards need to display information about a variety of indicators, from student demographics and performance on assessments to use of resources and parental involvement. In some states, such as New York, report cards permit comparisons of student achievement results across similar schools in the state based on the age of students, the resource capacity of the district or school, and the economic needs of the students. Recent amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act also require

that, under certain conditions, the performance of students with disabilities be included in these reports.

In many states these report cards are distributed each year to parents and are publicized in local media when released. State, district, and school leaders generally agree that publishing school level indicators of achievement has been an important means of holding schools accountable for student performance.

Intervene in low-performing schools

Accountability for performance means that there must be consequences for schools that fail to help students achieve. Earlier this year the President released *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders*. The guide makes the point that holding schools accountable is not enough. Chronically low performing schools rarely have the capacity, on their own, to make the kinds of changes necessary to improve students' achievement. In these cases, states and districts must help create the capacity, vision, and commitment needed to improve. The guide examined numerous strategies pursued by districts across the country to intervene in chronically low-performing schools, including efforts in:

- **New York City**, where the city's lowest-performing schools, as identified by the New York State Education Department as Schools Under Registration Review (SURR), are assigned to the "Chancellor's District." The Chancellor's District Intervention Plan includes an in-depth assessment of existing school conditions using the Performance Assessment in Schools System (PASS) review, a comprehensive plan to address identified needs, and an intensive support system that ensures quality implementation. This focused intervention has resulted in the removal from the SURR list of all but four of the twelve schools in the Chancellor's Districts within the span of only two years.
- In **Chicago**, where very low performing schools are placed on probation. As part of the process, schools must develop a corrective action plan. Schools must select an external partner to assist them in the process. The district provides a school operations manager to deal with fiscal and administrative matters so that the principal can focus on improving instruction. The district also assigns a probation monitor (a former or current successful principal) to monitor a school's progress toward improving student achievement.

Because social promotion and retention disproportionately affect disadvantaged students in needy schools, it is essential that efforts to hold these schools and students accountable for meeting standards are accompanied by effective intervention strategies. To be effective, accountability measures must engage teachers and the unions that represent them, along with parents and the wider community in bringing about improvement.

Reward school improvement

Holding schools accountable for performance means not only intervening in and assisting schools where students are not meeting standards but also providing incentives for schools to continually improve performance and rewarding schools that meet expectations.

- In **Maryland**, schools that attain significant improvement over a one-year period receive a certificate of recognition. Schools that improve over two to three years receive monetary awards (ranging from \$19,000 to \$79,000 per school). School improvement teams decide how funds are spent for the benefit of the entire school.
- In **North Carolina**, schools achieving exemplary growth/gain (approximately 10 percent above statewide average) or expected growth/gain are eligible for incentive awards, which can be distributed as direct bonuses to teachers or can be used by the school. For exemplary gains, schools receive up to \$1,500 for each certified staff member and \$500 for each teacher assistant. For expected gains, schools receive up to \$750 per certified staff member and \$375 for each teacher assistant. To be eligible for incentives, schools must not have excessive exemptions and must test at least 98 percent of eligible K-8 students and 95 percent of high school students.

Ending social promotion requires real accountability for results--and this accountability must begin at the school level. These strategies require strong leadership, a sense of collective responsibility from within and outside the school, and open and honest communication among stakeholders.

Notes:

45. Education Week, 1999.

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[\[Helping Students Who Still Do Not Meet Standards\]](#)



[\[Conclusion\]](#)

Improving America's Schools: Newsletter on Issues in School Reform

Funded and Distributed by the U.S. Department of Education

May 1996

This is the third in a series of newsletters intended to help state, district, and school leaders explore key topics in improving America's schools. Each issue focuses on a critical education reform element, describes current thinking and activities, and offers sources of additional information. The newsletters share ideas nationwide on how states and school districts are reforming education and how U.S. Department of Education programs and initiatives can help.

This issue of *Improving America's Schools* provides an overview of the variety of professional development activities in this country. The issue describes: (1) better ways in which professional development is being conducted--both in school and out of school--to support improved teaching and learning; (2) principles of high-quality professional development that supports education improvement; (3) opportunities for professional development under federal legislation, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Goals 2000; and (4) state and local efforts to reform preservice preparation programs and teacher certification standards.

What's Inside:

- Rethinking Professional Development
- High-Quality Professional Development Supports Education Reform
- Opportunities for Professional Development Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education
- Reforms in Preservice Preparation Programs and Teacher Certification Standards
- Resources for Professional Development

Guest Editor:

Ann Lieberman, *National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching*

Contributing Editors:

Leslie Anderson, Miriam Gonzales, Kate Laguarda, Mary Leighton, Karen Walking-Eagle, Lisa Weiner

--*Policy Studies Associates*

The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.

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Great American Schools

Public Education Works

Schools are changing.

All across America, public school faculties are transforming teaching and learning to better meet the needs of their students, families, and communities.

Decisions about how to change the schools are not made by staff members on their own. They listen to their students, talk with parents, and meet with business and neighborhood leaders. They involve those whose lives are touched by the school. Because they know that schools are key neighborhood and community institutions — and that the only way to make meaningful improvements in student learning is to re-connect parents, communities, and their public schools.

The creation of community partnerships is one vital aspect of the school transformation process. Another crucial aspect is the support NEA members receive from the National Education Association and their state and local Associations. NEA members are education professionals committed to educational excellence. They draw on the knowledge and resources of NEA specialists and other education researchers as they work to improve learning in their schools.

Eighteen Great Schools.

The following are 18 shining examples of public school change. All are publicly managed and staffed schools deeply involved in the process of transforming teaching and learning. All are schools staffed by members of the National Education Association, education professionals committed to helping every child in America achieve to the best of his or her ability. These are public schools — free, accessible to all youngsters, committed to meeting the needs of all students and their families. They are models of what America's schools can, and must, be.

- Students at the Key School in Indianapolis may not know Harvard University Psychology Professor Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences. They may not be able to pronounce Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the name of the Professor of Psychology and Education at the University of Chicago who's done pioneering work on people's motivation to learn. But these two academics have had a major impact on learning at the Key School. The school's faculty redesigned their curriculum to reflect Gardner's work on how and Csikszentmihalyi's work on why students learn.

Results? Improved student learning in an inner-city school parents all over Indianapolis are clamoring to get their children into.

- The constant bells and hallway frenzy of the six-period day are gone from West Seattle High School. Students now take four 85-minute classes a day. Teachers have revised their teaching strategies to include more active and in-depth learning that teaches to multiple intelligences and different learning styles. The changes at the Seattle, Washington high school were made possible by a joint effort of the Seattle Education Association and the Seattle Public Schools to move more decision-making responsibility and resources to each school.

Results? In just one year student attendance jumped from 86 to 93 percent.

There are more electives. The school's halls are quieter. Discipline has improved. And teachers have three classes instead of five; 75-100 students instead of 130-150.

- Those accustomed to classes of students all the same age with the teacher in the front dispensing knowledge are in for a surprise when they visit Travis Heights Elementary School in Austin, Texas. Students are grouped in multi-aged classes that stay with the same teacher for two years. Teachers and students work cooperatively. There's loads of hands-on, active learning. Older students serve as mentors for their younger peers. Travis Heights' assessment system is based on portfolios of student work, parent-teacher and student-parent-teacher conferences, and narrative reports of student progress.

Results? Improved student achievement, including a narrowing of the gap between Hispanic and white student test scores. A waiting list of students who want to transfer to this inner city Austin school.

- The teachers in New Albany, Indiana control 72 percent of their school district's budget. They're the ones who decide how instructional funds are spent. They set teacher salaries, make key curricular decisions, and determine their own working conditions. The New Albany/Floyd County Education Association has transformed its collective bargaining committee into the budget oversight committee. Over the past couple years they've reshaped the school district budget to create 60 new teaching positions, reduce secondary school class size, and create prep time for elementary teachers.

Results? Improved student learning, greatly increased community support for the schools, and a newly supportive atmosphere for learning in the community.

- West Ridge Elementary in Greece, New York may be housed in an old building, but it's a very new school. Every classroom boasts seven IBM computers used by both students and staff. Students are grouped in K-5 families and they stay with those families throughout their West Ridge years. There's lots of cooperative and active learning that recognizes different learning styles. When Greece teachers planned the school in 1990, they designed it to meet the needs of students and their families, outside as well as within the traditional school day. They planned the school to make parents partners in their children's education — and partners in school decision making as well.

Results? High parental involvement. Student excitement about school and learning. West Ridge selects each year's kindergarten class by lottery. There was a 150-child waiting list for the 1995-96 kindergarten class.

- At San Diego's O'Farrell Community School students are grouped in Educational Families that consist of 150 students and six teachers. Student assessment centers on portfolios and exhibitions of mastery. The commitment is to prepare all students for advanced high school courses. The school, chartered under California's Charter School Law, is governed by a Community Council composed of staff, parents, and students. The Council has authority for staffing, budget, and all operational decisions. Teachers in the Educational Families decide on curriculum, scheduling, and discipline within their families.

Results? Increased student attendance and involvement. A strong sense of unity and caring among the students at this racially diverse urban middle school.

- Keep your fists down and your mind open. That's how students at Colbert Elementary School in Broward County, Florida are learning to create a safe school environment.

Working with parents and the community through the Coalition for Community Empowerment, the support staff at Colbert and seven other Broward County schools have developed safe school plans. Colbert students with a score to settle meet in the Peace Center to talk out their disputes with the help of an adult from the community trained in mediation.

Results? A safe school. Increased academic achievement. Closer school-community ties. And national recognition through a Safe and Drug-Free School Award.

- When Aztec Elementary in Scottsdale, Arizona opened in fall 1993, its staff and parents had already been working together for months. They planned a school in which school-wide, year-long learning themes are taught in multi-aged classrooms of no more than 25 students. Students work cooperatively. Active, student-centered learning is geared to multiple intelligences. Students with special needs are fully integrated into regular classrooms. The school uses a variety of assessment techniques including portfolios, performance tasks, and projects. Teachers plan and work together.

Results? After just two years of existence, Aztec is nationally recognized as a school of excellence.

- Six years ago teachers in Glenview, Illinois exchanged their collective bargaining contract for a constitution assuring that teachers, along with parents, play a major role in making educational decisions. Teacher-majority committees oversee instructional leadership, personnel, and finance for the district. And at each school, local school councils composed of parents and staff set educational goals and evaluate results. The collaboration has led to real educational change in this Chicago suburb. Among the instructional innovations are multi-age grouping of students; team teaching and learning; vastly increased use of technology; and whole school thematic learning.

Results? A new research paper on Glenview documents that increased staff collaboration has resulted in increased student cooperation and achievement.

- Up-to-date technologies and a learning community that includes staff and parents are hallmarks of Silver Ridge Elementary School in Central Kitsap, Washington. The media center is the hub of the school; classrooms with moveable walls are grouped around computer labs. Networked computers link students, teachers, and the media center. All classrooms have telephones. School-wide themes create a true learning community in this school designed by the staff with parent cooperation. Students' siblings and staff children are given top priority at a daycare program housed in the school.

Results? Silver Ridge students' achievement test scores have risen from the 43rd to 63rd percentile. Discipline referrals have decreased dramatically at this school serving a highly transient military community.

- A family resource center is located in the school. Adult classes -- in subjects as diverse as English, computers, and fire safety -- are offered at the school. These are just two of the initiatives the staff of Woodbury Elementary in rural Marshalltown, Iowa, has taken to meet the needs of its changing student population. Many Woodbury students are newly arrived immigrants who come to school speaking no English. Eight out of ten of the students are eligible to free or reduced price lunch. The Woodbury staff knows that the key to improving student learning is parent support. They are making parents welcome in the school and working to involve them in their children's education,

Results? Attendance has increased to 98 percent. Parent volunteer hours have quadrupled as Woodbury has become a focal point for the community. .

- A program that provides high school students opportunities to explore careers ranging from the arts to health care to plumbing and law. A schoolwide emphasis on writing and critical thinking. Internships, community service work experiences, and walking trips to local government, business, and cultural centers. All this is part of the educational program at the Brown School, a 600-student, ethnically diverse, K-12 inner city school in Louisville, Kentucky. Students are carefully guided through a self-directed curriculum as part of the school's focus on fostering student self-discipline and responsibility.

Results? Improved student learning and increased test scores. A waiting list to for places in the school.

- The staff at Azalea Elementary School in St Petersburg, Florida determined that to improved student learning they needed to: set clear standards for promotion from one grade to the next, increase the school-home connection, and provide access to health and social services for the families of students in need. They also decided to focus some extra attention on the fourth of Azelea's students who are bused to the school from one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. They've done it all -- including setting up after-school and summer programs in the neighborhood from which the students are bused.

Results? Dramatic increases in daily attendance, standardized test scores, and parent involvement. A dramatic decrease in disciplinary problems.

- In addition to stressing written and verbal communications, the 21st Century Learning Center in Largo, Florida focuses on providing its students with opportunities to explore different career paths. The Learning Center is a school-within-a-school, housed on the campus of a large senior high. Students -- those who are college-bound and those who plan to move directly into the labor force after graduation -- create individual career development portfolios and have the opportunity to work with local people in different careers.

Results? Exceptionally high pass rates on the state high school exit exam: 98% in English, 92% in math. Two applicants for each available opening.

- The Woods Learning Center in Casper, Wyoming is managed by its staff. The 120-student kindergarten through eighth grade school has no principal. Classrooms include students of varying ages. Instruction focuses on themes that cross traditional subject areas. Parents are in the building every day working with students and teachers. Woods Learning Center has managed to keep the school and classes small without spending more than other district schools.

Results? Twelve of last year's 15 graduates are on the honor roll in their current high schools. There's always a waiting list for admission to Woods.

- In the four years since the 1991-92, Tempe, Arizona's Rover Elementary School has been completely transformed. Working with a new principal, the staff totally redesigned the approach to student learning in this 400-student school. Students are grouped in multi-age classrooms, learning is organized around themes and skills instruction is woven into the themes. Teachers work with students to solve problems and student leadership teams take on responsibilities not only in the school, but in the community as well.

Results? Student attendance is high and discipline problems are minimal.

Standardized test scores are among the highest in the district.

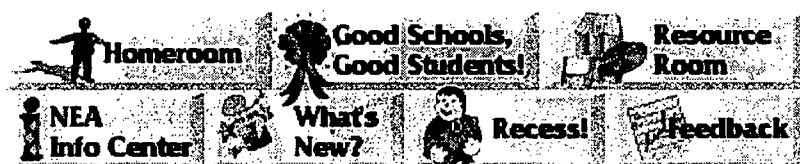
- Manhattan, Kansas, a rural community of 2,200, has no public library, health services, or public transportation. But it has Ogden Elementary School. The Ogden staff is dedicated to educating students -- and to serving the broader community. The school offers all-day kindergarten, health screening for preschoolers, after-school and summer enrichment programs, family reading and math workshops, budgeting and nutrition classes, and library services for everyone in Manhattan.

Results? Students at all grade levels average 17 months growth annually on standardized achievement tests. Ninety-eight percent of parents participate in four yearly parent, child, teacher conferences.

- America's high schools are changing. At Asheboro (North Carolina) High School, as at West Seattle High, the 55-minute, six-period day has been replaced by a slower-paced, more intensive day of four-periods. Students learn more and change classes less. Teachers use the time they're not assigned a class to work one-on-one with students, confer with parents, or plan with each other. Asheboro has also instituted a student registration to help personalize the large high school. Each student is assigned a staff advisor for the four high school years. Since the entire staff -- including the principal -- participates, each staff member works with just 10 to 12 students.

Results? Student scores on state-required tests, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and advanced placement tests have increased across-the-board since the new scheduling plan was implemented.

National Education Association National Center for Innovation 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 202-822-7350 / FAX 202-822-7482



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AN EDUCATORS' GUIDE TO SCHOOLWIDE REFORM

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS:

American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Education Association

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EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE

1 p.m. February 11, 1999

EDUCATIONAL REFORM 'CONSUMER GUIDE' UNVEILED

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Five national education associations representing both teachers and administrators have joined in announcing publication of "An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform," a consumer-friendly analysis of 24 widely used programs designed to improve student achievement in low-performing schools.

The 141-page guide, prepared by the independent, Washington, D.C.-based American Institutes for Research (AIR), was unveiled at a briefing at the National Press Club Feb. 11. Teaming to sponsor the project were the American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and National Education Association.

"Our common commitment to schoolwide reform brought us together to invest in this extensive research," explained NEA President Bob Chase. "When we have solid, defined measurements to show how reform efforts are really working, there can be significant payoff in the classroom."

"Our members want to know what will work to help their students succeed," said Nat LaCour, executive vice president of the AFT. "This guide helps us scrutinize the research so that we can distinguish among programs with a track record of success, programs that show promise, and those that are anybody's guess."

The guide evaluates the programs' performance and capabilities based on evidence of increased student achievement, first-year costs, and assistance provided by the developers to schools that adopt their strategies. Some of the programs have been in



existence for more than two decades. More than 8,000 schools nationwide follow their models.

AIR ranked the programs according to the amount of solid research and the findings of that research, according to Rebecca Herman, who directed its project team.

Included among the 24 schoolwide programs are 17 mentioned in legislation funded last year which created the federal government's Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program. While some are rapidly gaining popularity and wide attention in the press, studies on their effectiveness or comparative strengths have been sparse.

The guide found:

- Three programs show "strong" evidence of positive effects on student achievement: Direct Instruction, High Schools That Work, and Success for All.
- Five programs show "promising" student achievement results: Community for Learning, Core Knowledge, Different Ways of Knowing, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, and School Development Program.
- Six programs show "marginal" achievement results, two programs show "weak" results, while eight, most of them relatively new, had no research on which to judge results.
- Twelve programs offer "strong" support to schools that implement their strategies, with 10 others considered "promising."
- First-year implementation costs, which reflect variations in scope and requirements the programs place on schools, range from \$12,000 to more than \$588,000.

Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, pointed out, "Before this guide came along, about the only way educators could judge the worth of some of these programs was by the quality of the developers' advertising and the firmness of their handshakes. Now, superintendents, principals, and classroom teachers can sit down together and make reasonable decisions about which are best for their districts' needs."

National Association of Elementary School Principals Executive Director Samuel Sava emphasized that, while this report is a useful tool, principals should not rush to drop established programs that work in their schools. "No one size fits all schools; each one is unique. This report can guide principals and their teachers to reform programs that must fit their students and local circumstances, but the ultimate test of any reform is how well and thoroughly a school facility puts it to work."

An introductory letter by leaders of the five groups identified two challenges. "We need to develop a strong evidence base on if, how and why students are achieving," stressed Thomas Koerner, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. "And the federal government must invest in more schoolwide programs, building in multi-year programmatic research and development elements."

Copies of "An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform," which includes extensive appendices, are available from the sponsoring organizations. Non-member price: \$15.95. Member price \$12.95. The full text or a link to the full text is available on the Web sites of the sponsoring organizations and the publisher, Educational Research Service.

AFT Internet Resources on School Reform



Raising Student Achievement: An Internet Resource Guide for Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

Access on-line information about how to fix one of this nation's most persistent problems: schools that don't work. This resource guide presents ideas, information, and materials which educators and policymakers can use to help foster educationally sound efforts to turn around low performing schools. The site includes an AFT policy statement on redesigning low-performing schools, legislative updates and guidance, profiles of selected districts, sample contract language, information on research-backed programs, guidance on how to effectively select and implement such programs, links to additional resources on school redesign, and more. Visit the site at:

<http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa>



The **Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program**, or **Obey-Porter**, is a three-year federal program that, in its initial year, provides \$145 million to help improve low-performing schools -- especially those serving economically disadvantaged students. The program funds schools to select and adopt schoolwide reform models based on solid research, which can demonstrate their effectiveness and prove that they can be replicated. This web site includes more information about whole school reform, an overview of the CSRD legislation, guidance to states or districts on how to apply for CSRD funds, and up-to-date links to resources and events on whole school reform. Visit the site at:

<http://www.aft.org/edissues/csrd>

For more information, contact:

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No Excuses

by Tyce Palmaffy

Houston educator Thaddeus Lott puts failing schools to shame

Gayle Fallon wanted to give her 10-year-old godson a measure of stability in life. With a father who had compiled a long record of felony convictions and a mother imprisoned for shoplifting after two prior convictions for drug possession, the boy had shuffled in and out of foster care since birth. To worsen matters, he was languishing in the chaotic environment of a dismal urban school. Fallon, the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, knew that without a decent education, her godson might stumble along the same destructive path his parents had followed. So in 1994 she secured him a spot at Mabel B. Wesley Elementary, an innovative public charter school on the outskirts of Houston.

"I love that program," Fallon says. "I wouldn't invest my godson in it if I didn't."

Fallon's praise evokes a sun-dappled public school set against a leafy suburban backdrop. And so would Wesley's manicured lawn, pristine brick facade, and buffed floors—if you ignored the barbed-wire fencing and boarded-up houses encircling the school. In fact, Wesley Elementary serves the violent, drug-infested Acres Homes section of Houston. All of its students qualify for federal Title I education funds earmarked for disadvantaged children, and its student body is 99 percent minority (93 percent black, 6 percent Hispanic). The lives of many closely mirror that of Fallon's godson.

We have come to expect mediocrity from schools whose students are saddled with such tragic circumstances. But since Thaddeus Lott became its principal in 1975, Wesley has graduated thousands of children whose reading and math scores rival those of their suburban peers. Before Lott introduced his educational philosophy, only 18 percent of Wesley's third-graders were scoring at or above grade level in reading comprehension on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. By 1980, 85 percent were achieving at or above grade level. In 1996, 100 percent of Wesley's third-graders passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in reading. Statewide, fewer than 70 percent of third-graders in schools with similar demographics passed.

To achieve this astounding turnaround, Lott eschewed popular nostrums—computers, school-to-work initiatives, parental involvement—for the basics: a proven curriculum, rigorous teacher training, strict discipline, high expectations of teachers and students, and a fervent belief that any child can learn.

"It's a myth," says Lott, "that if you're born in a poor community and your skin is a certain color that you can't achieve on a higher level."

Having succeeded at Wesley, Lott wanted to vindicate his beliefs at other troubled schools.

In this desire the community saw an opportunity to have every Acres Homes child schooled by Lott. So its residents petitioned the Houston school board to allow Lott to manage Wesley and three neighboring schools as a separate district of charter schools. The contract was signed in spring 1995, making Lott's district the first charter-school arrangement of its kind in Texas, predating even the state law encouraging communities to establish charter schools. The charter's goal: To have 70 percent of all children who have spent three years in the charter system scoring at or above grade level.

The charter gives Lott total freedom to train staff, develop a curriculum, and make hiring, firing, and promotion decisions at the four schools. The charter "allows us to feel like we're not committing a crime by doing things differently," says Lott. "It does not release us from accountability, though. We have a three-year contract, and the community expects results." As the equivalent of a district superintendent, Lott reports directly to the superintendent of Houston schools, enabling him to sidestep several layers of bureaucracy.

Only \$2,500 Per Child

It is 8 a.m. at Wesley, and Mary O'Connor's third-graders are in a hurry. They are leaving on a field trip at 9, and there's plenty of learning to do before then. Not a moment is wasted as they correct their math homework, recite vocabulary lists, and read from a novel, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. By 9 a.m., they have accomplished more than many classes do all morning.

This is the typical classroom at Wesley: The pace is quick, the goals are set high, and no disruptions are tolerated. "We have a lot of ground to cover," says Lott. "The success of these kids depends on the percentage of time they are on task. We can't let one or two students disrupt the educational experience." The first lesson Wesley kids learn is how to walk through the halls quietly, single-file with hands folded. Fighting is forbidden.

The pace is rooted in the curriculum. Upon entering Wesley as principal, Lott purchased the Direct Instructional System for Teaching and Remediation (DISTAR), a program developed at the University of Illinois during the 1960s. Known now as Reading Mastery and Connecting Math Concepts, it is based on the direct-instruction model of teaching, in which students and teachers engage in a lively, interactive regimen of structured drills and sequential lessons, each building on the last. DISTAR's phonics-based reading lessons are literally scripted for the teacher, who is required to ask 200-300 questions per day, often in rapid-fire sequence. The children's high-decibel choral responses may sound like a high-school cheerleading squad hopped up on No-Doz, but they are learning the relationships between the sounds and the letters that constitute the English language. And there's no quibbling with the results at Wesley.

During Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," the federal government began Project Follow Through, which spent \$500 million and many years investigating the most effective pedagogy for disadvantaged students. It concluded that direct instruction was the only method that even came close to elevating poor readers to the 50th percentile in achievement. Child-centered approaches that diminish the teacher's role in the classroom and reject the teaching of basic skills finished in the cellar. Ironically, researchers also found that direct instruction elevated students' self-esteem far more than the child-centered methods that ascribe a central role to high self-esteem and maintain that self-esteem suffers in heavily controlled, teacher-directed environments. Disadvantaged students succeed more often with direct instruction, however, and Lott knows that achievement builds self-esteem, not the other way around.

Direct instruction works so well that Lott steers just 3 percent of Wesley students into special-education classes. By comparison, 10 percent of all Houston schoolchildren are labeled special ed.

Houston schools can mask poor achievement by inflating their special-ed ranks because special-education children do not count toward a school's average TAAS scores. Lott refuses to engage in such subterfuge. By exempting only 3 percent of its students for special ed, Wesley's TAAS scores represent more than 90 percent of the student body (a small percentage of Hispanic children are exempted for taking the test in Spanish). Only five of 242 other Houston schools test more children; most test well below 70 percent.

"Other principals hire remedial teachers," says Phyllis Hunter, manager of reading instruction for the Houston school district. "Thaddeus hires teachers who keep kids out of remedial classes." In fact, Wesley retains just one special-ed teacher, which helps to trim its costs to an average of \$2,500 per child—nearly \$1,000 less than the district average. "We've always done more with less," boasts Lott.

Lott held to his faith in basic skills while his counterparts swooned over the now-discredited "whole-language" theory of reading, which disavows explicit phonics instruction and views teachers more as "learning facilitators" than instructors. "People started teaching without ever giving kids any decoding skills," Lott says. "They gave them a bunch of books and said, 'Read.' That was the fallacy of the whole-language bandwagon."

So many educators jumped on this bandwagon that Lott, in the pre-charter era, had to run candy sales and forgo technology upgrades to purchase DISTAR because it was not on the state's list of approved curricula. Now the charter allows him to spend his precious curriculum dollars on whichever program he deems best.

Holding Teachers Accountable

In fact, Lott defies convention at every turn. Tracking—the practice of grouping students by skill level—has been accused of pigeonholing students into rigid categories. The first action Lott took as principal was to test his students, rank them by instructional level, and place the top 22 students in one class, the next 22 in another, and so on. The students in each class comprise, at most, three skill levels, making it easier for teachers to tailor their lesson plans to the individual needs of their students.

"If you don't teach a child on his instructional level," Lott says, "you will teach him at his frustration level. A child's self-esteem and success at learning are determined by his having an opportunity to be taught at the rate and level that he is capable of being taught."

Moreover, few school districts rate teachers based on performance, yet Lott demands accountability. Early in his career he began testing children at the beginning and end of each school year. By breaking the scores down by classroom, he knows which teachers are succeeding. His personnel decisions and merit bonuses are based on the results. Often he will even post the average student scores achieved by each teacher. "Now that's peer pressure," says Karen Anastasio, a reading specialist at Wesley.

Teachers are also subject to unscheduled visits from Lott and current Wesley principal Suzie Rimes, who checks on each classroom at least once a day. On one of the days I spent at Wesley, Rimes found a teacher who had not checked her students' homework. "She's got a short-lived existence here," Rimes said. "If she can find a place to pay her to do what she wants to do, more power to her." New teachers, in particular, can expect to be observed two to three times a day.

"New teachers don't come equipped to teach" upon graduation from education schools, says Lott. "So we have a lot of training focused on teaching teachers how to teach. They get so little field practice in college."

Underlying these policies is Lott's conviction that if a child does not learn, it is the teacher's fault. "I'm in the education business," says Osborne Elementary principal Ann Davis,

another of the Lott disciples in charge of the four charter schools under his management. "If I'm not doing my job, I need to be put out of business."

These lofty expectations would merely provoke resentment among teachers if Lott did not equip them with proven strategies. New teachers attend several days of training before school begins, and Lott will release them from classes for a week to observe an experienced teacher if they need to. "Teachers need to be trained," Lott insists. "They need to know that they are supported." The school year is replete with opportunities for further training and time to share strategies with colleagues. "You can't as a teacher fail at Wesley unless you don't want to do the program," says Gayle Fallon, the head of the teachers union.

But Fallon warns prospective teachers that if they want to interpret their contracts literally, Wesley is not the place for them. "I tell them, 'You're going to work through lunch, past 5 p.m., and on Saturdays. But you're also going to get disciplinary support, the materials you need, and all the training you require,'" Fallon says. Wesley typically loses four to six teachers at the beginning of each year because they dislike the program or fail to meet Lott's standards of competence.

The workload is heavy because students must be graded in five subjects each day. And a linchpin of direct instruction is that students are tested often to ensure they have mastered the material before moving on. These measures enable teachers to give students feedback on their mistakes. It's no use, Lott says, to have kids practicing bad habits. Or to have them turning the page without having learned the previous lesson. But it also makes the job of teaching that much harder.

The demanding hours and pressure to perform take their toll. The majority of Wesley teachers have fewer than five years of teaching experience, while the average Houston teacher has spent 12 years in the same school. According to Lott, the problem is competition: "We're surrounded by plenty of less rigorous schools that love to take the teachers we've already trained." Several observers say this is integral to Lott's success: He trains young teachers his way before they become entrenched in another philosophy.

Franchising Success

In terms of education policy, the key question is: Can the Wesley way become a model for widespread education reform? Can Lott succeed without devoting the amount of time to each of his four charter schools that he has always given to Wesley? Which is indispensable, the visionary leader or the approach he has championed?

It's too early to render a verdict on the charter experiment, but the initial signs are promising. Lott's first step at Highland Heights was to replace the principal (a power the charter gives him) with Sandra Cornelius, a former Wesley assistant principal. "The last principal was a joke," says Lott. "The place was a mess, and she wouldn't even show up on time." Cornelius shares his philosophy, and she began by beautifying the school, imposing a sense of order, and adopting the direct-instruction programs.

The results have been remarkable. In 1994-95, the year before Lott assumed responsibility for Highland Heights (where 94 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches), 37 percent of its fourth graders had passed the TAAS in reading. Last spring, a whopping 100 percent passed. In math, 94 percent of the school's fourth graders passed the TAAS this year. Two years ago, the passage rate was 30 percent among fourth graders.

Osborne Elementary, the third elementary school now under Lott's management, has been improving steadily ever since Davis was hired as principal in 1993, several years before Lott took over. Fewer than 40 percent of its students had passed the TAAS in reading and math in 1993. Nowadays, more than 80 percent pass. Instead of DISTAR, Davis has chosen to use Success For All, a teaching model developed at Johns Hopkins University that

incorporates direct-instruction techniques. Lott, for the most part, has left well enough alone. "All of [the principals] are free to do their own thing as long as they get results," Lott says.

Lott's most daunting challenge is to revamp M.C. Williams, the lone middle school (grades six through eight) in his care. He spent the first year of the charter battling the old principal, who disagreed with Lott philosophically and has since been replaced. This year the school has a new principal and a new look. Formerly dark hallways now have fluorescent lighting; a once perpetually dirty floor is swept and waxed daily; graffiti is cleaned up immediately; and new principal Roy Morgan himself donned an old sweatshirt one Saturday and painted the front doors bright blue.

Morgan is a constant presence in the hallways and classrooms, and teachers are assigned posts at high-traffic areas during breaks. Their mission: Maintain order. "The teachers and administrators have finally gotten control," says assistant principal Sylvia Jones. These initial renovations are revealing, for they reflect Lott's priorities. Before attending to academics, Lott says, you must create an environment for learning. That means a clean school with cheery colors, a staff of professionals who treat students with respect, and students who understand what type of behavior is expected of them.

Test scores, however, have only seen minor improvements. Besides the turnover in leadership and the wasted year with an ineffective principal, Williams suffers from a more serious problem: Cherry-picking. Wesley graduates are technically zoned to attend Williams, but few actually enter. Most are accepted by magnet schools throughout Houston or wooed by private schools seeking high-achieving minority students. So Williams is left with hundreds of graduates of other local elementary schools starting well below grade level.

Lott's solution is to bring textbooks from Wesley into the middle school. "These kids don't know how to decode a word," he says. "Now we're having to do what the elementary schools didn't do." The charter arrangement exempts Williams from regulations forbidding the use of below-level textbooks.

A Failure To Replicate

Lott's devotion springs from his deep roots in the community. His boyhood home stands just five blocks from Wesley, and as a child he attended Highland Heights. Back then Acres Homes was largely rural; his parents raised livestock and pumped water from a well. It was a different kind of community, too, "There were more families and they looked out for each other's children," Lott laments. "My neighbor was as much a guardian as my parents. Now we have drugs, violence, babies having babies—the whole nine yards."

Soon after graduating from Texas Southern University and becoming an educator, Lott and his wife built a home near Wesley. "I wanted my children to know their heritage," Lott says. "I wanted them to sit in their grandmother's rocking chair."

Even though Lott was told that he would never recoup the house's full value, it was important to him that Acres Homes kids hold high aspirations. "Children would pass the house and admire it," Lott says, "and say, 'You can come from Acres Homes and make a difference in the world.' "

But living in Acres Homes meant his children had to attend Wesley. Finding the education lacking, he sent them to private school and vowed to take the job as principal at Wesley if it ever opened. "I knew what it was like to be a parent looking for a school that taught my kids as well as I was taught," Lott says. "For them to do less is criminal."

Opportunity knocked in 1975, and the swift and dramatic improvements at Wesley soon

attracted notice. In 1980, the school district conducted a study of Wesley and 10 other schools with similar demographics. It attributed the sudden uptick in Wesley's scores to the use of DISTAR.

With these results in hand and a supportive superintendent, more than 300 Texas schools adopted DISTAR in the early 1980s. But since DISTAR had still not been approved by the state education board, public schools had to divert discretionary funds away from other endeavors to afford the program. When classroom computers became the latest rage, these schools largely abandoned DISTAR to purchase computer hardware.

The next superintendent, Joan Raymond, was an ardent whole-language acolyte. Lott's philosophy was anathema to her, and, according to Gayle Fallon, his success prompted many Houston school district administrators to question the validity of Wesley's scores. "They assumed that if minority kids were doing well on tests, they had to be cheating," Lott says. The district sent a pair of investigators into the school to look for evidence of foul play, but they came away empty-handed.

The baseless charges provoked an indignant backlash. "[Raymond] got to meet the entire Acres Homes community at the next school board meeting," says Fallon, smiling. The pivotal moment came when ABC's *PrimeTime Live* broadcast scenes of Lott's children reading two and three years above grade level. Raymond squirmed as reporter Chris Wallace questioned the district's lack of support for Lott and her own prejudices. It had all the elements of a juicy story—a crusading hero, an intransigent bureaucracy, and children's education in the balance—and ABC ran it twice. Ultimately, it gave Lott an aura of invincibility and forced Raymond out of office.

It also brought a wave of requests from parents throughout the city desperate to enroll their children at Wesley. Some resorted to lying about where their children lived, providing the address of a vacant lot or of a relative within Lott's district. While most schools take pains to expose such fraud, Lott does not. If they want to come and don't cause any trouble, he is glad to educate them.

Now Lott has a supportive superintendent in Rod Paige (the two are good friends) along with an adoring community and a national reputation. When Paige impaneled a blue-ribbon commission to settle the reading-instruction debate in Houston, Lott was one of the experts called to serve. The charter-school arrangement sprung from Paige's desire to "create an environment in which a renegade principal like Lott could flourish," he says. Observers visit Wesley from across the country. And despite the pressures Lott places on his teachers, even the national office of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has published approving stories on direct instruction and Wesley in its journal *American Teacher*.

The most important lessons, however, have yet to be learned. Lott's direct-instruction programs are still not a part of Texas's approved curriculum; schools that want to use the programs must either gain charter status or use precious discretionary funds to buy the textbooks. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is contributing \$4.4 million over the next three years to bring Reading Mastery (formerly DISTAR) into six low-performing Houston schools, but the school district has made little effort to find out what makes Lott's program work and encourage other schools to follow it.

The resistance to adopting direct instruction is an apt metaphor for the problems and promise of our decentralized system of public education. Current thought in education circles emphasizes "child-centered" classrooms and collaborative learning groups, values the learning "process" over correct answers, and disavows the teaching of basic skills in math and reading (although phonics has experienced a resurgence as of late). These trends place control over curriculum content largely in teachers' hands.

Direct-instruction programs do the opposite. Their scripted lessons leave the teacher with

little freedom, although Wesley teachers say that having ready-made lesson plans leaves them more time to develop creative supplements. In direct instruction, the teacher runs the classroom and the students focus initially on acquiring basic skills; the primary goal is measurable student achievement. How much a teacher likes the program is of little concern. Most teachers blanch at having their instructional methods dictated so heavily by the curriculum.

Moreover, longstanding traditions of local control in education prevent any superintendent from imposing a curriculum like direct instruction on an entire district. Although that means not everyone will adopt misguided reforms (as happened in California when the state education board mandated whole language statewide and repealed it several years later after a fierce public outcry), it also means not everyone will adopt the right ones. Lott has the pleasure of managing only four schools whose principals were either trained by him or believe in his approach. Imagine attempting to impose a curriculum on 242 Houston principals and their staff, all of whom possess their own educational philosophies.

The failure to replicate Lott's program reveals another vexing matter in education: Hero worship. Whether it's Thaddeus Lott, Joe Clark of New Jersey, or Jaime Escalante of California, the latter two made famous by popular Hollywood films, when we elevate educators to the height of myth we place their achievements seemingly beyond reach. For example, when asked why the school district had not tried to replicate direct instruction in other schools, Paige answered, "The error in your premise is that it's the methodology that makes [Lott] succeed. If I had to choose any single foundation of his success, it is his intense desire to cause children to learn."

Yet Thaddeus Lott spends most of his day in meetings. Although he should be applauded for ensuring that teachers have a well-designed curriculum and the training they need, they ultimately bear the responsibility for whether the children learn. "That's what bothers me," Lott says, "the people who say you need to have a Thaddeus Lott to change things. No, you don't."

To prove that there's nothing unique about direct instruction, Paige's office provided TAAS scores from 22 Houston schools with demographics and achievement levels comparable to Wesley's, only a few of which use direct instruction. The office neglected to supply—until asked—a list including the percentage of children in each school who actually took the test.

Of the 22 schools, only two tested more than 70 percent of their kids—and one of the two was Highland Heights, which uses direct instruction. Ten of the 22 actually tested less than 50 percent of their students. No schools had tested more than 80 percent of their students, while Wesley tested 93 percent. Lott does not need to hide low-performing students to prove that direct instruction works.

To be sure, Houston has made great strides in the area of reading—the blue-ribbon committee overhauled the district's curriculum to include a focus on early systematic phonics, and TAAS passage rates are way up under Paige's watch. The school district's accountability system, in which each school is given a grade for its TAAS passage rate, has forced principals to show marked improvement or risk losing their jobs. But schools are also exempting more and more of their students from the TAAS by labeling them special education or giving them the test in Spanish.

The district's policy of benign neglect toward a man like Thaddeus Lott may allow him to "flourish," in Paige's words, but education reform demands replicable models for improving entire districts, not just a tiny subset of schools. Lott's success with direct instruction, and even Davis's record with Success For All, suggest effective reforms. "Direct instruction will certainly give us a lot more success than we have right now," says Lovely Billups, the director of field services for educational issues at the AFT.

It's a measure of how low our expectations in education have sunk when a sense of mystique surrounds a man who brought in common-sense reforms such as choosing a research-based curriculum, measuring teacher performance, conducting an on-going effort to train those teachers, and expecting children to master subjects before moving on. Should we really expect anything less?

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The Gold Star State

By Tyce Palmaffy

How Texas jumped to the head of the class in elementary school achievement

If funding and demography were vital to educational performance, then Texas would likely have one of the worst public-school systems in the nation. Spending per pupil in the Lone Star State is well below the national average, and teachers' pay ranks 35th among the states. One-third of the state's schoolchildren qualify for federal education aid to disadvantaged students under the Title I program, and among the states Texas has the fourth-highest percentage of school-age children living in poverty. Nearly half the state's public-school students are black or Hispanic, minority groups that historically have done poorly on national achievement tests.

Yet within the past few years, Texas has become one of the highest-performing states in the nation. Consider a few telling statistics:

- Among the 39 states that participated in the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in fourth-grade math, Texas finished in the top 10, right alongside states such as Maine, North Dakota, and Wisconsin, which have far fewer low-income and minority students.
- The state's black fourth-graders and Title I fourth-graders scored higher in math, on average, than their counterparts in every other state, and its Hispanic children finished sixth.
- White fourth-graders in Texas had the highest average math score in the nation.
- Between 1992 and 1996, the percentage of Texas fourth-graders achieving at or above the NAEP's "proficient" level in math rose from 15 to 25 percent, far outstripping improvements nationwide. Similarly, the share of Texas children scoring below the "basic" level (the lowest tier on the NAEP) fell from 44 percent to 31 percent during the same period.
- Like every other state, Texas still has a broad racial chasm: In fourth-grade math, 53 percent of blacks and 45 percent of Hispanics scored below the "basic" level, compared with 15 percent of whites. But the gap is narrowing faster there than in any other state.

Texas achieved this remarkable turnaround by applying a simple lesson from the corporate world: Educators will find innovative ways to raise achievement if they are given the freedom to experiment and are held accountable for student performance.

Over the course of a decade, Texas lawmakers devolved more and more decisionmaking authority to local districts and schools. Meanwhile, they established nationally recognized achievement standards as well as tests to measure whether students had met them. In 1993,

with these cornerstones of an accountability system—standards, testing, and autonomy—in place, the state education department (known as the Texas Education Agency, or TEA) began rating schools based on test scores and other factors. The system combines deregulation for schools and high expectations for students of all races and income levels.

"Texas is paying deliberate attention to the fact that you can't leave any group behind," says Kati Haycock, the executive director of the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based organization devoted to improving educational opportunities for low-income children. "That sends a powerful message to educators that they have to make their system work for all kids. In Texas, we hear far fewer excuses, like having a lot of minority children, than we do in places like California."

A "Consumer Reports" for Schools

The yardstick for the TEA's ratings is the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), a series of yearly tests in reading, writing, and math given to students in grades three through eight and grade 10. Based on the percentage of its students passing the TAAS, as well as on its dropout and attendance rates, each school in the state is labeled "exemplary," "recognized," "acceptable," or "low performing." Schools may exempt from the TAAS students with limited English proficiency (LEP) or special-education needs, but no other allowances are made for a school's socioeconomic or demographic circumstances.

Texas has the usual set of rewards and sanctions tied to a school's results, from small cash awards for high ratings to wholesale layoffs at the state's worst schools. But the accountability system's real power rests within the ratings themselves. By spotlighting the performance of individual schools and districts, the ratings affect the career prospects of all educators, from teachers to superintendents. For instance, principals at "low-performing" schools have experienced a turnover of 31 percent during the past four years. By contrast, principals who have transformed schools already find themselves receiving promotions to middle and high schools.

This provides strong incentives to deliver results, and thus far they have been spectacular. In 1994, the TEA bestowed its top two rankings, "exemplary" and "recognized," on 67 and 516 schools, respectively. Last year, those numbers catapulted to 683 "exemplary" and 1,617 "recognized." Meanwhile, the number of schools receiving the TEA's lowest ranking dropped from 267 to 67, of which only a few were repeat offenders.

In 1994, barely half of all Texas students passed the TAAS math exam. By last year, the proportion had climbed to 80 percent. What's more, the share of black and Hispanic children who passed the test doubled during that time to 64 percent and 72 percent, respectively.

On the TAAS reading test, 70 percent of students were already passing the test in 1994. This included, however, only 51 percent of blacks and 54 percent of Hispanics. By 1997, 84 percent of Texas students had passed, including 73 percent of blacks and 75 percent of Hispanics.

These figures must be interpreted with care, since some schools might be hiding poor students by placing them in special-education classes or encouraging them to stay home on the day of the test. But the percentage of children exempted from the TAAS for limited English proficiency or special ed has not increased since 1993. The standards for each rating, meanwhile, have actually risen over time, and the TAAS has not been made any easier. Moreover, Texas's rising NAEP scores confirm that the gains are genuine.

"Their system is a real model for other states to follow," says Haycock.

The Emerging Movement

Texas is the vanguard of an accountability movement sweeping the states. Earlier this decade, Kentucky began to measure students' progress by the rise in their test scores each year. Schools whose scores on the state's tests rise more than expected receive financial rewards, while those whose performance declines receive assistance in the form of instructional specialists and extra resources. Kentucky also publishes the percentage of children scoring at each of four performance levels: "novice," "apprentice," "proficient," and "distinguished."

So far the results have been promising: Statewide, the percentage of elementary schoolchildren scoring at the "proficient" level rose from 8 percent in 1993 to 38 percent in 1997. Tennessee has a similar system, and North Carolina recently created an accountability system modeled on its neighbors'.

More broadly, every state except Iowa either has a set of standards for what is to be taught in each grade or is in the process of developing them. Among others, Arizona, Florida, Virginia, Colorado, Maryland, Louisiana, and Indiana also have created or are creating assessments that test students' knowledge of academic standards. States such as Alabama, New York, and Florida use such tests to compile and publish lists of low-performing schools in the hope that dishonor will spark improvement.

A growing number of states, including New Jersey, Georgia, Michigan, and New York, also provide access over the Internet to performance "report cards" for every school and school district in the state. These reports list information ranging from per-pupil spending to student test scores. Very few of these states translate these report cards into easy-to-understand performance ratings like those of Texas and Kentucky, but simply having test scores readily available to parents and policymakers is a step towards accountability.

Educators used to understand "accountability" to mean a focus on *how* students were educated. State regulators handed schools guidelines for *methods*, such as how much time to spend on each subject or what curricula to purchase, rather than *results*. In practice, this usually meant that good and bad schools alike passed inspection. (Under Virginia's former accrediting system, not one school ever lost its accreditation.)

The emerging accountability movement reflects the slow seepage of market principles into education. It recognizes that a prerequisite for holding any organization accountable, whether it be a *Fortune* 500 company or your neighborhood school, is to have information about its performance. That's why reform-minded state superintendents such as Linda Schrenko in Georgia, Lisa Keegan in Arizona, Frank Brogan in Florida, and Mike Moses in Texas insist on testing students and, at the least, publishing the results.

Business Takes Over

The old focus on teaching methods was "perfect" for educators, says Darvin Winick, a founding member of the Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC), an important player in Texas education reform. "It said that if we do what we're supposed to do, if we process correctly, and the kids don't learn, it's the kids' fault. That meant that the problems were communal and societal, not instructional." That attitude was reflected in the Texas Education Code, which dictated such minutiae as the amount of teacher training a school had to provide and the number of hours spent learning math each day.

In seeking to shed this antiquated system, Texas benefited from a unique set of circumstances. Early on, members of the state's influential business community, concerned about the quality of Texas's work force, organized to push for educational reform. Because Texas has four competing teachers unions and no trade organizations for principals or superintendents, any resistance was divided and weak. And the state's largest teachers

union, the Texas Federation of Teachers, actually joined businessmen in their decade-long quest for accountability. "It's important that we have some way of telling the public that their education dollars are being spent well," says John Cole, the TFT's president.

Before the TAAS was developed in 1990, accountability in Texas took the form of various minimum-skills tests and the famous "No Pass/No Play" provision for extracurricular sanctions championed by billionaire Ross Perot. School districts were handcuffed by state regulations and student test results were not used in any constructive fashion. To its credit, Texas was one of the first states to develop a system of education standards and assessments, but the business community and the public rightly criticized the minimum-skills tests for being just that.

Led by Charles Duncan, an investment banker from Houston, TBEC in the early 1980s pulled together powerful CEOs and educators interested in reform. Throughout the 1980s, in his role as head of TBEC and as an appointed member of the Texas school board, Duncan continued to jawbone educators into focusing on student performance.

In the late 1980s, court rulings forced Texas to narrow the gap in funding between wealthy and poor school districts. In the course of overhauling the finance system, lawmakers wanted to ensure that redistributed funds would be spent well. Thus the legislature established the Educational Economic Policy Center, a quasi-governmental body charged with developing an accountability system. Chaired by Charles Miller, another Houston-based money manager and a founder of TBEC, the center presented its report in 1993. With strong support from the Texas legislature, most of Miller's recommendations became law, including the rating system and testing in most grades.

Many educators were not pleased about business meddling in their bailiwick. One superintendent called the system "despicable." Nancy McClaran, the executive director of the Texas Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, wrote in the *Houston Chronicle* that Miller's report "contradicts every major, reputable piece of research on student testing that has been done in our nation in recent years. . . . If implemented, the recommendations would mean the dismantling of the public schools."

Despite such resistance, the Texas Education Code was rewritten in 1995 to further decentralize authority from the Texas Education Agency to local districts, giving schools even more autonomy to find solutions while holding them accountable for the results.

"The new Code put a major emphasis on performance and deleted references to telling districts how to teach," says Criss Cloudt, an associate commissioner at the TEA. Unlike rating systems such as Kentucky's that credit schools for simply making progress each year, Texas schools must reach a set of absolute benchmarks to improve their standing. In a school seeking an "exemplary" rating, for instance, 90 percent of the students must pass the TAAS in reading, writing, and math, the dropout rate must not exceed 1 percent, and the attendance rate must surpass 94 percent. In short, an "exemplary" school in the poverty-stricken barrios of El Paso must meet the same standards as an "exemplary" school in the cozy Bellaire section of Houston.

The TEA is sensitive to a school's socioeconomic or racial makeup, but only to hold it equally responsible for the performance of its most vulnerable students. A school striving to earn a "recognized" ranking this year must achieve not only a TAAS passage rate of at least 80 percent of all students, but at least 80 percent of each of three special racial and economic subgroups as well. If any one subgroup, such as black students, should fall below 80 percent or fail one of the other measures, the school would receive a lower ranking.

That's why affluent Bellaire High School in Houston was labeled "low performing" last year. Its overall scores were typical of a school that sends its top 50 students to the Ivy League, but its Hispanic dropout rate was too high. Average scores at Royal Middle School

in rural Pattison were good enough for an "acceptable" rating in 1996, but only 28 percent of its black students had passed the TAAS math test. Because that fell below the 30 percent cutoff for "acceptable" schools (which has since been raised), Royal was also branded "low performing."

Royal Middle's plight illustrates the slow pace of improvement at most schools. In the end, the "low performing" rating had its desired effect: Midway through the 1996-97 school year, the district replaced the ineffective principal with Patsy Ann Parker, who initiated two-hour afternoon tutoring sessions, cracked down on truancy by hauling parents into court, and began offering 7 a.m. breakfasts to lure struggling students to before-school tutoring sessions. Her efforts earned the school an "acceptable" rating in 1997.

The school, though, still occupies a precarious position between "low performing" and "acceptable." According to Parker, parental involvement is low, in part because the truck stops along Interstate 10 bring a steady flow of drugs into the community. To encourage parents to care about academic results, Parker requires teachers to call each student's home once a week. She is also using computer programs in reading and math to track students' progress; from now on, 80 percent of the children who advance to the next grade must have skills at or above grade level. Where gang fights once were routine at Royal, "now we have quiet halls and productive classrooms," Parker proudly says. She also brings drug-sniffing dogs into the school regularly. Still, Parker says, it will take three to five years to turn the school around.

If Royal is typical, Isaacs Elementary is extraordinary. One-hundred percent of the school's students qualify for Title I funds, yet they scored higher than the statewide average on the TAAS in 1995, when Isaacs received an "acceptable" rating. Even so, principal Leon Pettis was determined to raise scores. To him, "acceptable" was unacceptable.

He adopted the Saxon reading and math programs known widely for their adherence to traditional methods such as phonics-based instruction. He also began to monitor his teachers' instructional habits by requiring them to give him portfolios of students' work each week. Teachers in turn were expected to act on the feedback Pettis delivered. "He would tell the teachers, 'If your students aren't performing, you as a teacher are lacking something,' " says Fredye Hemanes, the school's Title I coordinator. He also required students who had failed or nearly failed the TAAS to attend after-school tutoring sessions four days a week.

Two years later, 95 percent of the Isaacs kids who sat for the TAAS tests in reading, math, and writing passed all three tests, compared to just 66 percent in 1995 and 73 percent statewide. The reward came when Isaacs was named an elite "exemplary" school in 1997, a distinction it shared with just 10 percent of Texas schools.

The Lessons

The successes of school districts all over Texas yield many lessons about accountability:

First, decentralization is critical. The TEA gave districts wide discretion in running their school systems. In turn, the most effective superintendents have decentralized even further, allowing individual schools to make most curriculum and training decisions. "Site-based management" has become the new catch phrase in Texas education. Superintendents see the district office as less a regulatory overseer than as a source of instructional expertise, information, and targeted spending. In Corpus Christi, where the percentage of kids passing the TAAS in reading rose from 66 percent in 1994 to 82 percent in 1997, superintendent Abelardo Saavedra managed the creation of tough district-wide standards and gave his schools broad freedoms to meet them.

"We expect all our schools to be on track towards 'exemplary,' " says Saavedra, "and we

look at the central office as their support system as opposed to the autocratic system we used to operate under."

The Houston school district, the largest in Texas, once mandated instructional methods like "whole language." Now superintendent Rod Paige routinely grants exemptions to principals who believe that district mandates are hampering their efforts. Houston was also the first district in Texas to permit public charter schools, which are liberated from most regulations in return for meeting rigorous performance standards. "We have turned the schools loose," says Paige. "We tell them that they're going to be responsible for the pie, so we're not going to give them the recipe." Paige's district boasted 25 "exemplary" schools in 1997, up from none in 1993, when the standards were easier to meet.

Second, student testing, used properly, helps schools to identify weaknesses among students and teachers. One key to Houston's resurgence has been its innovative use of the test data provided by the accountability system. The district office breaks apart the data to ensure that principals know how their schools, their students, and their individual teachers are doing. "We're able with this kind of data to go back down to the classroom, to the teacher," says Paige. "That makes the teacher's performance visible. It can be used to provide staff training and, in some cases, to make changes."

It's hard to overestimate the importance of test data in evaluating teachers and students. Teachers, says Saavedra, would like to improve but often don't know where their weaknesses lie. They often have no measure of their students' weaknesses either. Test scores provide the information they need. "When we do poorly in reading, we know specifically what part of reading we're not doing well in," says Saavedra. "There's no excuse for a classroom teacher not to be able to identify where she is weak. Scores should help guide the teacher."

Third, test data can also illuminate good practices. With schools' scores and demographic makeup in hand, educators can identify high-performing schools that are succeeding despite their obstacles. Without its TAAS scores, how else would Texans be able to identify a gem like Isaacs? "We've shown," says Darvin Winick, now an advisor to Texas governor George W. Bush's business council, "that you can't get credit for doing well without accountability." Then places like Isaacs become models for reform. According to Paige, more and more Houston schools are adopting programs such as Direct Instruction, Success for All, and Saxon reading and math because they have found that other successful schools are using them. "Schools are trying to find proven solutions because they're accountable for the results," says Paige.

Sonny Donaldson, superintendent of the nearby Aldine district, sent a team of curriculum and instructional specialists to the North Forest and Brazosport districts three years ago to divine their secrets. Both districts are famous for educating children who live, like those in Aldine, on the troubled outskirts of Houston, and Donaldson wanted to find strategies that would work for his students.

He found that these districts were closely analyzing individual students' test scores in order to tailor instructional programs to their needs. So he hired a consultant to write a computer program that would break down his own district's scores in a fashion helpful to teachers. He also sent curriculum specialists to any school rated below "recognized" to work with teachers in the field. With these reforms in place, 13 of the 26 schools that had been rated "acceptable" in 1995 rose to the "recognized" level in 1997. The district as a whole improved from "acceptable" to "recognized" in just two years. "We set out to be a 'recognized' school district," says Donaldson. "Now our goal is to be 'exemplary.' If 85 percent of a campus's kids are passing the TAAS, and they set a goal of maintaining that, we reject that. We want them to set more challenging goals."

Educators can use the test data to scour the state for proven instructional programs. At

Stephens Elementary in Aldine, principal Ruth Dimmick used the Success For All reading program developed at Johns Hopkins University to raise her school from "acceptable" in 1995 to "exemplary" in 1997—the only school in the district to do so. Don Hancock, the superintendent of the Connally school district near Waco, dispatched his math teachers to travel the state for the best program and they returned with Saxon math in hand. As a result, his district rose from "acceptable" in 1995 to "recognized" in 1997. Taft High School near Corpus Christi brought in Saxon math in 1996 and shot from "low performing" to "recognized" in one year. These programs are spreading throughout Texas as educators search for what works.

Fourth, in the most troubled schools, principals say, parental involvement is indispensable to reform. The principal at Brandon Elementary, a school north of Houston that went from "low performing" in 1996 to "acceptable" in 1997, now requires his teachers to call home whenever a student's performance falters. This is supposed to prompt parents to monitor their child's study habits or at least, in the worst of cases, just make sure their child comes to school regularly. Stephens Elementary in Aldine offers parents of its mostly Hispanic student population free English lessons. Hambrick Middle School in the same district offered parents gang-awareness workshops conducted by police officers, and exempts students from homework if they bring their parents to school. Hambrick parents now volunteer more hours than parents at any other school in the district. Frazier Elementary in Dallas, which jumped from a "low performing" rating in 1994 to "exemplary" in 1997, gives away donated furniture, pots and pans, and clothing to entice low-income parents to teacher conferences.

Lastly, the success of any reform depends on the deeply held conviction that any child can learn, even in the most challenging of circumstances. "I will not accept low student performance or excuses that students can't learn," says superintendent Gerald Anderson of the Brazosport school district. "We have a basic philosophy in this district that if one teacher can do it, then all teachers can do it. The same goes for school campuses and districts." Houston's Rod Paige adds, "We don't accept the conventional wisdom that some kids won't be able to handle the content and that we should lower the standards for them. There are schools in Houston loaded with low-income kids who perform. We believe that the school itself can make a difference."

Building Accountability

Texas is one of a handful of states fulfilling the model of an accountability system for educators. Such a system, says researcher Heidi Glidden of the American Federation of Teachers union (*AFT*), must have four prongs:

A set of standards describing the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn at each grade level. Teachers and principals in Texas know what they need to cover each year because the state gives them clear guideposts. The magazine *Education Week* and the AFT both gave Texas high marks for its academic standards.

A set of tests that are closely aligned with the state's standards. That way, the schools, the state, and the public know whether children are learning the skills needed to succeed in each grade. "Norm-referenced" tests such as the Stanford Achievement Test only measure where their students are relative to all the students who take the test. "Criterion-referenced" tests such as the TAAS and the NAEP tell them how much knowledge a student has acquired. The TAAS is easier than the NAEP, but it is much tougher than most states' assessments.

A system of rewards and sanctions for schools and students based on student test scores and other criteria such as dropout rates. Sanctions in Texas include the shame of

a "low-performing" rating and the public hearing that accompanies it, the threat of a state takeover, and, for students who don't pass the 10th-grade TAAS exam, failure to graduate high school. But these are merely stopgap measures, used only when the state is confronted with massive failure. For the average school or district, the surreptitious ways in which educators base their promotion decisions on performance have much more influence over achievement.

A system of aid to failing schools. Without extra help, says Chris Piphio, a senior fellow at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, giving a "low performing" rating would be like "giving an 'F' in an algebra class and saying the student is going to improve because he got an 'F'." Many schools could use the instructional expertise of top-flight teachers as well as an infusion of funds to purchase textbooks or to give teachers merit bonuses. Last fall, TEA commissioner Mike Moses visited the Dallas school district to scold the school board for public infighting. The district, in turn, provided \$25,000 and a team of specialists to each of its two "low-performing" schools.

Standards and tests are clearly an important piece in the accountability puzzle, but what is most important—and what is lost in the debate over national testing—is what you do with the results. Key to Texas's reforms is how public and how understandable the ratings are. The TEA holds an annual press conference to announce the rankings, after which big-city newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Dallas Morning News* (<http://www.dallasnews.com/>) splash the names of "low performing" and "exemplary" schools across their front pages. In addition, every school's ranking and vital statistics are readily available on the Internet, a key tool in the accountability movement.

"We're finding more and more that when people come from other cities and states, they've already done a lot of legwork over the Internet," says Diane Craig, a real-estate agent in San Antonio. Homeowners and businessmen take a keener interest in the local schools when their quality affects property values.

Subterfuge and Solutions

Texas's system is by no means perfect. For one thing, the benchmark for earning an "acceptable" rating is still rather low. In fact, just four years ago a school could see 80 percent of its students fail the TAAS and still avoid the "low performing" stigma. But the threshold to qualify as "acceptable" rises each year by 5 percentage points. By the year 2000, a school will need a TAAS passage rate of 50 percent to earn an "acceptable" rating. "The standards aren't where we want them to be," says Chris Cloudt of the TEA. "But that's a pretty fast pace to be increasing them." The standard for a "recognized" rating has also ratcheted up, from 60 percent in 1994 to 80 percent this year.

Another major weakness in the system is the loophole that overlooks the performance of special-ed and LEP students. The TEA already reports the scores of Hispanic students who take the TAAS in Spanish, and those scores will soon influence the rankings. A test for special-ed students is in the works. "There's a dual emphasis on raising standards and including the maximum number of students," says Cloudt of the TEA.

A more troubling issue is the sheer number of children labeled special education and LEP in the first place. Statewide, 10 percent of students are exempted from the TAAS, and another 6 percent or so take the test, yet are not included in the rating system because of their special-ed status. At some schools, those numbers are alarmingly higher. In 1997, the Houston school district only used the test scores of 39 percent of Brock Elementary students in determining the school's accountability rating because the school had labeled 40 percent of its students special ed and another 18 percent LEP. "The number of kids who are special ed ought to be 5 percent, max," says John Cole of the TFT union. Superintendent Thomas Tocco of the Fort Worth school district recently ordered an investigation of its special-education programs after discovering that one-third of all Fort Worth elementary

schools had exempted at least 20 percent of their kids for special ed.

What is happening here is a cloudy and controversial issue. Some observers claim that principals are finding ways to hide struggling students because the accountability system carries such high stakes. "We told lawmakers that if they didn't make the exemptions very tight, schools would test only the kids who do well," says Gayle Fallon, the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, the largest local arm of the TFT. "And that's precisely what happened." Houston superintendent Rod Paige denies such charges, saying that schools have strict guidelines for placing children into special education classes. Just last year, the TEA set up a special unit to investigate such claims.

Equally important is the question of how often students should be tested. Many teachers say the state tests students too often, and some say they are spending too much time teaching to the test, but others disagree. "If you're sure you have a strong link between the curriculum and the test, then you're testing what you want the children to learn," says Cloudt of the TEA. And there is strong support among business leaders and policy analysts for expanding testing to the first and second grades and to grades nine through 11. "When you last test kids at the 10th-grade level, you have not told them whether they are qualified to move past high school," says John Stevens, the executive director of TBEC.

Stevens's point is punctuated by the prevalence of high schools among the ranks of the "low performing." While many elementary-school pupils, with their fresh minds and pre-adolescent innocence, have little trouble climbing to a higher rating, high schools and, to a lesser degree, middle schools, have proven more intransigent.

The story that unfolded at Fox Technical High School in San Antonio illustrates the difficulty. After two straight years as a "low-performing" school, in 1995 auditors from the TEA deemed the problems plaguing Fox Technical High School too intractable for minor tinkering. Citing divisions among the staff and low morale, the team of auditors recommended a rare measure called "reconstitution"—essentially, starting from scratch. A new principal with a reputation for reform was brought in and the entire staff had to reapply to the school. Every principal's dream became a reality for Joanne Cockrell: She was able to hand-pick her entire staff, only a third of whom were holdovers from the prereconstitution days. "We thought that it be ludicrous to keep the same teachers and expect different results," says Cockrell.

Two years later, Cockrell unexpectedly found herself having to explain to TEA commissioner Mike Moses why the results had hardly improved. Despite higher reading scores and a declining dropout rate, in 1997 Fox Tech was saddled with the "low-performing" stigma for the fourth straight year because the proportion of its students passing the TAAS in math remained below 35 percent, the benchmark for an "acceptable" rating. The improvements were strong enough to justify some faith in Cockrell and her staff, but the TEA's monitoring of Fox Tech continues.

The Coming Years

The Texas accountability system must continue to prove itself. The gains of eighth-graders on the 1996 NAEP math tests were not as impressive as those of fourth-graders, perhaps because they had already received five years of Texas schooling by the time reforms began in 1993. It will be interesting to see what happens in the coming years, as kids who began their schooling during the reform era start to enter middle school. (Likewise, the benefits of reforms would not have shown up on the last NAEP reading assessment in 1994. On that assessment, Texas's fourth-graders performed at the national average.)

In the meantime, the reforms continue to spark some opposition. In October, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed suit against the TAAS. The suit charges that the TAAS's 10th-grade test, which students must pass to graduate,

discriminates against minorities. This accords with MALDEF's long history of opposition to student testing in general and to testing as a graduation requirement in particular. Fortunately, the U.S. Department of Education ruled against a similar complaint filed by the NAACP last summer, and few observers expect the outcome to change.

These groups are finding themselves on the wrong side of public opinion in Texas, even among educators. "Now the system is just a part of Texas," says Catherine Clark, director of the Texas Center for Educational Research. "It's not a subject of debate." Of the educators I have spoken with, the ones who did criticize the system argued that it wasn't tough enough.

Meanwhile, reforms continue apace. Governor Bush has proposed ending social promotion—the practice of graduating children to the next grade regardless of their skill level—statewide, and Rod Paige is in the process of drafting a plan for his district. A nascent program, the Public Education Grant, now allows students to leave any school receiving a "low-performing" rating within the past three years as long as another school or district will take them. Texas lawmakers are looking to provide incentives for districts to open their doors.

While many educational reform efforts quickly buckle to union pressure or public discontent, Texas's system has only become more rigorous over time. If this trend continues, Texas, one of the nation's poorest states, may soon become the best place to get an education.

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