Common Elements of High Performing, High Poverty Middle Schools

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High poverty middle schools that are high performing acquire grants and manage money well, use a variety of teaming configurations, and use data-based goals to improve student performance.

The problem

As schools face public demands for increased student performance, the daunting task is particularly problematic for schools with high poverty levels. Traditionally, achievement is associated with high parental education and high income, while lower socio-economic status children, often termed at-risk, show lower test scores (Payne & Biddle, 1999; Bracey, 1999; Urban Schools, 1996). Particularly at the middle level, where the decline in achievement gains has been documented (Linn, Lewis, Tsuchida, & Songer, 2000), schools face the additional developmental issues associated with the well-being and learning of young adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, 1996).

However, despite the challenges, effective middle schools exist and report higher achievement scores as compared to schools with similar low income student populations (Council for School Performance, 1996-1997). Why do such schools outperform other schools? To answer the question, the study reported here began with a look at the range of high poverty schools in Georgia, schools that traditionally have the lowest test scores. The highest performing of these schools in the south-eastern portion of the state were identified and became the case studies for a three-year study that examined school practices associated with higher student achievement.

The literature

A search of the literature related to high achievement, middle grades, and high poverty populations revealed two groups of research studies. The research studies in Group 1 examined all types of high poverty schools that reported increases in achievement. Group 2 looked at *middle schools specifically*, their achievement, and associated factors.

Studies in Group 1 consisted of schools with high poverty levels and high performance (Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Connell, Mendelow, & Tyson, 1999; Education Trust, 1999; Glidden, 1999; Johnson, 1999; Klein, Johnson, & Ragland, 1997). For example, Carter (2000) and Cawelti (1999) provided evidence of common characteristics among their case studies. Carter, using anecdotal evidence, found five traits to be common to all 21 schools: (a) principals who were free to act, who used measurable goals, and who elicited parental support; (b) master teachers who set the tone for improved teacher quality; (c) rigorous and regular testing that enforced school goals; (d) achievement that acted as the framework for self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem; and (e) time on task that resulted in students' demonstration of mastery. Although this report is not well respected among researchers (Biddle & Bracey, 2000), its focus provides evidence that attention is growing on high poverty schools that succeed. Likewise, Cawelti (1999) identified common characteristics among six benchmark schools, characteristics such as a focus on standards and on improving

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results, teamwork, the principal as a strong educational leader, committed teachers, and sustained multiple changes in concern. These common characteristics confirmed previous research that indicated the importance of the principal, positive school climate, quality teachers, and a focus on achievement.

Group 1 schools, however, consisted mainly of elementary schools. Few schools included the middle grades representative of the majority of middle school enrollments. Only one of the six benchmark schools identified by Cawelti (1999) contained grades seven and eight within a 7-12 high school configuration. Out of the 21 high performing high poverty schools studied by Carter (2000), only two schools contained 5-8 or 5-9 configurations.

An additional factor that limits the findings of studies in Group 1 is school size. Carter's two schools containing middle grades had enrollments of 223 students in grades 5-8 and 270 students in grades 5-9. These enrollments do not mirror the enrollments for the majority of middle schools; 1993 data collected by McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (1996) showed 70% of middle schools had over 400 students enrolled. The finding by Carter (2000) is, nevertheless, valuable; the two smaller middle schools showed higher achievement in high poverty students confirming the results of Glidden's 1999 study of 54 Kansas, mainly elementary, schools. Glidden (1999) found that smaller school size was associated with higher achievement in poverty student populations. **[Editor's note: See "The Power of Smallness in Urban Middle Grades Schooling," MSJ, March 2001.]** These findings also confirm Howley's (1999) *State Report for Ohio* which indicated that smaller schools or districts benefited high poverty communities.

In addition to the lack of case studies in Group 1 of high poverty high performance middle schools with student populations over 400 students, there was no attention to studying middle level schools that implemented effective school practices for young adolescents. Consideration of middle level best practices and their impact on student achievement was a major factor addressed in Group 2 of research studies related to middle schools, achievement, and poverty.

Research studies in Group 2 looked at middle schools, effective practices, achievement gains, and associated factors. Three major studies provided evidence that schools which implemented middle level improvements reported higher student achievement gains (DePascale, 1997; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). These schools used effective instructional strategies for young adolescents, and/or implemented to a substantial degree the eight *Turning Points* recommendations: create small communities of learning, teach the core academics, ensure success for all, empower teachers and administrators to make decisions, staff with expert middle school teachers, promote good health, reengage families, and connect with the communities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

However, the majority of middle schools do not implement *Turning Points* recommendations or any other effective middle level practices for young adolescents (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996). If we are to effect change in the majority of middle schools, specifically in schools with high-poverty student populations, evidence of what works in high poverty middle schools would contribute useful information for school initiatives. Jackson and Davis (2000) pointed to the need for empirical research that addresses middle level practices, student poverty, and achievement particularly "in

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high-poverty urban and rural communities where unacceptably poor student achievement is rampant" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 5). Hough and Irvin (1997) stressed establishing a research agenda that addressed achievement issues and the big questions of "What works?" and "Under what conditions?"

The study

To address these concerns, a three year study was conducted from 1997 to 2000 that looked at the policies, practices, and procedures of five high poverty middle schools, with enrollments above 400 students, which implemented middle level structures and practices (Trimble & Peterson, 1999, 2000). The overarching research question was, "In these schools, what practices are associated with higher student achievement?" Of particular interest were factors that moved beyond what we already know about effective schools: strong leadership, safe and orderly schools, and positive school climate.

Figure 1
The Five Schools: Demographics and Achievement Compared to Similar Schools

Cluster 7 Schools	Demographics	Number of Indicators in top 20% of similar schools	Number of Indicators in top 40% of similar schools
Fort Valley Middle School	701 students, 76% minority 70% free/reduced lunch 3% gifted, 9% sp. ed.	12/13	1/13
Screven County Middle School	720 students, 58% minority 67% Free/reduced lunch 5% gifted, 14% sp. ed.	12/13	1/13
Shuman Middle School	779 students, 76% minority 67% free/reduced lunch 2% gifted, 8% sp. ed.	5/13	6/13
Elder Middle School	901 students, 68% minority 70% free/reduced lunch 6% gifted, 9% sp. ed.	8/13	5/13
Mercer Middle School	963 students, 60% minority 60% free/reduced lunch 5% gifted, 10% sp. ed.	6/13	4/13

Data were collected from five middle schools in southern and middle Georgia. The schools were selected from a group of schools because their test scores surpassed the scores of other schools with similar demographics (minority populations ranging from 55% to 80% and free lunch participation from 55% to 70%). All five schools in 1997 met the high performance criteria of being in the top 20% to 40% of schools with similar student demographics. These schools were compared across 13 indicators in reading, math, social studies, language arts, and other subject areas. Figure 1 presents the number of indicators for each school that were in the 20% or the 40% range. Figure 2 provides an explanation of the 13 indicators. For example, Indicator 1 identifies the percentage of eighth grade students above the national median in reading, using the percentage of students at or above the median ITBS reading level in grade 8 as the numerator and the number of students taking the ITBS reading section as the denominator.

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Figure 2
Indicators of Achievement

Council for School Performance Middle School Indicator Calculations

Listed below are the numerators and denominators used to calculate middle school indicators. Indicators are listed in the same order as the performance reports.

	Indicator	Numerator	Denominator
		Academic Preparation	
1	% 8th grade above median: ITBS Reading	At/above median ITBS reading gr. 8	# taking ITBS reading gr. 8
2	% 8th grade above median: ITBS Math	At/above median ITBS math gr. 8	# taking ITBS math gr. 8
3	% 8th grade above median: ITBS Science	At/above median ITBS science gr. 8	# taking ITBS science gr. 8
4	% 8th grade above median: ITBS SocStud.	At/above median ITBS soc. St. gr. 8	# taking ITBS social st. gr. 8
5	% 8th grade above median: ITBS LangArts	At/above median ITBS LangArts gr. 8	# taking ITBS Lang Arts gr. 8
6	% 8th grade above ITBS Sources Info.	At/above median ITBS s_info gr. 8	# taking ITBS sources info gr. 8
7	% 8th grade upper quarter ITBS Reading	Upper quartile ITBS reading gr. 8	# taking ITBS reading gr. 8
8	% 8th grade upper 8 quarters ITBS Reading	Upper 8 quartiles ITBS reading gr.8	# taking ITBS reading gr. 8
9	% 8th grade upper quarter ITBS Math	Upper quartile ITBS math gr. 8	# taking ITBS math gr. 8
10	% 8th grade upper 8 quarters ITBS Math	Upper 8 quartiles ITBS math gr. 8	# taking ITBS math gr. 8
11	% w/ "Good/Very Good" on Gr. 8 Writing Test	# w/ "Good/Very Good" gr. 8 writ. Test	# taking gr. 8 writing test
12	% with "Very Good" on Gr. 8 Writing Test	# with "Very Good " on gr. 8 writ. Test	# taking gr. 8 writing test
13	% 8th Gr. Completing basic computer course	# 8th gr. Completing computer course	Enrolled Grade 8 (FTE97)

Figure 2: Description of Thirteen Indicators used by the Council for School Performance to compare schools with similar student populations.

The test scores were reported in *Public Report Cards* (Georgia Department of Education, 1996-1997) and were compared to similar low SES schools by the Council for School Performance (1996-1997). The Georgia Council for School Performance is a legislatively mandated organization that annually compiles performance indicators for all Georgia public schools.

All five schools satisfied the Georgia Middle School State Incentive Grant eligibility requirements in 1997-1999: Each school had its own administrator, at least two interdisciplinary teams per grade, at least 85 minutes of common planning time per week, at least four and a half hours of daily core instruction, and two exploratory classes. As a result of satisfying these eligibility requirements, these schools received additional state funding.

The five schools studied were located in rural southeastern and middle Georgia and in urban Savannah. The two Savannah schools were Mercer Middle School and Shuman Middle School. The rural schools were Fort Valley Middle School in Fort Valley; Screven County Middle School, Sylvania; and Elder Middle School, Sandersville.

Multiple sources of data were collected. Team meetings and classrooms were observed; students were talked to individually and in groups; administrators and teachers were interviewed; school documents were examined, as well as school reports. In two of the five schools, teachers responded to a questionnaire, the *Team Process Inventory* (Trimble, 1995), a 30-item self-report measure, targeting human factors (e.g., group process and team beliefs) and task factors (e.g., team tasks such as instruction and guidance). As part of the research study these teachers also wrote stories about three pictures depicting people in groups. The stories were interpreted as projections of teachers' underlying beliefs and attitudes about teams (Murray, 1943; Pollak & Gilligan, 1982). These stories were analyzed for common themes, that revealed the following: pride, ownership, proactivity, pleasure in meeting together, sense of accomplishment, and a lack of feelings of boredom, uselessness, distractions, fear, suspicion, and tiredness.

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The variety of data sources provided evidence of repeating patterns across all five schools. The common elements included (a) acquiring grants and managing money well, (b) using a variety of team configurations to do the work of the school, and (c) concentrating efforts on data-based goals and programs that affected student performance. Each of these three common elements is explained below.

ACQUIRING GRANTS AND MANAGING MONEY WELL

Educators in each of these five schools recognized that the needs of their students called for effective programs and practices to address those needs. They recognized that current funding did not cover these "extras" and is often inadequate for those districts with low SES levels where the need for achievement gains is most apparent. As a result of seeing the need for extra programs and practices, these five schools worked to gain the fiscal support for the extras of reform (e.g., staff training; additional help for students; and large chunks of time for teachers and administrators to learn, implement, and sustain new ways of doing things). Federal programs such as Title I funds and the Comprehensive School Demonstration grants, and state programs such as school improvement grants became a source of funding for reform initiatives. A key component to raising achievement at these schools was the ability to access funds.

All schools in the study had personnel who knew how to acquire money and maneuver existing funds; they could write successful grant proposals and managed money well. Formal or informal in-house grant writers wrote and revised grant proposals, created budgets, compiled supporting data, and filed reports. These grant writers included principals, teachers, former teachers under special contract, consultants, and district personnel all of whom collaborated to access grant offerings.

Penny Maestretti, principal of Mercer Middle School in Savannah, addressed the topic of adequate resources, "You have to know how to manipulate money." Grant money at her school has enabled the funding of mentors, parent training, new programs, volunteer programs, environmental education, a school counselor, weekly interest-based activities, and the staffing of a full-time enrichment specialist.

The veteran core faculty at this school have acquired a series of special status awards and grants for the past eight years. They have worked together since 1993 as the Building Leadership Team. In 1993 they applied and gained magnet school status; in 1994 they were recognized as a Georgia School of Excellence; in 1996 they moved to Schoolwide Title I status, which resulted in a comprehensive needs assessment; in 1997 the school incorporated a Learn and Serve American/BusinessLink grant for a business partnership; in 1998 Mercer became a charter school and was granted a Pay for Performance monetary incentive for school improvement and meeting of goals. In addition, in 1998 the school became part of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Plan (CSRD), a federal program to distribute Title I funds to schools for the adoption of a schoolwide reform model *(http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/)*. With grant funds of approximately $150,000 for three years, Mercer Middle School adopted the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Renzulli, 2000, 2001) that provides interest-based learning clusters once a week.

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The CSRD grant and other funds helped to create staff positions that support students in special areas. During the past decade, as the need arose, the veteran teachers have developed their own areas of expertise such as grant writing, parent contacts, and curriculum development. These special skills have evolved into staff positions. Linda Rocheleau became the designated grant writer and restructuring specialist. Working on a three-fourths-time contract, she coordinates all restructuring efforts. The parent/community coordinator, Romanda Talley, maintains a parent center for training and celebrations, the volunteer program, and the connections with local businesses. The instructional support specialist, Doris Johnson, administers the magnet and charter school programs, recruits magnet students, schedules exploratory classes, and files district reports. An enrichment specialist, Kathie Burke, coordinates the weekly clusters of activities as part of the School Enrichment Program and maintains the resource room for individual and group activities, accompanied by adult mentors from the local community. A reading specialist, Mary Ruli, administers and interprets individual reading inventories and coordinates the Reading Challenge program. The school counselor, Carol Minkovitz, is also the person who acts as the testing coordinator and leads a committee for curricular planning using testing data as a diagnostic tool. The principal is quick to point out, "I hire the best people and surround myself with wonderful people. It is having the right people in the right places."

Fort Valley Middle School, like Mercer Middle School, chose to apply for the competitive CSRD grant and was awarded approximately $50,000 per year to implement one of the 33 demonstration school reform models. They choose two programs that most suited their students' needs. The *Avid Program* targets increasing the achievement of the middle range students who were identified as capable of higher achievement than demonstrated. The *Accelerated Schools Model* promotes shared decision making among teachers and administrators. The funds also provided training, resources, and a model for classroom strategies.

In writing the grant proposal, the school used a team of teachers. The principal, Virginia Dixon, participated in all sessions. She remarked, "I am glad I helped write the Comprehensive School Reform Grant. I now know it *thoroughly*." Superintendent of Schools for Peach County, Billy Pack, attributed Dixon's success to being able to build her teams at the school level and to instill higher expectations for students' learning. Dr. Dixon commented, "I had to learn to step back, to give up some power, and that wasn't easy, since I had a type of authoritarian leadership. But I have learned that delegating and sharing work have made my job easier, and I don't want those jobs back. And now, the teams are trying to get me to take back the task of scheduling students!" A common element of all five schools is the active participation of the administrators such as Dr. Dixon in unifying their schools around the ideas supported by grant programs.

Shuman Middle School in Savannah is an example of a school that can reallocate funds from existing programs. The school has Title I funds and district financing from the DeWitt Wallace Foundation in conjunction with matching funds from a Savannah-Chatham County School District grant. The convictions of the principal, Dora Myles, and the assistant principal, Carl Waterbrook, to implement research-based effective practices has guided their decisions to reallocate money at the school level to provide additional resources for students. Using the $100,000 from The Beacon Program, part of the Youth Futures, the school is able to provide afterschool tutoring, recreation, and leadership opportunities for students at the school until eight p.m. each school night.

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HIGHER PERFORMING SCHOOLS HAVE SCHOOLWIDE TEAMS THAT WORK

In addition to personnel who knew how to acquire grants and manage money well, these five high performing schools used teams of teachers and administrators to do the work of the school. Erb (1997) noted, "Since the work of the organization (the education of youth) is too complex and uncertain to be left to professionals operating in isolation from each other, teams of teachers are required to work together to carry out the main function of the school" (p. 34). In middle schools, teams increase parent contacts, increase job satisfaction, improve the work climate, and are associated with higher student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999). Teams provide the structure for discussion and problem solving while working with *diverse* populations of students with *complex* situations. They also activate the creative thinking processes and group dynamics that generate multiple solutions to problems. Erb (1997) pointed to teams as "the success routes of the era [that] have come to involve working collaboratively in teams to identify and solve problems" (p. 30). Teams supply emotional support that can evolve into small groups of communities for learning. In short, teams engage the participants and establish the relationships that Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) deem as "absolutely necessary for successful reform" (p. 90).

My work with the five high performing schools showed that these schools accomplished their work using a variety of types of teams. In addition to interdisciplinary teams, these other types included administrative teams, grade level teams, school improvement teams, content area teams, student support teams, and special focus teams.

The teachers of Screven County Middle School sustain their reform initiatives through the work of their school improvement team and the consistent presence of a three-person administrative team. Its school improvement team of 16 member teachers provides faculty input into schoolwide decisions that affect the work of teachers and students. Beginning with a comprehensive needs assessment that presented feedback from students, teachers, parents, and community members, the teachers worked together to write schoolwide goals, action plans, and timelines. Principal Al Freeland commented, "The school's improvement team has really pulled the faculty together and provided them with ownership. They have really 'bought-into' whatever the group decided." This group of teachers over the past three years has written grants that totaled $360,000, a boost to faculty buy-in and morale.

Another type of team at this school is the administrative team, whose three members complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. They provide a balance of abilities to coordinate the school's efforts to help all students succeed. A father figure, Principal Al Freeland is visible from early morning coffee in the mailroom, to lunchtime roundtable discussions in the cafeteria, to afterschool walks on the campus trails. He provides consistency, stability, and access for teachers and parents. His people and public relations skills are balanced by the curriculum orientation of a well-respected lead teacher, Patty Hill. Acting as a type of assistant principal, Ms. Hill monitors classroom practice and teaching strategies, and is accessible for instructional help to a core faculty of veteran teachers with average tenure of 17 years. She also organizes the effective school improvement team. A third member of this administrative team, the assistant principal, provides a management focus. Dennis Carpenter implements disciplinary procedures to provide the consistent management of student behavior that supports the teachers' work. These two teams, the school improvement team and the administration team, enable the school to maintain its focus on a learning atmosphere.

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Elder Middle School uses multiple types of teams that enable communication to flow across grade levels, throughout subject area disciplines, and among all personnel (Trimble & Peterson, 2000). There are horizontal and vertical types of teams that help information to flow both vertically through the levels of students, staff, teachers, and administrators and to flow horizontally among all the classrooms in all subject areas. The network of teams consists of an executive team, a school leadership team, grade level teams, subject area teams, and interdisciplinary teams. Attendance and participation on these teams are taken seriously. The teams meet according to a predetermined schedule and always begin by addressing instructional concerns first on the agenda. As vehicles for communication, the variety of teams provide a well-used network for faculty input and administration feedback and directives.

Principal Bern Anderson, a former high school coach, uses coaching strategies to motivate and unify his faculty, students, and executive teams. He focuses their attention on knowing the rules for playing "the game" and scoring achievement points. For example, he verbalizes high expectations daily, "Everyone knows the plan and everyone works the plan. Everyone is on the same page. The faculty knows what we expect, and the students know what we expect of them." He proudly shared a comment by one student entering the bus ramp after school who looked at him and yelled, "I got my points today!"

At this school, interdisciplinary teams also function as study groups (Murphy & Lick, 1998). Once a month a consultant works with the teams during their common planning time to learn new teaching and learning strategies. For example, in 1998 new writing strategies were targeted to address the need for improved writing across disciplines. Once a month each team's common planning time was designated as a time for a consultant to teach writing strategies to team members. During these practice sessions, teachers as a team practiced the new strategies, e.g., they pretended they were students and responded to the teacher consultant who led them in brain storming writing ideas. As a group they also suggested sentences that were written on the overhead and used to generate discussion on transitions and word choice. Following the study session, teachers returned to their classrooms to implement the new writing strategy within their subject area. After two weeks, they reassembled in their study groups and shared their teaching experiences using the new strategy. Feedback and other ideas for improving the use of the new strategies were generated during these sharing sessions.

In a similar fashion, other strategies have been introduced into the classroom using the team structure as a means for practice and feedback from peers and a consultant. These new strategies included induction sets, re-creation, mnemonics, slotting, and concept attainment. The personal support from peers for risk-taking behaviors and for a change in practices emerged within these team settings. These study teams appear to be the structure that enables sustained changes in classroom practice (Trimble & Peterson, 2000).

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HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS FOCUS ON GOALS AND SPECIFIC STRATEGIES TO MEET THOSE GOALS

All five schools in this study had well-articulated goals and maintained programs and practices that targeted those goals. For example, Shuman Middle School established positive student behavior as one of its major school goals. Student conduct and teacher conduct were monitored. There were omnipresent verbal and visual reminders, such as the continual presence of the administrators in the halls and daily comments of high expectations from teachers and administrators that all students can learn. In addition, positive reinforcements such as rewards, certificates, and field trips helped to ensure proper student conduct. During lunchtime, the principal also sat in the cafeteria with her signature blow horn in hand to monitor behavior and to talk with students about their day. Likewise, the assistant principal was attentive to faculty needs; he trained and monitored the interdisciplinary teams in unit planning and helped maintain instructional standards by writing comments in the margins of team lesson plans and observing classroom teaching and team meetings. These actions kept the students and faculty focused on their purpose, often verbalized by the faculty, "you are here to learn, and we are here to teach." More on-task behavior was the result.

At this school, politeness now has become a school norm. However, in 1995 Shuman Middle School was labeled the worst school in Savannah. That same year, newly appointed administrators, Principal Dora Myles with Assistant Principal Carl Waterbrook, arrived at the school and resolved to accomplish two things: establish strong discipline and become a Georgia School of Excellence. Four years later in 1999 they had achieved both those distinctions. A reputation for strong discipline and an emphasis on Effective Schools research such as safe learning environments and high expectations of all students have established a stability that enables teachers to teach. As a result, their test scores have steadily improved.

Elder Middle School likewise established yearly goals that targeted specific subject areas. From 1995 to 1997, the emphasis was on reading, with diagnostic work, consultants, and study groups all focusing on reading improvement. In 1998-1999 the yearly goal targeted the improvement of writing. That yearly goal guided decisions related to the choice of consultants and the topics for staff development. All practices targeted the improvement of writing. Principal Bern Anderson used principles of sport psychology to build "his team of players"—Catchy slogans, such as "Give me 5 in '95" and daily reminders of their goal and of successful behaviors to reach those goals. Slogans were taped to every classroom's walls, and appeared in memos, agendas, announcements, and in the congratulatory announcements that highlighted the progress made that year in ITBS scores. Targeting goals has been a major force that helped the school to establish its position in the top 20% of all 30 schools with similar high poverty demographics, according to the 1998 reports of Georgia Council of School Performance *(http://cspweb.gsu.edu/cfdocs/csp/ms_performance98.cfm).*

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CONCLUSION

These three common elements of high performing high poverty schools addressed the resources, processes, and focuses in their schools. In summary, the elements are as follows:

- ***These schools use a grant writer or a team of grant writers*** who know how to generate grant proposals that obtain additional funds to implement reform initiatives. This finding is not addressed in the literature related to high performing, high poverty schools. Biddle and Bracey (2000) pointed out the lack of information about the cost of schooling in Carter's (2000) study, *No Excuses*. With reform grants available to districts and schools, a key component of raising achievement is the ability to access these funds. Schools need to have access to people who can write grant proposals.
- ***These schools use teams*** to do their work. A variety of teams support team members and maximize their talents, the use of time, and other resources. The result is an increase in sustained learning opportunities for students. This finding expands the conclusions of prior studies that teacher groups and leadership teams are associated with restructuring (Keefe, Valentine, Clark, & Irvin, 1994), contribute to the quality of life at school (Clark & Clark, 1997), and make decisions with effective middle school principals (Valentine, Trimble, Whitaker, 1997).
- ***These schools use goals*** and focus on specific strategies to meet these goals. They have built-in criteria for decision making when multiple demands could distract and divide the attention, efforts, and resources at a school. Goals keep the end-result in focus, providing a sense of direction. This finding confirms prior research on the importance of goals in middle level teams (White, 1997) and in their focus being "goal-directed and results-driven" (Erb & Dickinson, 1997, p. 533). The finding also confirms the research on groups (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1993).

Figure 3
Eighth Grade ITBS Scores

	School A		School B		School C		School D		School E	
	96--98	Pts*	96--98	Pts*	96--98	Pts*	96--98	Pts*	96--98	Pts*
Reading										
School	32--40	+8	36--41	+5	36--45	+9	38--33	-5	40--39	-1
District	35--35	+0	36--41	+5	36--44	+8	43--39	-4	35--35	-0
State	48--48	+0	48--48	+0	48--48	+0	48--48	-0	48--48	-0
Math										
School	32--50	+18	47--56	+9	51--59	+8	47--55	+8	47--48	+1
District	39--43	+4	47--56	+9	51--57	+6	53--58	+4	39--43	+4
State	53--55	+2	53--55	+2	53--55	+2	53--55	+2	53--55	+2

Pts*= points difference between 1996 scores and 1998 scores

A more detailed examination of the achievement scores over three years was made at the conclusion of the study. The trend data from 1996 to 1998 are presented in Figure 3. Three years of performance data in math and reading are compared among the five schools and presented in relationship to district and state means. For example, some schools reported increases from 5 to 18 percentage points on the ITBS eighth grade test. However, not all five schools sustained their position of being in the upper 20% to 40% among similar schools on the 13 indicators of the Council for School Performance for the year 1998-1999 *(http://arcweb.gsu.edu/csp/)*. As we move from understanding what works with high poverty student populations to enabling schools to sustain

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their efforts, the need is apparent for future research to look at factors that help sustain performance among high poverty schools.

The common elements that emerged in this study work together to achieve success. The key people are the grant writers and team players who know how to identify and target the needs of their students. They articulate goals and acquire the funds to implement them.

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