Journal of Educational Leadership in Action

Volume 6 | Issue 2 Article 6

1-2020

The Quest to Increase Student Academic Outcomes: Actions of Two Charter High Schools

Laura Schaffer Metcalfe
Northern Arizona University

THE QUEST TO INCREASE STUDENT ACADEMIC OUTCOMES: ACTIONS OF TWO CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS

Article by Laura Schaffer Metcalfe

Abstract

This study examined how two charter high schools located in the Phoenix area with a large population of low-socioeconomic students were able to assist students with academic success as measured through accomplishment on standardized achievement tests. Analysis of two Title 1 Reward high schools with grades 9 – 12 during the 2014 school year to determine what actions were implemented to attain high levels of student success on standardized achievement tests. Results were gathered through qualitative means from teacher, administrator, and other staff interviews and classroom observations. Findings from the study revealed how students were successful on standardized tests, how a culture of trust amongst teachers and administrators was implemented, identification of a specific set of academic commonalities was outlined that allowed for student interaction, support, and increased communication amongst between parents, teachers, and school administration, and other areas.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Poverty in the United States has been a concern of government officials, school administrators, and teachers for decades. It affects all levels of society, directly and indirectly, and has become more pronounced within public schools as students of impoverished families come to learn and achieve with peers who reside in homes where making ends meet was not a daily struggle. Education has been a discussion point for decades on how schools can equalize educational opportunities for all students, especially those who came from a low socio-economic background. *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) provided direct insight as to how schools should operate to ensure that students were achieving, and it offered specific recommendations on how to measure student success. One such measure was a standardized test given to all high school students prior to graduation to ensure they were on track with learning. No Child Left Behind legislation provided the formal pathway to require states to design and

implement standardized testing to formally track all student academic progress and it added accountability measures, such as school grading systems and parental choice for school attendance. School grading systems were available so parents could decide how schools were performing and these schools provided the best opportunity for possibly measuring their children's academic success. Oftentimes, the schools with the lowest performance ratings were those with the highest levels of poor children in attendance. Many explanations from authors over the decades have tried to illuminate answers about how to help schools with poor children to succeed. From parent behavior, to parent education levels, to teacher attitudes towards poor children, to student race, to facilitating standardized tests, to blaming standardized tests themselves, explanations do not point to a single description or answer. Poverty was a complex social issue that provided no direct and single answer to help students succeed academically. The bottom line was that standardized tests were likely to stay as the benchmark measurement of all student academic learning and achievement. Until a better way to determine public school student levels of learning, it was imperative that schools and communities find and implement the best measures possible to help those less fortunate to enjoy academic success.

Statement of the Problem

High school students attending public schools located in the Phoenix, AZ metro area needed to perform at or above stated test levels on standardized, high-stakes tests in order to earn a high school diploma effective with the graduating class of 2006 (Arizona Department of Education [ADE], 2013a). Lower socioeconomic students traditionally did not achieve at high levels of performance on standardized tests (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). There were schools located within Phoenix that were breaking this mold and reasons for this trend needed to be discovered and shared. This study pointed out how two high schools classified as a Title 1 Highest-Performing Reward School were helping low socioeconomic students perform at high levels of achievement on standardized tests. The schools that earned the Title 1 Reward School recognition were charter high schools and were the schools of focus in this study.

Conceptual Framework Basis

The following key factors or variables were identified, studied, and the presumed relationships among them were measured in this study. Areas included parent socioeconomic status, elements present in each school's educational environment which lead to student success on standardized tests, identification of specific staff and school culture characteristics within these schools that assisted students with success on standardized tests and which did not exist in economically comparable areas, and identification of specific student attributes/attitudes which may have contributed to high test scores.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify, explore, and examine the effects of social class and school efforts on low-socioeconomic student performance on standardized, high-stakes tests in high schools located in the Phoenix, AZ metro area. Specifically, two Title 1 Highest-Performing Reward Schools chosen; both were charter schools. One charter school located in western Phoenix metro area and one high school located in the eastern metro area were identified and reviewed. One of the 2012 charter high schools earned classification as Title 1 High-Performing and the other charter high school earned classification as a High-Performing, High-Progress Reward School. These levels were determined by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE, 2012a) criteria outlined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Approved Flexibility Waiver.

Research Questions

The research questions this study asked included:

R1: Did some schools experience success on standardized tests even when social class predictors of academic success forecast differently?

R2: What was occurring in these schools that contributed to student of poverty success on achievement tests?

R3: What characteristics were prevailing within schools that experienced success that may not exist within economically comparable districts/schools?

R4: What specific student attributes/attitudes were in place that may have contributed to high test scores according to high school teacher perceptions?

R5: What leadership actions/attributes did the principals have that may have contributed to high test scores?

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The issue of a “broken education system” has long been a topic of discussion in American politics and at American dinner tables. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was formed to study the overall health of American education and to make recommendations on its improvement. The commission completed its report to the American people with a document entitled “*A Nation at Risk*” (Gardner et al., 1983). It made several recommendations about what American society and school systems as a whole should do, but one recommendation, located in the “Recommendation: Standards and Expectations” section of the report, specifically stated:

standardized test of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work. The purposes of these tests would be to: (1) certify the student's credentials; (2) identify the need for remedial intervention; and (3) identify the opportunity for advanced or accelerated work. These tests should be as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests. (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 28)

This strong statement was the formal call for widespread, mandatory standardized testing formed throughout public education systems in the United States.

A Culture of Poverty does not Prepare Students for Academic Success

Achievement can take on many different meanings. In the academic sense of the word, achievement was defined as a certain earned score on a scale of a standardized test. Achievement, on a personal level, can mean getting out of bed, getting dressed, and arriving at work on time to produce a full-days' worth of effort and finishing required tasks. High achievement, according to Burney and Beilke (2008), included definition "as a level of performance that was higher than one would expect for students of the same age, grade, or experience" (p. 176). The authors also elaborated on the definition of high achievement as proficiency by successfully mastering curriculum material beyond what was standard grade-level. Characteristics of high achievement found in students included rapid learning, complex thinking, and creative problem solving (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Breaking achievement characteristics down further, the authors explained that students who possessed achievement related beliefs, values, and goals and the ability to master tasks, and changes that came along with mastery were also essential to their success (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Students who came from schools with rigorous curriculum, including advanced math and science courses, and who generally had the opportunity to access college-level courses, were more likely to enter college and complete a bachelor's degree in a timely manner than students who did not have such academic opportunities. This type of high school curriculum which offered many advanced options was essential for low socio-economic students to be successful outside of their high school environment. Schools with high minority and low-income student populations were less likely to offer such programs (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Conclusions the authors tried to convey included the culture of poverty spilled over into academic successes, and that high school students coming from such environments are not adequately prepared for college or the workforce. Thus, the culture of poverty continued to perpetuate for these students, and they have offered suggestions to educators to incorporate high level, high achievement programs to help them reduce the effects of their impoverished environment. To incorporate Lewis' (1998) culture of poverty thoughts, he stated a way to eliminate the belief system found in the culture of poverty was to slowly raise the level of living for those trapped in it and eventually incorporate these people into the middle class. Those who are living in a culture of poverty perceived by others to be "shiftless, lazy, and unambitious people" (p. 9) and these people were implanted with higher middle-class aspirations and academic achievement as one way to accomplish their exit from this type of life.

Burney and Beilke (2008) examined further whether a continuous mindset of people living in a culture of poverty pervaded over low educational and occupational attainment. They termed this as “deficit thinking” (p.182). It appeared that deficit thinking wasn’t limited to racial groups, but it was apparent in all races whose culture is poverty—White, African American, Hispanic alike were victims of this type of thinking. Deficit thinking encompassed values and beliefs that influenced behavior. For example, the beliefs and values of not needing to succeed in school or go on to further education and training were passed to children from their parents. Even though parents want their children to succeed, they believe schooling was not the only means to attain it.

Family support was also essential for academic success. Even though many families who live in a culture of poverty did not pass on multiple positive attitudes to their children, there were families who did support high achievement and success in school and life in general. Burney and Beilke (2008) pointed out that if low income children who participated in a guaranteed college tuition program alongside their parents, family members were likely to be supportive of the efforts their children were making and they were also likely to want to improve their own educational levels. Parental experience with academic achievement was also a key factor in moving themselves and their children on to higher levels of success. Parents who participated alongside their children in the guaranteed college tuition program reported that pressure to pay for such an education were relieved and it provided a means for more financial resources put towards other types of job training or higher education for their personal use. A “will to succeed” was instilled as result of program participation (Burney & Beilke, 2008). The culture of poverty still existed, but some elements of it were relieved.

Outstanding Instruction is Essential for Low Income Student Success

Research also demonstrated the greatest tool for success for all students, especially those who belonged to a culture of poverty, was outstanding classroom instruction. Teachers in low income schools often lacked experience in their content areas and worked at these schools to “get their feet wet” with experience and later transferred out of those schools. Nearly 77% of teachers left low-income schools for more affluent campuses. This cycle perpetuated a sequence of poor instruction and poor academic gains for low socioeconomic students (Armstrong, 2010). Positive interaction and outstanding instruction may help relieve the ongoing grip of the culture of poverty which Lewis (1998) stated was habitual because the poor have very little sense of history, and they only know their own troubles, their own local conditions, and their own way of life.

As urban schools were centers of societal issues, the location of these schools was the heart of where the culture of poverty began. Even though these schools were located in high poverty, high crime, low resource areas of many large cities, the culture of the school made a huge and positive difference in the learning levels of the students who attended them. In an article written by Osher and Fleishman (2005), the authors outlined three elements of positive culture in high poverty schools. Several elements were clear from their research: caring connections, positive behavioral supports, and emotional learning were essential for students to thrive.

Caring connections between teachers and students explained by the authors as teachers who paid attention to their students. These students tended to perform better in classes than teachers who did not pay attention to their students. Strong connections with teachers were likely to resist the influence of gangs (Goldstein & Soriano, 1994). Additionally, harsh discipline in inner-city schools did not provide positive behavioral changes in students of poverty. Rather, Osher and Fleishman (2005) stated that specific behavioral expectations, direct instruction to students about appropriate behavior, supporting students to meet these expectations, monitoring individual and school wide behavior trends, and offering positive reinforcement for proper behaviors were all powerful contributors to helping decrease overall discipline referrals and increased instructional time.

Social and emotional skills were the third component of a positive culture in inner-city schools (Osher & Fleishman, 2005). Social and emotional skills included processes for students to monitor their own behavior and deal effectively with the multiple academic and social challenges they faced. The authors stated that “teaching students relationship building, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making, could prevent problem behavior and promote academic success” (p. 84). Inner-city schools whose students were a part of a culture of poverty had the power to change their environments while they were at school. A positive learning culture with caring connections with teachers, positive behavioral instruction and supports, and teaching positive social and emotional skills enhanced students who had tough lives. These caring efforts allowed students to understand that the culture of poverty did not have to continue once each experienced an environment different than what they were accustomed.

Research Methodology

Introduction

This study examined social class and school efforts on low-socioeconomic student performance on standardized, high-stakes tests in high schools located in the Phoenix, AZ metro area. Specifically, qualitative research endeavors were employed using case study methodology. Data collection included interviews with school personnel, demographic and secondary data items, and classroom observations. The study attempted to answer five research questions that illuminated the efforts the schools took to ensure their student’s academic achievement.

Study Population

The study population consisted of high schools with grades 9 - 12 that were determined by the Arizona Department of Education as part of two Title 1 Reward Schools. The two charter high schools who participated in the study included one Title 1 High-Performing Reward School and one Title 1 High- Performing, High-Progress Reward School in 2012. In 2012, there were a total of 38 Title 1 High-Performing Reward Schools and 68

Title 1 High-Performing, High-Progress Reward Schools awarded this designation from the Arizona Department of Education's Reward, Focus and Priority Schools list (2012c).

There were two charter high schools who participated in the study. Both schools located in the Phoenix metro area and served students who had low-socioeconomic designations as determined through the federal Free and Reduced lunch program and participation in Title 1 as a school-wide program. Both schools had high minority student populations. EHS held a student demographic breakdown of approximately 79% Hispanic, 24% Caucasian, 9% African American, 2% Asian, and <1% other (Movato Real Estate, 2014). The WHS student demographic breakdown of approximately 72% Hispanic, 14% Caucasian, 12% African American, 2% Asian, >1% Native American (SRHS, 2014). Both schools fully provided permission to participate and data collection began in January 2014 and concluded in March 2014.

Sampling Procedures

The total sample respondents comprised of six English language arts and five math teachers, two principals, one assistant principal, one federal programs director, and one counselor from the two high schools which participated in the study. At EHS, a total of two math and three English teachers participated, as well as the school's leadership team members who comprised of the principal, the federal programs director, and the counselor. At WHS, a total of three math and three English teachers along with a principal and one assistant principal participated in the study.

The sampling procedures used in this study comprised of a non-random technique with purposive sampling methods. Non-random sampling technique according to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) did not allow the researcher to specify a chance that each member of sample was representative of the population. Additionally, purposive sampling entailed the researcher choosing sample members based on experience or knowledge of the group (Gay et al., 2009).

Differentiated school recognition came in the form of Reward, Priority, and Focus school categories (ADE, 2012b). High-Performing and High-Performing, High-Progress Reward Schools were schools using Title 1 funds that Arizona recognized for high student academic achievement or high levels of student academic growth over time. There were two subgroups for Reward school recognition that schools could qualify for. High-Performing Reward Schools were Title 1 schools that met each of the following criteria (ADE, 2012b):

- Schools had to earn a letter grade of "A" in Arizona's A – F Letter Grade accountability system

- Schools had to meet 2012 annual measurable objectives (which changed with approval of the flexibility waiver) for all students and all subgroup of students

- Schools had to show student growth percentile for their Bottom Quartile subgroup of greater than 50 in 2012

- Schools had to demonstrate more than 50% of Bottom Quartile students passing the AIMS test in math and reading in 2012

- Schools that were high schools must possess a 4-year cohort graduation rate in 2011 of greater than 80%

High-Performing, High-Progress Reward Schools had to meet each of the following criteria to have earned recognition by ADE (2012b):

- Schools must have earned a grade of “A” or “B” on the A – F Letter Grade accountability system in 2012

- Schools must have shown growth pointed for all students and the Bottom 25 quartile from A – F Letter Grade calculation of greater than 59 in 2012

- Schools must have demonstrated student growth pointed from their Bottom Quartile group of greater than 50 in 2012

- Schools with more than 35% of the Bottom Quartile subgroup passing AIMS in math in reading in 2012

- Schools that were high schools ensured an increase in their 4-year cohort graduation rate of greater than 10% between cohort 2009 and cohort 2011

Delivery of the instruments was in small group settings, called focus groups, with an audio tape present to ensure accuracy of collected information. Approximately one hour of discussion time was allotted for each interview/focus group (there were a total of two focus groups/interviews conducted with participants) to answer the open-ended questions.

Observations

There were only two classroom observations conducted for each teacher for this study. The author paid close attention during the observations of how the ideas presented in the interviews aligned with observable actions within the classroom. Additionally, a classroom observation tool guided the researcher to look for certain elements within a classroom. These elements were helpful to answer the research questions of the study. Observations recorded were also with written comments on the observation instrument.

Demographic and Secondary Data

Demographic and secondary data included such items as student AIMS scores (without identifiable student information), general school demographic data, general attendance data, policies and procedures of the school (i.e., school handbook), general demographic information for the district, any SAT/ACT test scores (with all student identification information removed), English and math curricular items (blank worksheets, lesson plans, names of resources, course descriptions), school and/or district mission and vision statements, administrative policies and/or procedures provided insight into actions that contributed to the school's success on achievement tests. The researcher worked closely with each school principal and she was provided, or it was recommended, to access other secondary and demographic information to help answer the research questions. The artifacts listed above were simply an estimate of what was available as each school was different in nature and may have had other items to offer for consideration.

Validating the Findings

Triangulation was employed to validate the findings of the data collected. Triangulation, according to Glesne (2006), stated that using multiple methods of data collection and different types of data to reduce the threats of invalidity of the information. The author went on to explain that multiple data collection methods increased confidence and trustworthiness of the data and in the researcher, who collected it. The data collection efforts explained in this section of the study included, focus groups/interviews, observations, and demographic and secondary data, enough to yield data to answer the research questions of this study. The data also contributed different perspectives on how the schools involved with the study were able to help their students succeed on their standardized tests (Glesne, 2006).

References

American Psychological Association. (2013). *Education and socioeconomic status*. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/factsheet-education.aspx

Arizona Department of Education. (2012a). *Esea flexibility request*. Retrieved from https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=57a5039aaadebe130c518610

Arizona Department of Education. (2012b). *Reward, priority, and focus schools*. Research and Evaluation, Retrieved from http://www.azed.gov

Arizona Department of Education. (2012c). *2012 Arizona reward, focus, and priority schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.azed.gov/no-child-left-behind/files/2012/09/az-esea-reward-schools.pdf

Arizona Department of Education. (2013a). *High school graduation requirements*. Retrieved from http://www.azed.gov/hsgraduation/

Allen, J. (2004, January 1). The debate: Charter schools spark reform. . Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/closingtheachievementgap/debate_charter.html

Armstrong, A. (2010). Myths of poverty—realities for students. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review, 75*(8), 49-53.

Bloom, H. S., & Unterman, R. (2012) Sustained positive effects on graduation rates produced by new york city's small public high schools of choice. *Policy Brief: by MDRC*. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED528865.pdf

Burney, V. H., & Beilke, J. R. (2008). The constraints of poverty on high achievement. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *31*(3), 171 - 197.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement. (2008). Essential elements of engagement: High expectations, high support. *Executive Summary of 2008 Findings*. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED526360.pdf

Gardner, D. P., Larsen, Y. W., Baker, W. O., Campbell, A., Crosby, E. A., Foster, Jr., C. A., & Wallace, R. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/members.html

Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2009). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (9th ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson.

Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pearson. Retrieved from http://www.ablongman.com

Goldstein, A. P., & Soriano, F. L. (1994). Juvenile gangs. In L.D. Enron, J.H, Gentry, & P. Schlegel (Eds.), *Reason to hope* (pp. 315–333). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Lewis, O. (1998). The culture of poverty. *Society, 35*(2), 7-9.

Movato Real Estate. (2014). *Gateway early college high school test scores and information*. Retrieved from http://www.movoto.com/schools/phoenix-az/gateway-early-college-high-school-040004100718/

Osher, D., & Fleischman, S. (2005). Positive culture in urban schools. *Educational Leadership, 62*(6), 84-85.

South Ridge High School (SRHS). (2014). *About us*. Retrieved from http://www.southridgeprep.com/aout-us.html