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Beating the Odds: Exploring the 90/90/90 Phenomenon

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Beating the Odds: Exploring the 90/90/90 Phenomenon

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This article presents a case study of one high performing high poverty campus serving students of color in South Central Texas. The researchers utilized the criteria for 90/90/90 schools established by Douglas Reeves (2004). In order to meet these criteria, schools had to have the following characteristics: 90% or more of the student body had to be non-Anglo, 90% or more of the students had to qualify for free or reduced lunch, and achievement testing was mastered at rates of 90% or greater. Researchers conducted an initial examination of every public school within a 16,631 square mile area utilizing these criteria. The results yielded 15 schools that met this standard at least once between the years 2006–2010. Only one school met the criteria in each of these years. Panel interviews, focus groups, site visits, and individual follow up interviews were conducted to glean information on the characteristics of this high performing campus, the results of which are presented herein.

Experts agree that our nation's future and our society's resilience is predicated on our schools' ability to meet the needs of all learners, close the achievement gap, and improve the quality of education in our local communities (Darling-Hammond, Kohn, Meier, Sizer, & Wood, 2004). Scheurich and Skrla (2003) noted, "The success of our society will soon be directly dependent on our ability as educators to be successful with children of color, with whom we have not been very successful in the past" (p. 5). School leaders throughout the nation struggle to find ways to address the educational needs of low-income Hispanic students. How do high-performing campuses that serve low-income, Hispanic students succeed in high-poverty areas?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The case study presented here builds on earlier research conducted by the authors regarding 90/90/90 schools in South Central Texas. The initial study that spawned this investigation was based on a focus group panel of principals selected because their campuses were 90% non-Anglo, 90% economically disadvantaged, and had attained a 90% passing rate on the TAKS (Texas' State Competency Exam) tests in both math and English-Language Arts (Kearney & Herrington, 2010).

In this current study, the investigators were determined to drill deeper, talking to teachers, parents, students, and staff to obtain a closer look into one 90/90/90 school in South Central Texas that had been extraordinarily successful, sustaining the 90/90/90 achievement level for four consecutive years.

Reeves (2004) coined the term “90/90/90 schools.” He defined these as schools in which at least 90% of the student body can be classified as in poverty, at least 90% of the study body is non-Anglo, and at least 90% of the students are performing at the 90th percentile or higher on state or national standardized tests. This study deviates from the Reeves’ criterion slightly, using instead a 90% pass rate on state-mandated criterion referenced exams in both math and language arts.

This qualitative investigation began with a search for consistently successful elementary schools serving 90% students of color and 90% low-income children in the South Central Texas region. Researchers conducted an analysis of the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) state report (Texas Education Agency, 2010) to locate these campuses. Applying the modified Reeves (2004) criteria, schools were included in the initial study if at least 90% of the student body qualified for free or reduced-fee lunch, 90% of students self-identified as non-Anglo, and at least 90% of students passed the State Achievement Test in both Reading and Math. A total of 664 public schools were included. The search yielded 15 campuses within the South Central Texas region that met the established criteria.

Only one campus met the established criteria for all four years under investigation: Lackland City Elementary School, a campus in the Northside Independent School District located in San Antonio, Texas. The authors acknowledge that it is very unusual to use a school’s real name; however, the authors (along with school and district officials) decided to identify this campus in the interest of full disclosure and for the benefit of readers who may wish to research this campus. In this investigation, the researchers wanted to learn more from the viewpoint of teachers, staff, parents, and children on this campus to understand how they had achieved a sustained level of 90/90/90 success that set them apart from all other campuses in the region. According to the state AEIS reports, this campus has the following characteristics:

Number of students: 603.

Percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch: 94.2.

Percent of students who are of minority status: 95.9

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in reading for the year 2007: 94

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in reading for the year 2008: 97

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in reading for the year 2009: 93

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in reading for the year 2010: 93

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in math for the year 2007: 94

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in math for the year 2008: 96

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in math for the year 2009: 96

Percent of students who passed the state achievement test in math for the year 2010: 96
(Texas Education Agency, 2010)

METHODOLOGY

The following procedures were carried out to gain a more complete picture of the processes that led to Lackland City Elementary's success. First, interviews were conducted with Mr. Jerry Allen, principal of Lackland City Elementary. Next, the researchers developed a series of questions to be asked during the follow-up site visit to the campus. Each of the three researchers conducted a follow-up site visit to the campus that included classroom visits and follow-up interviews with parents, paraprofessionals, other school leaders (counselor and assistant principal) and teachers. All group and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Teacher, parent, student, and principal perspectives were compared to allow a higher level of triangulation against which to compare the findings. Member checking was conducted with follow-up visits and phone calls to ensure accuracy of the quotes and corroboration of theories developed by the researchers.

Each of the three researchers coded the transcripts independently before coming together to identify common themes. Three themes emerged endemically from the data: support structures; relationships; and consistency.

FINDINGS

Support Structures

Support structures are here defined as systems established by the campus leadership that contribute to the future success of the campus (Gorton & Alston, 2009). According to stakeholders at Lackland City Elementary, some of the support structures needed for academic success included hiring practices, staff development, significant reliance on teacher and staff input, and strong principal leadership.

Selecting staff members who are likely to positively impact teaching and learning begins with determining what unique positions a given campus will need (Wagner et al., 2006). The principal was emphatic about relying on teacher input to identify specific needs before hiring new personnel. On this particular campus the need focused on a math specialist, a reading specialist, and a community liaison. The principal, Mr. Allen, stated: "We were the first school in (our district) to hire a community liaison. And she is probably the busiest person I have on that whole campus." Mr. Allen went on to explain the vital role of these specialists:

One of the things that we do is we have a Math Facilitator and a Reading Facilitator. These people are not teachers of children. They're teachers of teachers. So—they do tutor a little bit during the day, but primarily what we do, and particularly our newer teachers, we send these specialists in to observe, to model teach for them, to say, "I see you are having a difficulty with this component. You know, Mr. Smith over here does a great job with that, why don't I teach your class tomorrow, and you can go observe." What this creates for you is a 185 day staff development program. These two teachers are in teachers' classrooms every single day, assisting and working with them.

Once the essential positions were identified for this campus, the right people needed to be moved into these roles. When asked what one thing contributed more than any other to this campus' success, one of the teachers responded, "I [would] say it's the administration and who they hire." Interestingly, although content knowledge was important to those on the hiring panels, it was not the most important consideration. Mr. Allen put it this way, "When I interview a

person, I'm not concerned about how smart they are—I'm concerned about the heart they have. I can teach you how to teach school, but I can't teach you how to love children. So that is very important." From the teacher's perspective, this was just as meaningful. One teacher said,

Well, I think when I interviewed with Mr. Allen, he didn't ask me about what I knew or anything, we just chatted. And so when we were done, I was like, "Okay, did I get the job or not?" So it was a different interview. It wasn't intimidating, and I think from there, he can . . . see what kind of person you are. So that makes a big difference.

After making efforts to identify the right positions and people, employees are supported with continuous professional development. Here's how staff development is handled on this campus:

I don't send a teacher to hear a speaker who has spent 40 years of his life developing theories to come back and teach us what she heard. That's probably the lowest form of staff development that can ever be developed. We get the speaker to come in and speak to us. Yes that costs money. I spend \$35,000 a year in staff development. Nothing is more important. Now, this year, I have three schools [I work with]. The reason we three work together is because their ex principals used to be my vice principals, so we formed our little group, and one day during the August training, we would hire somebody that was really good [to conduct staff development] (Mr. Allen, principal).

Teacher empowerment is another important area of organizational management that was consistently brought up by those we spoke to on this campus. Teachers felt strongly that their principal could and would advocate for them as necessary. In the principal's words:

And then you're a cheerleader. And I mean, if I have to wear a skirt and pompoms I'll do it, but you are a cheerleader. I have never made a teacher better by telling them how bad they are, ever. I work off of their strengths, I use our facilitators, and we build them up and continually brag on the good that they're doing.

Putting on a skirt and pom-poms may sound like a silly thing for Mr. Allen (A masculine principal in Texas cowboy boots who drives an F-150 pickup) to express, but the researchers sensed he was not kidding.

Principals must be influential, able to inspire faculty and staff to strive for continuous improvement (Sergiovanni, 2006). They must also be able to exert upward influence in the school district, celebrating the successes of teachers and students to the central office administrators and board, advocating for their needs to sustain the successes (Gorton & Alston, 2009). Below is one example of how Mr. Allen exerted upward influence to make a difference.

Now, I talked to the superintendent, and I said, Jack we need to make some changes out here. We're in the 40th/50th percentile. And we can't do [that]. So the teachers found a [reading] program. They're the ones that found the program—I'd never heard of it. And they brought it in, and then we started building on that, and I told all the [central office] supervisors in the district, "Don't come to my campus. We're just going to work on Reading this year."

Mr. Allen has a clear vision for the teachers that he communicates to them on a daily basis. He empathically notes that it not such a good thing to have 90% passing because, "every number is a child. It is not acceptable that any child would fail." The vice principal noted,

Another thing that we do here that I have not seen at any other school is the [way in which we] tutor. Mr. Allen finds ways to get money to pay teachers to stay after school and tutor their students, and

it's not just one or two people, which I've seen at other schools. This is every classroom teacher gets to tutor.

The principal agreed that this was a key to their campus' success,

Yes, yes. I don't want questions about tutoring, so I say if you come to work with us, here are our expectations what you'll need to do. I've only had one person in all this time come back and say, "I can't tutor." And I said, "Gosh, I guess I'll see your resignation tomorrow then." That's just something we're going to do. It's an expectation for the children."

One of the teachers added, "None of us really enjoy it [tutoring] but . . . we know that it's helping our students, and that's what we're here for." The principal's longevity on the campus and rapport with teachers had enabled him to establish an unyielding position on this critical area of student support. The researchers acknowledge that Mr. Allen's ability to enforce the tutoring requirement is rare. It is not something that any principal can do, especially in states where the teaching profession is unionized. At Lackland City Elementary School the tutoring requirement for teachers was embedded in the school culture. To fit in at Lackland City Elementary School, teachers tutor.

Relationships

Relationships with caring and supportive adults within the school and community are established through mutual trust among all parties—school personnel, students, and parents. The formation of such relationships is based on the assumption that low-income parents have the same interests in their children as do middle-class parents (Tripses & Scroggs, 2009).

The main protective factors that families, schools, and communities foster to increase resilience in children are caring and supportive relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high parent and teacher expectations regarding student performance and future success (Bryan, 2005). A high expectation for success is communicated in every facet of the routine operations on this campus—from the daily attendance posted on the marquee outside to phone calls home on a daily basis. As one walks the halls of this campus, he or she is greeted by university banners and pennants which are visible from any vantage point. This is just one way that Lackland City creates and communicates the message that college is not only a part of your future; it's a presence and an expectation today. Students earn points throughout the school year for good behavior and academic achievement in order to attend field trips to local universities. One administrator said, "We're building that process for kids to say, 'Yes, I can go to college.' So we get [exposure to] as many universities [as possible] to show it's doable."

There are many fun programs that students and parents can count on year after year. These include Fiesta, Reading Game Nights, Math Game Nights, Soc-Hops, and Western Days. The principal described a few of these events as follows,

We have our younger grade levels dancing there, and we have mariachis and *folclorico* dancers. It's kind of like an Old Afternoon at Lackland City. Children earn tickets based on their behavior, and they can go out and participate in that. Then we have a Reading event where the same thing occurs—for six weeks—we have an expectation of extended and outside reading. And when children meet that

expectation, they earn tickets, and then our VP puts on a huge carnival at the end of the year, and they can spend those tickets there. Then February during [the] Rodeo . . . we have a western day here. We've got a great band coming in to play . . . We have our rope specialist, and then in the afternoon, we'll have a covered wagon, showing how the cowboys cooked—we'll have a petting zoo, and we used to have a friend of mine who was a blacksmith, and he would come in and show how to make horseshoes. And then we have a guy who was a rodeo clown, and we have story tellers—so it's—they learn a lot.

It is important for children to have fun programs to work for and look forward to (Manzo, 2000). As one grandmother said,

Those things really help, because I know giving them those rewards with fiesta tickets and all that, I know my grandkids will say, "Grandma, I need to read this book because I need to take an AR test to attend these functions." They know there's a reward at the end."

One parent said,

I think the kids are the ones that pushes [sic.] us to get those rewards. They want those rewards . . . especially single parents like myself. You know, I'm at work full time Monday through Friday, so I don't have a lot of time to do stuff with my kids, so, it's like they push, push, push for us to do it for them, you know to help them and I think that's what it is.

Partnerships create avenues by which relationships or networks of trust can be formed among administrators, teachers, family, and community members. These relationships provide a source of connections, information, and understanding that parents can draw on to help their children succeed. Such partnerships facilitate the exchange of knowledge across cultures and lead to a bridging of the gap between home and school cultures, values, and expectations (Huang & Gibbs, 1992). This school utilizes its partnerships to help support some of the needs of the campus. For example, one alumnus donates money to purchase backpacks every year. Another former student organizes a barbeque and silent auction that raises around \$5,000 each year. The school uses these funds to provide food and other resources to needy families in the community. The staff we spoke with on this campus explained their support of needy families this way:

So our philosophy is teachers can teach children who are healthy, and healthy children come from healthy families. So if you have an unhealthy family in your neighborhood, no one is going to do anything about that if you don't [do anything about it].

This campus also orchestrates support from local universities, former students, and parents.

We don't have much business in our area. So what do we do? We get more affluent schools to adopt us. I have one school that brings coats. They're usually coats from last year, but they're cleaned, and they bring those coats over, and I have teachers standing at every entrance on that very first cold day. And we know exactly who to get those coats to. (Mr. Allen, principal)

There are many other examples of community partnerships, including a spaghetti dinner the local neighborhood association hosts on behalf of the school and a clothing closet maintained throughout the year at the campus.

Consistency

The third major theme that emerged from this case study was consistency. This is demonstrated in the pedagogy, in the people, and in the programs of Lackland City Elementary.

The pedagogy is consistent at Lackland City Elementary. As one teacher put it, “I think what’s neat is that they all teach the same thing. So even if we have a substitute, that classroom is not going to fall behind because the substitute did not know what to present, because they all have the same kind of curriculum.” The principal explained that teachers utilize grade level plans to ensure continuity across classrooms. Providing for a consistent learning experience across classrooms is accomplished through training and follow up (Clarke, Stow, Ruebling, & Kayona, 2006). The math facilitator noted,

I have [something] that I think [is] different from any other school . . . the training that is provided for the teachers . . . There is initial training and ongoing training, and I think that’s very important to give the teachers the skills that they need.

The people are also consistent on this campus. One parent noted, “What stays the same is the teachers. We may have a few come and go, but they’re [mostly] the same. They’re always willing to talk to you about your child or whatever. They’re always willing.” Teachers on this campus agree,

The team I work with has been consistent for most of the 17 years [I’ve been here] . . . that makes it easy. What I think we forget sometimes is when you bring new teachers in, you basically are teaching them the first year how they teach the kids here. But once they’re here, they kind of get the feel of it. So when you have a teacher here five years, we all know what to expect, we all know how to get through to these kids, we all know what we can do to be where we need to be, and it’s actually fun to come to work.

Many of the teachers and parents interviewed spoke about the impact of seeing individuals leave and come back. As one parent noted, “I see a lot of teachers that have gone I don’t know where, but then they come back . . . teachers leaving and coming back. We’ve had several.”

It is not just the teachers that provide consistency; the administration is as well. According to one parent,

I think that’s what it all boils down to that the kids know what is expected by the teachers, and the teachers know what is expected of them by the principal and the vice principal because—I know Mr. Allen doesn’t know this—but at home we call him The Big Kahuna. But my grandkids they know, if they don’t do what they’re supposed to be doing, they’re going to go see The Big Kahuna.

This campus has had the same principal for the last 25 years, and all five of the vice principals who left in that time period did so to accept principal positions of their own. The idea of having principals in place for an extended period of time seems to run counter to current practice in the state of Texas. According to a recent comprehensive study of all public schools in the state of Texas, the average principal position in this state comes vacant once every $3\frac{1}{2}$ years (Fuller, Young, & Shoho, 2010).

The families are consistent at Lackland City Elementary as well. As one teacher noted,

I have kids who I had in my first year here who have kids here now, which I never thought I would see. I bet you I’ve had 3 or 4—this year I’ve had 14 kids who I’ve had their brothers and sisters in my

class. So the parents know me, I know them. The families are great . . . I'm not going to come here if I can't work with the parents, because we need each other. I'm not going to do it all myself. He's not going to do it. So if you work with me and I work with you, that child is going to be successful. (Teacher)

The attendance clerk provided interesting insight. She stated, "I do the enrolling and withdrawals, and I get a lot of parents that say, 'We want to come back. We're looking for a place to live [in the Lackland City attendance zone] because the other school we were at, we're not learning [as much as we did at Lackland City].'" A cafeteria worker/parent said, "I had moved away from here, and I didn't like the other school, so that's the reason I moved back here, for the school."

Even the substitute teachers provide consistency on a campus. One parent/substitute noted:

I think even the substitutes, cause I'm a sub myself for Northside, you see a lot of the same ones coming to sub, and I guess that comes back to him knowing which ones, not because they're always calling me, but because they know which ones work the best and are here to do what is expected of them also.

Perhaps the most powerful statement about the students themselves came from teachers from the middle school into which Lackland City Elementary feeds. These middle school teachers have noted that they can tell which students came from Lackland City because of their comparatively high self-confidence, skill level, and work ethic.

SUMMARY: A CONCEPT MODEL EXPLAINED

The authors have created a concept model (Figure 1) to help identify the common factors identified by various stakeholders within 90/90/90 campuses (Kearney & Herrington, 2010). This visual model may provide some usefulness in capturing the key points that emerged endemically from the individuals interviewed within this study.

At the top of the concept map, the reader will find the term, "support structures." This concept encompasses the areas of organizational management that often exist behind the scenes. It includes decisions involving organizational employment charts, sitting on interview panels, and designing effective professional development. It was interesting to hear the stakeholders identify this area because although it is not highly visible, it appears to be a foundation of their success.

Moving to the bottom of the concept map, each of the stakeholders interviewed for this study communicated a strong belief that building relationships was critical to the success of this school. In this case study, relationships were identified between administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the broader community. Although strong relationships are certainly not unique to this one campus, it is a factor that the stakeholders we spoke to identified as paramount to their school's success.

Perhaps most importantly, the reader's eyes should be drawn to the underlying arrow entitled, "Stable leadership over time." Within this paper, consistency was seen on many levels. In a shared leadership model, all stakeholders are leaders. That parents chose to move back to this neighborhood in order for their children to benefit from the education at this campus cannot be overlooked. They remembered their own experiences at Lackland Elementary and believed that their own children and grandchildren would be best served in a campus that had succeeded in creating a compassionate learning environment that focused on student learning. Teachers,

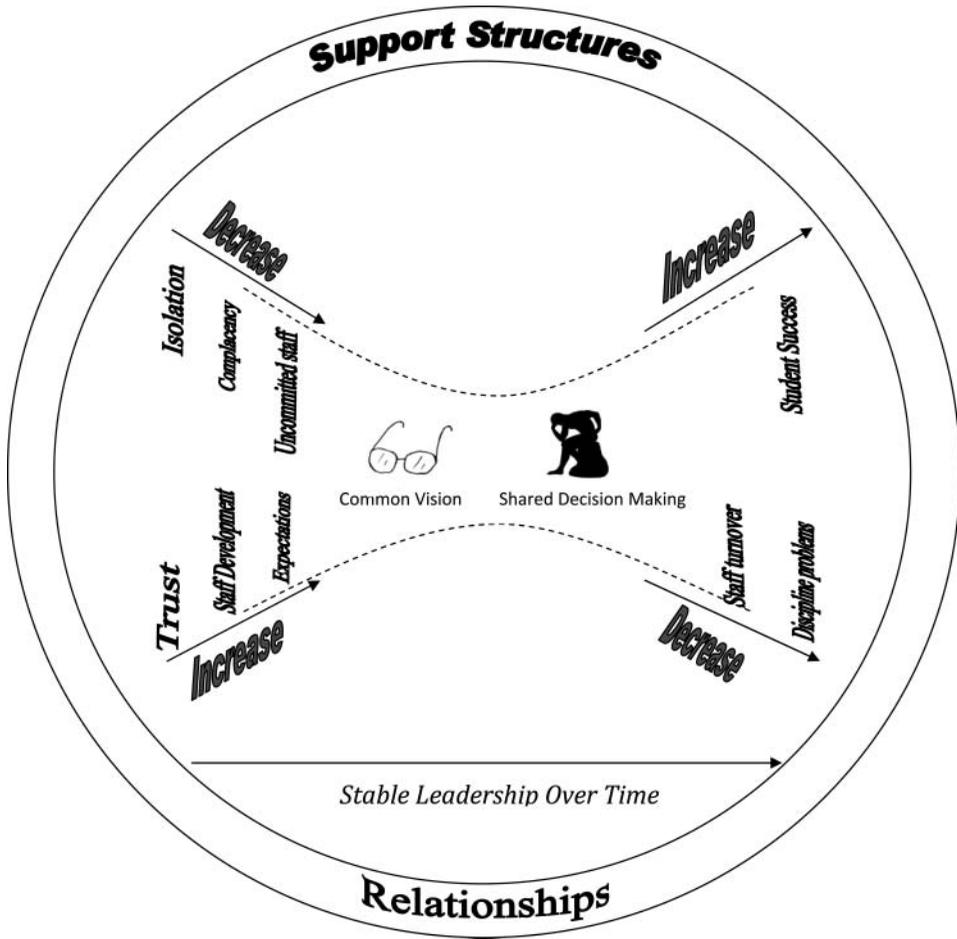


FIGURE 1 Model of Effective School Leadership (Kearney & Herrington, 2010).

support staff, and administrators have indeed provided stability on this campus for years. The clearest example of this is the principal’s own tenure of 25 years on this campus, a number that far exceeds the average $3\frac{1}{2}$ year turnover of principal positions in the State of Texas (Fuller, Young, & Shoho, 2010). The principal created a working and learning environment that made excellent teachers want to stay. They felt that they were a part of something important and indeed they were. When seeking to learn lessons from a 90/90/90 campus, enhancing principal longevity may be an important point for policymakers to consider, especially when those principals understand the value of reaching out to teachers and the surrounding community to create and foster a vision of learning that is compassionate toward families, passionate about children, and dedicated to making the community better.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The authors acknowledge that this is just one case study and the results are not generalizable to every campus or student population. Lackland City Elementary stands out as a school that has attained high levels of success with economically disadvantaged students of color. Because the success of the campus was examined on many levels, corroborated through interviews with administrators, staff members, parents, and teachers, the authors believe the results may be applicable to other campuses with similar demographics that aspire to achieve excellence. The authors will continue to investigate this phenomenon at Lackland City Elementary and other 90/90/90 campuses. The authors encourage other researchers to continue to identify 90/90/90 campuses across the United States and internationally in an effort to add to the existing literature and our collective understanding in this area.

CONCLUSION

This study was motivated by the growing sense that educational researchers talk a lot about equity and excellence, but we do not know much about how to achieve it. Brown (2010) stated:

Excellence without equity is not excellence—it is hypocrisy. Further research is needed to document the specific strategies that principals of “excellent, equitable schools” use to confront and change past practices anchored in open and residual racism and class discrimination. (p. 11)

This study has taken one small step toward meeting Brown’s charge. It is our hope that other researchers will continue to identify 90/90/90 campuses across the United States and internationally in an effort to add to the existing literature and our collective understanding in this area.

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