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Common miracles

The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that has focused on closing the achievement gap, has identified more than 4,500 schools with high percentages of students of color and of students who live in poverty who also achieve at high levels. Have these schools found a silver bullet, a program that has dramatically changed what they do to help all students achieve at high levels, no matter what students' background or culture or language?

The list of characteristics among these schools is neither exotic nor uncommon. What is unusual about the sites is their focused dedication and consistent implementation of a few practices. The implications of this finding for educators elsewhere are very clear. Central office staff members can help schools attain high levels of learning for all students by **providing a clearinghouse of best practice options to address educational equity** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 154). The practices used by high-achieving, high-poverty schools include:

1. A belief that all students can and will learn. Professional development promotes supportive and nurturing classroom environments where teachers press for academic achievement (The Center for Public Education, 2005a). Teachers use strong instructional strategies and have a deep understanding of their content.

2. Ongoing student assessment that allows individualized instruction. Teachers have the tools to diagnose student learning needs and alter instruction to meet those needs (The Center for Public Education, 2005a; Payne, 2008).

3. Curriculum aligned with instruction and assessment. Educators align instruction with content standards to ensure student learning. School faculty and administrators demonstrate collective responsibility for helping students succeed (The Education Trust, 2005;

The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

4. Collaborative decision-making. Staff members help make key decisions about curriculum and instruction. They use assessment data to plan curriculum improvements or classroom assignments (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

5. Teacher collaboration. Teachers work together and believe that the "faculty as a whole can execute the actions necessary to produce positive outcomes for students" (Jerald, 2007).

6. Support. Educators create early warning systems to ensure they identify and help struggling students, and teachers share responsibility for all students (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

7. Highly-qualified teachers. Teacher quality includes teachers' experience, advanced degrees and training, and use of effective instructional skills. Leaders create class schedules based on students' needs rather than seniority or teacher preferences (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

8. Protecting academic time. Teachers devote their time to challenging and aligned learning activities (The Education Trust, 2005).

9. Ongoing professional development. The Education Trust reports that "one-third of high-performing schools spent 10% of their Title I budgets on professional development" (Center for Public Education, 2005b, p. 6).

Central office administrators help schools understand and *consistently* implement quality practices by eliminating any that divert energy focusing on core practices that have been shown to improve the achievement of *all* students.

NSDC STANDARD

Equity: Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

References for this article are available online at www.nsd.org/news/system/index.cfm.