

Creating a culture of high expectations

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In 2006, McREL released the findings from a three-year study of high-performing, high-needs schools. Findings from this study, which are summarized in the report, *McREL Insights: Schools that “Beat the Odds,”* suggest that low-performing schools may be doing many things “right.” Teachers in low-performing schools were just as likely as those in high-performing schools to say they were attending to such research-based practices as offering challenging curricula and engaging in staff development on instruction. So, if low-performing schools are doing those things right, what aren’t they doing?

Study methodology

McREL researchers identified 739 high-performing and 738 low-performing schools with 50 percent or more of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. We surveyed participating teachers in those schools about their schools’ performance in four areas: 1) school environment, 2) professional community, 3) leadership, and 4) instruction.

Findings

Five key differences emerged between the perceptions of teachers in high-performing schools vs. low-performing schools. Teachers in high-performing schools were more likely to report that their schools had a shared mission or goals, a press for academic achievement, and a safe and orderly environment. In addition, teachers in these high-achieving schools were more apt to report that they could influence school decisions, and that they had clarified instructional goals for their students.

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One conclusion we draw from these findings is that high-performing schools develop a “culture of high expectations.” That is, they develop, with input from teachers, a common vision and focus for their efforts. This vision establishes high expectations for student performance and behavior. Through shared leadership, teachers take responsibility for creating structured, well-managed classrooms, where they

ensure that students are clear about their learning goals and behavioral expectations.

This conclusion validates our earlier examinations of more than 30 years of research on effective schools and classrooms (reported in the ASCD publications, *What Works in Schools* and *Classroom Instruction that Works*). These studies found that creating a “safe and orderly” school environment and classrooms with “clear goals and effective feedback” are strongly correlated with higher levels of student achievement.

But what about the fact that many other well-documented influences on student achievement, such as creating a challenging curriculum tied to

standards do not appear to differentiate high- and low-performing schools? Does this mean these other activities and processes are unimportant? Not at all. But it does suggest that absent a culture of high-expectations, potentially valuable activities, such as encouraging teacher collaboration can be akin to sowing seeds on rocky ground—the right idea, but in the wrong environment and unlikely to bear fruit.

In summary, what appears to distinguish high-performing schools from low-performing ones is less the *tangible* aspects or technical processes of schooling, and more the *intangible* sometimes elusive aspects, such as a school’s mission, culture, and its teachers’ and students’ attitudes and beliefs. This insight may explain why school improvement is so difficult. Were it simply a matter of offering a different professional development program, raising student achievement would be easy. But the differences between high- and low-performing schools suggest that successful schools may need to first change something far more complex—people’s perceptions, expectations, motivations, and behaviors. **CS**

Distinguishing characteristics of schools that “beat the odds”
1. Shared mission & goals
2. Academic press for achievement
3. Orderly climate
4. Support for teacher influence
5. Structure (<i>clear student goals, strong classroom management</i>)