

# Instructional and Organizational Arrangements That Improve Achievement in Inner-City Schools

Three programs provide guidelines for successful teaching of basic skills in urban schools.

---

DANIEL U. LEVINE AND JOYCE STARK

---

What makes an urban elementary school effective? It now seems fairly well established that outstanding leadership is required from a building principal or other administrator and that instructional goals and activities must be focused on attainable objectives (Phi Delta Kappa, 1980). But what organizational and instructional processes and arrangements are required for successful widespread implementation of improved instructional practices in big city schools?

With support from the National Institute of Education we recently completed a study of three school districts im-

plementing programs that promise to improve academic achievement and create more successful inner-city schools.<sup>1</sup> Two of the districts—Community District 19 in Brooklyn, New York, and Chicago—are using the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program (CMLRP). District 19 has been using the program (CMLRP) for a while; Chicago is just beginning to implement it. Los Angeles Unified School District, the third school district, has developed a schoolwide approach to improving achievement through systematic school-by-school planning in Title I schools in Los Angeles. A schoolwide approach is important in Los Angeles because of their district's participation in the schoolwide section PL 95-561, which allows schools to avoid "pullout" arrangements for Title I (now called Chapter 1) students and spend funds on students not educationally eligible for Title I.

## What Are They Achieving?

Before summarizing the study results, we should emphasize that the inner-city elementary schools we visited and described in this report are making impressive gains in improving students' reading achievement. Among the 21 elementary schools in District 19, for example, the percentage of students scoring two years or more below grade level on the California Reading Achievement Test decreased from 20 in 1979 to 11 in 1982, and the percentage of students at or above grade level increased from 30 to 40. At Woodson South K-4 Elementary School in Chicago, fourth-grade reading achievement averaged 4.5 for 1980 and 1981, and in Los Angeles the sixth graders at 107th Street School registered a gain in percentage of reading skills from 35 in 1979 to 56 in 1981. What instructional and organizational processes and arrangements did we notice in our study that could have helped

---

*Daniel U. Levine is Professor of Education, University of Missouri at Kansas City, Missouri; and Joyce Stark is Research Associate, Midwest Research Institute, Kansas City, Missouri.*

***“all of the schools effectively targeted resources to help their most educationally retarded students through a schoolwide effort that eliminated or minimized the dysfunctional aspects of pullout instruction.”***

bring about these achievements?

#### **Instructional Processes and Arrangements**

All the schools we described in the study had six major instructional characteristics in common:

- Curriculum and instruction were explicitly and painstakingly aligned to improve the appropriateness of instruction with particular attention paid to effective spacing of instruction
- More effective arrangements were made to deal with the learning problems of low-achieving students
- Greater emphasis was placed on
  - Teaching higher-order cognitive skills
  - “Assured availability” of teaching resource materials
  - Minimal recordkeeping for teachers
  - Improving the quality of homework and increasing parent involvement in students’ learning.

With respect to *curriculum alignment*, Los Angeles elementary schools either participated fully in the Curriculum Alignment Project<sup>2</sup> or aligned objectives, instruction, and testing less formally through intensive staff development and supervision. Chicago and New York District 19 schools achieved alignment either through CMLRP and related staff development or from years of staff development that focused on selection and correlation of learning objectives, teaching, and assessment of student performance.

With respect to *special arrangements for low-achieving students*, all of the schools effectively targeted resources to help their most educationally retarded students through a schoolwide effort that eliminated or minimized the dysfunctional aspects of pullout instruction. In District 19 schools, this was done largely by systematically coordinating federal, state, and local resources for compensatory education and devising parallel instruction and related arrangements (for example, use of the CMLRP in both regular and parallel classes, introduction of a schoolwide writing program) for the lowest-achieving students.

This approach also has the virtue of reducing class size, usually by one-half, for regular classroom teachers who are assigned the lowest-achieving reading

group within a particular grade. In the Chicago and Los Angeles schools, arrangements for eliminating or minimizing negative pullout effects varied with the school, but each worked out arrangements other than the modal Title I pattern in which the lowest-achieving students are temporarily removed from the regular classroom for instruction that frequently is not well coordinated with that in the regular classroom.

With respect to *greater emphasis on teaching higher-order cognitive skills*, the Chicago mastery learning program materials are specifically designed to make this happen, and the Curriculum Alignment Project helps teachers identify and overcome problems associated with basal readers and other textbooks that teach reading comprehension, math problem solving, and other abstract skills poorly or not at all.

Perhaps the best example of emphasis placed on higher-order skills is at Woodson South in Chicago, where students are required to score 80 percent in mastery of comprehension skills even though many inner-city schools in Chicago with much lower achievement do not set a specific reading comprehension standard for promotion to the next grade.

By “*assured availability*” of teaching resources, we mean that the schools instituted specific measures to ensure that appropriate instructional resources were easily available to teachers. Various actions included:

- Assigning resource personnel and/or aides the task of providing teachers with enrichment or corrective materials appropriate for a given classroom
- Duplicating testing materials and delivering a sufficient quantity to the classroom
- Making arrangements for parents or college students to assist in materials preparation and delivery to individual teachers.

Schools participating in CMLRP had resource personnel who delivered mastery learning teaching and testing materials to the classroom teacher, and 107th Street School had computerized correlation charts produced in the Curriculum Alignment Project in order to provide teachers with an immediate listing of resources for teaching specific skills to specific children. Many of the schools

***“all the schools in this study in one way or another minimized the teacher’s burden in collecting and maintaining data required for a mastery-oriented learning approach.”***

also had established or reorganized teachers’ resource centers so that all the materials available in the school were coded for specific essential skills. They emphasized assigning trained aides to tasks that helped make appropriate instruction immediately available to the teacher. One major result of these efforts was that the faculty could no longer say that obtaining appropriate materials was too burdensome for a busy classroom teacher.

With respect to *minimal recordkeeping for teachers*, all the schools in this study in one way or another minimized the teacher’s burden in collecting and maintaining data required for a mastery-oriented learning approach. In part, CMLRP was designed to reduce record-keeping tasks inherent in Chicago’s continuous-progress mastery curriculum, and in New York administrators at District 19 schools took great pains to minimize teachers’ recordkeeping.

Among schools that had established other schoolwide approaches and arrangements, this goal was particularly salient at Woodson South, where Principal David Helberg devised simple arrangements for keeping good records; and at 107th Street School, where the computer was put to good use after the curriculum had been aligned and “assured availability” support services had been carefully arranged.

With respect to *improving the quality of homework and parent involvement in student learning*, to a significant degree this was accomplished either by implementation of CMLRP, which specifies reading skills to be learned in a manner that helps parents understand how they can help with homework and other learning reinforcement activities, and/or by introduction of an aligned curriculum that helps parents identify essential skills and understand how their children are progressing in skill mastery.

More than merely introducing CMLRP and/or an aligned curriculum, however, nearly all the schools actively encouraged and assisted parents in finding ways to help their children master essential skills, particularly with homework. At the Powell School in Chicago, for example, parents received information that related local library resources to essential skills and homework assignments. May School (in Chicago) parents are encouraged to provide the ad-

ministration with feedback about nonproductive homework assignments; 107th Street School parents receive regular computerized mailings describing their children’s performance on essential skills; Fourth Street (in Los Angeles) parents participate in Saturday workshops on topics involving facilitation of learning; Woodson South parents are notified as soon as a child begins to make unsatisfactory progress; and all District 19 parents receive booklets describing and explaining various aspects of that district’s comprehensive reading program. Successful inner-city schools can involve parents in many ways to help improve their children’s mastery of essential skills.

#### **Organizational Processes and Arrangements**

The schools described above exemplified three major characteristics involving organizational processes and arrangements:

- Instructional planning emphasized grade-level decision making
- Supervision had become much more outcome-based
- Comparative monitoring of classroom progress was emphasized as part of the decision-making process in several schools.

With respect to *grade-level planning of instruction*, it should first be noted that our study reinforces much recent analysis and research pointing to building-centered staff development as the key level for effective inservice training. Neale, Bailey, and Ross (1981), for example, recently surveyed the literature on school improvement strategies and concluded that inservice training should be “located in the local school building, directed by the principal and staff of that building to meet educational needs identified by the staff and clientele of that school.”

All the schools in this study placed intensive and ongoing emphasis on building-level staff development to the extent that this was virtually a defining characteristic of their mode of functioning. District 19 schools had a full-time resident trainer; two of the Los Angeles schools participated in the Curriculum Alignment Project that provides schoolwide staff development, and all the schools conducted a wide range of staff

***“Collection and analysis of these data seemed important for low-achieving students because teachers could see that some students were progressing more rapidly than others.”***

development activities initiated by the principal or other resource personnel or the teachers themselves.

Even more specific than the emphasis on building-level staff development, furthermore, was the centrality of grade-level and adjacent-grade-level instructional planning at most of the schools. Instructional decision making carried out by a group of teachers at a given grade is probably the most important organizational arrangement in the Curriculum Alignment Project, and grade-level instructional planning was a key consideration at Woodson South in Chicago, where teachers meet weekly to help make all types of instructional decisions including the assignment of students to classes and the selection of textbooks for each grade. At schools where grade-level meetings were relatively less frequent, such as P.S. 214 in New York and Huntington Drive in Los Angeles, resource personnel such as Title I coordinators served as an almost omnipresent link between teachers within and across adjacent grade levels.

We also want to emphasize that grade-level planning requires and encourages participation that is both active and continuing. Much has been written concerning the pros and cons of “top-bottom” vs. “bottom-top” planning, but the discussions frequently miss the point that quality and quantity in grass-roots participation probably are more important than whether initiative starts at the top or bottom and then proceeds up or down.

With respect to *outcome-based supervision*, introduction of CMLRP in some schools and of an aligned curriculum with detailed grade-level and individual-teacher planning for the teaching of specified essential skills focused supervision much more clearly on concrete questions and data than generally is true in most elementary schools, whether inner city or not.

Because CMLRP's structure provides information on student mastery for teachers, supervisors, and other resource personnel, supervisory conferences centered more on concrete issues involving improvement of instruction. Because curriculum alignment carried out in the context of a districtwide list of essential skills for each grade and criterion-referenced tests for assessing mastery of these skills provide data more useful

than most schools now have for diagnosing and prescribing solutions to students' learning problems, supervisory conferences could center on questions involving effectiveness of instruction rather than on broad discussion of deficiencies in students, materials, or teachers.

“What materials can we find to improve the teaching of topic sentences among students who did not master this skill in Mastery Level K?”; “How can we accelerate the pacing of comprehension instruction for five students in Mastery Level C?”; and “How can we obtain more tests to assess student performance after corrective instruction on making inferences?” were the kinds of questions teachers and supervisors asked. In contrast, supervisory conferences in the past have more typically dealt with broader questions such as “Where can we find better materials to teach reading?”; “Where can we find materials students will be more interested in?”; and “Why can't these children learn?”

It should be noted that “data-based” supervision of the kind we found in the schools in this study has gained support nationally under the theme of “clinical” supervision. In fact, most of the schools we visited could serve as models for a cyclical clinical supervision process.

With respect to *comparative monitoring of classroom progress*, we found that many of the schools charted student performance and progress on a class-by-class basis and used this information to set minimum goals for introduction and pacing of lessons and materials. Collection and analysis of these data seemed important for low-achieving students because teachers could see that some students were progressing more rapidly than others. This information led to re-examination of instructional procedures and techniques for low-achieving students. Comparative monitoring of classroom progress was particularly evident at Woodson South in Chicago, where charts showing the performance of groups of students within classes were used as a basis for discussion at grade-level and faculty meetings and at teacher-supervisor conferences.

Of course, comparative monitoring of classroom progress can be threatening to teachers and can be misused in a simpleminded way to reach facile conclusions about the ability or performance of

teachers. Administrators at Woodson South and several other schools, aware of this danger, tried to use comparative monitoring as a basis for instructional program review and revision rather than as a club for "bad" teachers. On the other hand, these administrators also were aware that comparative monitoring highlights and rewards successful teachers.

### Leadership Characteristics and Emphases

We saw examples of outstanding administrative leadership at both the building and district or subdistrict levels throughout the study, but we would like to point out two important leadership characteristics apparent at all the schools.

First, administrators were both *supportive* of teachers and skilled in providing a *structured institutional pattern* in which teachers could function effectively. Examples of supportive leadership included attention paid to school security in District 19 and at other schools, careful (but informal) accounting so that extra time volunteered by teachers was "paid back" to the extent possible at P.S. 174 (in New York) and other schools, and provision of opportunities for teachers to have additional "breathing time" as necessary at many of the schools. Supportive administration, however, was embodied not so much in any single policy or action but more by a pervasive concern for problems teachers face every day in the school and an attempt to perceive problems and respond with understanding of the teacher's point of view.

Of course, it was no surprise to find that building principals and other administrators working with the schools in our study provided leadership that was both structured and supportive. Decades of research and analysis on organizational effectiveness have indicated that both these dimensions of leadership are important in determining the success of an organization, whether one uses these terms specifically or instead substitutes others such as "consideration" and "structure" or "person-oriented" and "institution-oriented" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977).

Second, administrators of the schools in this study were willing and able to interpret rules in a manner that enhanced rather than reduced the effectiveness of their institutions. In many

cases this meant that rules and regulations were "bent" to the point that they were mangled or broken, or at least might have been perceived as such by others. For obvious reasons we will not give specific examples of modification of rules that were somewhat freely interpreted with a view to improving the effectiveness of schools in the study, but we do want to emphasize that higher-level administrators generally seemed tolerant or supportive of rule adaptations that might well have been questioned in a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy. One principal referred to such adaptations as "creative administration," and another said that "There is no way the central office can prevent me from interpreting rules so they are effective in this school. Our parents wouldn't stand for it because their children are learning." In general these and other statements were reminiscent of those obtained from principals more than ten years ago in a previous study of effective inner-city schools in Chicago (Doll, 1969).

### Additional Conclusions

We would like to conclude with several brief comments regarding approaches to improving schools in general and inner-city schools in particular.

First, the instructional and organizational approaches and arrangements we have described may point the way toward more widespread and rapid improvement of inner-city schools than many people have thought possible. It is

true that full-scale organization development approaches in which faculty re-examine their educational philosophy and develop a high level of skill in "problem solving, communication, collaboration, participation, trust, and uncovering and confronting conflict" (Fullan, Miles, and Taylor, 1981) prior to reforming instruction may not work in big city school districts which lack time, money, and a stable environment to implement this approach. The difficulties inherent in trying to reform big city schools—or any sizable group of schools, for that matter—have led many to despair concerning the prospects for widespread improvement in the inner city. Stephen Miller (1981) recently posed the underlying issue involved as follows:

Do there exist a large number of low income schools . . . which we must write off as to the possibility of improving school learning climate and raising achievement? That prospect is dismal; there are far too many schools in low SES communities where achievement is low and the learning climate is far too typical. Unfortunately, many researchers on educational change suggest that change agents only attempt innovations in schools which are "ready" for change. . . . Perhaps we will have to qualify our ending with the statement, "At this time there may be some schools which are not ready for or are unwilling to change." But . . . even public schools respond to inevitable outside pressures for change. Maybe an aroused public demanding high achieving, high quality schools for *all* children is the answer (p. 17).



***"The difficulties inherent in trying to reform big city schools . . . have led many to despair concerning the prospects for widespread improvement in the inner city."***

Miller, Wilbur Brookover, Ronald Edmonds, and others are developing approaches for improving school learning climates and other factors that may raise the achievement of students at inner-city schools. At present, however, it is not known whether or to what extent the positive learning climate found at successful inner-city schools causes or reflects high achievement or can be introduced effectively at other schools less "ready" for change.

Keeping this uncertainty in mind, we believe that some of the instructional and organizational arrangements described in this paper can be introduced and implemented effectively in a large number of schools, and that doing so will generate a more positive school climate and improved student learning. This is particularly the case with respect both to CMLRP, which can be viewed as a content technology to improve teaching and learning, and to Curriculum Alignment inservice training, which can be viewed as a process technology to improve curriculum and instruction. Implemented well, they both provide a means to improve teachers' and students' performance and, hence, school climate, reversing the failure syndrome found in so many inner-city schools. From this point of view, CMLRP, the Curriculum Alignment Project, and the Schoolwide Project under ESEA Title I represent a means to bring about incremental school improvement at a large number of inner-city schools.

Finally, we want to stress that the instructional and organizational arrangements and processes described in our report must be meshed and adapted to the individual school building if they are to improve achievement at inner-city schools. It would be easy enough, for example, to pass our CMLRP materials to teachers throughout a school or district, or to mandate grade-level curriculum-alignment training and planning for all teachers, but actions of this sort probably would have little long-range impact unless accompanied by appropriate support services and outcome-based supervision, schoolwide arrangements targeting some resources effectively on the problems of low-achieving students, and creative administration on the part of building principals. When these and other inter-

related arrangements and processes are well coordinated, inner-city schools will be more consistently effective than they have been in the past. □

<sup>1</sup>Daniel U. Levine and Joyce Stark, *Instructional and Organizational Arrangements and Processes for Improving Academic Achievement at Inner City Elementary Schools*, NIE-G-81-0070. (Kansas City, Mo.: Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri 64110). Copies of the full report are available for \$3. Copies of a 63-page extended summary version are available for \$2.

<sup>2</sup>Two of the three Los Angeles schools participated in the Curriculum Alignment Project initiated by the Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD) and the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development in 1979. The Curriculum Alignment Project is an inservice activity that helps teachers select appropriate materials for teaching and testing essential skills to be emphasized in LAUSD's "Balanced Curriculum and Its Survey of Essential Skills" (Niedermeyer and Yelon, 1981).

#### References

Doll, R. C. *Variations Among Inner City Elementary Schools*. Kansas City, Mo.: Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, 1969.

Edmonds, R. "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor." *Educational Leadership* 38 (1979): 15-24.

Fullan, M.; Miles, M. B.; and Taylor, G. *Organizational Development in Schools: The State of the Art*. Washington, D.C.: The National Institute of Education, 1981.

Hersey, P., and Blanchard, K. H. *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

Lezotte, L. W., and others. *School Learning Climate and Student Achievement*. Tallahassee, Fla: The Site Specific Technical Assistance Center, Florida State University Foundation, 1980.

Miller, S. "Changing the School Learning Climate: Overcoming Resistance to Change." *The Generator* 11 (1981): 16-17.

Neale, D. C.; Bailey, W. S.; and Ross, B. E. *Strategies for School Improvement*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981.

Niedermeyer, F., and Yelon, S. "Los Angeles Aligns Instruction with Essential Skills." *Educational Leadership* 38 (1981): 618-620.

Phi Delta Kappa. *Why Do Some Urban Schools Succeed?* Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1980.

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.