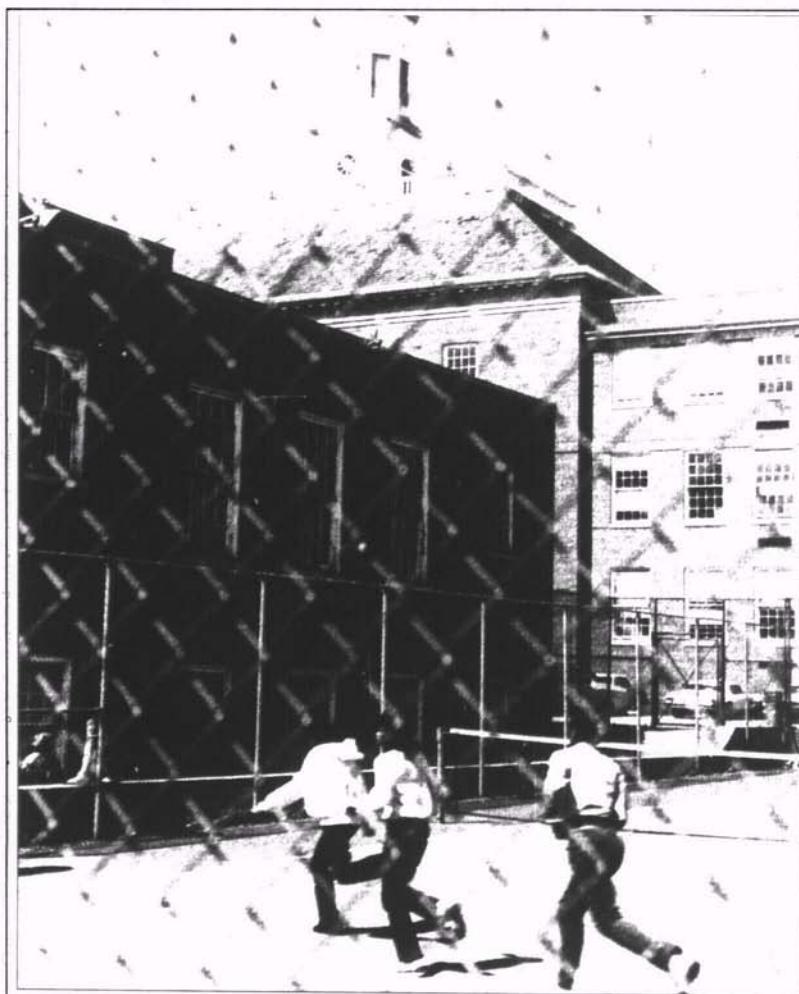


# Milwaukee's Project RISE

Twenty Milwaukee schools have set and enforced standards that reflect their belief in their students' ability to achieve—and achieve they have!

MAUREEN McCORMACK-LARKIN AND WILLIAM J. KRITEK



While the search for the characteristics of instructionally effective schools continues, some urban school districts, acting on what we know so far, have already designed and implemented programs to make their schools more effective. One such program began in Milwaukee in March 1979 when the school board directed the administration to develop a plan for improving achievement in the 18 elementary and two middle schools that scored lowest on the annual achievement tests.

Project RISE (Rising to Individual Scholastic Excellence) involves schools that serve predominantly low-income and minority students. It is based explicitly on the following three assumptions:

1. Virtually all students, regardless of their family background, race, or socio-economic status, can acquire the basic skills.
2. Inappropriate school expectations, norms, practices, and policies account for the underachievement of a preponderance of low-income and minority students.

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3. The literature on effective schools and classrooms has identified expectations, norms, practices, and policies that are associated with high achievement; it is reasonable for schools to emulate these characteristics.

### RISE in the Schools

Although coordinated at the district level, RISE is essentially composed of 20 individual school programs. At the heart of each is the school's plan for implementation of the essential elements of effective schooling. These elements (identified in Figure 1) were derived primarily from the research and literature on school and teacher effectiveness and from correspondence and communication with practitioners from instructionally effective schools.

It is significant that these elements are interrelated and that no single factor isolated from the others would significantly improve the school. The essential elements are elaborated on in the RISE handbook, which was developed by the principals and central office personnel. Reflecting on their own experience, a representative group of RISE teachers and principals identified those factors that seem to be most important in the initial stages of school improvement efforts:

1. *The cultivation of the pervasive belief that all students can learn and that the school is primarily responsible for their learning.* During the first year of the project, the issue of the influence of family background and socioeconomic status on student achievement was the topic of much discussion and debate in staff meetings and inservice sessions. Many of the RISE practitioners came to accept the premise that low socioeconomic status need not be an impediment to academic achievement. High expectations were reflected in specific school norms, policies, and instructional practices that conveyed to the students in no uncertain terms that they were truly expected to achieve. For example, the schools made a conscious effort to eliminate any grouping practices that led to academic stratification or tracking.

2. *The development of a strong sense of academic mission.* The school's primary responsibility is the provision of thorough and systematic intellectual training in the fundamental disciplines. Particularly at the elementary level, emphasis needs to be on basic skills. The amount of time spent on nonacademic activities was significantly decreased to allow more time for academic learning.

School assemblies now include oratory presentations, debates, and competitive meets between academic varsity teams. Exemplary student work in math and language is prominently displayed on walls. Issues related to instruction and curriculum dominate most staff meetings, and principals view themselves more as instructional leaders than as building managers.

3. *The cultivation of a high level of professional collegiality among staff members.* Because students benefit most from expectations that are conveyed and reinforced consistently by the school staff, RISE emphasized the need for staff members to reach consensus in establishing the school's philosophy, goals, and policies. Grade level meetings were held frequently, and reading, math, and language committees were formed to provide a forum for discussion and determination of the school's policies.

4. *The establishment of a strong sense of student identification and affiliation with the school.* Efforts to create an atmosphere of support and belonging included school convocations and academic honor assemblies; the use of school logos printed on notebooks, homework folders, and T-shirts; the es-

**Figure 1. The Essential Elements of Effective Schooling.**

#### A. School Climate

1. Strong sense of academic mission
2. High expectations conveyed to all students
3. Strong sense of student identification/affiliation
4. High level of professional collegiality among staff
5. Recognition of personal/academic excellence

#### B. Curriculum

1. Grade level expectations and standards in reading, math, and language
2. Planning and monitoring for full content coverage

#### C. Instruction

1. Efficient classroom management through structured learning environment
2. Academic priority evidenced in increased amount of allocated time
3. Key instructional behaviors (review and homework check, developmental lesson, process/product check, actively monitored seatwork, related homework assignment)
4. Direct instruction as the main pedagogical approach
5. Maximizing academic engaged time (time-on-task)
6. Use of the accelerated learning approach (planning for more than one year's growth)
7. Reading, math, and language instruction beginning at the kindergarten level

#### D. Coordination of Supportive Services

1. Instructional approach, curriculum content, and materials of supplementary instructional services coordinated with the classroom program
2. Pull-out approach used only if it does not fragment the classroom instructional program, does not result in lower expectations for some students, and does not interfere with efforts to maximize the use of time

#### E. Evaluation

1. Frequent assessment of student progress on a routine basis
2. Precise and informative report card with emphasis on acquisition of basic school skills
3. Serious attitude towards test-taking as an affirmation of individual accomplishment
4. Test-taking preparation and skills

#### F. Parent and Community Support

1. Regular and consistent communication with parents
2. Clearly defined homework policy which is explained to students and parents
3. Emphasis upon the importance of regular school attendance
4. Clear communication to parents regarding the school's expectations related to behavioral standards
5. Increasing awareness of community services available to reinforce and extend student learning

tabishment of academic varsity teams that competed intramurally and with other RISE schools; student exchange days; and various forms of public recognition for the academic accomplishments of the school, its staff, and students.

5. *Grade level expectations and standards in the areas of reading, math, and language.* RISE schools abandoned the systemwide ungraded, continuous progress organization and developed grade level objectives and standards. Grade level expectations included skills, concepts, and learnings appropriate for subject matter at the particular grade level. Grade level standards were identified as the subset of expectations that were prerequisite for success at the next grade level. Teachers used these expectations as a guide in their planning, and students and parents were informed of them via a checklist of standards.

6. *The use of an accelerated learning program for students performing well below grade level.* Accelerated learning is a curriculum design and instructional approach intended to help underachieving students make more than a year's gain in a given school year. The goal of accelerated learning is for students to perform at grade level. Concentrated instruction focuses on the essential content included in each of the preceding levels. One component of the accelerated learning program is whole class instruction at grade level supplemented by small group instruction at the students' actual skill levels.

7. *An increase in the amount of time allocated, and actually used, for active student learning.* Using time well is a concept supported by research and common sense. Some of the strategies that RISE schools used to maximize the use of time included abandoning or minimizing the "pull-out" approach in the delivery of Title I services, replacing recess with study breaks, using whole class instruction as an alternative to multiple small groups, and implementing and enforcing a rigorous homework policy.

8. *The establishment of a structured learning environment.* The suggestion of structure sometimes conjures impressions of environments that are oppressive or boring. In most RISE classrooms one could observe children who were secure and confident in knowing what was expected, and instruction that included lively explanations, demonstrations, and illustrations that actively engaged the attention of the children. Techniques of direct instruction provided a sequenced instructional pattern and clearly defined behavioral expectations that contributed to an orderly, task-oriented classroom.

#### **RISE at the District Level**

Extensive planning and coordination and the provision of inservice were the primary district level functions. A coordinating committee including central office administrators and supervisors and representative principals was responsible for the planning and coordination of RISE activities.

The hallmark of project planning has been the active involvement of the principals of the 20 schools in most decisions. All RISE principals meet regularly and subgroups of the principals meet periodically to address specific problems. Two principals are members of the coordinating committee. This active participation has evolved over the life of the project and represents a growing "ownership" on the part of the principals, as well as a recognition by their superiors that little would be accomplished in the schools without the principals' support.

From the beginning of RISE there has been a strong emphasis on inservice education for principals and teachers. In the initial year, the focus was on introducing participants to the "effective schools" concepts and philosophy. In succeeding years, the thrust has been more on "how to do it." One program, for example, featured principals from other urban school districts whose schools have a reputation for effectiveness. A recent day-long workshop for all RISE teachers included sessions on ac-

celerated learning, techniques of direct instruction, strategies for conveying high expectations to students, and so forth. Exchange forums were also included that drew on the expertise of RISE teachers who were identified by their peers. They met with colleagues from other RISE schools to explain, demonstrate, and discuss their successful practices. During the past year, the emphasis has been on providing specific help to individual school staffs and teachers. For example, teachers have been given the opportunity to visit and observe teachers in other schools who have been identified as skilled in direct instruction.

#### **Ancillary Structures**

The local school plans, the coordinating committee, inservice sessions, and other formal structures and activities do not tell the whole story. An attempt to duplicate RISE would fail, we think, unless functional equivalents of the behind-the-scenes structures and activities were also provided.

We can identify at least three ways in which commitment to Project RISE has been developed—and developed more effectively than by any formal RISE efforts. First, the Title IV-C Milwaukee Teacher Expectation Project (MTEP), directed by one of the primary developers of the RISE strategy, crystallized the belief among a small group of teachers that schools serving poor children can be effective. Concurrent with Project RISE, but independent of it, MTEP provided small cadres of teachers from most of the RISE schools with a systematic approach to making schools more effective. Beginning with an analysis of various theories that explain the low academic achievement of many low-income and minority students, MTEP seminars guided teachers through the evidence that low socioeconomic status need not result in low achievement. The teachers in the seminars then were introduced to activities for improving the academic achievement of their students. These teachers formed nuclei in the RISE schools around which teacher commitment was built and school-based planning was initiated. Since the initial

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reaction of teachers to Project RISE was intense anger at their schools having been singled out as "ineffective," having knowledgeable teacher-advocates in the building was extremely important.

A second structure, the League of Urban Educators, came as a spinoff from the Title IV-C project. The League, which receives no funding, is a voluntary group of teachers, principals, central office staff, school board members, university professors, and others—not all associated with Project Rise and not all from the Milwaukee Public Schools—who meet monthly to share a potluck dinner, listen to a presentation of an issue related to urban education, and then discuss the issues raised by the speaker. For the most part, the presentations and discussions have focused on the essential elements of RISE. The League has strengthened the resolve to make the schools effective, provided new ideas and techniques to be used in the schools and classrooms, united people across role and status lines, and served as a professional support group among its participants.

Finally, we can point to a third behind-the-scenes activity involving principals. In addition to the district level meetings referred to in the previous section, the 20 RISE principals meet periodically over lunch and tackle RISE-related issues. These meetings include no central office administrators or supervisors but sometimes include a facilitator from a local university. The sessions have resulted in important recommendations regarding the program and have contributed to the principals' ownership of the program and to their collective sense of power within the school district. An additional benefit has been the creation of a support group among the principals.

### Project Results

Project RISE completed three years at the end of the 1981-82 school year. Although the program will continue in its present form for at least one more year, it is fair to ask whether it has achieved its goal. The results of the school district standardized tests administered in the spring of 1982 will not

New! **CHILDREN'S SUCCESS IN SCHOOLS** edited by Joan M. Lakebrink. Helping children to succeed in school is the focus of this book. Contributors offer theoretical and practical insights into students' physical, cognitive and affective development. Problem areas, such as population diversity, discipline, community relations, desegregation, and special education, are examined; suggestions for dealing effectively with these situations are provided. '83, about \$19.75

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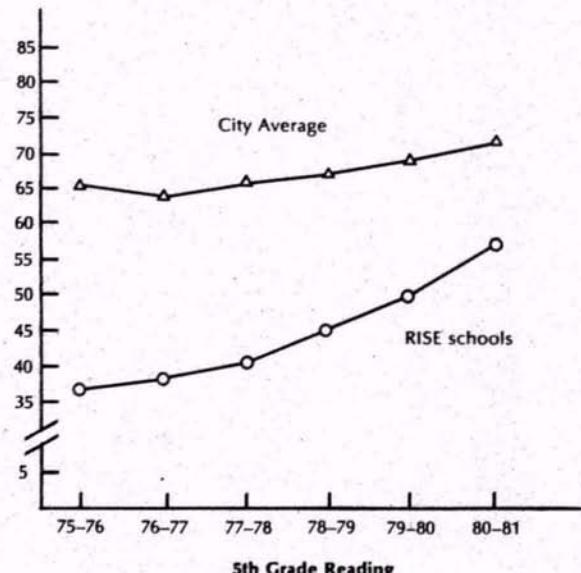
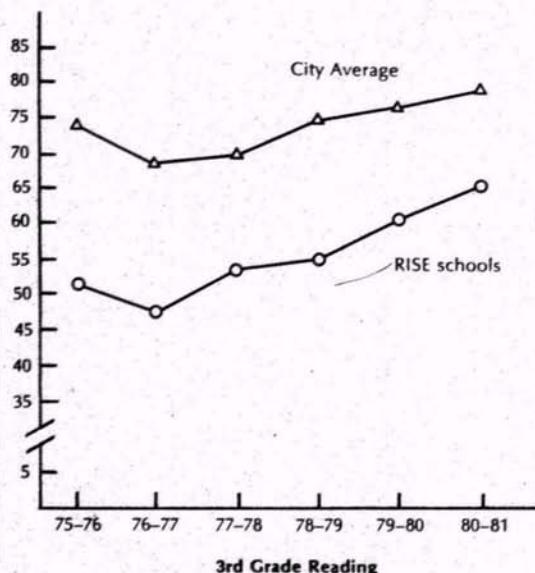
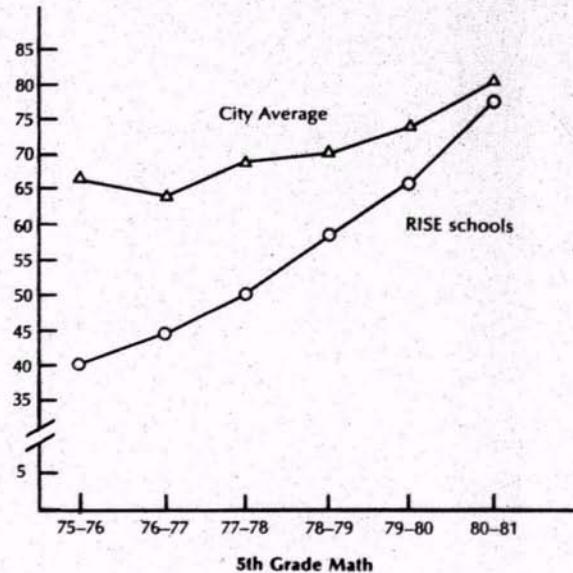
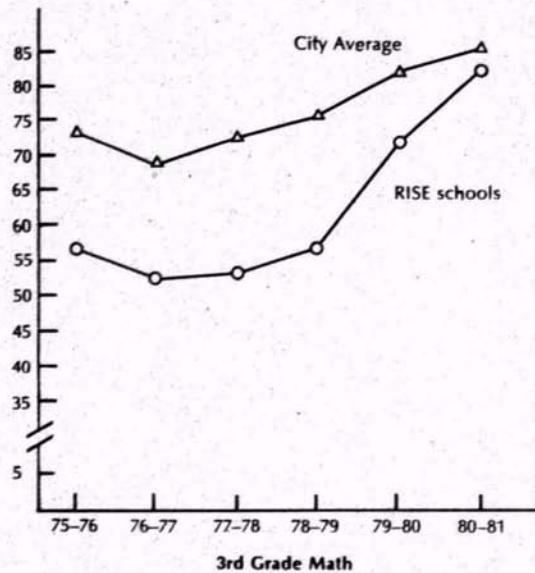
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**Figure 2. Performance of Milwaukee Elementary Students on Metropolitan Achievement Tests from 1975-76 through 1980-81.**



be released to the public until March 1983, but the 1981 test results provide an approximation of the program's progress.

The Milwaukee Public Schools tests its third- and fifth-grade students in the spring of each year. For the past six years, the district has used the Metropolitan Achievement Test. Scores for individual schools are reported to the public as the percent of students scoring in high, average, and low achievement categories. Figure 2 shows the percent of students in the combined high and average categories for the 18 RISE elementary schools and for all 109 Milwaukee elementary schools.

RISE schools have shown tremendous improvement in mathematics and some improvement—not as dramatic—in reading. The difference can possibly be attributed to the comprehensive instructional inservice provided to a committed group of Title I math teachers who, for the most part, worked with teachers within the classroom setting using the key instructional behaviors included in the essential elements. The results seem to indicate the importance of the classroom instruction and curriculum components of the RISE strategy.

There have been other "spinoffs" of Project RISE. At the start of the 1982-83 school year, the school improvement effort was extended to all schools in the system. There is one component for all secondary schools and another for the non-RISE elementary schools. Project RISE, as indicated earlier, continues as a separate program.

School board policy has changed on two important issues due, at least in part, to the influence of Project RISE. First, Milwaukee's public schools have shifted from an ungraded primary school to a graded system. As of this school year, there are officially grades 1, 2, and 3 for the first time in approximately 40 years and grade level objectives have been adopted systemwide. Second, school board policy has changed regarding promotion and retention. It is now possible to retain primary students who have not mastered the skills deemed essential for the next grade level.

#### Conclusion

Project RISE has not been flashy. There has been a minimal amount of new

money associated with the program. In fact, some of the more cynical critics refuse to believe there is a Project RISE because they have seen no new staff, no new materials, and little additional funding for inservice education. Nor have the RISE schools been a protected subculture. The principals and teachers did not volunteer to be in the program. There have been routine changes in personnel, student mobility patterns have not changed, and the established supervisory and administrative relationships have been maintained.

Yet, Project RISE has certainly achieved some success. We are sure one reason for that success can be attributed to following the prescriptions for effective schools and effective instruction. In addition, it has been important to have concrete goals for the program, that is, the district goal of raising achievement to reflect national averages and the school goals as specified in the local school plans. Further, we single out the focus on the principals. The district

administrators have given them the responsibility to design and implement individual programs and have held them accountable for results.

In the years ahead, more attention will have to be given to classroom teachers. Teachers have voiced a need for additional help in mastering the techniques of direct instruction, accelerated learning, and other curriculum and instructional strategies. In our opinion, further substantial gains will depend on the full implementation of classroom strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective.

Project RISE is significant because it is a systematic effort to improve the academic achievement of poor children. It has gone beyond the findings of the effective schools studies and has made an attempt to create such schools. We think it has achieved some success and has the potential for even better results. Finally, there is no reason that RISE-like programs cannot be started—and be successful—in other urban school districts. □

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