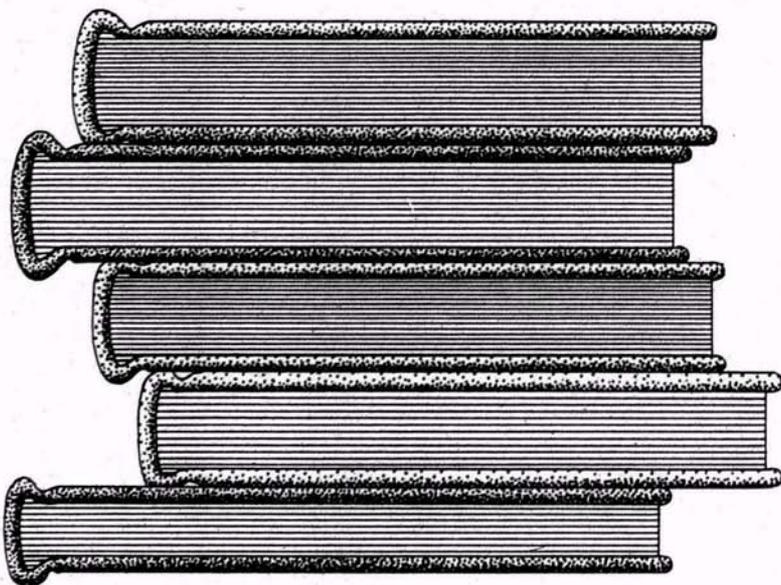


Academic Press: Translating High Expectations into School Policies and Classroom Practices

Schoolwide policies are the foundation for practices that promote behaviors leading to achievement and positive self-concept.



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The School Effectiveness Program¹ in Santa Clara County, California, has been working for the past two years to determine the key behavioral aspects of the generally accepted effective schools variables (See Benbow, 1980; Hallinger, 1981; Sweeney, 1982). One particularly important effectiveness variable is academic press.

Academic press is the degree to which environmental forces press for student achievement on a schoolwide basis. The concept, however, is broader than high staff expectations; it pulls together vari-

ous forces—school policies, practices, expectations, norms, and rewards—generated by both staff and students. Together, these forces constitute the academic “environment” experienced by students and press them to respond in particular ways, specifically, to work hard in school and to do well academically.

Our primary task was to find out the connection between staff beliefs and the academic press outcomes of student academic norms, self-concept of academic ability, and sense of academic utility (Brookover and others, 1978, 1982).

Brookover and his colleagues (1982) defined student academic norms as the “prevailing standards for emphasis on

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grades, amount of time devoted to homework, and the importance of academic work compared to non-academic activities" (p. 59). Self-concept of academic ability refers to the belief that one is capable of high academic achievement, while a sense of academic efficacy is the belief that one's efforts can make a difference in school.

In particular, we wanted to determine how staff beliefs about students' ability to master basic skills, earn good grades, complete school successfully, and go on to higher education become translated into school and classroom behaviors.

We maintain that high staff expectations for students are translated into (1) school level policies and enforcement practices, and (2) classroom-level practices and behavior, which consistently communicate to students that success in academic work is expected and attainable. As shown in Figure 1, staff beliefs are more likely to be incorporated into policies and practices when they are translated through a school norm of staff responsibility for student learning.

Before proceeding to a discussion of school policies and classroom practices, it is important to point out that the direction of influence in our model is speculative. We are unsure whether staff beliefs encourage use of the policies and practices we discuss or whether academic press is merely an effective rubric for certain school and classroom activities not necessarily the result of staff beliefs. Our working hypothesis is that the first position is more accurate.

School Organizational Policies

Our work on school organization and effective schools has led us to believe school policies can play a predominant role in creating effective schools.

The importance of policy at the school level. The notion that school systems and schools themselves are loosely coupled entities is one of the most alluring and powerful models of school organization in the literature (Weick, 1976; Meyer and Rowan, 1975; Deal and Celotti, 1977). In loosely coupled schools, the connections between district offices and schools and between school offices and individual classrooms are tenuous for a number of reasons, including lack of consensus about school goals, the absence of a clear instructional technology, the constant flow of people into and out of the school community, and the semiprofessional characteristics associated with schools (Cohen and others, 1972; Lortie, 1975; Deal and Celotti, 1977; Cohen and Miller, 1980). The basic tenet of loose coupling is that the lack of tight organizational connections substantially reduces the capacity of one organizational level or component (for instance, the principal) to influence the activity of other organizational levels or components (such as teachers or students).

At the same time, some models of schools indicate that principals, at least, may have a significant impact on classroom activity and, subsequently, student achievement and behavior. These models are basically of two types, those

employing traditional organizational perspectives (Bossert and others, 1981; Murphy and others, 1982), and social systems models (Lezotte and others, n.d.; Weiss and Hawkins, 1979; Rutter and others, 1979; Wynne, 1980; Brookover and others, 1982). All of these models share a belief that school policies and practices can influence teachers and students in ways consistent with school goals. That such policies actually do influence student achievement and behavior is currently being validated (Wellisch and others, 1978; Stallings and Mohlman, 1981).

The entire area of school-level policy analysis is relatively new. Individual schools have traditionally been thought of as implementers rather than initiators of policy. However, as we gather more evidence that school policies can influence student achievement, we expect schools to increasingly become the focus of policy analysis. We also expect this analysis to show the way to resolving the dilemma between the general notions of "schools as loosely coupled organizations" and "school effectiveness." The former is a fairly accurate description of the nature of many American public school systems—a description of what is. The latter is an analysis of what can be (Duckworth, 1981; Gersten and Carnine, 1981). Although there are numerous ways to reconcile these two different conclusions about schools (Deal and Celotti, 1977), we believe the most important method is by tightening couplings through school-

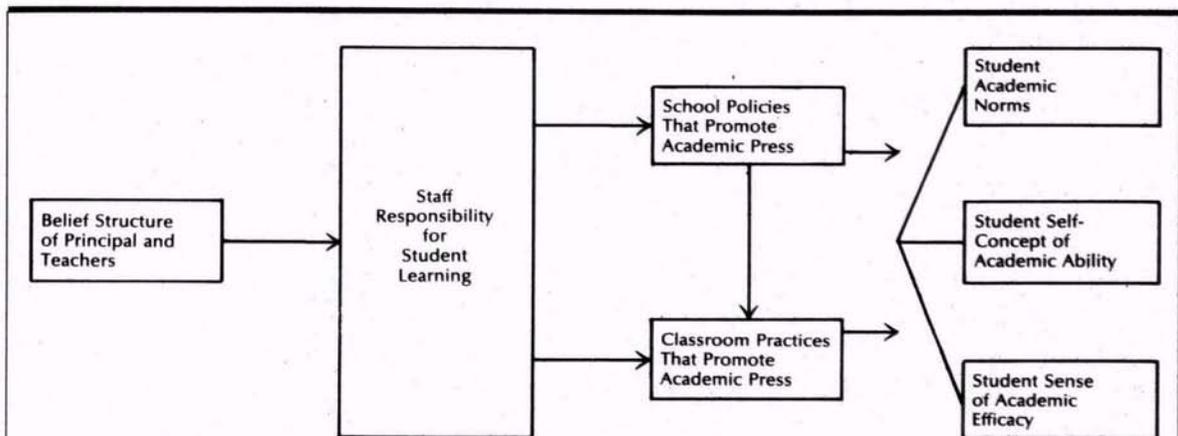


Figure 1. A Working Model of How Academic Press is Created in Schools.

level policies and enforcement practices.

Policy is not the only area that needs to be considered as we move from loosely coupled organizations to effective schools. There should be a logical movement from policy to practice to behavior (Borwich, 1977; Squires and others, 1981); thus, the role of school and classroom practices and behaviors in our own model. Attempting to work from behaviors towards policies in a loosely coupled organization is to invite failure. This point takes on significance when we stop to consider that traditional supervision models work primarily on specific behaviors with discrete and unconnected organizational units, that is, teachers (Weick, 1976; Lortie, 1975).

School-level policies that communicate high expectations. There are at least two areas of school activity where policies can communicate high expectations to students. In Figure 2, we have grouped them under the headings of policies on school function and structure and policies on student progress (See Figure 2).

Policies on school function and structure. Within function and structure, the first policy area is *school purpose*. It is clear both from the organization theory literature (Perrow, 1970) and the school effectiveness literature (Lezotte and others, n.d.; Benbow, 1980; Hallinger, 1981) that schools that promote academic achievement have clearly defined goals based on academic matters. Given the pressures within educational organizations for attaining multiple and oftentimes conflicting goals and goal displacement (Perrow, 1970), and the fact that many school systems have acquiesced to these pressures (Cohen and others, 1972), perhaps the most important thing schools can do to promote high expectations is to frame school purpose policies in terms of one or two academic goals, which can in turn provide the framework for all other school activity (Lezotte and others, n.d.).

A second important policy area that deals with school function and structure is *student grouping*. Brookover and others (1982) and Squires (1980) point out that methods used to group students clearly convey academic expectations to them. According to these authors, policies that promote ability grouping create de facto differences in levels of educa-

Figure 2. School Policies and Classroom Practices That Convey Academic Press

School Policy Areas	Classroom Practices Areas
Policies on School Function and Structure — school purpose — student grouping — protection of instructional time — orderly environment	Establishing an Academically Demanding Climate Conducting an Orderly, Well-Managed Classroom
Policies on Student Progress — homework — grading — monitoring progress — remediation — reporting progress — retention/promotion	Ensuring Student Academic Success Implementing Instructional Practices That Promote Student Achievement Providing Opportunities for Student Responsibility and Leadership

tional aspirations for children. Once these aspirations are established and communicated, they tend to become self-fulfilling. On the other hand, school policies on instructional grouping that promote the belief that all students can achieve grade-level objectives (for instance, mastery learning) convey to all that the school expects, demands, and works to ensure high levels of student achievement for all students.

School policies that *protect instructional time* constitute a third area associated with increased academic press. Stallings and Mohlman (1981) found that clear and consistently enforced school policies on student attendance and tardiness helped produce an atmosphere of high academic expectations while reducing tardiness and absence rates. In addition, Stallings, Needles, and Stayrook (Stallings and Mohlman, 1981) studied school policies on interruptions of classroom instructional time, such as announcements over the public address system and requests for students to come to the office. They found that when instructional time in reading was protected by school policies that minimized interruptions, students scored higher in basic reading skills. They hypothesize that such policies create an understanding that academic learning time is too important to be interrupted—in short, that they promote the general norm of academic press.

The final policy area under school function and structure is *orderly environment*. Policies that promote an orderly and safe school environment have consistently been shown to be related to student achievement (Rutter and others, 1979; Phi Delta Kappa, 1980; Wynne,

1980). When the school staff takes time to develop and enforce policies about appropriate student behavior, they are telling students that school is for learning and that behavior that interferes with learning opportunities will not be tolerated. Wynne (1980) and Stallings and Mohlman (1981) have shown that such policies help create and convey high expectations for student achievement.

Policies on student progress. Six policies in the area of student progress seem to be related to academic press. The first is a *homework policy*. Where homework is an integral part of the students' day and is consistently used throughout the school, it clearly helps establish high expectations for students. Likewise, when an incrementally based schoolwide *grading policy* is monitored by the principal, academic press is enhanced (Wynne, 1980; Brookover and others, 1982).

In similar fashion, a schoolwide *policy on monitoring student performance* in conjunction with instructional objectives communicates to students that they are held responsible for and expected to learn a specific amount of information and range of skills (Edmonds and Frederiksen, 1978; Wynne, 1980). *Remediation policies* that base remediation efforts on the common instructional framework not only help ensure student mastery but promote academic press as well, as do policies that prevent students from entering permanent remediation groups (Brookover and others, 1982).

Schools in which policies require that *progress reports* be sent to the parents of all students numerous times a year convey to students and parents the importance the staff places on academic work. In a similar vein, a policy that requires

parents to pick up student report cards at school and meet with their children's teachers helps build the general norm of academic press.

Finally, a school policy on retention and promotion which makes promotion dependent on student mastery of basic grade level skills acts to communicate high staff expectations and build academic press (Wellisch and others, 1978).

Classroom Level Practices and Behaviors

Within the framework of a school policy approach to developing and maintaining high academic expectations for students, teacher practices and behaviors can be significant. The material in this section is drawn from the available information within the school effectiveness literature about connections between teacher behaviors and academic press (Rutter and others, 1979; Squires, 1980; Wynne, 1980; Brookover and others, 1982) and our own work at the School Effectiveness Program.

We have identified five broad categories of teacher practices and behaviors that contribute to academic press in the classroom: (1) establishing an academically demanding climate; (2) conducting an orderly, well-managed classroom; (3) ensuring student academic success; (4) implementing instructional practices that promote student achievement; and (5) providing opportunities for student responsibility and leadership (see Figure 2). These categories are not intended to cover all the ways in which teachers can build academic press. Neither are the behaviors discussed within categories complete. Rather they are examples of how teacher expectations are translated and communicated to children.

One of the most direct ways teachers create academic press is by *establishing an academically demanding climate*. Teachers do this by setting rigorous demands in terms of course content to be covered, by making clear course requirements and specific instructional objectives, by setting high work standards for *all* students, by regularly assigning homework (with prompt follow-up and correction), by devoting a high percentage of class time to learning tasks with a strong academic focus, and by communicating with the parents of students who are experiencing academic

problems. Underlying this rigorous academic climate is a belief that all students can succeed. Thus, teachers interact with all students in a similar manner. They do not call on some students and leave out others. They prompt all students to correct or improve responses. Praise is given when it is deserved. Less able students do not receive empty praise.

A second category is *conducting an orderly well-managed classroom*. When classrooms are well-managed, learning occurs, more time is devoted to instruction, and self-concepts are enhanced. It is difficult to establish a demanding academic climate in a chaotic classroom. Practices that contribute to an orderly classroom include establishing clear rules and procedures and enforcing them consistently and fairly, organizing the physical environment to prevent disruption, and promptly handling student disruptions.

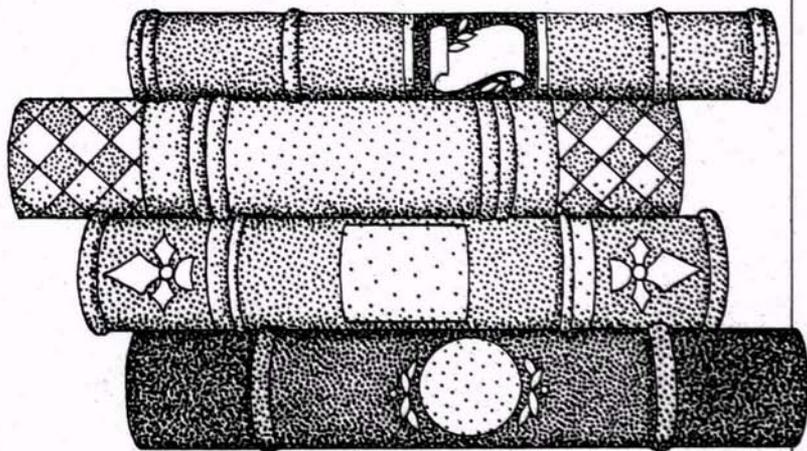
Ensuring student academic success is a third component of academic press in the classroom. In addition to making demands, teachers communicate that they expect students to do well by structuring opportunities for students to succeed. While all the practices discussed in this section are important, we believe this is the most important. When teachers fail to provide opportunities for students to reach high expectations, teacher efforts in other areas are not likely to be particularly helpful. Some practices that have potential for ensuring student success are selecting instructional objectives that are appropriate for the stu-

dent's level, giving students plenty of opportunity to receive instruction in one objective before moving on to the next, being available on a regular basis to assist students in their work, letting students know they have been successful by providing many opportunities for assessment and positive feedback, and by rewarding students for improving, not just reaching, absolute levels of achievement.

It is also important that teachers *implement instructional practices that promote achievement*. Devoting time to clear, complete explanations of new material; providing sufficient opportunity for teacher-directed, structured practice before students work on their own; giving students corrective feedback if their responses are incorrect; providing sufficient practice in new material; closely monitoring students' work; assessing frequently; and implementing cooperative goal structures all promote student achievement.

Finally, teachers promote academic press by *providing opportunities for student responsibility and leadership*. By holding students responsible for their own work, by demanding accountability, and by giving students the chance to exercise power, teachers communicate that students are expected to succeed and that the ability to do so is under their control.

Two final points need to be made here. First, a demanding academic press is most successful with all students if done in a supportive environment—where a concerned, helpful teacher is



interested in students' ideas and problems and where class context promotes students' concern and caring for one another. Satisfying human relationships are a necessary but insufficient condition for student learning. Second, teachers themselves need to model appropriate academic press behaviors. Specifically, they need to plan their lessons in advance, start classes on time, and stay on-task.

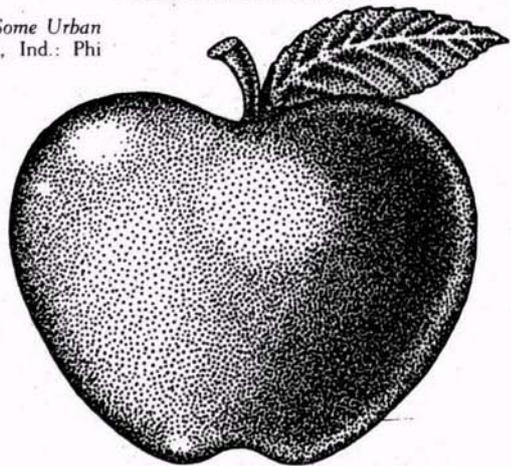
Conclusion

We have attempted to show how academic press is created and how high expectations are communicated to students. Our model of academic press relies on both school-level policies and enforcement practices, as well as classroom level practices and behaviors. Academic press can be maximized when school level policies and enforcement practices form the framework for classroom-level activity. This integrated policy-practice-behavior framework is essential in moving from loosely coupled to effective schools. □

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The School Effectiveness Program is funded primarily by the Office of the Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools. Its mission is to uncover the policies, practices, and behaviors that account for school effectiveness. This article was made possible in large part by a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.



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