

Improving Secondary Education in Wisconsin

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Individual programming and goal-setting strategies have improved achievement, attitudes, and attendance in Wisconsin high schools.

Although many individuals and groups are offering recommendations for the reform of the American high school, few of those recommendations have actually been put into practice. One reform, however, the Wisconsin Program for the Renewal and Improvement of Secondary Education, has been improving student achievement, attendance, and attitudes for the past four years.

Improvement Strategies and Organizational Structures

The Wisconsin program includes three improvement strategies and a menu of organizational structures to help implement them. School staff members decide what their needs are, what strategies are appropriate for their situation, and how they would best be applied. The result is a school improvement capability that can apply to a variety of educational problems.

Two strategies focus on educating the individual student. In the first, individual *educational* programming, the school sets up an advising system so that a program of courses and activities is arranged for each student that meets both the student's own needs and legal requirements. The second strategy, individual *instructional* programming, is used at the classroom level, where instruction is arranged for each student, taking into account the student's aptitudes, interests, motivation, career goals, and other characteristics. Most students require some teacher-directed whole-class instruction as well as some



Bern Teicher

small-group and individual activities. Using a third strategy, *goal setting*, the school annually establishes goals to improve learning outcomes for particular groups of students; for instance, a 10

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percent improvement in 9th grade math achievement, a 2 percent increase in average daily attendance, a 20 percent drop in discipline referrals and suspensions. The goal-setting strategy is the most powerful of the three in attaining desired student outcomes, including high achievement. This is because all the people who must work together to improve the situation are involved at the outset in identifying the problem area and trying to resolve it. The principal, teachers, counselors, and sometimes students and parents bring their perspectives to bear on setting realistic goals. And having set a goal, they work together to attain it.

To help implement the three strategies, schools can use such organizational processes as these:

- Organizing staff and students into small groups for instruction or advising
- Helping students progressively assume more responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating their programs
- Establishing a committee of the principal, counselor, and representative teachers to identify areas for improvement each year and to coordinate implementation of improvement strategies
- Having teachers act as educational advisors to students

• Getting parent input into student advising, curriculum development, and other school matters.

Analyzing the Program's Success

The Wisconsin Program for the Renewal and Improvement of Secondary Education was developed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research under the direction of educational psychologist Herbert Klausmeier and James Lipham, a University of Wisconsin professor of educational administration. In 1977, Klausmeier began a longitudinal study of the program to find out how well schools could implement the three improvement strategies and initiate the various organizational structures and processes. All the schools worked on achievement in English, math, and reading, trying either to maintain or surpass baseline levels. Each school spent at least one year working to increase attendance or improve attitudes toward schooling. Data were collected and analyzed annually by the schools and by Klausmeier and his research team after the last year of data collection (Klausmeier, Serlin, and Zindler, 1983).

Each school implemented one or both of the first two improvement strategies during the first two years of the

study and then implemented the goal-setting strategy in the third and fourth years. Overall, scores reported for the second year were about the same as first-year scores, but goal-setting combined with the other strategies in year three brought notable improvement. In 139 before-and-after comparisons, achievement increased significantly in 67 instances, remained unchanged in 69 cases, and dropped in three (all in reading vocabulary in one school).

These results came about despite turmoil in some of the schools that might have pulled achievement down: enrollment declines, staff changes, and lower budgets. Also these results were obtained during a time when national achievement averages for 13- and 17-year-olds were declining.

Steuben Middle School in Milwaukee was one of the five study sites. Its student body is about 40 percent white, 50 percent black, and 10 percent Hispanic and American Indian; the socioeconomic level of the students qualified the school for Chapter I aid. Enrollment in grades 7 and 8 increased from 751 to 874 during the years of the study.

Beginning in 1977 Steuben's students and teachers were organized into groups they called instructional and advisory units. Each unit had four teachers who handled instruction in English, reading, math, science, and social studies for about 120 students. The school also set up a committee composed of the principal, the curriculum coordinator, and at

least one teacher from each of the instructional units to plan and monitor the improvement activities. Over the course of the first three years the school staff implemented all three strategies.

Achievement in reading, language, spelling, and math for the second 7th- and 8th-grade classes was about the same as for the first classes; however, the third and fourth 7th- and 8th-grade classes showed statistically significant improvement over the first two classes in all four areas.

Another research school, Webster Transitional in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, was among the 152 exemplary institutions named in the Department of Education national Secondary School Recognition Program.

Unique factors in each of the five test sites contributed to the program's success, but there were two common elements.

One was teamwork. In all the schools the teachers, counselors, and administrators perceived themselves as members of a professional team working together to improve education in their school.

Another reason the program works is that it's initiated and carried out locally; the program's developers do not prescribe improvements for the schools. School staff members, who identify their own needs, can use whatever parts of the program are appropriate in the ways that seem best for their students and school setting. This goes along with the team idea.



Berry Teicher

The staff can best identify needed improvements by working together; and because the staff is involved as a team their chances of successfully making the improvements are good.

Recommendations

These favorable research results suggest three ideas for other districts who may want to base their improvement efforts on the Wisconsin program.

1. District offices should work with middle schools and junior and senior high schools to establish an improvement capability in each school as well as at the district level. This can be done by adapting the Wisconsin improvement strategies and organizational structures to the needs and characteristics of each school. Not all of the strategies and structures can be implemented during the first year or two, and structures such as a teacher-advisor program or the organization of teachers and students into small units may currently be unattainable for some schools due to budget constraints. It would appear, however, that each school in a district, with the district's cooperation and support, could develop an improvement capability much as the research schools did:

- Establish a coordinating group, or groups, consisting of the principal, teachers, and others to take responsibility—with input from the entire faculty—for conceptualizing, planning, and coordinating the school's improvement program; or delegate this responsibility to an existing group or groups.

- Change or develop other organizational structures and processes (curricu-



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“Without support, any school improvement program, however excellent, can be terminated.”



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lum, evaluation tools and procedures, home-school-community relations, and so forth) as necessary to start an effective improvement program.

- Review and update the school's educational philosophy, aims, and educational program annually.

- Identify areas of improvement annually, using the results of the school's evaluation information and its needs assessment.

- Set measurable goals that specify maintaining student outcomes already at a desired level or raising an unsatisfactory level.

- Develop a plan to attain the goals.

- Acquire the knowledge and develop the skills needed to implement the planned activities, primarily by conducting the school's own inservice activities, and secondarily by securing external assistance.

- Work out the managerial-operational procedures, work schedules of staff, procurement of instructional materials and evaluation tools—needed to implement the plan.

- Implement the goal-directed improvement activities.

- Monitor progress to assure goal attainment.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the activities annually and use the evaluation results for further improvement.

Establishing a district improvement capability calls for leadership by the district administrator parallel to that of the building principal. It implies adapting the preceding steps to the district, and assumes that the district office takes initiative to ensure that the school board also supports the improvement efforts. Without supportive policies, a newly-elected board or a new district administrator or building principal could terminate any local school improvement program, however excellent.

2. Each school should provide the public an annual report of student outcomes, and the district should provide a similar report for the district. Each school should also prepare and report its improvement plan for the ensuing year, as should the district. The privacy of teachers and other school personnel should be protected in the public reports just as student privacy is.

3. The local school board and the state education agency should provide the conditions essential for local schools and districts to continually improve. Most schools and districts can start improvement programs immediately, but they cannot independently achieve continual educational improvement without greater support from the state. Leadership in the state education agency is required to assure that: (a) local school districts are adequately financed by state, local, and federal funds; (b) school personnel are carefully selected and adequately prepared at the preservice level; (c) inservice education is provided for each new demand placed upon the school; (d) the pay of teachers is competitive with that of other professionals; and (e) the intellectual resources of the state education agency, the state's institutions of higher learning, district offices, professional educational associations, and parent and other citizen groups are mobilized in the improvement of education at the local level. In connection with

funding, the federal government should provide monies to the states for the education of all students, not just for certain groups. The funding should be provided without any prescription of curriculum content, methods or materials of instruction, or evaluation tools or procedures.

In closing we should recognize that the five research schools focused on student achievement in English, math, and reading, and they continued to use their already-adopted norm-referenced and criterion-referenced achievement tests. Other schools might focus on other student outcomes in the cognitive domain, such as learning strategies or writing skills, and they might emphasize other means of measuring student outcomes. The Wisconsin program is not prescriptive in these matters; each school makes its own decisions regarding desired outcomes and measurement tools.

There is a significant difference between implementing this design and acting on the findings from other research. For example, effective instructional leadership; expectations for high student achievement; an orderly, safe learning environment; clear goals; and careful monitoring and evaluation of student progress have all been identified as characteristics of effective schools (Edmonds, 1982; Purkey and Smith, 1982). This effective schools research, however, does not indicate how ineffective schools become effective. The Wisconsin program, in contrast, shows how a school and school district can establish a permanent improvement process. Schools and districts that have established such a process can decide whether and how to implement school effectiveness research as well as other recommendations, such as those of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. □

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