

Growing Use of the Effective Schools Model for School Improvement

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As the body of research on effective schools expands, so will our understanding of the school improvement process.

In 1982, Ronald Edmonds said of the effective school: "It need not bring all students to identical levels of mastery, but it must bring an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social class to minimum mastery" (Edmonds, 1982, p. 4). His perceptions, which were based on firsthand observations of school improvement programs in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, New Haven, and Milwaukee, can be reaffirmed today.

Because of the spreading awareness of the effective schools research and an increased demand for school improvement by the general public, programs utilizing effective schools research are multiplying dramatically. With this dramatic increase is a diversi-

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ty in the types of local districts that are implementing programs. In this article we provide an update on the effective schools movement by drawing on the work of Edmonds as well as our own involvement in improvement efforts. By clarifying the essential premises of various research-based improvement efforts—citing only a few good examples from the many possible—we will illustrate the nature of significant events we have observed in schools. Those events collectively represent a tribute to the personal dedication and professional contribution of Ronald Edmonds to the long-range goal of improving all schools for all students.

Trends and Perspectives

Joining the list of large, urban schools enumerated by Edmonds as school improvement sites using effective schools research models are Jackson, Mississippi; Norfolk, Virginia; and Memphis, Tennessee. These efforts are well documented and in all cases were launched by determined and visionary superintendents with supportive staff members.

A persisting criticism of the effective schools research is that most of the results and findings described in the

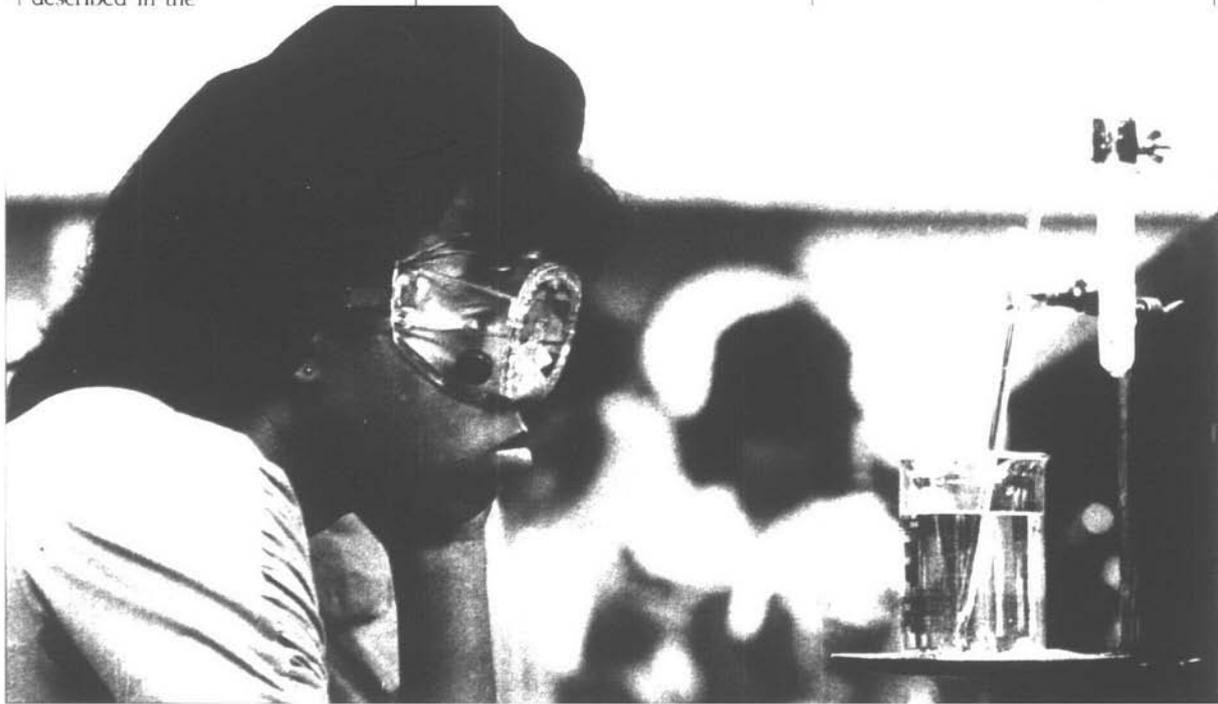
literature were conducted in large, urban school districts with a substantial concentration of minority and economically disadvantaged students. District and school personnel, anxious to begin a school improvement program, but with differing sociodemographic characteristics, still question the relevance of the research as a framework for planning their particular school improvement efforts. Even so, districts intent on long-range improvement, which fit neither the large nor urban category, have designed and implemented programs based on the effective schools research. Preliminary indications from those districts report successes and continuing progress.

For instance, a few months before his death, Edmonds and I inaugurated a long-term effort with the Spencerport Central School District near Rochester, New York. Spencerport Central School District is neither large nor urban. With only five buildings (three elementary, a junior high, and a senior high), and a student population that is predominantly middle class and Caucasian, Spencerport's success illustrates that effective schools research principles can be applied in a different

context. Now in its third year, the program enables staff members and researchers to verify the effective schools research model's versatility and adaptability to a broader variety of school types.

Promising and exciting to many educators are the rising numbers of secondary schools committed to school improvement through effective schools research. Three contrasting school settings illustrate this recent trend.

The Detroit Public Schools, initially with support from the Ford Foundation, are developing a high school improvement program. Staff members in the Glendale, Arizona, Union High School District (composed of only high schools), have adapted the effective schools research with reasonable applications to fit the local requirements of their special and complex setting. In Berkley, Michigan, a program is under way that involves only the district's two middle schools. No less persuasive is the success of junior high/middle school adaptations in Jackson, Norfolk, and Memphis.



As more secondary schools and K-12 districts, encouraged by these recent developments, begin to use the effective schools research model, researchers will be able to tap into the expanded knowledge base to promote understanding and to more clearly identify the types of adjustments needed to provide a flexible and efficient framework for the complex high school environment.

Beyond the Local School

Plans are under way for the National Institute of Education to fund, among several others, two research centers: one aimed at advancing the knowledge base on effective elementary schools; and the other, on secondary schools. As the new research accumulates and is studied in laboratory settings, researchers, teachers, administrators, and agency planners will acquire expanded and shared understandings of the effective schools research and its enriched application for school improvement.

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Edmonds often spoke of the promising signs of active involvement between institutions of higher education and local school improvement projects. Unfortunately, the urgent press for resources has influenced universities to narrow their focus, emphasizing today the improvement of pre-service teacher education. Liaisons between colleges and local schools are vital, but are now only sparsely apparent.

Academy programs, such as the one at Harvard University, offer professional development opportunities for practicing school administrators, focused on effective schools/effective teaching research.

The opportunity for practicing administrators to participate in continuing professional education through nondegree programs is accelerating. For example, with the leadership of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Michigan has recently awarded a grant to the state’s association of school administrators to plan and carry out a variety of comprehensive leadership training opportunities.

Yet another example of a creative initiative for promoting school improvement based on effective schools research is that sponsored by the Michigan Middle Cities Association with the Department of Educational Administration at Michigan State University. With funding from two independent sources, parallel training programs are offered. The Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek is supporting a three-year program of staff development for elementary principals in 12 school districts. Increased student achievement is the long-term goal, and the instrument of achieving that goal is training principals in areas of effective schools and effective teaching. The Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education is, for two years, providing a program similar to Kellogg’s, yet different in design. It involves principals from 17 urban districts in Michigan. The inclusion of teachers, along with administrators, is an encouraging feature of these undertakings. Recognition of the necessity of such collaborative learning and planning experiences sets the stage for a shared, long-term commitment to local school improvement by a more cohesive staff.

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Premises and Assumptions

Although effective schools research is founded on the local school improvement effort of each school concerned, a review of effective schools research activity would not be complete without drawing attention to a groundswell of spontaneous involvement by individual states in promoting educational reform programs. At last count, 35 states have adopted a major reform agenda. A substantial number of these recommendations or mandates utilize either wholly or partially the effective schools research framework. Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Arkansas provide reference points of this trend.

What do all of these local school improvement programs have in common? Each one:

- Focuses on a single school as the strategic unit for improvement.

- Uses a building-based improvement team consisting of teachers and administrators.

- Has a longer term orientation (3–5 years) in planning and implementation.

- Is organized around the concept of the effective school as reflected in the research.

- Most important, each of the participating schools has accepted the following *premises and assumptions* as the rationale and foundation for their long-term effort.

Premise 1. School improvement based on the effective schools research begins with a clear and unambiguous statement: *The primary purpose of schooling is teaching and learning.* Too often, schools respond to prevailing local demands or react to pressing national political issues. Then, the primary purpose of schooling becomes less clear and focused. Educators who choose to adopt the effective schools model need to say "yes" to this question: "Is this school community prepared to change patterns and practices that do not currently serve this goal?" Edmonds aptly observed that effective schools spend as much time avoiding things that don't work as they do gravitating toward things that do.

Premise 2. Educators who believe

the primary purpose of schools is teaching and learning assume that *the basis for assessing school effectiveness is in terms of student outcomes.* Although this may seem obvious, past practice reveals that evaluation procedures used by schools have placed more emphasis on the process of schooling than the outputs of schooling. That is, evaluation has been more closely associated with accreditation than with measuring student outcomes.

With the current pressure on human service organizations for accountability, it is necessary to produce describable results. Since the accountability trend is more likely to increase rather than subside, educators would be well advised to use and manage "outcome" standards in desired and positive directions. It is at the local level that educators may decide "which" outcomes ought to be addressed and assessed. Ask these questions: "Which outcomes do we care most about?" "What indicators will we monitor to determine whether the outcomes of interest are being achieved?"

Premise 3. *The way in which the local school district assesses student outcomes accurately represents the educational outcomes that the school or district cares most about.* Educators may encounter one of two problems with this part of the model. First, they

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may say, "Our current outcome measures do not adequately reflect the broad goals of our school's program." Or, they may report, "Our current assessment tools are limited to the more cognitive outcomes and virtually ignore the affective ones." To both concerns, the effective schools research recommends that educators move to eliminate these needless discrepancies.

If that suggestion sounds harsh and uncompromising, there is good reason. First, the "good old days" are long gone when an educator's best proof of learning outcomes. Evidence gathered over time must support even expert judgment; and, second, organizational literature clearly implies that in complex organizations such as schools "what gets measured gets done!" Goals without accompanying monitoring systems are tenuous at best.

Some of the important outcomes of interest to a local school are not always easily assessed. Strenuous or not, making the effort is essential. For educators to know that they have taught effectively and to ascertain that students are learning with efficacy, they must be able to describe the resulting knowledge, skills, and behaviors that indicate student mastery. Teachers using the outcome information may proceed with confidence to facilitate instruction, offer praise, directly assist individual learners, and choose the

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propitious time to move to the next set of learning tasks.

Premise 4. An effective school is able to demonstrate both quality and equity in its program outcomes. Americans continue to expect their public schools to provide an opportunity for every student to obtain a quality education and to ensure that each student is offered equal educational opportunity. Therefore, for a school to support the claim that it is effective for students, it must evidence the concurrent presence of quality and equity. How can schools promote both equity and quality instruction for their students? There are several approaches.

For most school improvement efforts based on effective school research, the issue of quality is directly associated with the *level of achievement* that students exhibit on local outcome measures. Determination of equity is associated with the distribution of achievement as it applies to student outcomes based on those same local measures.

Two outcome standards are anticipated in effective schools. First, the overall level of achievement to which the students rise on the outcome measures must be sufficiently high to signify acceptable mastery of the essential curriculum. Second, the distribution of achievement must not vary significantly across the major subsets of the student population (that is, middle socioeconomic students versus lower socioeconomic students). Certainly, some will do better than others. Setting this standard does indicate, however, that the proportion of students from any one subset of students demonstrating mastery on the outcome measures cannot attain at a significantly higher or lower level than any other subset of entire student population. Acceptance of this premise and the supporting rationale permits local policymakers to incorporate a suitable method of planning for and monitoring of their customized and desired goals and outcomes.

Premise 5. The final premise identified with local effective schools research school improvement practice rests on the belief that *quality and equity are achieved and maintained*

only when the school improvement effort has been designed to accrue benefits for all students. Local school authorities may evaluate their intentions in this regard by asking, "What indicators will we monitor to determine if our school is improving?" And, "How will we analyze and report those indicators to ensure that the improvement effort is reaching and benefiting all students?"

Potential for the Future

With numerous monumental activities emerging from recent local school improvement initiatives, it is impossible to predict the impact or import of these emerging trends.

Although it did not pass, the "Effective Schools" bill, presented by Congressman Hawkins from California, proposed the creation of a matching grants program that would provide local school districts with planning and implementation support for effective schools research-based school improvement programs. Receiving strong bipartisan support, the bill's mere presence and the broad national discussion it received have strengthened and broadened the base of support for local efforts.

Collectively, these activities lend support to the belief that individual schools can and do make a difference for students, and that it is possible to improve both teaching and learning in the context of the effective school. Now each time an individual school community commits itself to school improvement utilizing effective schools research, staff members, over time, contribute valuable research data to the overall body of research on effective schools. The benefit of this new knowledge, acquired from richly diverse settings, eventually accrues to all participants. The formulation of programs so conceived advances the potential of educational quality and equity for all students. □

Reference

Edmonds, Ronald R. "Programs of School Improvement: An Overview." *Educational Leadership* 40 (December 1982): 4-11.

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