

Ingredients of a Successful School Effectiveness Project

In five years Milwaukee's Project RISE has significantly raised the achievement levels of students in 18 elementary schools.

In 1979 the local school board directed 18 elementary schools in Milwaukee to improve their achievement levels in reading, math, and language to reflect citywide or national norms. These schools were identified as the lowest achieving schools in the system. All were located in the central city and served a predominantly low-income and minority student population.

No changes were made in the administration or in teacher or student composition, and no additional monies were allocated to these schools. Yet achievement levels have increased significantly in the last five years.

Maureen McCormack-Larkin, who is on leave as a curriculum supervisor in the Milwaukee Public Schools, is currently involved in research related to effective schools. She is an officer of the National Council for Effective Schools and was project director of the Milwaukee Teacher Expectation Project and assistant to the director of Project RISE.

Robert E. Kerby



Figure 1. The Essential Elements of Effective Schools.

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. Ongoing recognition of personal/academic excellence

Curriculum

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

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

Coordination of Supportive Services

1. Instructional approach, curriculum content, and materials of supplementary instructional services coordinated with the classroom program
2. Pullout 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

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 toward test-taking as an affirmation of individual accomplishment
4. Test-taking preparation and skills

Parent and Community Support

1. Regular and consistent communication with parents
2. Clearly defined homework policy that is explained to students and parents
3. Emphasis on 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

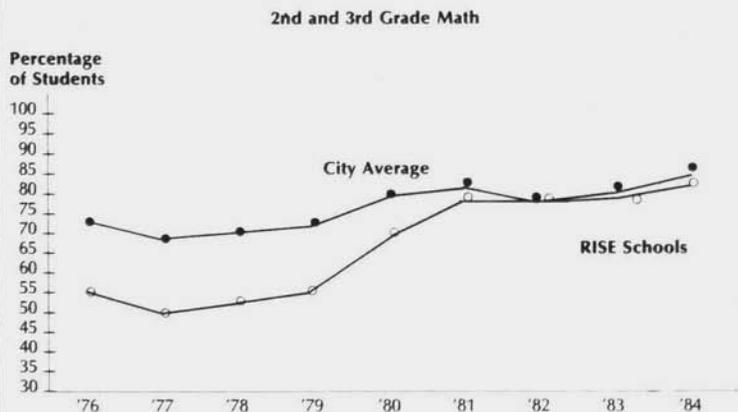
Project RISE

Since 1979 these schools have participated in Project RISE, which attempts to raise student achievement by systematically implementing the essential elements of effective schooling. These elements (see Figure 1) were derived primarily from the research and literature on school and teacher effectiveness and from the reported practices of other effective schools.

By the close of the 1983-84 school year, Project RISE had been operating for five years. Figure 2 charts the percentage of elementary students in Milwaukee's 107 elementary schools who scored average and above average on standardized tests. The most significant gains occurred between 1979 and 1983 and brought the Project RISE schools to the level set by the school board.

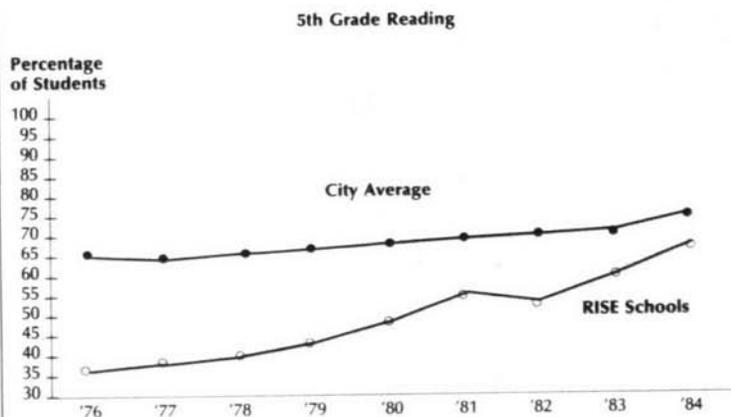
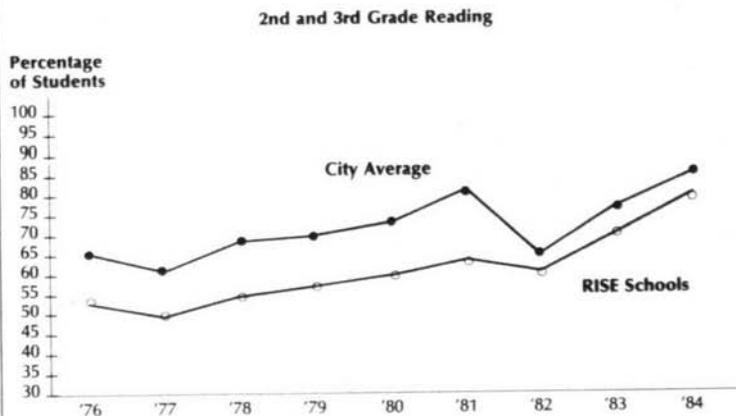
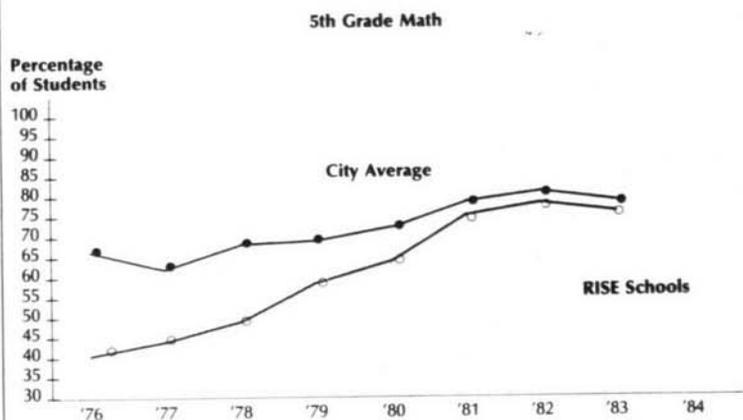
Among the RISE schools, several distinguished themselves from the rest in their exceptional rate of gains and

Figure 2. Percentage of Milwaukee Elementary Students Achieving Average or Above-Average Scores on Standardized Tests From 1975-76 Through 1983-84.



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Figure 2. (continued).



high levels of achievement. Specific changes made by these fast-improving schools fall into four categories: changes in staff attitudes, changes in school management and organization, changes in school practices and policies, and changes in classroom practices. While each of the 18 schools in Project RISE may have made one or more of these changes, the fast-improving schools made most or all of them.

Changes in Staff Attitudes

Staff members verbally and behaviorally expressed the belief that all of their students could achieve regardless of socioeconomic status or past academic performance.

- Inservice activities that underscored the educability of all students were offered. These sessions were designed to re-educate misinformed personnel by refuting the individual deficit and cultural deficit theories that are commonly used to explain the underachievement of low-income and minority students. The school deficit theory was explained and the potency of school expectations emphasized.

- Staff members were encouraged to meet and establish networks with practitioners from effective schools throughout the country. RISE principals and teachers visited effective schools, and practitioners from these schools came to Milwaukee to share how they had changed their schools.

- Literature and reports related to the successes of schools that served low-income and minority students were disseminated among staff and reviewed on a regular basis, reinforcing the belief that low-income students can perform at high levels of achievement.

- Grouping practices and programs that identified some students as low achievers were abandoned.

Staff members indicated an improvement in their sense of self-esteem and efficacy as professional educators.

- Inservice activities included exchange forums wherein teachers would act as the consultants in pre-



William E. Mills, Montgomery Public Schools

senting successful methods and practices to other teachers, and principals would share their successes in various domains. This contributed to a shift from depending on outside educational experts to recognizing the expertise within their own ranks. Staff members

from the fast-improving schools frequently volunteered or were asked to lead these sessions.

- Staff members (rather than the superintendent or central office personnel) acted as spokespersons for the school effectiveness program at local

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professional meetings, press conferences, university classes, and community forums. Thus, the practitioners who were responsible for the implementation and successes of the program were the ones to discuss the program and receive the recognition due.

- When visitors came to the schools, the principals shared with the staff the responsibilities involved in guiding tours, explaining the program, and recognizing the accomplishments of individual staff members and students.

- Staff members orchestrated their own professional development activities. Schools used their allocated funds to design their inservice, selecting the topics and presenters. A number of RISE principals and teachers led a professional education group called the League of Urban Educators. The League, which received no funding and met after school, was a voluntary

group of teachers, principals, central office staff, university professors, and business and community leaders, who met monthly in a prestigious university conference center to share a potluck dinner, listen to a presentation on an issue related to urban education, and discuss the issues raised in the presentation. For the most part, the presentations focused on the essential elements of RISE. Participating members report that the League elevated their stature as professionals, united people across role and status lines, and served as a professional support group.

Changes in School Management and Organization

Principals reported a change in their role as building manager to include being an instructional leader.

- Principals had the opportunity to meet with other principals from effective schools who emphasized the importance of being knowledgeable of the curriculum and of instructional practices, visiting each classroom on a daily basis, and concentrating the agenda of the staff meetings on instructional issues.

Principals involved teachers in important planning and decision-making processes, thereby generating a strong sense of ownership of their school.

- Principals in these schools loosened the linkages between central office and the school and strengthened the sense of school ownership, thus engendering the responsibility among staff for the school's successes or failures. One way they did this was by empowering the teachers in acting as advocates for the changes proposed by the teachers. For example, when teachers denounced the pullout approach used by supplementary programs as being disruptive and counterproductive, and recommended that all programs be conducted in their classrooms coordinated with the classroom instructional program, the principals supported the teachers in implementing this approach.

- Although all of the annual improvement plans were required to in-

clude the RISE essential elements, each school decided for itself how to best reach the project goals based on the unique characteristics of the school.

- School effectiveness committees assumed responsibility for making plans to improve school climate, reading and math achievement, and the school's evaluation program. Their plans were presented as recommendations at staff meetings for discussion, modification, and adoption.

- Principals established grade-level teams and arranged for them to meet on a weekly basis during the school day for planning, sharing, and coordinating their efforts.

Staff members expressed their recognition of the interrelatedness of their responsibilities and the need to work together as a unified system.

- During the program's five-year period, the schools operated less as a set of separate classrooms and programs and more as a unified body with interrelated and interdependent responsibilities. The principals heightened this awareness in a number of ways; for example, by emphasizing the responsibility each teacher had in seeing that students were performing at or above grade level. A 3rd grade teacher soon came to realize that all of the effort exerted to prepare her students for the 4th grade could be rendered meaningless if the following year the 4th grade teacher did not also work toward grade-level proficiency. The teacher also realized that the 2nd grade teacher's failure to prepare his students for the 3rd grade would create a burden for this 3rd grade teacher.

- Behavioral expectations were developed and consistently reinforced by all staff.

- Supplementary programs discontinued the pullout approach and worked with the classroom teacher within the classroom setting.

Changes in School Practices and Policies

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schools, with a focus on acquiring basic skills.

● Because the majority of the students were performing far below grade level in 1979, staff members expressed the need to concentrate on reading, math, and language arts as a first step in improving student achievement. In 1984, staff members in the fast improving schools reported that the majority of their students are now performing at or above grade level, and that plans are now under way to move from effectiveness to excellence. These plans include broad-

ening and strengthening the curriculum, learning better ways of teaching higher order skills, and possibly adopting computer programs, Great Books study clubs, and critical thinking projects.

● Extracurricular activities and assembly programs emphasized academic achievement by including competitive meets with the reading and math olympic teams, academic pep rallies, student recognition programs, oratorical presentations, debates, and so on.

The schools were characterized by well-maintained and orderly environments.

● Behavioral expectations were developed by the staff, and a commitment was made to consistently enforce them.

● The principal conveyed these behavioral expectations to the students at the opening assembly at the beginning of the school year, followed by a discussion of the expectations in each classroom.

● Behavioral expectations were printed in the student handbook and distributed to every parent.

● Student traffic in the hallways was reduced by the elimination of pullout programs.

● Some schools substituted outdoor recess with indoor study breaks throughout the day when students could casually interact, go to the lavatory, and so on.

The schools clearly articulated grade-level objectives and minimum standards within each subject area.

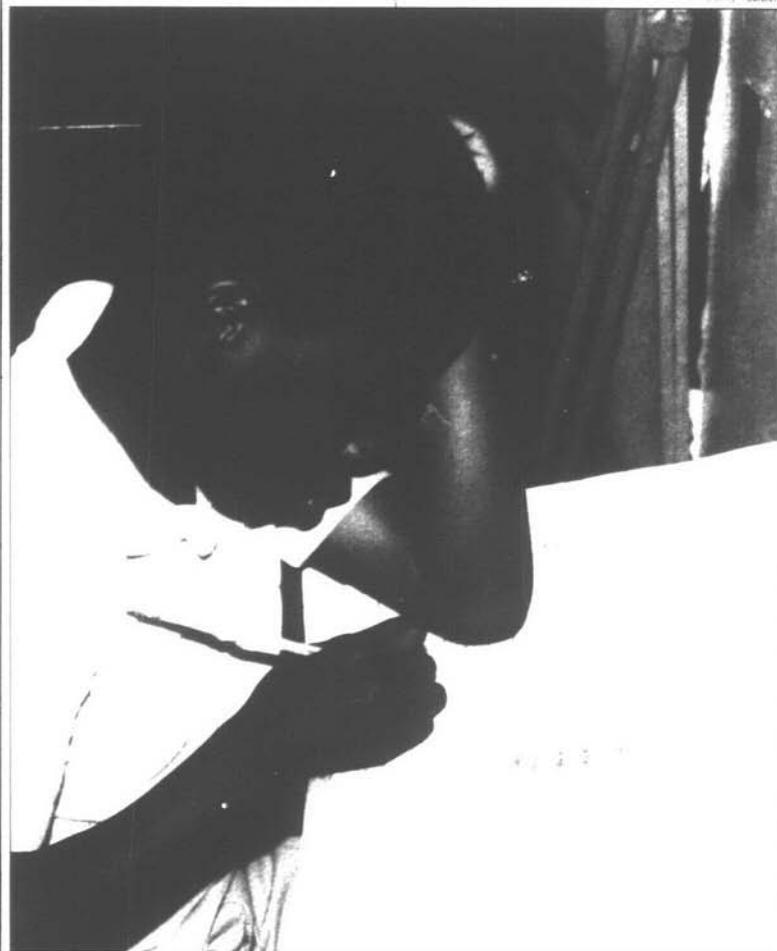
● Staff members were involved in the development of grade-level objectives and standards.

● Grade-level standards were defined as those skills, concepts, and learnings that are prerequisite for success at the next grade level.

● Grade-level standards were printed on “Yes I Can” sheets, reviewed with students, and distributed to parents.

The schools developed a school-wide policy that expected all students to complete daily homework assignments.

Terry Caudil



“The schools clearly articulated grade-level objectives and minimum standards within each subject area.”

- The rigorous nature of the homework policies was defended as necessary to bring underachieving students to grade-level proficiency.

- Principals and teachers enforced the policy by monitoring the doors at dismissal and sending empty-handed students back to their rooms to get their homework.

- Parents were informed if students were not completing their homework assignments and told that the students would be retained after lunch, during recess, or after school in the “home-work center” to complete missing assignments.

The schools had schoolwide policies designed to protect instructional time from unnecessary disruptions and distractions.

- Some of the schools identified blocks of time in the daily schedule when the entire school would be teaching reading, math, and language

arts. Interruptions such as public address announcements, requests from the office, pullout programs, and the like would not be allowed during these instructional periods.

Changes in Classroom Practices

Teachers planned to teach the entire grade-level curriculum content to every student.

- The grade-level objectives were organized into units of instruction, and teachers used content coverage schedules to plan on a yearly, weekly, and daily basis.

- Adjustments in the content coverage schedules were made throughout the year as some lessons required more or less time than expected.

Lessons were usually taught to the whole class and were supplemented with small-group corrective or enrichment instruction.

- Whole-class instruction was taught at the student's *grade* level, and small-group instruction was taught at the student's *performance* level.

- The pullout approach for compensatory education was replaced by an in-class delivery of service. Support teachers were in classrooms during the instructional lesson, which prepared them to supplement the instruction.

- Precautions were taken to avoid ostensibly identifying or labeling students as Title I students or as the “slow group.”

- Grouping was flexible, and outside observers commented that they were unable to identify the slow learners.

Instructional lessons were highly structured and generally included the key instructional behaviors.

- These behaviors were identified as: a review of the previous lesson and homework check, a developmental lesson using direct instruction, a process-product check for understanding, actively monitored seatwork, and the assignment of a related daily homework assignment.

- Staff members reported that the systematic and structured instructional format helped maintain order by mini-

mizing the opportunity for disruptive behavior and increased the academic engagement of the students.

Teachers expected their students to perform at or above grade level, and used remedial measures to help underachieving students advance to grade-level proficiency.

- Teachers used some form of accelerated learning. This was described as an intervention strategy intended to help underachieving students make more than a year's gain in a given school year. This curriculum design and instructional approach included concentrated instruction that focused on the essential content included within each of the preceding levels.

- When many older students complained that they were embarrassed to carry home books that were years below their grade level and that younger students were using, the schools prepared and distributed book covers with the school's name and logo to all the students. Soon the underachieving students began bringing home the books and assignments needed to help them advance to grade-level proficiency.

Concluding Remarks

Project RISE appears to be a promising example of the successful implementation of the school effectiveness and teacher effectiveness findings. The project schools began with a clear vision of what an effective school is (one performing at or above national norms in reading, math, and language arts, with no disparity based on race or class); they used the school effectiveness correlates as a framework for developing their own plans; and they implemented these plans in a systematic and self-conscious manner.

The RISE practitioners are modest when discussing their accomplishments. They are obviously proud of the gains their students have made, but are quick to point out that becoming an effective school is only a first step. Narrowing the educational agenda was a necessary prerequisite in turning their schools around, but now they are eager to accept the challenge of converting their effective schools into excellent schools. □

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