Executive Summary

Educational Practices of Six Effective Tennessee Schools

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By

Guy S. Bruce, Ed. D; BCBA
Appealing Solutions, LLC

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Common Practices of Top Performing Schools

Between April 22 and May 1, 2007, I visited the six Tennessee elementary and middle schools that have won the Education Consumers Foundation's Value-Added Achievement Award for two consecutive years. These six schools have produced gains in reading/language arts and math that are among the highest in Tennessee. They are located throughout the state, some in rural communities and others in large cities. Most have a large proportion of children from low-income families. The principals and staff were very cooperative in answering my questions about how they operate. The following summarizes the educational practices that I found them to have in common.

The six schools were: Amqui Elementary in Davidson County, Collinwood Elementary in Wayne County, Hardy Elementary in Hamilton County, Holladay Elementary in Benton County, Joppa Elementary in Grainger County, and North Stewart Elementary in Stewart County.

Of the identifiable practices that they have in common, the most obvious is their habit of routinely collecting student progress data and using it to make instructional decisions. It is not a recent innovation. Over many decades, this approach has had a variety of names: "cybernetic process of instruction," formative assessment, data-based or data-driven instruction, etc. All refer to systematic data collection designed to prevent students from falling behind.

1. **Principals receive frequent reports on individual student progress towards the Tennessee curriculum standards.** In addition to the TCAP scores provided at the end of each school year, the principals review progress data from a variety of reading and math tests, such as ThinkLink, STAR reading and math, Dibels Reading, and Accelerated Math. These data are collected at least 3 times per year. They also get reports on the progress of at-risk students every two weeks. Frequent progress reports allow the principals to identify individual student problems and take action before the student falls behind.

2. **Teachers receive frequent reports on the progress of each of their students**. In addition to the student performance reports that are reviewed by the principals, teachers get weekly reports of student progress in reading and math from either computer-based reading and math tests, tests provided by textbook publishers or teacher-made tests. This information helps the teachers to identify student learning problems and to take corrective action before the students fall behind.

3. **Schools keep parents regularly informed about their children's progress and ask the parents for assistance when children are having difficulty achieving a particular state objective**.

4. **In addition to Tennessee's TCAP examinations, these schools use supplemental tests that assess the same knowledge and skill domains sampled by the state examination.** Coordinate use of both summative and formative assessments allows teachers and principals to identify and correct student learning problems before they become performance problems on the TCAP tests.

5. **Schools use criterion-referenced progress tests.** Teachers and principals compare each student's score to a mastery criterion for each state curriculum standard in order to identify students who need additional instruction. Norm referenced data are available but criterion referenced information is primarily relied on for instruction.

6. **Schools set mastery criteria higher than those required by the state curriculum standards.** Teachers do not consider a skill mastered until that student correctly answers at least 80% of the performance items. Higher mastery levels are thought to better ensure preparedness for the next level of the curriculum.

7. **Principals use student progress reports scores to evaluate each teacher's effectiveness in bringing about student achievement gain.** Principals and teachers continuously review individual student progress scores to pinpoint teaching/learning problems.

8. **Principals and teachers collaboratively group students to optimize student progress.** Students are selectively placed a) with teachers who have been particularly effective with similar learning problems, b) in reading groups with students having similar difficulties, c) with Title I teachers who provide additional

tutoring or d) in computer-based programs focused on specific skills.

9. **Teachers employ supplemental learning activities when one or more students are having difficulty achieving a particular objective, even though the rest of students have mastered that skill.** Students are not permitted to fall behind.

10. **Teachers who are experiencing difficulty in particular areas of teaching are mentored by the principal and other teachers.** Principals frequently observe in classrooms. They provide frequent and individualized feedback regarding instruction and classroom behavior management. They work with teachers to create personal improvement plans and arrange coaching from members of the teaching staff who demonstrably effective in a given area of practice. They systematically provide mentoring for new teachers and in-service training focused on effective instruction.

11. **Teachers and principals select activities that allow students to practice the knowledge and skills that will be tested.** Although the state curriculum standards are described in the Tennessee Curriculum guide, schools have found it helpful to obtain additional information about the tested knowledge and skills from the TCAP publisher and from previous exams.

12. **Schools have adopted school-wide programs that reward positive social and academic student behaviors.** Principals monitor the success of these programs, collecting data on the number and type of student referrals for problem behavior.

13. **Principals acquire additional resources to help teachers whose students are making insufficient progress.** Title I funds, educational grants, and private-sector partnership funds are used to pay for tutoring and computer-based learning activities. In some cases, principals select supplemental resources on the basis of the vendor's ability to provide scientifically credible evidence of effectiveness.

14. **Schools survey parents annually to assess satisfaction with the school's services**.