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## Examining middle schools that narrowed the Achievement Gap in the Los Angeles Unified School District

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### Summary

This study examines the instructional and school-wide practices of seven LAUSD middle schools that narrowed the achievement gap. The major findings are presented below:

- *Leadership, collaboration and operational support that are specifically tailored to a school's needs were perceived to be the key school-wide practices that improved student learning.*
- *In addition to strong leadership, teachers pinpointed cultural factors within their schools – collaborative, cohesive environments in which students and teachers felt comfortable, cared for and safe – as facilitating their successes.*
- *Poorly prepared students, insufficient (or ineffective) central and local district support and low levels of parent involvement were identified as the primary impediments to students' success.*
- *Respondents did not know how to implement culturally relevant (CR) pedagogy.*
- *Despite their lack of CR pedagogical knowledge, principals, administrators and teachers recognized the tremendous need to make culturally relevant human relations training more available.*

### Overview

Academic success in middle school increases the prospect of success in high school, post-secondary education and in the world of work (National Middle School Association, 2003). In contrast, students who do not perform well in the middle school context are more likely to participate in potentially injurious behaviors, leave school before graduation or experience other negative outcomes. In an effort to examine the factors that influence middle school success, the Research and Planning Division identified seven LAUSD middle schools that narrowed the achievement gap for their African-American and Latino student populations in ELA and Mathematics over a five-year period (2001-2002 to 2005-2006). Importantly, while six of the seven schools had been designated as Program Improvement schools based upon the accountability components of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), we observed increasing numbers of African-American and Latino students functioning at proficient and advanced levels within these schools. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors are viewed by school staff as facilitating or inhibiting student achievement gains?
2. What pedagogical strategies contribute to academic achievement?
3. Do culturally relevant pedagogical methods and strategies influence instructional practice in the selected schools?

## Methods

We limited our initial selection to schools whose student populations were comprised of at least 40% minority students. Then, we calculated the gain in the percentage of proficient/advanced students in 2006 as compared with the percentage of proficient/advanced students in 2002 on the California Standards Tests for English Language Arts and Mathematics. We then selected schools that had increased the percentages of African-American and Latino students scoring at proficient/advanced levels by at least 5% between 2002 and 2005. Achievement gains needed to be observable for both subgroups in order for the schools to be eligible for study inclusion.

In developing our sample of teachers, we asked principals to recommend teachers whose practice most positively influenced the increase of student achievement and the narrowing of the achievement gap at their sites. We collected qualitative data in the form of classroom observations, faculty and parent meeting observations, and instructional staff interviews at each school. In total, 126 days of classroom instructional practice and 23 school meetings were observed. We also interviewed 35 administrators. A total of 42 teachers were observed and interviewed. We asked each interviewee questions regarding their campus roles and their opinions regarding the factors that improved student achievement on their campuses. We asked respondents to share their perspectives regarding the major challenges to instructional quality and student achievement within their schools. Finally, they answered specific questions regarding instruction, classroom practice, student-teacher interaction, and parent involvement.

To determine the patterns of behavior and opinion at these sites, both qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted. The central phenomenon of interest was the improvement of student academic achievement, while the contexts were school specific.

## Key Findings

***Leadership, collaboration, and operational support that are specifically tailored to a school's needs were perceived to be the key school-wide practices that improved student learning.***

Moreover, distributed leadership and collaboration were perceived to be essential to creating effective and sustainable systems for improving discipline and the quality of instruction.

***Two different leadership styles emerged across the seven schools.*** Four of the seven principals focused heavily on instructional issues, while the remaining three tended to focus more upon operations while delegating instructional oversight to others. The four principals demonstrated a deep understanding of the issues involving instructional practice on their campuses.

***Generally, the respondents admitted that their schools did not do well at assessing the academic performance of, or meeting the instructional needs of their lowest performing students.***

***When asked to specify the classroom-level factors that they believed improved student academic achievement, almost all principals and administrators attributed their students' success to their teachers' commitment and dedication.*** "Good" teachers were happy, consistent, liked children, knowledgeable about their subject areas and professional.

***In addition to strong leadership, teachers pinpointed cultural factors --- collaborative, cohesive environments in which students and teachers felt comfortable, cared for and safe --- as facilitating their successes.***

***Low levels of parent involvement, insufficient (or ineffective) central and local district support, and poorly prepared students were identified as the primary impediments to students' success.***

***Respondents did not know how to implement culturally relevant (CR) pedagogy.***

***Despite their lack of CR pedagogical knowledge, principals, administrators and teachers recognized the tremendous need to make culturally relevant human relations training more available.***

## Conclusion

The majority of middle school staff that we interviewed or observed did not reflect a deep conceptual understanding of adolescent development or culturally relevant strategies. For example, the respondents described themselves as not having much of an understanding of their students' points of view or their likes and dislikes. Staff had a tendency to blame unprepared students and underinvolved families for their students' academic underperformance more than ineffective instruction, classroom management, or student-teacher interaction.

The following school-wide issues were perceived to improve student success:

1. *Leadership.* Certainly, effective principals were thought to be central to students' success and staff performance. Additionally, however, respondents remarked that schools that distributed responsibility for student success among all of a school's staff produced results.
2. *Collaboration.* Staff associated working cooperatively on projects with school improvement and success. Conversely, they believed that less successful efforts often failed because they were developed without the input of a diverse group of campus stakeholders.
3. *Operational Support.* Assistance from local district and central office staff was well received and perceived to be useful when it was specifically tailored to meet the school-wide and classroom level needs of a particular school site. Regrettably, much of the support offered to schools was perceived to be "canned;" or produced without regard to particular schools' needs.

Respondents identified the following classroom factors as positively influencing student achievement:

1. "*Good teachers:*" Teachers who understood their subject matter, who were skilled in pedagogy and who wanted to be where they were able to affect positive change.
2. *School wide support for classroom instruction:* Good teachers need support from strong leaders, collaborative work environments and safe and healthy school environments.

Our observations demonstrated that high quality instruction provided to students resulted in student gains. However, high quality instruction was not evident in the majority of the classrooms visited. Despite the fact that principals told us that they were nominating their best teachers, in most schools we saw excellent teaching in only 1 or 2 classrooms. Furthermore, several of the teachers we observed stated that this was their first or second year of teaching. In only one school did we see evidence of both high quality teaching and positive student outcomes.

Many teachers and administrators described relating to their students as important; we saw little evidence of this in our observations. One school noted that the lack of culturally relevant practice was the single most significant hindrance to their students' academic achievement. We did see some exemplary culturally relevant practice, in other schools. Its presence or absence did not seem to be directly associated with student achievement.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. *Collaboration* should be continually stressed, and the effectiveness of current vertical and departmental teacher teaming methods should be assessed. Collaboration was understood to be critically important to effective school practice and student achievement. Students were less successful in school environments where staff did not collaborate with one another.
2. *Caring* should be encouraged and made to be a component of each teacher's job description. Also, schools should continue their efforts to train staff to teach in a manner that is attuned to students' cultural backgrounds and informed by their stage of adolescent development. Nearly all of the teachers that we observed seemed to genuinely care for their students.
3. *Positive student-teacher interaction*. Professional development should be developed that trains teachers to more effectively communicate with their students. Also, instructional support teams should be dispatched to observe and retrain teachers who do not communicate effectively with their students. Finally, the importance of positive student-teacher interactions in supporting healthy classroom management and student achievement should be highlighted.
4. *Deficit orientation*. Implement programs that address the enduring deficit orientation that we observed on school campuses. School leaders should focus upon student strengths in their critique of instructional practice and classroom management. This approach (strength models) should also inform staff's interaction with parents. Staff should work together to develop positive belief systems at each school.
5. *Operational Issues*. Develop and communicate a sense of urgency to improve the circumstances on campuses that are perceived to undermine school effectiveness and student achievement, such as campus safety, and school appearance.

**For more information regarding this study see the full report: Patton, D.C. & Munoz, L. Examining Middle Schools that narrowed the Achievement Gap in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Research and Planning No. 2008-13. Available at [www.research.lausd.net](http://www.research.lausd.net)**