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It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
April 2005

Whole-School Reform

Thousands of schools around the country, including many schools with a high concentration of low-income students, have turned to whole-school reform programs as a way to boost student performance. These programs offer standardized packages of management and instructional procedures. Unlike many other types of reform, they focus on schools, not school districts, and address many different issues at the same time, including management techniques, resource allocation, classroom organization, curriculum and instruction, parental involvement, and counseling.

The spread of whole-school reform programs has been encouraged by the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program, which was enacted in 1997 and re-authorized in 2002. This program provides grants for schools to adopt “research-based” school-wide reform models. Moreover, in response to the failure of New Jersey’s elected officials to enact meaningful school finance reform, a 1998 decision by the New Jersey Supreme Court required hundreds of urban schools to implement (and the state to pay for) one well-known whole-school reform model called Success for All (SFA).

Several scholars examine the impact of various whole-school reform programs on student achievement. Although some of these studies find that whole-school reform boosts student achievement, the evidence is decidedly mixed, and a 1999 publication by the National Research Council concluded that whole-school reform designs have “achieved popularity in spite rather than because of strong evidence of effectiveness.” The most recent high-quality studies of the whole-school reform programs also provide, at best, mixed evidence for a positive impact on student performance.

A study by Robert Bifulco, William Duncombe, and me examines the impact on student performance of three whole-school reform programs based on data from New York City in the mid 1990s. Our study was published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

The New York City example is instructive because many low-performing schools in the City implemented a whole-school reform program during this period. Some schools turned to whole-school reform in response to efforts by the New York State Education Department to help the state’s most

troubled schools. In addition, two large subdivisions of the New York City School District decided to promote whole-school reform on their own. Because of these activities, we are able to identify 47 schools that adopted one of three whole school reform programs (SFA, the School Development Program, and More Effective Schools). Our study compares the performance of students in these schools with the performance of students in comparison schools that did not turn to whole-school reform.

We find that the extensive efforts to implement whole-school reform in New York City met with limited success. On average, schools in our sample did not boost their elementary reading test scores by adopting Success for All or the School Development Program. We also find some evidence, however, that the impact of SFA depends on the extent to which its prescriptions are implemented and that SFA might have had positive impacts if it had been implemented more fully. This possibility provides small comfort to large cities, because implementation problems appear to be particularly severe with widespread adoption of SFA, as in New York City or New Jersey.

In contrast, we find that More Effective Schools (MES) had a positive impact on student reading scores. Unfortunately, we also find that the positive impact of MES disappeared when the MES trainers, who are not school employees, left the MES schools at the end of our sample period. In other words, a school may have difficulty sustaining the positive impact of MES on its own, at least not without adding resources for additional personnel.

Overall, our results highlight the challenges facing poor, inner-city schools. We find evidence that whole-school reform may have a role to play in boosting student reading performance in these schools, but this potential contribution is undermined by the fact that these schools have limited resources, a high concentration of students with disadvantages, and high student mobility. We conclude that “Further experiments with, and evaluations of, whole-school reform models are clearly warranted, but nobody should expect this approach to be a panacea for poor, inner-city schools.”