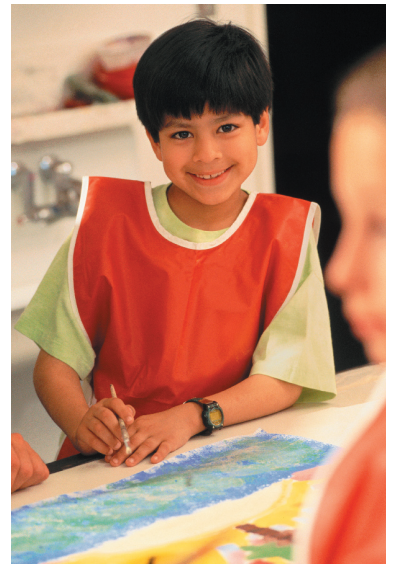# Best Practices and School Success

By Erin Rigg Burton and Robert P. Parker

The search to identify "best practices" appears in organizational leadership and professional development literature encompassing many private and government industries. In education, the term "best practices" was first used in the 1970s in reference to special education programs. In the 1980s, the idea of "best practices" began to be used more generally in relation to curriculum design and school reform. The quest to identify "best practices" continued to gain popularity through the 1990s and on to the present. The directive of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 further spurred efforts by researchers and practitioners alike to identify and implement the "best practices" at the classroom, school, and district levels.

While the majority of "best practice" research has been focused on the district and school levels, there is anecdotal evidence for "best practices" at the classroom level. Moreover, the focus of most research studies has been on high-performing, high-poverty schools.

This **Research Brief** summarizes findings from several best practice studies. It is divided into District level, School level, and Classroom/ Teacher level. The reader will see an overlap in practices as several practices can apply to district and school levels, or school and classroom levels. A consistent theme that emerged from the literature is there must be support from all levels of the school district in order for best practices to be implemented and most importantly to be sustained.

1) District Level Best Practices

Successful Districts:

a) Research programs before implementation:
   I) Study literature about the programs previously evaluated at more than one site.
   II) Examine longitudinal research.
   III) Seek out opinion of experts (Tableman, 2002 No. 23).

b) Evaluate already executed programs.

c) Take a comprehensive, system-wide approach to reform rather than relying on schools to fend for themselves:
   I) Initiate reforms led by superintendent and school board who are in-sync about how to increase student performance.
   II) Conduct community-wide meetings to build support for reform initiatives (Casserly, 2003).

d) Provide schools with the means to teach teachers best practices:
   I) Build the capacity of principals to provide instructional leadership (Johnson & Asera, 1999).
   II) Use a larger portion of funds to support increased professional development (Loeb, 2003).
   III) Link professional development directly to the program teachers are teaching and the standards and assessments they use. Teacher professional development can improve student achievement when it focuses on teachers' knowledge of the subject matter (Holland, 2005).
   IV) Channel resources in ways that provide additional instructional leadership to schools by minimizing non-instructional duties so teachers can focus solely on their teaching (CCSSO, 2002).
   V) Have a focused and sustained staff development program (Quick & Quick, 2000 as cited in Daggett, 2005).

e) Set direction for school administrators:
   I) Help develop a shared understanding about the goals.
   II) Make these goals personally compelling, as well as challenging, but achievable (Leithwood et al. 2004).
   III) Create clear, measurable, and rigorous school accountability provisions.
      (1) Set measurable goals with an accountability system based on results.
      (2) Set accountability systems that go beyond what the state establishes and then hold district leaders and school staff personally responsible for results (Casserly, 2003).
   IV) Ensure that accountability provisions are accompanied by adequate strategies to build capacity and provide support.
   V) Provide schools adequate flexibility and support to use that flexibility well (Johnson & Asera, 1999).

2) School Level Best Practices

Successful Schools:

a) Make the school feel like a family, a home, a community, or a sanctuary:
   I) Create a sense of shared responsibility between teachers and students - all are involved in the school's success (Loeb, 2003).
   II) Generate such a potent influence, so much that for six hours a day it can override everything else in the lives of the children (Benard, 2003).
   III) Establish an effective school environment that can have a greater effect on the resilience of an African American student when compared to Latino or Caucasian students (Borman & Overman, 2004).

b) Promote Parent Commitment:
   I) Have support and help from the parents and community (Marzano, 2003 as cited in Daggett, 2005).
   II) Make a concerted effort to reach parents:
      (1) Through telephone calls with positive comments
      (2) Books and other resources
      (3) Surveys or focus groups (Tableman, 2004 No. 29)
   III) Provide parent education (Loeb, 2003).

c) Are Consistent:
   I) Create clear, high expectations for students.
   II) Create an orderly, safe school, which is needed for learning and academic resiliency (Benard, 2003; Borman & Overman, 2004).

d) Start School-Based Mentoring Groups:
   I) Elicit help from community volunteers, teacher mentors, or cross-age peer-helping/tutoring (Johnson & Asera, 1999).
   II) Promote social and academic outcomes in students through mentor programs.

e) Provide Career Exploration:
   I) Establish career and higher education counseling, as well as partnerships with higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 1999 as cited in Daggett, 2005).

II) Set a goal or sense of purpose as it is key to resilient survivors and learners (Borman & Overman, 2004).
f) Organize Early Intervention Services and After-School Programs:
  I) Offer counseling, support groups, and student assistance programs.
  II) Set up community service opportunities.
  III) Provide a safe haven after school hours (Benard, 2003).
g) Engage in ongoing assessment of students for quality improvement:
  I) Systematically use student assessment data to improve student performance (Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000).
  II) Evaluate both the students' conceptual knowledge and their ability to apply knowledge (Quick & Quick, 2000 as cited in Daggett, 2005).
  III) Train every member of the schools' professional staff to use the assessment data to improve classroom instruction (CCSSO, 2002).
h) Make teachers' opinions matter:
  I) Encourage teacher creativity, leadership, and actively support effective classroom instruction (Benard, 2003).
  II) Encourage collaboration and community feelings among the staff (CCSSO, 2002).
  III) Allocate more common planning time for staff (Loeb, 2003).
i) Redefine special education as a temporary placement:
  I) View special education as a means to integrate students with disabilities into regular education programs.
  II) Increase opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in schoolwide activities.
  III) Minimize inappropriate referrals for special education services.
    (1) Develop multiple pre-referral assessment and intervention strategies.
    (2) Train faculty and staff to recognize and address learning problems that could be misidentified as indicators of disabilities (CCSSO, 2002).

3) Classroom Level Best Practices

Successful Teachers:
a) Develop Caring Relationships:
  I) Convey loving support; students not only want as much help as the teacher can give, they also appreciate resourceful teachers who find other help for them, including tutoring or after-school programs (Wilson & Corbett, 2001).
  II) Develop trust and give unconditional love.
  III) Respect the students; student behavior will improve as they learn that they are valued and respected (Johnson & Asera, 1999).
  IV) Never take student's behavior personally.
  V) Listen actively and interestedly to students and get to know the gifts students have to offer; students appreciate teachers who make an effort to understand and believe in them (Wilson & Corbett, 2001).
  VI) Promote healthy relationships between students:
    (1) Student to student
    (2) Student to their family
    (3) Student to community (Benard, 2003)
b) Have High Expectations:
  I) Develop a deep belief of the student's innate resilience and capacity to learn (Gates Foundation, 2002; and U.S. Department of Education, 1999 as cited in Daggett, 2005).
  II) See the possibility of success:
    (1) Adopt a "Culture of Success" and do not miss an opportunity to encourage achievement.
    (2) The whole school embraces the belief that all students can and will be academically successful (CCSSO, 2002).
  III) Recognize existing strengths and mirror those strengths:
    (1) Help the student see where they are strong.
    (2) Assist students' to reframe their belief from being a damaged victim to not only a survivor but also a resilient, successful learner.
    (3) Teach students to re-examine the adversity in their lives:
      (a) Do not see adversity as permanent
      (b) Do not see setbacks as pervasive (Benard, 2003)
  IV) Accept "No Excuses"
    (1) Give students no other choice but success, best practices alone are not sufficient (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2005).
    (2) Insist that students complete assignments. Students have expressed that they feel it is the teacher's job to motivate them to do their work, as well make sure they remain on task (Wilson & Corbett, 2001).

c) Provide Opportunities for Participation and Contribution:
  I) Become student-centered and engage the whole child:
    (1) Connect learning to student's lives; make lessons personal to the student's circumstances (U.S. Department of Education, 1999 as cited in Daggett, 2005).
    (2) Give the students a voice, the chance to be heard.
    (3) Listen deeply to what they have to say, they will teach you how they need to be taught (Benard, 2003).
  II) Give students lots of opportunities to make choices:
    (1) Promote resourcefulness and problem- solving skills (Daniels & Bizar, 2005).
    (2) Treat students as responsible people.
    (3) With choice comes responsibility. After letting the students make choices, hold them accountable for finishing the jobs they started, let them monitor their performance, have them share their work with the public, and encourage them to make better choices in the future (Daniels & Bizar, 2005).
  III) Foster Experimental learning:
    (1) Vary classroom instruction (Wilson & Corbett, 2001).
    (2) Vary blocks of instructional time, especially for math and literacy (Loeb, 2003).
    (3) Have time in small groups paired with explicit instructions (Taylor, Pressley, & Pearson, 2000).

What can we do with this summary of "best practices" at the district, school, and classroom levels? We can use these research-identified best practices in two ways: (1) as a lens to examine our current practices, and (2) as a starting point for developing new approaches and practices. This framework can help us:

1. Find the best things that schools and teachers are currently doing;

2. Share this knowledge with other schools that are working hard to improve; and

3. Collaborate in developing new practices to meet our ever-changing and always challenging circumstances.

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