


Turnaround

Times Twenty

Paul Regnier





Project Excel shows what can be accomplished when a large school system focuses on its poorest-performing schools.

A turnaround principal is most likely to be successful when supported by a turnaround school system that provides the resources, training, and accountability the principal needs. This has certainly proven true in Fairfax County, Virginia, a relatively affluent suburban region that sends 166,000 children to public schools that have earned a reputation for excellent education.

But in a county this large (about 400 square miles) there are areas of poverty as well as wealth, and the percentage of children eligible for free and reduced-price meals has increased substantially in recent years, along with the percentages of students eligible for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) services. Five years ago, the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) initiated a comprehensive program designed to provide principals of the 20 schools with the lowest standardized test scores—and the highest percentages of minority, LEP, and low-income students—the resources and support needed to raise the achievement of these students and turn their schools around. It is called Project Excel.

Creating Learning Time

The purpose of Project Excel is to provide these at-risk schools with three ingredients of academic success: more learning time; enhanced academic programs; and increased accountability. Before Excel, these

schools often had excellent principals and excellent teachers, but were unable to meet the special needs of students from poverty. In its five years of existence, Project Excel has lived up to its name. Research has shown that these schools do excel, raising student achievement substantially.

The most immediate need for the Project Excel schools was increased time for learning. To meet that need, FCPS provided all of the schools with more teachers and, if needed, relocatable classrooms to implement

IN BRIEF

Project Excel was initiated by the Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia to raise student achievement in 20 schools with the lowest test scores. It focuses on providing more learning time, improving academic programs, and increasing accountability. Innovations include technology-based phonics programs in kindergarten and first grade, full-day kindergarten, reduced class sizes, and a year-round calendar.

full-day kindergarten. Excel schools also extended the number of instructional hours in the week by eliminating a long-standing practice of dismissing school early on Mondays for teacher planning.

Another way to provide more time was to introduce a year-round calendar at many Excel schools. This provides the usual 180 days of instruction, but with more frequent and shorter breaks than the traditional two-month summer vacation.

Year-round school offers two clear benefits for student achievement: less time for students to forget what they learned the year before, plus intersession programs during the breaks that can help students catch up with their peers or learn in a less structured environment. Intersessions at the Excel schools are staffed by regular and retired teachers, community members, and parents with special talents and knowledge. So far, seven elementary schools have chosen the

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year-round calendar, with strong community and staff support.

Academics, Accountability, and Evaluation

The second critical resource these schools needed was enhanced academic programs. Every Excel school implemented a technology-based phonics programs in kindergarten and first grade. Several other research-based programs were suggested to the schools, including

Reading Recovery, High Impact, Success for All, and Direct Instruction. Also suggested was reduced instructional class size. Although different schools tried different programs, most determined that reduced class size was the most effective.

Accountability has been a valuable motivator for the Excel schools. Starting with a Schoolwide Achievement Index (SAI) score reflecting student achievement on standardized tests, each Excel school is expected to improve its SAI score by five points each year. The carrot is financial rewards for meeting or exceeding this goal. The stick is an instructional audit for schools that do not meet minimal SAI increases over three years.

Evaluation is another important component of Project Excel. Success of the program was validated when evaluation over the first four years (1999–2000 to 2002–03) indicated that 14 of the original 20 Excel schools had already met or exceeded the provisional accreditation benchmarks the state had set for 2006. While the evaluation showed the achievement gap narrowing between students in Excel schools and those in other FCPS schools, it also indicated some continuing needs: skills learned in lower grades needed to be reinforced at higher grades; vocabulary-building and language skills needed more emphasis in earlier grades; and students needed more opportunities to apply math skills to real-life examples.

The Rewards of Success

Project Excel is a success and many of its best practices have been adopted by other FCPS schools with special needs. These include:

- Developing a schoolwide vision for student achievement;
- Analyzing data to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses;
- Assessing student progress to match instruction to individual needs;



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“...Many young teachers are eager to teach children from poor and LEP backgrounds.”

- Training teachers to do these assessments; and
- Teaching test-taking skills.

In recruiting hundreds of teachers every year, FCPS has found that many young teachers are eager to teach children from poor and LEP backgrounds. However, they want to teach those students in schools that are safe, staffed by top professionals, and supported with the services they need. Excel schools are just what they are looking for, and FCPS recruits them for those schools.

Project Excel shows that principals can turn schools around and make a difference in the lives and achievements of low-income and LEP students

if they have teachers who want to teach those students and the resources, support, and accountability they need to succeed. ■

WEB RESOURCES

The Fairfax County Public Schools provides an overview of its Project Excel and a description of its academic programs.

www.fcps.k12.va.us/Superintendent/SuptOff/projexcel.htm

www.fcps.k12.va.us/Superintendent/SuptOff/excelaca.htm

The National Association of Year-Round Education describes nine of the many different year-round calendars.

<http://members.aol.com/donohoyrs/yrs.htm>

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform provide a detailed examination of a direct instruction model for K-8 schools.

www.nwrel.org/spcd/catalog/ModelDetails.asp?ModelID=13

The American Federation of Teachers examines the benefits of small class size, with supporting research.

www.aft.org/edissues/classsize/index.htm

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MAKING OUR SCHOOLS MORE EFFECTIVE

What Matters and What Works

by Martin Patchen

Educators and others interested in school improvement are confronted with an often bewildering variety of research findings and different prescriptions for school reform. This unique and valuable book provides a comprehensive overview of decades of K-12 research and gives the reader a clearer picture of the evidence on what makes for effective classrooms and schools. The book:

- Is well-documented and authoritative, yet clear and engaging
- Describes the ways in which student learning is affected by the relations between students and teachers, among teachers, and between teachers and administrators.
- Shows how what's happening in the classroom relates to the characteristics of the individual school and to the way the school system is organized.
- Presents, in a balanced way, evidence relevant to many current, often controversial issues—including standards and testing, bilingual education, charter schools, voucher programs, the achievement gap between minority and white students, and others.



Martin Patchen is a professor emeritus of sociology at Purdue University. His research and writing on education has been widely cited.

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