

Across the Board

A few school districts have found a way to clone success.

By Jon Palfreman

As a television producer with an interest in education, I have long been puzzled by a paradox. Despite the immense challenge of teaching at-risk children to read, there are isolated examples of striking success.

- A teacher in Chicago who always manages to teach her poor grade 1 students to read at least at a grade 2 level.
- A school in inner-city Baltimore that somehow manages to defy failure and achieve excellence.

Are such examples simply testaments to the determination, vision, and talent of exceptional individual teachers and principals? Or are they a signal that excellence is achievable and copyable?

One way to answer this question is to find examples of entire school systems serving poor at-risk children that have been able to replicate excellence across multiple campuses. But are there any such school systems?

With the help of educators from the University of Oregon, I identified three candidate regions: Inglewood School District in California; Los Fresnos School District in Texas; and the Houston-based Rodeo Institute for Teacher Excellence (RITE).

I have now visited them all. I can happily report that the success of individual schools can indeed be repeated across entire school systems. What follows is a report of my observations.

The most striking observation is that these three rather different systems use basically the same means to get results.

- All use a research-based curriculum (two use *Open Court*, one uses *Reading Mastery*).
- All have been motivated by key influential people (usually a superintendent) asking a simple question: if one or two schools in my district can be excellent, why can't all of them be?

- In all three cases, the principals, teachers and administrators realized that simply buying a new program cannot guarantee results. They all followed these six steps and achieved their goals.

1. Fully implement a research-based program across the district

Full implementation implies more than simply selecting a program and mandating it in all schools. Schools MUST ensure teachers have ALL the materials that go with a program, and someone (for example, a school coach, master teacher, or principal) must be made responsible for guaranteeing this. Sufficient time must be devoted to instruction. Perhaps most important, teachers must be trained to teach the adopted programs, and this training/coaching must be on-going.

2. Align the Curriculum

All three systems have aligned all the schools in their charge to a detailed curriculum, which in turn is aligned to the calendar. I believe this is perhaps the most important aspect of what they do. In a smoothly-running system, every teacher has to do his or her job, so that every child is prepared for the next grade. These systems don't wait until the end of the year to see whether a teacher has succeeded or failed; rather, they break down an individual year into parts. For each grade, the sequence and timing of essential skills are specified clearly in advance, so that by certain specified dates, certain specified skills will have been taught and mastered.

3. Monitoring Progress

All three systems base their success or failure on data collected throughout the year. These assessments occur every five to eight weeks. Their purpose is to generate timely data that measure the performance of every child on a range of targeted skills.

4. Evaluating Data

Data underpin the entire accountability scheme in each district. What's impressive is how easy these data are to interpret. Inglewood uses a colour-coded chart that shows at a glance which kids are struggling on which skills. The data, a measure of whether teachers are keeping to the timeline/pacing schedule, are also the trigger for intervention and remediation.

5. Immediate Intervention

Rather than waiting until the end of the year to do something, the data trigger an immediate set of responses. First, lagging kids get immediate help. Next, teachers get specific help from master teachers or coaches in their school. Finally, as the data reach the superintendent's office, principals may be called in to explain what they are doing to overcome problems. A cycle of staff development, testing, evaluation, remediation, and knowledge-sharing is repeated throughout the year.

6. Validation and Recalibration

To check whether their internal procedures really work, all three school systems have a reality check in the form of an external test. Following each external assessment in May, the districts get together to make adjustments to next year's timeline or pacing schedule. This is their chance to "recalibrate" the system, to improve instruction in the light of experience.

I came away impressed and optimistic. In these districts, children can move from one school to another without skipping a beat, even if they draw a novice teacher. It amazes me that parents are willing to tolerate the huge disparities that currently exist among schools in most school boards. Imagine if only two out of 13 health centres gave adequate health care!

(Adapted with permission from "Three Cheers for American Education". The complete article is available from [Mr. Palfreman](#).)