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## Parents' Involvement Not Key to Student Progress, Study Finds

Report on standardized testing in lower-income schools disputes conventional wisdom.

By Jean Merl  
Times Staff Writer

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A new study examining why similar California schools vary widely in student achievement produced some surprising results: Involved parents and well-behaved youngsters do not appear to have a major effect on how well elementary students perform on standardized tests.

But four other factors seemed to count a lot more, at least when combined in schools, according to EdSource, an independent group that studies state education issues.

The study of lower-income schools found that the strongest elements in high-performing schools are linking lessons closely to state academic standards, ensuring there are enough textbooks and other teaching materials, carefully and regularly analyzing student performance and putting a high priority on student achievement. The study's authors say that these criteria show that poverty and other challenges need not keep students from doing well.

"Similar Students, Different Results," to be released today, was headed by EdSource executive director Trish Williams and Stanford professor Michael Kirst. The study focused on 257 public schools with substantial numbers of low-income, minority students. Typically, 40% of them were still learning English. Yet these schools' scores on the California Academic Performance Index varied by up to 250 points on a scale of 200 to 1000. Researchers promised the schools in the study anonymity.

The state assigns a single API score to a school based on how its students perform on several standardized tests. The score measures progress toward the state's goal of 800 for each school and is widely used as an indicator of school quality.

The study provided an unusual look at how some schools, despite the challenges their students face, manage to improve, even without spending additional money to lengthen the instructional day or hire more teachers, according to one of the lead researchers.

Some of the findings seem to fly in the face of widely held beliefs that parental involvement is among the most important reasons for school success and that academic achievement depends largely on a family's education and income level.

"Lots of people believe that demographics determines achievement," Williams said. "This shows that is not true."

The study also found that enforcing high student behavior standards did not have much of an effect.

Williams noted that some of the highest-performing schools in the study had some of the most challenging demographics; 19 of the 44 schools with the highest scores are in urban neighborhoods in or near Los Angeles.

The study did not include schools serving largely middle-class or affluent families, which generally tend to score higher, experts say, in part because well-educated parents are better able to help their children succeed.

Nor did the study include charters, which are public schools independent from school districts, and the lowest-performing district schools.

Kirst, the principal investigator on the study, said it turned up practices that schools could implement without spending extra money, such as putting more effort into analyzing test data and rearranging budget priorities to ensure that every student has an up-to-date textbook.

"These are not high-spending schools ... but they are doing relatively well," Kirst said.

He said he was surprised at how much time principals in the most successful schools spent studying test data and making sure the teaching was closely aligned with the state standards for each subject and grade level.

"They were really managing instructional improvement," he said. "It indicates the state accountability system is filtering down to the classroom in the more successful schools."

Williams cautioned that the study's findings should not be taken as a sign that such practices as involving parents or encouraging collaboration among teachers should be discounted.

"We are not saying that parents or professional development are not important," Williams said, noting that the study aimed to highlight what successful schools were doing differently. "But that is not what is making the difference here."

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

What works

A nonpartisan organization that studies education issues in California surveyed 257 public elementary schools to see which practices were most closely related to high student achievement.

**Most Effective**

- Tying classroom instruction to state standards in academic subjects
- Ensuring enough textbooks and other teaching aids
- Using test data to analyze instructional strengths and weaknesses
- Making student achievement a top priority

**Less Effective**

- Enforcing high student behavior standards
- Encouraging teacher collaboration and professional development
- Involved and supportive parents

**A typical school in the study had students with these characteristics:**

- 40% were still learning English
- 78% lived in poverty
- 32% had parents who were not high school graduates
- 66% of students were Latinos; 15% white; 8% African American; 6% Asian, and the rest Native American or other

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Source: EdSource

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Los Angeles Times

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