National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

Schools to Watch®: School Transformation Network

DID SCHOOLS TO WATCH IMPACT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND MATH ACHIEVEMENT OF MIDDLE-GRADES STUDENTS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS?

Project Overview

THE INTERVENTION

THE PROBLEM: What Challenge Did the Program Try to Address?

The Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network (STW) seeks to holistically improve persistently low-performing schools that experience a variety of sociocultural and environmental challenges, such as high poverty, high rates of English learners, low morale and teacher efficacy, student behavioral problems, and a dysfunctional climate. The intervention targeted persistently low-performing schools serving high-need students in either an urban or rural setting.

THE PROJECT: What Strategies Did the Program Employ?

With an i3 development grant[1] awarded from 2010-2015, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform designed the STW intervention to increase the capacity of schools to improve the academic performance of all students and reduce achievement gaps among student subgroups in the middle grades. The STW whole-school reform model promotes the increased use of evidence-based instructional practices, improved parental involvement, increased teacher buy-in and collaboration, and improved student behavior and attitudes. The project was implemented in 18 urban and rural middle-grades schools in California, Illinois, and North Carolina and was evaluated through a quasi-experimental study in which matching was conducted at the school level within each state. Schools were also matched on district demographics, school size, student demographics, school performance on standardized tests, and measures of No Child Left Behind status. The project provided intervention schools with intensive supports.

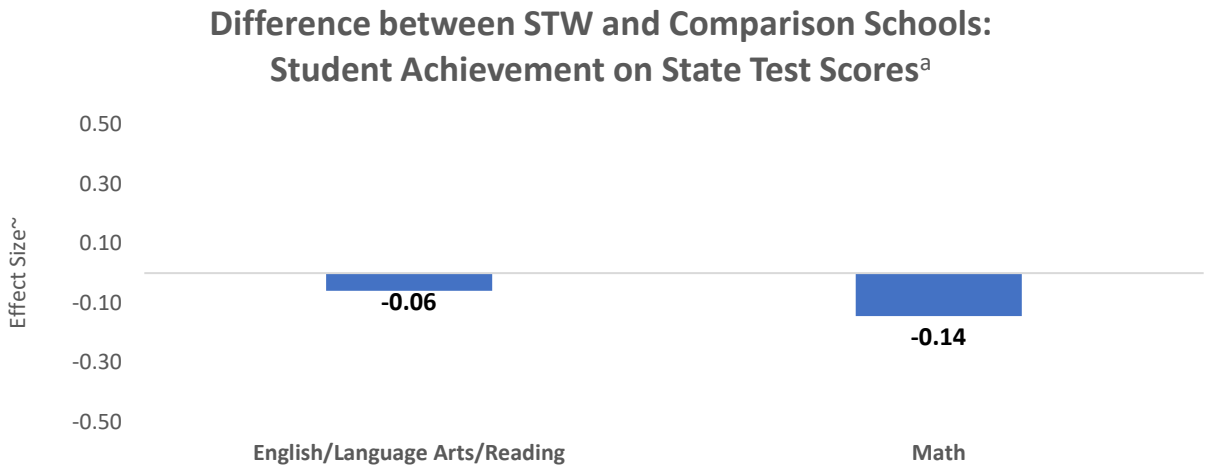
[1] Development grants provide funding to support the development or testing of novel or substantially more effective practices that address widely shared education challenges. All i3 grantees are required to conduct rigorous evaluations of their projects. The quality of evidence required to demonstrate a project's effectiveness depends on a project's level of scale or grant type. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform received an i3 development grant supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation program through Grant Number U396C101182.

THE SCHOOLS TO WATCH MODEL

- **Vision for High Performance.** The project used the STW criteria as a vision for reform. These criteria are a set of strategies and practices which deem high-performing middle grades schools as ones that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and that establish organizational structures which provide students with high-quality teachers and supports.
- **In-depth Assessment.** Using the STW criteria, school leaders examined data and identified areas for improvement, developed measurable goals, and implemented an action plan.
- **Coaching and Mentoring.** The program provided STW coaches for teachers, mentors for principals, and also designated mentor schools which served as role models and worked with project school leadership teams.
- **Early-warning Indicators System.** This component identified students in need of supplemental support. It did so through a regular process for compiling and examining student data, using a three-tiered intervention process to help students who were getting "off-track."
- **National and State STW Network.** Through the STW network, program schools could access peer support.
- **Targeted Professional Development.** STW implemented targeted professional development in order to build learning communities and address the needs of students at risk of educational failure. The program also created professional learning communities for teachers.

Summary of Results

DID SCHOOLS TO WATCH IMPACT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF MIDDLE-GRADE STUDENTS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS?



[a]California Standards Test, Illinois Standards Achievement Test, or North Carolina End-of-Grade Test
~ Education researchers generally interpret effect sizes as follows: 0.2 = small, 0.5 = medium, and 0.8 = large. If the impact does not have an effect size of 0.2 or greater, it is not meaningful, even if it is statistically significant.[2]

- **ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA).** The study found that there was no statistically significant difference between intervention and comparison students' ELA achievement. The effect size of the difference was also small, at -0.059.
- **MATH.** The STW intervention had no statistically significant effects on students' math achievement. The effect size of the difference between intervention and comparison group students was small (-0.144).

Please see Appendices B and C for information about the evaluation's design and the quality of the evidence, respectively.

SECONDARY FINDINGS

The intervention did not have an impact on key student sub-groups. However, students in schools which progressed further in school reform showed promising results in math.

[2] Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. Psychological Bulletin, 112, 155-159.

- **Student Sub-groups.** The evaluators applied additional statistical models separately on samples of English language learners and special education students. They found that STW's impact on these subgroups' reading and math achievement was not greater than its impact on all intervention students, meaning that the program did not reduce the achievement gap between these subgroups of students relative to students overall.
- **Achievement in STW-Designated Schools.** Three of the project schools made such substantial progress in their practices and outcomes during the grant that they received STW designation before the end of the grant period. In these three schools, students' average math scores were statistically significantly higher than math scores in other project schools and in comparison schools. The difference in ELA scores remained statistically insignificant.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The study noted a variety of different takeaways and lessons learned throughout the duration of the project. These observations may benefit practitioners interested in whole-school reform for persistently low-performing schools.

- **Coaching.** The project schools unanimously ranked coaching as the most important factor contributing to school improvement. Three types of coaching were utilized throughout the intervention: reform coaching, instructional coaching, and responsive coaching.
- **Collaborative leadership.** Collaborative leadership that generated engaged teachers who actively participated and took ownership of the project fostered better communication and opportunities to "teach smarter," coordinate lessons, reflect on teaching practices, and try new strategies with the support of colleagues.
- **Tools.** The STW criteria were powerful tools that provided a guiding vision, common language, and a framework for observations, resource gathering, and goal-setting.
- **Continuous School Improvement Model.** The STW framework was used to support a continuous school improvement model where data was used at every stage to inform planning, set goals, evaluate progress, and refine implementation. The continuous improvement model was found to be critical to sustaining improvements.
- **Site Visits.** STW visits allowed teachers to observe others in the field, share experiences, and network. This practice allowed for dissemination of best practices and increased teacher confidence.
- **Stakeholder Engagement.** Buy-in at all levels was valuable to the sustained implementation of the project. Building relationships and creating opportunity for involvement for those at the district level was important to continual support and alignment with the goals of the school district.

- **PERSISTENT CHALLENGES.** The implementers encountered persistent challenges with turnover in coaches, principal mentors, and principals; adaptation versus consistency in implementation across sites; incomplete implementation of the principal mentor and early indicator components; changing district demands on school leaders; and changes in state assessments to align with common core standards.

For More Information

Evaluation Reports
Final Evaluation Report (2015) (PDF) (Center for Prevention Research and Development, University of Illinois, September 2015)[3]

[3] The information and data for this report was collected from the most recent report as of 02/10/2020: Center for Prevention Research and Development, University of Illinois (2015). *Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network, Final Evaluation Report*. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED564016.pdf

Appendix A: Students Served by the Project[4]

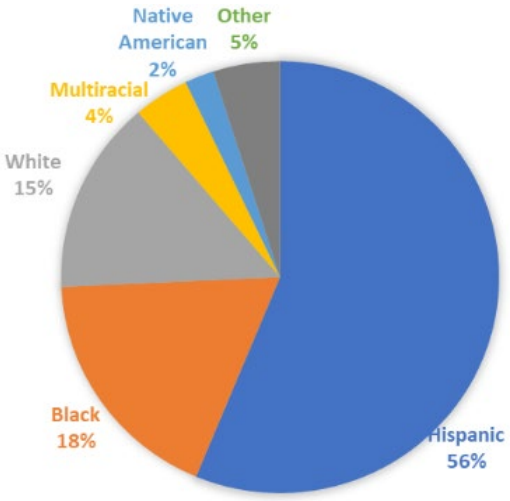
GRADE(S)

PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

GENDER

Not Reported

RACE/ETHNICITY



COMMUNITY

Not Reported

HIGH-NEED STUDENTS[i]

Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	English Learner	Students with Disabilities
85%	27%	N/A

[4] These data reflect the entire student population served by the intervention, not just the evaluation sample used in the impact study.

Appendix B: Impact Evaluation Methodology[5]

RESEARCH DESIGN:

Design:	Quasi-Experimental Design
Approach:	▪ Two student cohorts were tracked over four years at 34 schools (17 intervention and 17 comparison). Comparison schools were selected using key demographic and achievement variables to match them to intervention schools within each state. Baseline comparisons were conducted using 5th grade achievement scores (the year prior to the start of the intervention) on the final analytic sample.
Study Length:	Four years: two cohorts tracking 6th-8th graders. Cohort 1: 2010-2013, Cohort 2: 2011-2014

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Study Setting:	Middle-grade schools in California, Illinois, and North Carolina
Final Sample Sizes:	▪ *Intervention:* 2,710 (ELA)/2,721 (math) students across 17 schools ▪ *Comparison:* 2,897 (ELA)/2,929 (math) students across 17 schools
Intervention Group Characteristics:	▪ Free/Reduced Price Lunch: 85% ▪ Black: 17.5% ▪ Hispanic: 54.7% ▪ White: 14.1% ▪ Asian: 0.6% ▪ Native American: 2.1% ▪ Other: 4.2% ▪ Multiracial: 4% ▪ English Language Learners: 27%
Comparison Group Characteristics	▪ Not reported
Data Sources:	▪ Student assessments ▪ Student and teacher surveys
Key Measures:	▪ Student achievement in Reading/Language Arts and Math - California Standards Test; Illinois Standards Achievement Test; North Carolina End-of-Grade Test

[5] These data reflect only the evaluation sample in the impact study, not the entire population served.

Appendix C: Quality of the Evidence

Although an evaluation may not have been reviewed by the time of publication for this summary, it is possible that the study will be reviewed at a later date. Please visit the websites found in the footnotes on this page to check for updates.

WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW[6]

STUDY	RATING
Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network. A U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) Development Grant. Final Evaluation Report: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/study/32031	▪ Meets WWC standards with reservations ▪ No statistically significant positive findings

EVIDENCE FOR ESSA REVIEW[7]

STUDY	RATING
Not reviewed as of 02/10/2020	N/A

NATIONAL CENTER ON INTENSIVE INTERVENTIONS REVIEW[8]

STUDY	RATING
Not reviewed as of 02/10/2020	N/A

[6] https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW
[7] https://www.evidenceforessa.org/
[8] https://intensiveintervention.org/

*The **Investing in Innovation Fund (i3)**, established under section 14007 of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, is a Federal discretionary grant program at the U.S. Department of Education within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). i3 grants help schools and local education agencies work in partnership with the private sector and the philanthropic community to develop and expand innovative practices that improve student achievement or student growth, close achievement gaps, decrease dropout rates, increase high school graduation rates, and/or increase college enrollment and completion rates for high-need students.*

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[i] "High-need student" refers to a student at risk of academic failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, attend high-minority schools, are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, in foster care, have been incarcerated, have disabilities, or who are English learners. For more information see: Applications for New Awards; Investing in Innovation Fund-Development Grants, 81 FR 24070 (April 25, 2016).