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SPOTLIGHTS ON SUCCESS: TRAITS AND STRATEGIES OF FIVE HIGH-GROWTH SCHOOLS IN ARKANSAS

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

 Identifying and recognizing success is one of the core interests of the Office for Education Policy (OEP). Last fall, our Office released its annual OEP Awards, which highlighted top-performing schools across Arkansas. These Awards, while useful for recognizing high-performing schools, are limited in their ability to illustrate the characteristics or highlight the practices and culture of successful schools. The current report, which we are calling *Spotlights on Success* (SOS), seeks to highlight and describe schools that are genuinely effective by focusing on schools that boast positive *changes* in student achievement over time. Moreover, in the SOS, we consider the socioeconomic characteristics of each school and seek to recognize schools that are succeeding in serving diverse and disadvantaged student groups. In the end, we identified five schools with outstanding performance in one of three different categories. Each of the five schools are presented here as a case study in academic success.

The following five schools were identified as part of *Spotlights on Success*:

- **Bragg Elementary** in West Memphis was identified for its exceptional progress in student achievement with a diverse student population composed of significant numbers of white and black students. Over the last five years, the proficiency rates for Bragg students have increased by 23 percentage points in math, and by 24 percentage points in reading.
- **Grace Hill Elementary** in Rogers was identified for high achievement growth for a diverse student population (over half are Hispanic students) with very high rates of poverty. The Hispanic students at Grace Hill, as of 2010, are outperforming all of their peers of all races across the state of Arkansas.
- **Howard Elementary** in Fort Smith was identified for exceptional student growth in a high-poverty, high-minority, urban setting. Over the last five years, Howard's proficiency rates have increased by 37 percentage points in math, and by 26 percentage points in literacy.
- **Marked Tree Elementary** in Marked Tree has shown great progress in student learning in a high-poverty, rural setting. Since 2006, proficiency rates for the Marked Tree students have increased by 44 percentage points in math, and by 34 percentage points in literacy.
- **Salem Elementary** in Bryant was identified as a relatively advantaged school in which the students have experienced remarkable academic growth even after starting out at relatively high levels of achievement. The percentage of Salem students scoring at the <u>advanced</u> level on the Benchmark exams has grown by 41 percentage points in math, and by 39 percentage points in literacy since 2006.

While each school was unique in its operations and curricular strategies, we observed two underlying themes in the general culture of the schools: high expectations for all teachers and students, along with strong networks of instructional and disciplinary support for teachers. These themes were interwoven in four characteristics consistently observed in each of these schools:

1. **Visible, Supportive, and Pro-Active Leadership**
2. **Autonomous Teaching Driven by Data**
3. **Culture of Success and High Standards Permeating School**
4. **Collaborative Environment for Entire School Family**

While this study is not a rigorous empirical evaluation of effective schools, and thus has limitations, there is still a substantial amount of valuable information to be gleaned from these case studies. While none of these "common characteristics" are silver bullets, it does appear that the comprehensive implementation of the four observed characteristics in these schools creates an environment conducive to learning and one focused on student achievement. Certainly, the exceptional academic performance fostered by these schools supports the importance of the practices in these successful schools. We were inspired by the remarkable students and educators at these five outstanding schools; they have shown us what can be done for young students all across Arkansas.

II. INTRODUCTION

Successful schools are those which best educate the students, regardless of background. They are not those with students who come in well-educated but show only slight improvement, nor are they schools which use the disadvantage as an excuse for continued low levels of achievement. Instead, successful schools are those which advance the learning of all their children beyond what is expected.

Identifying and recognizing this success is one of the core interests of the Office for Education Policy (OEP). Last fall, our Office released its annual OEP Awards, which rewarded top-performing schools across Arkansas. These Awards, while useful for singling out high-performing schools, are limited in their ability to illustrate the characteristics or highlight the practices and culture of the successful schools. The current report, which we are calling *Spotlights on Success* (SOS), seeks to highlight and describe schools that are genuinely effective by focusing on schools that boast positive *changes* in student achievement over time. We take school demographics into account, and identify five schools with outstanding performance in one of three different categories. Each of the five schools then is treated as a case study in academic success.

The three categories examined with different student populations are listed as follows:

- **Racially diverse schools with great academic success for all student groups**
- **High poverty schools whose students had wonderful records of achievement growth**
- **Relatively affluent schools with continued academic growth beyond high levels of initial achievement**

The purpose of this diversification is for educators in any type of school to take observations and practices from our report and consider their relevance in their own schools. Success for these schools is possible through overcoming unique sets of challenges. Insofar as their challenges resemble those of any other school, there are lessons to be learned.

The OEP would like to thank the dedicated educators at each of these five schools who were very generous with their time during this process.

III. SPOTLIGHTS ON SUCCESS METHODOLOGY

Differences Between SOS and AYP

Educators today are very familiar with adequate yearly progress (AYP) labels of school performance inspired by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Performance labels related to AYP are based on the proficiency model of school accountability. In this model, a high-achieving school is one with a high percentage of students exceeding a proficiency threshold. One common criticism of the proficiency model is that it does not give any credit for student learning growth. As a result of the use of proficiency measures in calculating AYP, schools serving advantaged students with a high "starting point" may not be increasing student learning very much but still may rate favorably in the AYP model. On the other hand, schools teaching disadvantaged students, who often enter school behind their peers, may be fostering great progress in achievement for their students but still might not receive passing marks in the AYP model.[1] This difference is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

In Figure 1, two schools' yearly proficiency levels (denoted with the green and tan lines) are compared to state AYP goals for each year (denoted with the red line). The figure shows that, even though a school may make AYP, this could be due to simply starting out at a high level of achievement rather than making great progress with their achievement scores. Notice that the "failing school" shows greater increases in its proficiency rate than the "successful school", yet the failing school does not meet the AYP goal until the final year in the figure. While the "failing school" sees achievement growth but still falls short of the goal, the "successful school" sees less growth but makes AYP in all but the last two years in the figure.

*Figure 1. Comparison of Growth Model and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*

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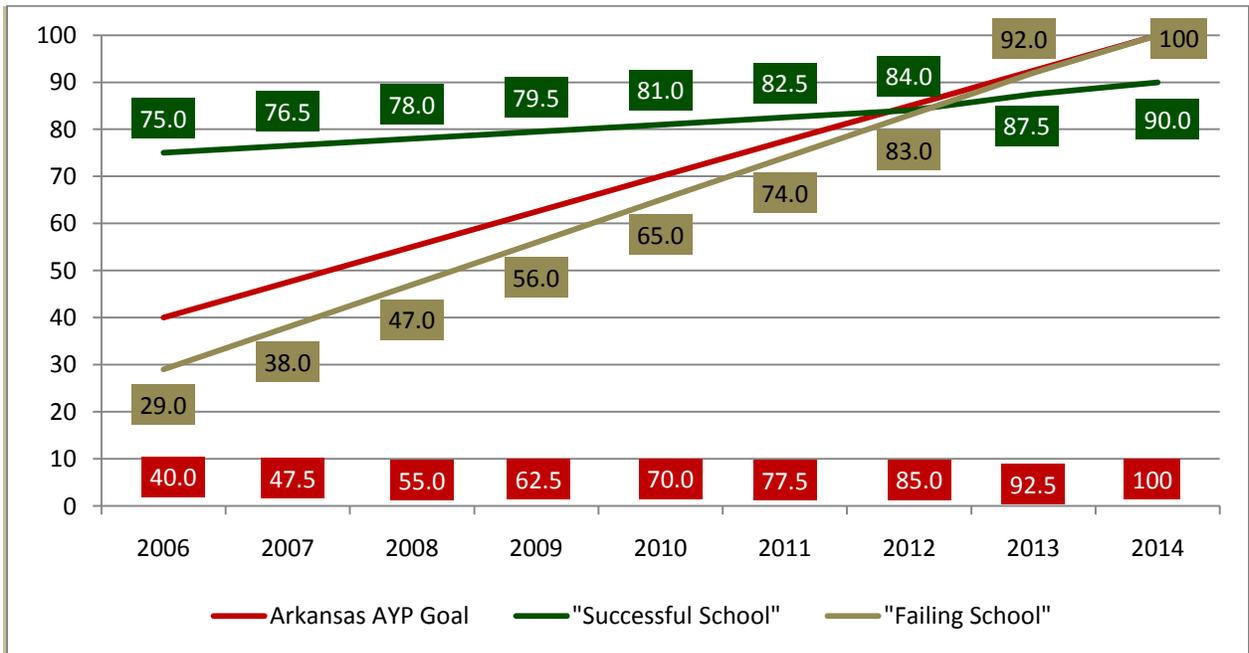
[1] In response to this criticism, provisions have been added in Arkansas that allow schools to make AYP based not only on proficiency, but also on growth. While this option has been used for a few schools in order to make AYP, most schools still meet or fall short of AYP based on student proficiency, not growth measures.

Because of this shortcoming of the proficiency model, it is not useful for identifying outstanding schools which meet the definition given in the Introduction: growing student achievement regardless of student background and prior learning. The aim of this study is to identify and examine those schools that show exceptional growth, regardless of the demographics of the student body. The growth model we have developed for this purpose is different from the proficiency model used to determine AYP. Some differences are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Comprehensive Growth Model Compared to AYP Accountability Model

Comprehensive Measurement of Student Growth	AYP
Considers test score changes or "growth"	Considers test score levels
Schools succeed only on overall changes	Schools pass or fail depending on subgroups
Can take into account different "starting points"	Does not take into account different "starting points"
Does not have as strong of a "ceiling effect" for high performing students	Does not encourage growth in high performing students

SOS Method of Identifying Outstanding Schools

To measure growth in student learning, we mixed two different approaches, giving each equal consideration. First, we examined gains on the state Benchmark exams for cohorts of students from 2009 to 2010. This approach helps capture how well the schools are advancing overall student learning.[2] In addition to considering 2009-2010 student gains on the state Benchmark exams, we analyzed the gain in schools' overall proficiency rates on the Benchmark over a longer period, from 2006 to 2010. Simply put, long-term success matters. By looking back to 2006, we were able to gain perspective on a school's 2010 results. Because most schools have seen increases in their proficiency rates, our study rewards schools whose gains were greater than what we observed in schools across the state.

While the growth measures themselves do not involve subgroups or demographics, these were considered in our selection of high-growth schools. To make sure that schools serving challenging populations receive consideration, four of the five categories of schools in the study intentionally have high rates of poverty, and two of the categories are for racial diversity. Additionally, we included one category for a school with relatively low levels of poverty compared to the rest of the state. Indeed, there are many affluent schools across the state, but many struggle to nurture student achievement growth above the students' initial starting points. Some quite successful schools, however, serving students with initial high levels of achievement find ways to fight through any "ceiling effects" and boost the students to higher levels of achievement. In this category, we can learn a bit about how successful schools with very different student populations go about raising student achievement.

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[2] This approach to measuring growth is not perfect. In particular, it can be misleading depending on the characteristics of students moving into or out of tested grades. If higher-achieving students leave a particular cohort, then that cohort's results will appear worse than otherwise, through no direct fault of the school. Similarly, the departure of lower-achieving students may make the school's contribution to student learning appear better than it actually is. To account for this possibility, we made sure that no selected schools showed major population or demographic changes between 2009 and 2010.

IV. IDENTIFICATION OF SCHOOLS

Based on the *SOS* growth model and the five school categories, the following schools were identified for our study:

- **Bragg Elementary, West Memphis SD:** Success with Diverse Student Groups (Black Students and White Students)
- **Grace Hill Elementary, Rogers SD:** Success with Diverse Student Groups (Hispanic Students and White Students)
- **Howard Elementary, Fort Smith SD:** High Poverty School in Urban Area
- **Marked Tree Elementary, Marked Tree SD:** High Poverty School in Rural Area
- **Salem Elementary, Bryant SD:** School Fostering Continued Growth Among High Achievers

Spotlights on Success (SOS) is a case study of five very successful schools, but is not intended to be a list of the "best" schools in the state. Indeed, we found many schools with fantastic records of student success and we look forward to highlighting more schools in the future in this report, which we plan to produce annually.

Bragg Elementary in West Memphis was identified for its exceptional progress in student achievement with a student population composed of significant numbers of white and black students. Bragg's students were 56% white and 42% black, and sixty-eight percent received free or reduced lunches. Over the last five years, their proficiency rates have increased by 23 percentage points in math to 88%, and by 24 percentage points in reading to 82%.

Grace Hill Elementary in Rogers was identified for high achievement growth for a population with significant numbers of white (41%) and Hispanic students (56%). Eighty-seven percent of its students received free or reduced lunches. Since 2006, their proficiency rates have increased by 32 percentage points in math to 91%, and by 29 percentage points in reading to 81%. Their Hispanic students are outperforming white student averages for Arkansas as a whole.

Howard Elementary in Fort Smith was identified for student growth in a high-poverty urban setting. Ninety-five percent of Howard's students received free or reduced lunches. Thirty-two percent of their students were African American, 51% were Hispanic, and 15% were white. Over the last five years, Howard's proficiency rates have increased by 32 percentage points in math to 62%, and by 26 percentage points in literacy to 55%.

Marked Tree Elementary in Marked Tree has shown great progress in student learning in a high-poverty rural setting. Seventy-eight percent of Marked Tree's students received free or reduced lunches. The population was 66% white and 32% black. Since 2006, proficiency rates have increased by 44 percentage points in math to 81%, and by 34 percentage points in literacy to 66%.

Salem Elementary in Bryant was identified as a high-growth school with relatively low rates of students receiving free or reduced lunches (33% of their students were eligible); this is below the state average of 57%. Salem has shown remarkable growth in the percentage of its student scoring *advanced* on the Benchmark exams, with this level of achievement growing since 2006 by 41 percentage points in math to 79%, and by 39 percentage points in literacy to 64%.

Bragg Elementary

District: West Memphis
Grades: K-6
Enrollment: 384
FRL: 68%
White: 56%
Black: 42%
Hispanic: 1%

■ Black ■ White
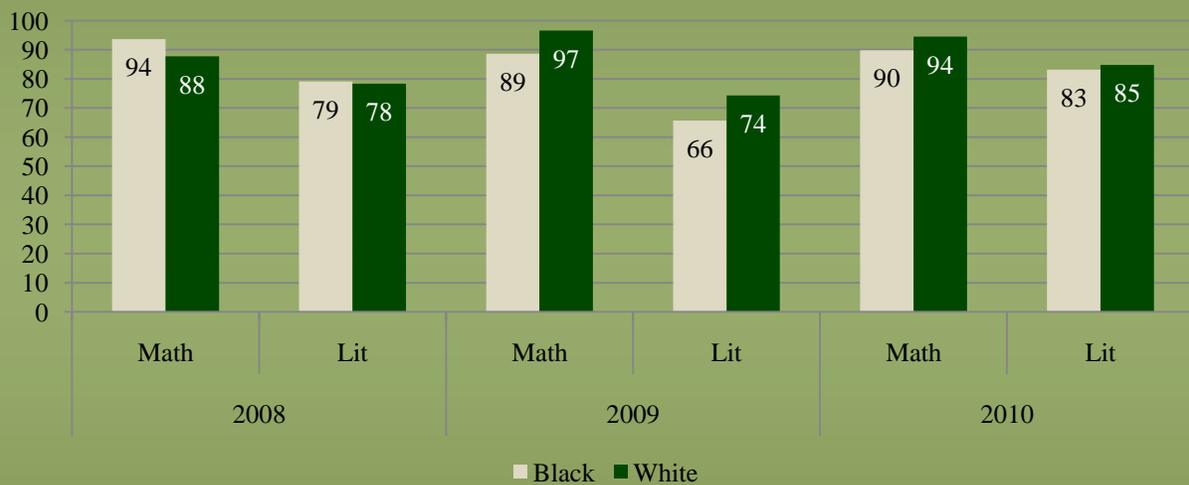
Academic Progress

Percent Proficient or Advanced

|	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bragg Math	65	78	87	90	88
Bragg Lit	58	73	74	68	82
Ark Math	55	62	68	73	75
Ark Lit	59	60	64	68	72

Bragg's black students performed at levels equivalent to Bragg's white students. Even while their school has seen an increase in poverty, their scores have continued to exceed expectations in both math and reading.

Grace Hill Elementary

Chart data:

	2008		2009		2010	
	Math	Lit	Math	Lit	Math	Lit
Hispanic	81	61	90	67	94	87
White	76	66	85	70	90	78
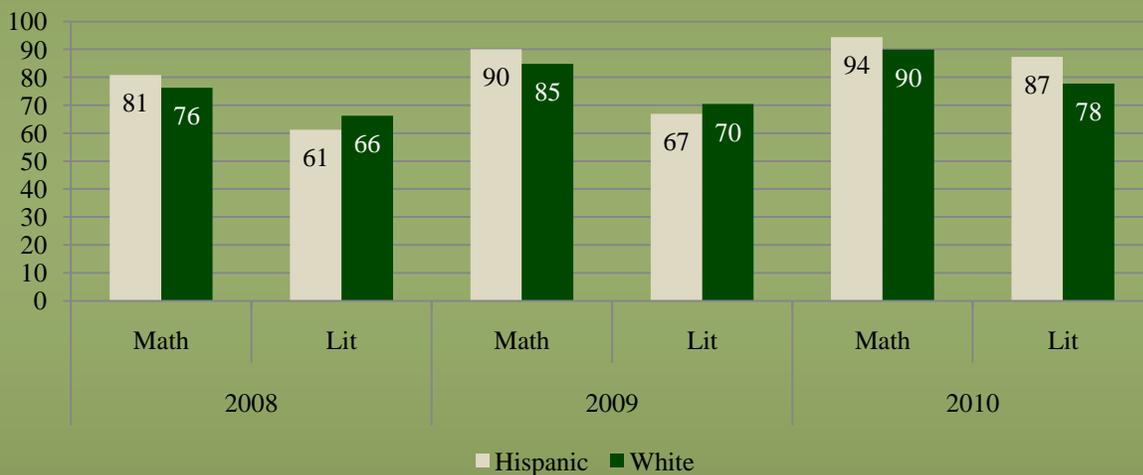
Academic Progress

Percent Proficient or Advanced

|	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
GH Math	59	63	78	86	91
GH Lit	52	47	63	65	81
Ark Math	55	62	68	73	75
Ark Lit	59	60	64	68	72

Grace Hill's Hispanic students have matched or outpaced white students in their school. Even as their school has seen an increase in poverty, their achievement has continued to match or exceed expectations in both math and reading within schools across the state.

Howard Elementary

District: *Fort Smith*
Grades: K-6
Enrollment: 354
FRL: 95%
White: 15%
Black: 32%
Hispanic: 51%
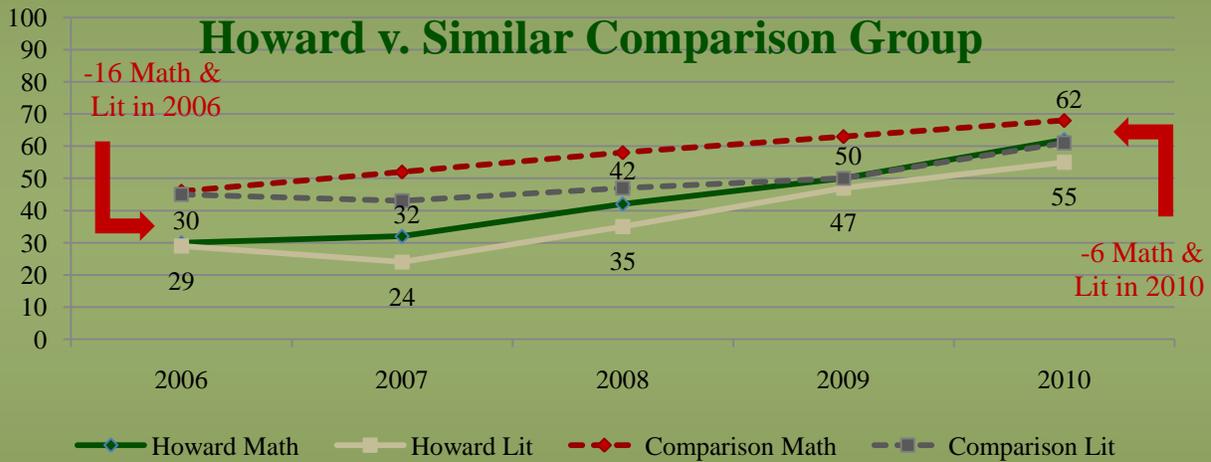
Howard v. Similar Comparison Group

-16 Math & Lit in 2006

-6 Math & Lit in 2010

| | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
Howard Math: 30, 32, 42, 50, 62
Howard Lit: 29, 24, 35, 47, 55
Comparison: 62

→● Howard Math ━■ Howard Lit ◆ Comparison Math ■ Comparison Lit

Academic Progress

Percent Proficient or Advanced

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Howard Math	30	32	42	50	62
Howard Lit	29	24	35	47	55
Ark Math	55	62	68	73	75
Ark Lit	59	60	64	68	72

Howard's students have outpaced students across the state in their proficiency gains. Even while their school has seen an increase in poverty, their scores have continued to exceed expectations in both math and reading.

Marked Tree Elementary

District: Marked Tree
Grades: K-5
Enrollment: 343
FRL: 78%
White: 66%
Black: 32%
Hispanic: 2%

Marked Tree vs. State

-18 Math in 2006

+6 Math in 2010

Data points: MT Math 37 (2006), 65 (2007), 67 (2008), 79 (2009), 81 (2010); MT Lit 32 (2006), 51 (2007), 50 (2008), 57 (2009), 66 (2010)

Legend: MT Math | MT Lit | Ark Math | Ark Lit
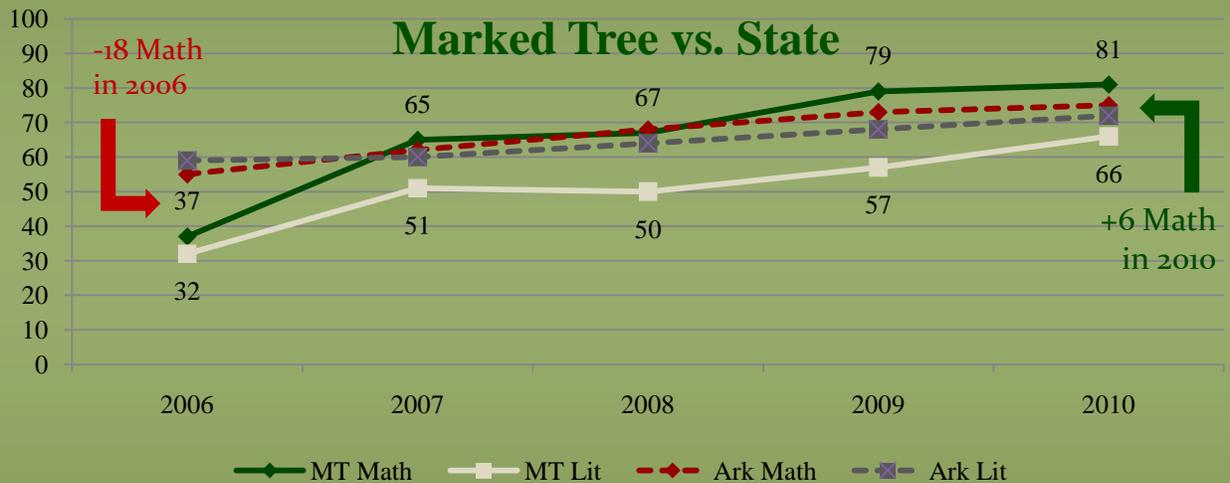
Academic Progress

Percent Proficient or Advanced

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
MT Math	37	65	67	79	81
MT Lit	32	51	50	57	66
Ark Math	55	62	68	73	75
Ark Lit	59	60	64	68	72

Marked Tree's students have made dramatic progress in closing the achievement gaps between them and the state. In 2006, the gap in math was -18 points, but in 2010, Marked Tree students scored +6 points above the state average in math. They have made similar gains in literacy, closing from -27 points in 2006 to only -6 points in 2010.

Salem Elementary

District: Bryant
Grades: K-6
Enrollment: 504
FRL: 33%
White: 91%
Black: 1%
Hispanic: 5%

Math

Year	Proficient	Advanced
2006	34	38
2007	30	51
2008	24	64
2009	21	72
2010	18	79

Lit

Year	Proficient	Advanced
2006	44	25
2007	36	40
2008	34	50
2009	35	52
2010	28	64

■ Proficient ■ Advanced
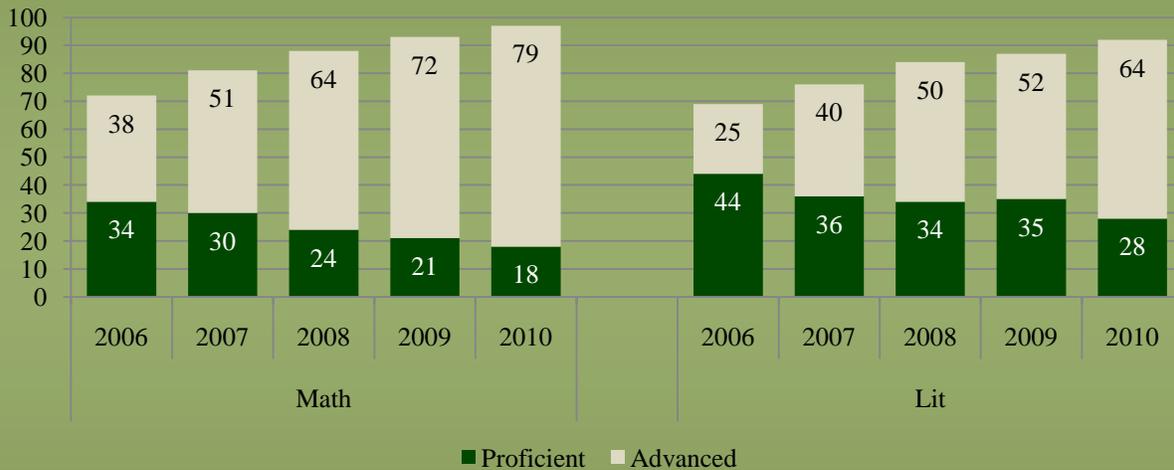
Academic Progress

Percent Proficient or Advanced

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Salem Math	72	81	88	92	96
Salem Lit	69	75	83	87	92
Ark Math	55	62	68	73	75
Ark Lit	59	60	64	68	72

While some school leaders may dismiss Salem's "demographics problems", this school could have easily fallen into the trap of just maintaining proficiency with no real growth. Instead, Salem has continued to increase its overall performance by moving more and more of its students up from proficient to advanced.

VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

The various schools visited by the OEP team had drastically different student populations and, as such, met the needs of their students differently. However, several common themes emerged at these schools, despite their different school styles and student demographics.

There certainly was not one specific "type" of leadership style observed at these schools. One principal was a self-described "head cracker", while another sympathized so much with her students that she became emotional when discussing some of the challenges the children had endured that year. Though their approaches differed, both of these school leaders were loved by students and teachers. Further, these principals shared many similar characteristics and beliefs that appear to have had a significant impact on the school culture.

After reflecting on our school visits, we identified **two unifying themes** among all of the common characteristics of the schools**: high expectations and strong support**. The leaders at these schools seem to have found a balance between high expectations for both students and teachers, and ample support to meet these expectations. This "high-expectations, strong support" culture was signified by a number of traits common to each of these five successful schools. We organized these traits into the following four broad categories:

1. **Visible, Supportive, and Pro-Active Leadership**
2. **Teachers Focused on Achievement and Supported by Autonomy**
3. **Culture of Success and High Standards Permeating School**
4. **Collaborative Environment for Entire School Family**

Visible, Supportive, and Pro-Active Leadership

"Teachers know that if they work here, they can teach, and I'll take care of the discipline so they focus on the classroom."
—Mark Scarlett, Principal, Salem Elementary

The high level of visibility of the principals in these schools created an atmosphere that fostered the adherence to high standards, while simultaneously providing the support necessary to achieve these standards. The old adage that no one knows what happens when a teacher closes his or her door could certainly not be claimed at any of these schools. Principals were aware of what occurred in the hallways, the lunch room, and the classrooms. All of the principals monitored standards through daily or weekly classroom walkthroughs to observe instruction, classroom management, and organization of the teachers. Teachers at these schools described their principals as being in the classroom often.

The visibility and involvement of the principal in the classroom certainly provided opportunity for feedback and support, including corrective feedback. These high quality principals did not shrink from addressing weaknesses, and seemed careful to couple criticism with support. In many of the schools, teachers claimed that principals had followed up visits with suggestions for improvement. At times, this was done through a simple conversation. At other times, principals arranged for a substitute so the teacher could observe stronger teachers in the building, or they would send an instructional facilitator into the classroom to teach a model lesson or behavior management. Principals were committed to equipping their

teachers with the tools necessary to improve instructional ability. These tools included mentoring and professional development.

These classroom walkthroughs not only had an effect on the teachers, but on the students as well. The walkthroughs and other means of visibility enabled many of the principals to be very involved in student discipline. Students at these schools recognized principals as disciplinarians. This perception fostered good student conduct. By being available and visible in the hallways and classrooms, principals could support teachers in discipline issues quickly. Their presence appeared to "prevent" many discipline issues from arising, which likely empowered teachers to focus more on instruction.

As Mark Scarlett of Salem Elementary described it, "Teachers know that if they work here, they can teach, and I'll take care of the discipline so they can focus on the classroom." While other principals did not say quite the same thing, they were clearly very hands-on in both positive and negative behavior management. From ceremonial leadership at the morning meetings where students were recognized for positive behavior at one school, to the principal's interactions with parents during discipline challenges with students at another school, teachers had a substantial amount of support. This support empowered teachers to be more focused on student achievement.

Autonomous Teaching Driven by Data

"Hire the best people and then get the heck out of the way."
— Principal

While the principals were visible and active in the day-to-day life of the school, they were by no means micro-managers of classroom instruction or curricular choices. Instead, the principals worked to create an environment in which teachers could truly become experts in the classroom. Teachers were provided a substantial amount of freedom and autonomy. While some professional development (PD) hours were assigned by the district or the school, teachers had the freedom to choose as much as half of their PD hours. At Grace Hill, one of the teachers claimed, "I feel like I am an expert." She went on to describe never having a feeling of being "talked down to", but of having interactions with her principal and instructional facilitators based on mutual respect and confidence in her instructional ability.

One principal even claimed that the concept of the principal as instructional leader is overblown: "The teachers are the experts in the classroom." While principals set the school culture and provided support for teachers through discipline and organization, they gave substantial autonomy to teachers where classroom instruction was concerned. One principal was blunt in describing her motto as, "Hire the best people and then get the heck out of the way."

The use of data at these schools appeared to focus educators on the achievement of each individual student. One teacher stated the use of data has helped focus their school on student achievement with "less adult drama." Interestingly, each of these schools used The Learning Institute[3] (TLI), a data-driven, standards-based curriculum program, for at least a portion of their assessment and data programs. Many used other data tools in conjunction with TLI, including data walls that marked the progress of each

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[3] The Learning Institute (TLI) is an Arkansas bases organization that assists districts in curriculum alignment, interim assessments, research, consulting and technology services to help teachers and administrators more effectively meet the needs of all students. More information can be found at www.tlionline.net

individual student in the school. Teachers appeared to have "bought-in" to the use of data, which served to encourage the teachers to focus on low performers or provide an extra push to high performers. The existence of detailed student data at each of our five successful schools allowed teachers to create a more individualized approach to instruction.

Additionally, the data helped the teachers distribute the accountability for achievement to the students. While some would simply ensure homework was done the night before through both check-up and follow-up questions, others actually explained the student performance categories to the students (and even parents) and discussed test scores with students. Teachers and administrators helped students set goals each year and, of course, celebrated with them when these goals were met. The celebration of success and high standards was clearly important at all of the schools.

Culture of Success and High Standards Permeating School

"Every child is the same in expectation level, but not in story."
—Teacher, Grace Hill Elementary

Principals at these schools were very effective at creating a culture of success that was evident in the standards set for both the students and the teachers. Many of the schools worked with students from challenging backgrounds and poverty, or grappled with limited resources and school improvement labels. However, during our conversations, interviews, walk-throughs, and observations, we did not observe complaints about these circumstances. Indeed, we did not hear any discussion of victimization by the "system", by accountability requirements, or by the demographic composition of the school. Nor was there apathy regarding any of the challenges faced. Instead, an overwhelming sense of energy was felt at these schools, and a hopeful, proactive attitude displayed by the teachers. It was clear that the teachers perceived student disadvantages as challenges to be tackled rather than as excuses to be used. Instead of focusing on the problems, the educators at these five successful schools were solution-focused.

It was not uncommon for teachers and principals to claim that they held all of their students to high expectations, regardless of any external factors. As one teacher from Grace Hill Elementary said, "Every child is the same in expectation level, but not in story." For this reason, Grace Hill teachers said they really tried to keep in mind each child's story, while maintaining the same academic and behavioral expectations.

Moreover, the culture of success was both supported by and illustrated by the behavior of the children at all of the schools. One remarkable trait was the level of structure and excellent student behavior at these schools. Orderly, but intellectually active classrooms were common at each. In most of the schools, students gathered quietly each morning before heading to class. At Howard Elementary, each student sat in their grade-level line when they arrived at the school and routinely pulled out a book and began to read until the morning dismissal. In most of these schools, the lunch room and cafeteria was unusually quiet and orderly as well. Indeed, most observers would have pegged these schools as good schools with positive learning environments before seeing any graphs or tables highlighting the remarkable test score growth that has occurred over the past several years.

We often hear school employees talk about holding students to high standards. It is slightly less common to hear principals discuss holding teachers to a high standard. However, the principals in these effective schools held teachers to a high standard and were not afraid to address teachers if they failed to meet

those standards. These principals took it very seriously when teachers failed to "buy in" to the cultural norms and expectations laid out by the school leadership. One principal openly told non-cooperative teachers, "I'll non-renew you" and even suggested the resignation of one particularly intractable teacher who was negatively influencing the culture of the school. Others said teachers who did not fit left on their own, while still another claimed the district helped redirect teachers that did not fit with the school. The overarching theme was that the principals put great value on the positive and collaborative culture at each school and were very protective of that culture. If a faculty member who did not buy into the mission of the school represented a threat to the school's culture of success, the principal was quick to address that issue.

This retention and hiring of new teachers who "fit" with the culture appeared to be one of the definitive characteristics of the school culture that so many describe as the "key to success." These principals determine the culture not only through the vision they set and through their attitude, but also by attracting, hiring, and maintaining a faculty who share similar attitudes. One principal said she no longer hires new teachers because the challenging environment of the student population often leads these people to a school with easier demographics after a year or two. By hiring veteran teachers, she knows she is hiring those who truly desire to teach at the school. By temporarily converting to a charter school, the principal at Grace Hill Elementary was able to get the staff she wanted by starting from scratch in hiring. The effective recruitment of teachers who buy into the school's culture of success is immensely important.

Collaborative Environment for Entire School Family

"I can train anyone with a degree and a qualification to be an effective instructor. What I really look for in hiring job candidates is a passion for children and a fit with our school culture. That can't be trained."
— Terri McCann, Principal, Bragg Elementary

A common perception of teachers is that they are "free agents" who do whatever they want when the classroom door is closed. However, the teachers in these successful schools were not free agents but were instead part of a larger team committed to pursuing the mission of the school. Perhaps the greatest concern of principals we met was that teachers have a strong sense of mission, and that they fit well with one another. One principal stated that during the hiring process she tells applicants, "You have to have a sense of mission to work here. If you do not love dirty hands and head lice, go somewhere else." The sense of mission created a common attitude in the teachers that fostered collaboration and partnership.

The collaborative culture at the school allowed both principals and teachers the opportunity to support and provide feedback to the each other. Not only was the *principal* aware of what was going on in the classroom, but there also appeared to be a high level of cooperation, interaction, and feedback among teachers. The teachers and instructional facilitators were closely involved in improving one another's classroom practices. Several personnel mentioned that if one teacher was having a problem, a stronger teacher would come into the classroom and observe or provide guidance to the new teacher. The schools had a culture that was conducive to this type of collaboration and oversight.

The teachers responded very amicably to this culture of feedback and interaction. The word most often used to describe the school environment was *family*. In fact, the faculty and staff at these schools appeared very pleasant and empowered to do their jobs. This resulted in several of the teachers claiming

they would not be willing to work elsewhere; this refrain was common at most of the schools. Principals jealously guarded this atmosphere by prioritizing "fit" and collaboration above anything else. As one principal summarized it best, "I can train anyone with a degree and a qualification to be an effective instructor. What I really look for in hiring job candidates is a passion for children and a fit with our school culture. That can't be trained."

VII. Summary

While this study is not a rigorous empirical evaluation of effective schools, and thus has limitations, there is still a substantial amount of valuable information to be gleaned from this case study. We were somewhat surprised to find the consistencies observed in the culture of these schools, despite serving drastically different student populations. While none of these are silver bullets, it does appear that the comprehensive implementation of the four observed characteristics in these schools--at minimum--creates an environment conducive to learning and focused on student achievement. It is not surprising, then, that these schools had the "numbers", in terms of student achievement, to back up the observations.

It is not uncommon to hear educators, or any professional for that matter, complain about the challenges they are faced with and the demands which are placed upon them. For example, teachers and schools are often depicted as victims of absurd accountability requirements, insufficient funding, and the challenging external factors students face that are outside the realm of the school's control. However, what appears to set these visited schools apart and places them on an upward trajectory is their ability, and even excitement, to tackle these challenges rather than be victimized by them.

The teachers and administrators at these schools appeared to have a very strong internal locus of control. In other words, they felt that it was within the realm of their ability to solve these problems. They did not project these limitations to some external source of control, over which they had no jurisdiction. This in turn produced an expectation for every teacher and student in the building. And as is true in almost every other professional field, the faculty and students met the expectations set for them.

It is our hope that other administrators and teachers will read this case study and subsequently elevate their standards regarding the capacity of the students and teachers in their school. It is entirely possible to have an ordered, structured school environment regardless of the type of home and structure from which a child comes. Neither poverty, nor language proficiency, nor access to outside learning experiences should limit the expectation that schools have for their children. If a 95% poverty rate cannot hold Howard Elementary students back, then who should be allowed to use that as an excuse? If an 87% poverty rate at Grace Hill cannot keep the Hispanic students from outperforming the state average for **all** children, then why should this be an excuse for anyone? It should no longer be enough to have an economically advantaged student body barely performing at the proficient level when schools like Salem Elementary continue to push their students to higher levels of achievement year after year.

These results do not come easily, nor are they necessarily rewarded or recognized by the current AYP system of accountability. However, we hope these schools inspire principals and teachers throughout the state of Arkansas to reach for these standards. Additionally, we hope that this report can serve as a guide, and that the schools in this report can serve as a model to assist school leaders throughout Arkansas to provide the support and the expectation for their teachers to overcome the challenges associated with low or even just proficient performance. We have been inspired by the remarkable students and educators at these five outstanding schools; they have shown us what can be done for young students all across Arkansas.