

# LOUISIANA HIGH PERFORMING, HIGH POVERTY PROJECT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study examined successful leadership practices that led to student achievement in schools with concentrated levels of poverty and minorities. A primary focus of the study was to identify common leadership behaviors which have a substantial outcome on improving student learning and to ultimately influence practices of all school leaders.

The Louisiana Department of Education declared 21 schools to be high performing, high poverty (HHP) schools. These schools were selected in February 2008 for their students' academic success according to the following criteria: (a) minority membership 50% or greater (b) free/reduced lunch participation at 82% or above, and (c) a School Performance Score (SPS) of more than 80.

The study consisted of two survey instruments - *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-Ed)* and *Louisiana HHP Principal Questionnaire* - onsite interviews with the principals, and a statistical analysis of the *VAL-Ed* findings with specific teacher, principal, and school factors.

Results from *VAL-Ed* (72 items rating leadership behaviors in learning-centered environment; 1= ineffective, 2=minimally effective, 3=satisfactorily effective, 4=highly effective, and 5= outstandingly effective)

- 21 HHP principals had an overall effectiveness rating of 4.01 on a 5-point effectiveness rating.
  - Principals generally rated themselves lower than did the teachers and supervisors.
  - Supervisors gave the highest overall rating.
  - In general, the three respondent groups agreed on overall effectiveness.
- Six Core Components – *High Standards for Student Learning, Rigorous Curriculum (content), Quality Instruction (pedagogy), Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior, Connections to External Communities and Performance Accountability.*
  - Highest rated - *Quality Instruction and Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior*
  - Lowest rated - *Connections to External Communities*
- Six Key Processes – *Planning, Implementing, Supporting, Advocating, Communicating, and Monitoring.*
  - Highest Rated– *Supporting*

- Lowest Rated – *Advocating*
- National Norms – 91% scored proficient or distinguished
  - Distinguished: above 4.00 - 14 principals (67%); overall for 21 is 4.01
  - Proficient: 3.60-3.99 – 5 principals (24%)
  - Basic: 3.29-3.59
  - Below Basic: below 3.29 – 2 principals (9%)

Findings from *Louisiana HPHP Principal Questionnaire* are consistent with *VAL-Ed* results and interviews. The open-ended questions in the *Louisiana HPHP Principal Questionnaire* supported *Quality Instruction* and *Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior* as leadership behaviors prominent in the 21 HPHP schools. The results also reinforced a relationship between *Quality Instruction* and engagement as well as a connection between *Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior* and structure.

Five of the top rated *VAL-Ed* principals were selected to be participants in a multi-case study to delve deeper into their leadership behaviors as well as processes used to implement them. One of the products of the interviews was an insight into the first three years of the HPHP principal's journey as a successful leader.

- Year One - implemented a highly structured environment and established rapport with students
- Year Two - began building trust with teachers and instituted strong collaborative groups
- Year Three – committed to reflection and refinement

A statistical analysis was performed using *Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)* to evaluate for a significant relationship among teacher and principal years of experience at the current school and the size of the school against the results of the *VAL-Ed* study.

- Principal and teacher years of experience at current school were not found to be significant.
  - Significant differences and positive mean differences between the small schools (less than 300 students) and the large schools (500 or more students) in the core components (all except *Connections to External Communities*) and in all the key processes.
  - Significant differences and positive mean differences between mid-size schools (300-499 students) and large schools in high standards, rigorous

curriculum, quality instruction, and performance accountability, and in all six key processes.

- No significant difference found in the overall effect of small schools when compared to mid-size schools in both core components and key processes.

Based on Lee Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge, the term Pedagogical Leadership Wisdom (PLW) was coined to describe the "secret weapon" of these successful principals. PLW defines the wisdom of a school leader who has the academic foundation to make decisions about the instructional program and monitor the progress of the teachers and students. A leader with PLW has a deep understanding of the instructional programs, teaching strategies, and student achievement, also has the ability to support teachers and students toward academic and social success. PLW is evident when structure is based on engagement; i.e., **structure with a purpose**. Examples of PLW include:

- Changing the lunch schedule to allow an extended time for a reading block;
- Placing the same teachers on early morning duty so that they are aware of potential problems;
- Instituting a policy that does not allow interruptions (checking out students, announcement, etc) during a reading block;
- Requiring auxiliary staff to make their schedules so that they are in classrooms to work with small groups during reading block;
- Expecting teachers to keep notebooks handy to record notes about student's progress during the instructional day;
- Creating flexible schedules for paraprofessionals so that they can help a student when the need is first recognized;
- Providing transportation for parents to attend school meetings;
- Making home visits to pick up a student who did not show up for an important test;
- Creating lesson plans so teachers can focus on student data and identifying strategies to help them succeed;
- Setting up a new teacher's classroom, including decorating bulletin boards so that the new teacher can concentrate on the district meetings held at beginning of school year;
- Changing the time to report absences and lunch counts to the office allowing for teacher instruction at the beginning of the school day; and

- Organizing parent groups to serve as communicators for other parents to ensure important information is received by all parents.

The principals participating in Louisiana's High Performing, High Poverty Project have demonstrated their PLW ability. Their wisdom surrounds and supports all of the effective leadership behaviors identified by the authors of *VAL-Ed* while ultimately resulting in increased academic and social learning for all students. In summary, when effective leadership is present, students from low socioeconomic families can be academically and socially successful. An appropriate statement from the interview session captured the essence of the project – “We [students in this project] might be poor, but we sure are smart!”

