Research Brief: Case Studies of Four Effective Elementary Schools in SFUSD

Purpose of Study: In 2008-2009, Stanford researchers from the School Redesign Network studied four elementary schools and two high schools in San Francisco seen as effective as closing the achievement gap. The district administration hoped to use these case studies to find promising practices that other schools might be interested in adopting to "reduce the predictive power of demographics."

Selecting Effective Schools: The Stanford team selected the schools by examining student achievement data as measured by the Academic Performance Index (API), looking for an upward trend in achievement and a closing of the achievement gap between subgroups. Also the researchers used a value-added model of student achievement that assesses students' levels of "academic productivity," a measure of how much value schools add beyond students' initial achievement, and looked for schools with high levels of academic productivity. There were many SFUSD elementary schools that fit these criteria. However, the four elementary schools chosen for the study are ER Taylor Elementary School, Sheridan Elementary schools, Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, and San Francisco Community School.

Common Characteristics Across Effective Schools: The study found that the schools shared four characteristics. As seen in Figure 1, "leadership as a foundation" sits on the outer ring of the framework supporting the other three elements. "Relational trust across the school community" and "dynamic instruction and curriculum" share the middle layer of the framework because they have similar levels of frequency in the data. Finally, "alignment of practices, personnel, and resources based on a shared vision" sits in the center of the circle because efforts at alignment enhance the other three themes. Each of the themes are parsed out below by some of the distinguishing characteristics:

1. **Leadership as a foundation:**
    a. All the school leaders had long tenures
    b. Leaders paid close attention to hiring, developing and retaining quality teachers
    c. Leaders cultivates shared vision

2. **Dynamic instruction and curriculum:**
    a. Pay attention to subgroup needs
    b. Facilitate teacher planning
    c. Examine data from multiple measures
    d. Utilize anecdotal evidence
    e. Curriculum with cultural relevancy and multiple points of access
    f. Access higher order thinking skills

3. **Relational trust across the community:**
    a. Enrollment may support/undermine trust
    b. Leaders cultivate political resources
    c. Staff cultivate parent-school ties

4. **Alignment of practices, personnel, and resources:**
    a. Align resources with their school vision
    b. Articulate a clear vision to new teachers
    c. Teams and committees align efforts
    d. Vertical, horizontal alignment of instruction

Figure 1: Common characteristics across four effective elementary schools in San Francisco

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