



Delaware Middle Schools Beating the Odds

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Prior research conducted by Delaware Education Research and Development Center has looked at the practices that distinguish successful elementary and high schools in the state. Building on these, this study examines the practices in a group of successful Delaware middle schools where students scored significantly higher for the past three years on state tests of reading and mathematics when compared to schools with similar student populations. Those successful schools are referred to here as "Beating the Odds" schools.

In January and February 2010, researchers surveyed administrators and teachers at twelve Delaware middle schools—six that were identified as “Beating the Odds” and six comparison schools where students performed at or below the average when compared to demographically similar schools. They also conducted interviews with 111 administrators and randomly selected teachers and students at the six “Beating the Odds” schools in order to develop an understanding of how the schools work to promote student achievement.

There were three questions which guided the study:

1. Which Delaware middle schools are “Beating the Odds” when compared to middle schools with demographically similar student enrollment?
2. How do middle schools that are “Beating the Odds” differ from other middle schools?
3. What do educators and students at “Beating the Odds” middle schools say accounts for the success of their schools?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Which Delaware middle schools are “Beating the Odds” when compared to middle schools with demographically similar student enrollment?

DERDC used publically available demographic and testing data to identify which of Delaware’s 40 public and charter middle schools meet the study definition of “Beating the Odds.”

- Forty public and charter middle schools fell into three demographic clusters when student population was compared by race and income. The clusters generally corresponded to high income/ high percent white students, middle income/middle percent whites students, and low income/low percent white students.
- Eight of the 40 public and charter middle schools met the study criteria to be labeled “Beating the Odds”: Two from the low income cluster, two from the middle income cluster, and four from the high income cluster.
- Five of the eight schools that were identified had either a reform model of curriculum or a school-wide curricular theme. Two were charters and three were public magnet schools.

2. How do middle schools that are “Beating the Odds” differ from other middle schools?

The study examines the differences between six of the “Beating the Odds” (BTO) schools and six comparison middle schools. Principals and teachers from all 12 schools responded to an online survey which examined practices and beliefs in a number of domains shown to be important to successful middle schools: collaboration, high expectations, data use, leadership, teacher role, instructional support, and district influence.

Significantly more educators from “Beating the Odds” schools agreed that 18 specific practices and beliefs were typical of their schools when compared to educators from comparison schools. Fourteen of these were found in three domains: high expectations, data use, and collaboration. Some examples of these differences include the following:

High expectations

- The community and school share a common vision.
- Each student at their school is expected to achieve high standards.

- High quality instruction can be seen in classrooms every day.
- Teachers here believe their students can achieve.
- Our principal communicates expectations for student achievement.

Data use

- Teachers receive student data disaggregated by subgroups and skills.
- Teachers use data to make instructional decisions such as creating student groups and focusing their instruction.
- Specific intervention plans are in place for students who do not meet expected proficiency levels.
- Our school routinely uses disaggregated data to assess how well we are doing.
- Our school uses tests aligned with the state standards to monitor students' progress during the school year.

Collaboration

- Teachers and parents work together to improve student learning.
- There is a high level of trust among administrators, teachers, and parents in our school that supports working together.
- Teachers are involved in making important decisions at this school.

Importantly, on 40 of the 48 items, the two samples of schools differed in the intensity of their responses. That is, "Beating the Odds" respondents significantly more often than comparison school respondents "strongly agreed" to these 40 statements. Twenty-six of these items fell under the domains of teacher role, leadership, district influence, and instructional support. Examples include the following:

Teacher role

- Teachers take responsibility for student achievement.
- Teachers make adjustments in their instruction based on areas where students encounter problems.
- Teachers intentionally provide support to students as they transition to middle school from elementary grades.

Leadership

- The principal encourages teachers to take a leadership role in this school.
- The principal communicates a clear vision for this school and sets high standards for student learning.
- The principal ensures that teachers have time for planning and visits classrooms each week in our school to monitor instruction.

Instructional support

- Each one of my students has a copy of the textbooks.
- Our school creates an environment that encourages all students to learn.
- The purpose of professional development programs is to improve student achievement.

District influence

- The district provides instructional resources and support.
- The district expects all schools to improve student achievement.
- The district provides up-to-date instructional materials.
- The district encourages teachers to take a leadership role in the district.

3. What do educators and students at “Beating the Odds” middle schools say accounts for the success of their schools?

This question looks at interviews with principals and randomly selected teachers and students at each of the six BTO schools to determine what they believe accounts for their school’s success.

While there are essential local differences, what most of these schools share is an organizational climate shaped by leadership that identifies compelling educational approaches and brings educators, students and parents together around those approaches.

- Effective leadership includes, but extends beyond, one or two dynamic individuals and feeds into organizational qualities such as trust and collaboration and the valued relationships of the local school community.
- A core educational vision, grounded in a school’s unique circumstances, supports adaptive responses to broader mandates and opportunities.
- The investment of parents in their children’s success is seen as necessary for the ongoing success of these BTO schools. Alternately, parents are seen as barriers to school success when they are believed to be inadequately involved in their children’s education.

Recommendations

These six middle schools that are beating the odds in student achievement remind us that practices, policies, supports and beliefs work in concert. Because changes in a few areas will impact all the others, consideration of the local culture is critical for the outcomes to be favorable. Recommendations connect and build upon the study findings:

- Focus on supporting key foundational domains of practice.
- Focus on teacher empowerment to build a collaborative culture.
- Focus on each school’s culture and vision.