Proven Results

Want to raise student achievement? Follow these five research-based strategies used by high-performing school districts

Bobby Moore

Many states are using some type of achievement growth measure to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Growth measures or value-added data are popular because they level the playing field to determine how much of an impact a teacher, principal, school, or district has on student learning, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the families attending the district.

We have found that the level of growth that a student group experiences is not limited to the effectiveness of the teacher. Battelle for Kids is a not-for-profit organization that offers school improvement services to districts nationwide. For the last decade, we have led a school improvement collaborative of more than 100 districts that uses value-added data, as well as other measures, to provide high-quality information to inform data-driven decisions for professional development.

We have observed and recorded low-performing teachers, buildings, and districts moving from low student growth to high student growth in one year. Many of these changes have been documented by how a building or district has approached structures and procedures, curriculum alignment, and leadership.

Over the past two years, we have researched the stories and strategies behind the highest-performing and most effective teachers, principals, schools, and districts in the state of Ohio. We have surveyed and interviewed educators

from the highest-performing schools or those from the schools that have made the greatest improvement in growth data over the past two years. Five common strategies emerged.

1. A laser-like focus on student learning

Buildings and districts with a narrow focus, fewer initiatives, and a strong emphasis on student learning produce far greater gains in student growth than those districts that mistakenly allocate valuable resources, including time and money, for too many initiatives.

In fact, high-performing schools often do audits and create "not to do" lists, temporarily abandoning or suspending initiatives that are not directly related to student learning or where there is little evidence of such a link. Additionally, buildings that more thoroughly implement key initiatives at all levels produce greater student learning gains.

High-performing schools usually have student learning as their No. 1 goal. Many have a simple formula for success: Ensure a systemic approach to examining student learning data and respond accordingly. These schools align all of their resources and professional development to focus on a few initiatives. They revisit their goals and reassess through multiple lenses (parents, students, and staff) to make sure their practices align with their vision and goals.

Questions to consider:

■ Have we identified a limited number of goals and communicated them to all shareholders?

■ Do our goals stay the same and only objectives change from year to year?

■ Have we suspended, abandoned, or eliminated some initiatives that we no longer support or that have very little impact on student learning?

2. Establish structures and routines

Nearly every high-growth school has put into place structures, procedures, and routines that lead to collaboration for examining and responding to data, sharing professional best practices, providing additional learning opportunities for students and teachers, and developing leaders system-wide.

For some schools, these new routines involve redesigning the school day to reallocate resources toward achieving specific goals. When researchers Allan Odden and Sarah Archibald studied districts and schools that had actually "doubled student performance data," they discovered that these schools used time and resources differently than other schools.

Many increased their reading and math instructional time, used flexible grouping for smaller groups, reduced class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, found extra time for struggling students during and after school, and adopted professional learning community concepts. These

districts accomplished this despite limited resources.

The highest-performing districts and schools believe in identifying times, structures, and outcomes for collaboration. Nearly every district emphasizes purposeful collaboration by creating structures or routines that ensure the time is spent examining student work or sharing instructional or assessment practices.

Some specific examples of structures or routines include:

■ Response to Intervention model implemented with fidelity, with a focus on helping struggling students and giving enrichment time to students who master material

■ Increased instructional time for reading and math

■ Collaboration time for teachers to review and analyze data, with principal participation

■ Summer academies and workshops for teachers and principals for additional professional development

Questions to consider:

■ During times of financial constraints, do we still ensure that our educators have time to collaborate?

■ Is our collaboration time purposeful, and do we monitor outcomes from that time?

■ Are we helping both our high-achieving and low-achieving students improve?

3. Develop a balanced assessment approach

Frequent and timely monitoring of student learning is an essential part of every high-growth district we surveyed. "What gets measured gets improved" is what nearly every district shared about the importance of common, benchmark, short-cycle, quarterly, and rigorous assessments. Individual school and teacher teams created many of the assessments. Odden and Archibald discovered that nearly every school that doubled its performance data had implemented common or short-cycle assessments.

Many school officials express the importance of posting and communicating targets, and introducing standards in student-friendly language. High-growth schools focus on resources for formative instructional practices and assessment. Those are the formal and informal evaluations used by teachers to modify instruction so students can learn better.

The research is clear: A literature review by researchers Paul Black and Dylan William of 250 empirical studies of classroom assessment from more than 680 published investigations shows conclusively that formative assessment improves learning.

No other education intervention has produced more student learning gains than formative instruction, and the payoff is even greater for struggling students. Getting feedback that is both descriptive and specific can produce more educational gains than nearly any other intervention.

Many of the high-performing districts we studied empha-

Our best guides are others who have been successful.

size ongoing review of common assessments, curriculum, and student data. This is extremely important as teachers transition to the Common Core State Standards and continue to develop a greater understanding of the standards and improve their craft.

Questions to consider:

■ Do we allocate time and money to provide professional development to our teachers on the use of formative instructional practice on a regular basis?

■ Do we have a feedback system in place to monitor student learning?

■ Do our teachers modify instruction based on this feedback?

4. Use multiple measures for accountability

Nearly all high-growth districts understand the importance of using multiple measures. No one measure is powerful enough to use by itself. High-growth schools embrace multiple measures to uncover, discover, and recover for school improvement. High-growth districts collect and analyze multiple data sources and use strategic measures from common assessments, assignments, year-end state tests, and value-added information to inform teachers and decision makers.

Districts use performance, practice, and perception data for school improvement. Some examples of either student, parent, or staff surveys were often discussed by these districts. When examining performance data, many districts use comparison groups and benchmarks to explore the reasons behind school and district success.

Questions to consider:

■ Do we use data for improvement as well as accountability?

■ Do we use student surveys for feedback to teachers and staff surveys for feedback to administrators?

■ What are the most important measures to collect for our school improvement process?

5. Empower teachers and develop leaders systemwide

Creating and leading a high-growth school or district is much too difficult for one leader. Leaders of high-growth districts know this. Teachers want to be part of the process, and allowing them to help create the world in which they work will ensure greater levels of ownership. While it is important to have a high-quality teacher in every classroom, it is as essential to have a high-quality principal in every building.

We did not discover any high-growth buildings without a talented principal at the helm. The high-performing schools used teacher teams for instruction and/or leadership. We agree with Michael Fullan, who argues that you don't improve schools by just hiring and supporting individuals, but rather by developing collaborative groups or social capital. Research shows that distributed leadership throughout the district and school produces gains in student achievement and growth.

In other words, individual success does not guarantee organizational success. High-growth districts create structures and routines for teachers to have the opportunity to lead and contribute. High-growth schools also offer opportunities to develop the leadership skills of their teachers and principals.

Questions to consider:

■ Do we provide opportunities and professional development for teachers to work as teams?

■ Are there leadership opportunities for teachers?

■ Do principals receive professional development to learn how to distribute leadership and develop high-performing teams?

System-wide thinking

In order to help all schools achieve excellence, we must make information available about best practices as it relates to all aspects of education. This means thinking about not only what teachers do in the classroom, but also what schools and districts do systemwide. Our best guides are others who have been successful. This is why we place such value on the qualitative data provided by high-growth schools in our research.

When leveraged, the practice of limiting goals, establishing important routines, developing a balanced assessment approach, using multiple measures to inform improvement, and empowering teachers and developing leaders can lead to a highly effective system and produce high student achievement in districts and schools. ■

Bobby Moore (bmoore@battelleforkids.org) is a senior director at Battelle for Kids in Columbus, Ohio.