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Investing in Educators Produces Student Learning Gains in High Need Schools

Two large Virginia school districts improve student achievement in their lowest performing schools by working with teachers and principals to systematically build specific instructional skills.

WASHINGTON, DC, December 7 – The mantra is familiar: instructional improvement is the key to raising achievement in underperforming schools. Too often, however, states and school districts pursue that goal by creating standards, accountability measures, and incentives for improvement while giving short shrift to a pivotal piece—the support educators need to build instructional knowledge and skills. As a result, student achievement languishes.

By contrast, two of Virginia’s largest school districts measurably improved student achievement in their lowest performing schools. Findings issued today from research studies by the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) show that Prince William County Public Schools and Henrico County Public Schools achieved these gains in student learning by systematically coupling accountability and incentives with direct support for building instructional capacity.

The two districts provided teachers and principals in the participating schools with extensive professional development and on-the-job coaching customized to specific educator needs. Both initiatives also tied what students learn to what educators earn. Each year, effective teachers and principals were able to earn performance-based compensation.

The two reform initiatives, conducted from the 2010-11 through the 2015-16 school years, were supported by the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Incentive Fund program.

The Prince William County Public Schools’ Teacher Incentive Performance Award (TIPA) initiative focused on the district’s 30 highest need schools, which implemented a performance-based compensation system. It consisted of student growth and achievement measures as well as other indicators of effective schools such as positive school culture, effective parent engagement, and teacher leadership—23 criteria in all, each with assigned point values. Compensation bonuses were school based, with larger awards going to administrators/teachers in core subjects versus others. Key components of TIPA’s instructional capacity building approach included providing “real time,” tailored professional development to teachers and a school leadership strand supporting the 30 TIPA principals.

CTAC’s analysis found that TIPA led to statistically significant increases in student achievement in all four core subjects analyzed—in particular in mathematics and science—as measured by Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) test results.

The Henrico County Public Schools' Learning Leaders initiative focused on eight of the district's highest need schools. Learning Leaders centered on improving instructional capacity through explicit student growth target setting, teacher observations focusing on areas with highest payoff for student learning, and tailored professional development and coaching for both teachers and administrators based on needs revealed by analysis of student data and teacher observations. The strategy included both a Professional Development Academy for formal trainings and workshops and a more informal coaching component performed by trained full-time teachers. The performance-based compensation system rewarded individual educators.

CTAC's analysis found that, on average, SOL scores increased in Learning Leaders schools in all four core subjects analyzed, with statistically significant gains in science and history.

In both districts, the initiatives engaged educators in planning and implementing the reforms, thus promoting educator buy in. Processes put in place greatly increased collaboration and instructional dialogue among principals and teachers as well as strengthened the use of data to inform instruction.

"Student gains in these districts resulted from putting systems in place that build specific areas of instructional knowledge and directly support teachers and principals," says CTAC Founder and Executive Director William J. Slotnik. "Prince William and Henrico then translated that knowledge into effective strategies and practices."

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