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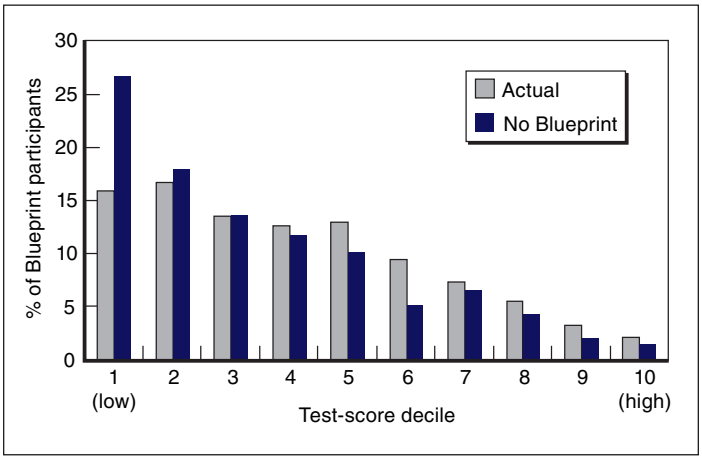
The Success of San Diego School Reforms Could Serve as a Blueprint for the State

A broad set of reforms to improve reading skills among San Diego Unified School District students in large part has accomplished its goal. A significant percentage of elementary and middle school students who took part in reform-driven activities—such as double- and triple-length English classes, extended school days, and summer school reading programs—scored better on standardized reading tests later. However, this success did not seem to extend to high school, where the reforms may have actually reduced achievement. Nor were all of the myriad elements of the reform program successful in their first two years. Nonetheless, the evidence for the program's overall success is so definitive that San Diego's efforts are well worth a look by other school districts in California and the nation.

In *From Blueprint to Reality: San Diego's Education Reforms*, Julian R. Betts of the Public Policy Institute of California and the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), and Andrew C. Zau and Kevin King of UCSD, investigated the effectiveness of the San Diego district's Blueprint for Student Success program, which was introduced during the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 academic years.

Student academic data examined by the report's authors show that notable gains in elementary school, and to a lesser extent middle school, can be linked to participation in the Blueprint program. The results indicate that Blueprint interventions shifted more than 10 percent of participating elementary school students out of the bottom tenth—or decile—of reading achievement and into higher levels (see the figure). For middle school students, Blueprint participation shifted about 4 percent of students out of the bottom fifth. However, at the high school level, Blueprint participation seemed to mildly aggravate existing achievement gaps—although participation in summer school reading programs did boost high school reading proficiency.



The percentage of elementary school Blueprint participants who would have scored in the lowest 10 percent (decile) districtwide on reading assessment tests was reduced by more than 10 points because of the Blueprint program.

The success of even some aspects of the Blueprint regimen, at a time of increased scrutiny of schools' performance in almost every state, is noteworthy. For other school districts around the state and country struggling to satisfy both state and federal accountability mandates, the authors suggest that the overall direction of the Blueprint deserves serious attention.

Reform Strategies

The Blueprint program's goal was to improve reading skills in the San Diego district through three strategies. The first, known as prevention, sought to improve all students' literacy skills through the use of new teaching materials, extended-length English classes where necessary, additional resources for schools with lower test scores, and additional teacher training. The second strategy, known as intervention, targeted students clearly identified as lagging behind in read-

ing; the program provided them with additional classroom time for reading practice and instruction, both in before- and after-school reading programs and in summer school. The third focus, called retention, was the policy of holding back for a year students in certain grades who showed below-grade literacy skills.

The authors analyzed about 112,000 student records from grades 2 to 11 between fall 1999 and spring 2002. They sought to evaluate not only the effectiveness of Blueprint but also its ability to close gaps in reading scores among various ethnic, language, and socioeconomic groups. They also looked at participation rates and examined the relative effectiveness of the various aspects of the Blueprint.

About a third of all students participated in some kind of Blueprint intervention, with almost all of these students receiving additional instruction time in the classroom. Only a little more than 1 percent in three targeted grade levels participated in the most drastic intervention, grade retention.

Clear Successes

Of the activities that required extra classroom time, such as the double-length English classes known as *literacy block* or the Extended Day Reading Program, students were far more likely to be nonwhite, to be English learners, or to have parents with low educational achievement. Their participation made a big difference to those students. In elementary schools, the Blueprint narrowed achievement gaps defined along racial and ethnic, language, and socioeconomic lines by about 15 percent over two years. In middle schools, achievement gaps also shrank, by about 5 percent.

Two of the most effective Blueprint elements were the Extended Day Reading Program—in which students reading at below grade level received three 90-minute periods of supervised reading each week before or after school—and summer school. The extended-day program has been sharply curtailed, but given its positive results, the authors suggest that the school district may want to consider reviving it when funding permits. Also found to be highly effective were the prevention strategies targeting low-performing elementary schools. These schools received additional resources, an extended school year, and additional peer coaches—teachers assigned to assist colleagues with improving student reading—beyond the number typically assigned to other schools.

However, in the district as a whole, the data could not show a positive link between improved reading scores and the peer coach program.

Apart from summer school, virtually no Blueprint program helped the reading scores of high school students. The authors suggest several explanations, such as the sensitivity of teenagers to being placed in activities that differentiate them from their peers, as well as the more distant teacher-student personal relationships typical of high school. Unlike the elementary and middle school versions, which evolved from an earlier, similar reform in New York City, the high school elements of Blueprint had never been tried before.

The research, which studied the first two full years of the Blueprint, does not necessarily indicate the long-term effectiveness of the reforms. But in almost all cases, individual Blueprint elements became more effective in the second year.

Lessons Learned

Several aspects of the Blueprint program were controversial and were opposed by many parents and teachers. Some of the original elements have been discontinued, partly for financial reasons. But the data suggest that some of the ill effects predicted by opponents have not occurred. For example, gains in literacy did not take place at the expense of math skills; indeed, in some cases, math skills rose along with reading skills. Nor, at the elementary school level, did excessive exposure to reading cause student burn-out and, therefore, an increased number of student absences.

The PPIC researchers recommend that other districts interested in San Diego's success story examine it for ideas they can use in their schools, especially in the lower grades. Less important than the individual program elements are the Blueprint's broader principles: These are to use reading assessments to identify students who lag behind, to strongly encourage families of these students to enroll them in additional literacy classes during the school year or in the summer, and to do everything possible to ensure that teachers are fully trained in techniques to improve literacy.

This research brief summarizes a report by Julian R. Betts, Andrew C. Zau, and Kevin King, From Blueprint to Reality: San Diego's Education Reforms. *(2005, 176 pp. $15.00, ISBN 1-58213-105-8). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This study was supported with funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies.*

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