

**CURRICULUM AND CULTURE:
FINDINGS FROM NEW JERSEY'S ILLUSTRATIVE BEST
PRACTICES STUDY
*JUST FOR THE KIDS-NEW JERSEY***

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Preface

The Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (BCEE) at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce has implemented a school reporting and accountability system known as *Just for the Kids-New Jersey (J4K-NJ)*. This program offers a free Web site (www.just4kids.org) that provides education leaders, policy makers, parents, and the public with fair comparisons of schools and valuable data for educational decision-making. It also enables education leaders to tap into practices that have effectively enhanced student achievement. The *J4K-NJ* system is based on the premise that lower performing schools, regardless of the nature of their student populations, can improve by studying and implementing the effective practices of high performing schools. To achieve that objective, the BCEE has funded this Illustrative Best Practices Study conducted by a team of education researchers at Rutgers University. Specifically, the study has been funded by the following corporations:

Verizon-New Jersey – Language Arts

Johnson & Johnson -- Science

Washington Mutual -- Mathematics

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STUDY**

Just for the Kids-New Jersey

Conducted by Rutgers University

Funded by the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence

at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce

Executive Summary -- April 2004

A study of six high-performing New Jersey schools suggests that school culture and curriculum contribute to school success. The New Jersey study is one of a series of *Just for the Kids-New Jersey (J4K-NJ)* School Reports that provide details about what practices lead to increased achievement in high-performing schools. By providing specific examples and stories, these studies spotlight success and challenge and dispel arguments that some children cannot achieve at high levels. This study also provides concrete models from which other schools can learn.

School performance on state tests can often be predicted by the family background of the students in attendance. These schools were picked because they scored substantially better than might be predicted in all three Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) subjects – language arts, mathematics and science – over four years. They represented the northern, central and southern regions of the state, and a variety of enrollment sizes, grade patterns (K-8, 6-8, etc.) and socioeconomic circumstances; two of the schools were in Abbott districts.

The school visits suggest that there are three broad categories of factors that contribute to success in these high-performing schools. The first category reflects the school's overall culture – its core beliefs and values. The second has to do with the organization of curriculum and instruction. The third is a diverse set of factors that facilitates development of conditions that support student learning. An example of each is:

School Cultures that Respect and Motivate Teachers and Students. All the schools shared a culture of seriousness about the teaching enterprise and student work. Staff evinced tremendous respect and support for students, who reflected that respect back to staff. Teachers saw their schools as safe places where they could experiment and take risks. Staff described these schools as a team or a family, metaphors for a nexus of cordial and effective relationships among administrators, teachers, other staff, students and parents

Organization of Curriculum and Instruction: In four schools with middle to low income students, much energy was devoted to aligning curriculum with standards and infusing GEPA-like open-ended questions throughout the curriculum. In some cases, special preparation for the test did take place and included after-school and weekend classes. Above all, these districts treated GEPA as a *multi-year challenge* and began preparing for it – in formal or informal ways – in grade 5 or before by emphasizing content, writing, etc. In contrast, schools in the two affluent communities downplayed the test, secure in the knowledge that their students would perform well without any specific preparation.

Facilitating Factors: Several factors contributed to the strong cultures and focused curricula in these schools. One critical one was the principal. All schools had principals who were active leaders: with a clear vision, deeply engaged in instruction, supportive and respectful of teachers, dedicated to continuous improvement and zealous in visiting classes and engaging in dialogue with teachers. Teachers often saw principals as the glue that united the various strands that made the school effective.

CURRICULUM AND CULTURE: FINDINGS FROM NEW JERSEY’S ILLUSTRATIVE BEST PRACTICES STUDY

Just for the Kids-New Jersey (J4K-NJ) is designed to identify practices that schools can use to help all students achieve at high levels. In this, our first research effort, our focus is on understanding why some schools are especially successful on New Jersey’s Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA). The GEPA is an annual, standards-aligned assessment of student proficiency in language arts, mathematics and science; test-takers are scored as partial proficient, proficient or advanced proficient in each of the three subjects. The six schools chosen for this study were consistent high performers in all content areas, according to analyses conducted by J4K-NJ. .

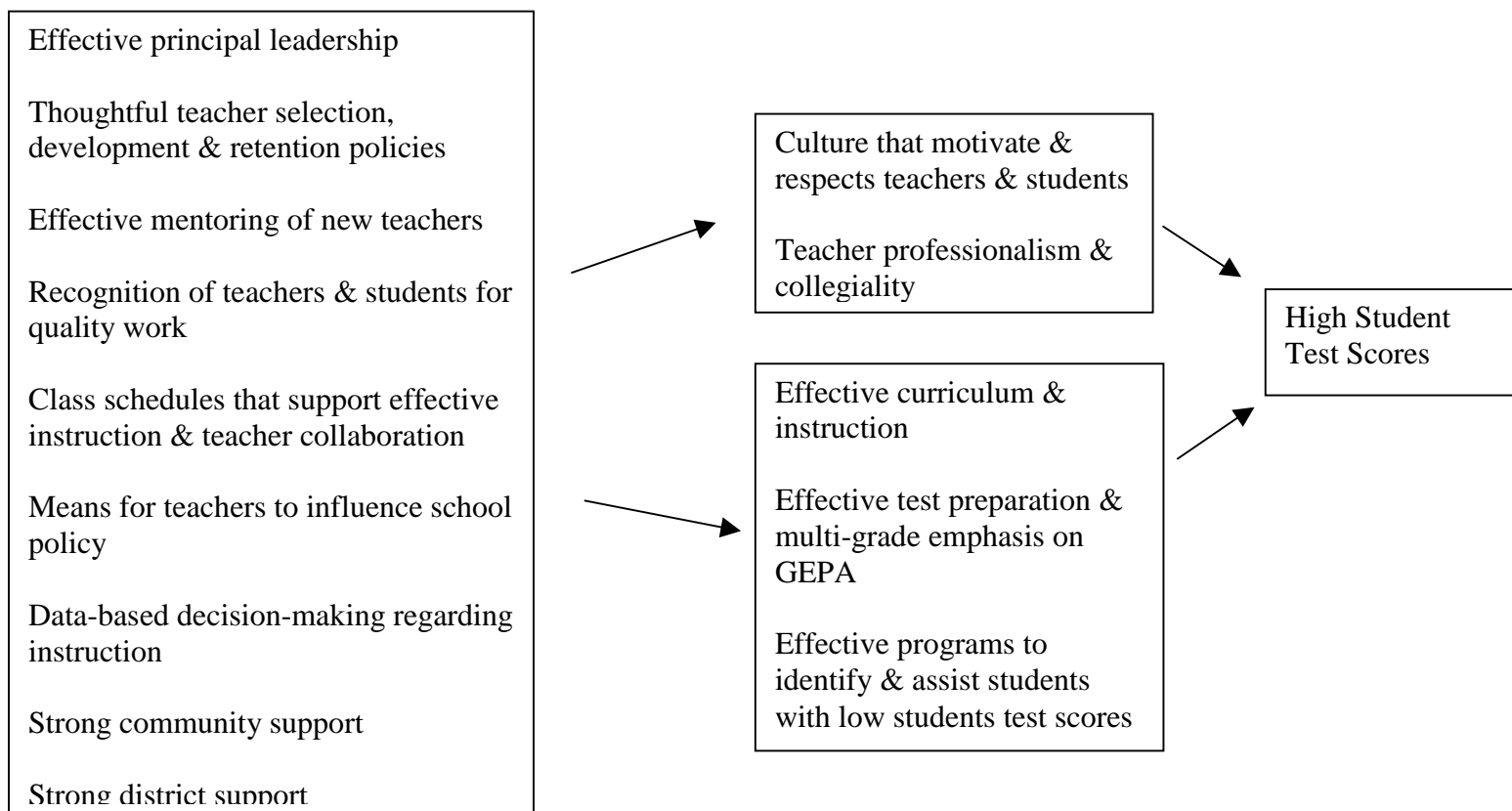
Evidence from six especially high performing schools suggests that three clusters of factors contribute to their GEPA success:

- The first is a culture of mutual respect between adults and children where the focus is on achievement. These schools are safe and orderly without being punitive; staff frequently liken the school to a “family.”
- The second is an effective curriculum, in that it is aligned with state standards at all levels and preparation for the 8th grade test begins long before the 8th grade.
- Finally, a variety of other practices, including effective leadership, teacher recruitment and data-based decision-making, supports the first two clusters of practices (see Figure 1). While other research and “common sense” may suggest causal relationships among some factors and clusters, our study did not examine causality; Figure 1 is simply one way to view and discuss relationships among practices.

J4K is a national education improvement organization that collects demographic and state test data from state education departments to analyze student achievement in core academic subjects. Traditionally, it is difficult to determine what value schools contribute to student learning because of large-scale variability in the socioeconomic status of the students they enroll and the strong influence of socioeconomic status on student achievement. J4K ameliorates this problem by comparing student achievement outcomes in a given school to those in other schools with similar or more disadvantaged student populations. Thus, J4K School Reports are useful in showing which schools are succeeding and which need more help, identifying a school's potential for improvement – its “opportunity gap” – and enabling researchers to identify and describe educational practices of the most successful schools, practices that other schools may be able to adopt in order to reach their potential.

J4K is also committed to identifying practices that contribute to student achievement so that one school can learn from another. J4K hopes that sharing data on high performing schools will help educators identify schools they can learn from. This report is one effort to facilitate such sharing. In addition, J4K-NJ is organizing a series of state-specific

Figure 1: Summary of Main Findings



“best practices” studies to identify factors that contribute to student achievement and steps that educators can take to improve performance of students in their own schools.

This limited study of six high-performing schools can only suggest the kinds of insights that a fuller investigation would be likely to produce. A larger, more complete investigation would involve more schools (including a control group whose GEPA results were only average, given their student populations); more time for classroom observation in order to improve understanding of the teaching and learning processes that occur there; and school visits at several times during the school year (the timing of this study required that all visits be made in the month prior to administration of the 2004 GEPA).

Methodology

Selecting Schools. The schools selected for this study were chosen because they were consistent high performers – among the state’s best – in language arts, mathematics and science on New Jersey’s Grade Eight Performance Assessment (GEPA) over four years on J4K-NJ high-performing lists. The selection process consisted of three stages.

First, within each subject, high-performing schools selected using the J4K model ranked within the top 25% of demographically similar schools with respect to the percent of continuously enrolled students that met a high standard on GEPA. The ranks were calculated using a regression analysis—a statistical technique that allows one to compare school scores while controlling for the effects of student characteristics. The main student characteristics taken into account included the percent of students living in poverty and the percent of English language learners. This analysis determined each school’s distance from the average of comparable schools. These residuals were then adjusted by the school size and ranked within one of four possible low income ranges (0-25%, 25-50%, etc.) for all tested grades in the analysis.

Second, additional criteria were used to identify high-performing schools. These included that from 2001 to 2003, schools always ranked in individual years and grades among the top 60% of similar schools using the same size-adjusted regression to rank them within their low income range; for privacy reasons, each tested grade and subject had at least 10 tested students to analyze; for each subject and grade, at least 85% of the enrolled students were tested on the exam, and; the absolute proficiency level never fell below 33.3% in any grade, subject and year included in the analysis.

Third, from among the high performing schools identified, six were chosen to represent various regions of the state, enrollment sizes, grade patterns (K-8, 6-8, etc.) and socioeconomic circumstances. Two of the schools were in Abbott districts, poor urban districts that receive high levels of state funding as part of the long series of court decisions in *Abbott v. Burke*. Appendix 1 shows how these schools compare to other schools in the state with regard to GEPA scores for language arts, mathematics, and science.

Schools Visited as Part of Study.

	<u>Abbott</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Grade Pattern</u>	<u>School Enroll.</u>	<u>Gr. 8 Enroll.</u>	<u>Percentage of Students Who Are . . .</u>			
						<u>LEP</u>	<u>Sp. Ed.</u>	<u>Mobile</u>	<u>Poor</u>
School A	No	N	K-8	1,350	150	11	7	19	54
School B	Yes	N	K-8	1,200	150	22	19	21	87
School C	Yes	N	6-8	400	150	27	11	14	87
School D	No	C	7-8	300	150	2	24	16	24
School E	No	N	6-8	1,000	300	1	11	3	1
School F	No	S	7-8	600	300	1	15	5	5

Key: Data in this chart are from 2002-03 and are approximated to protect anonymity of schools; regions are North, Central and South; LEP refers to students in limited-English proficiency programs; “Sp. Ed.” refers to students in special education programs; mobile students are those who entered or left the school during the school year; poor students are those eligible for school lunch programs.

Preliminary Procedures. Schools selected were contacted first by phone and then by a letter to the principal. All contacted schools agreed to host visits by school study teams. Principals drew up schedules of teacher interviews and focus groups and identified appropriate central office personnel to be interviewed (in some cases, principals scheduled these interviews as well, even though they had not been asked to). Principals also notified teachers about the nature of the study, using a short description provided by the research team.

School Study Teams. School study team members were:
 Sylvia Bulgar, Ed.D, associate professor of education, Rider University
 Lesley Lefkowitz, MS, faculty mentor, Mercy College, and a former literacy staff developer, New York City public schools
 Philip E. Mackey, Ph.D., an independent consultant specializing in New Jersey public education data
 Terrie Polovsky, MA, research associate, Rutgers University, and a former ESL/bilingual teacher in the New York City public schools
 Lisa Warner, Ed.D. (Oct. 04), senior mathematics specialist, Rutgers University.

Team members were trained on the use of all instruments, and instruments were modified and adjusted to ensure uniform use across sites. Further, to insure consistency, members were carefully matched according to expertise. Two team members visited each school; each team member visited either two or three schools.

Data Collection and Analysis. Data collection consisted of interviews and observations during two-day visits to each school by a study team. During visits, conducted in February-March 2004, the team:

- interviewed the principal for about 90 minutes;
- interviewed four grade 8 language arts, mathematics or science teachers (but no more than one science teacher) for one class period each;
- visited classrooms of the same grade 8 teachers for 15-45 minutes each;
- interviewed the school's union representative for one class period;
- interviewed two or three district administrators (typically, the superintendent or the assistant superintendent for instruction and district coordinators for language arts and mathematics) for 45-60 minutes each
- conducted a focus group for one class period with four to six academic teachers (or regular classroom teachers) in grades 5-7;
- conducted a focus group for one class period with staff who supported improvement in the school (e.g., whole-school reform facilitators; mathematics, science, or language arts coordinators or facilitators; and teachers who were assigned at least part time to help other teachers improve their teaching or implement the curriculum/whole-school reform);
- collected copies of goal or vision statements, descriptions of curriculum and other documents mentioned by interviewees in discussing reasons for their school's success; and
- observed indicators of the school culture, such as interactions among students, teachers and administrators; comportment of students in classrooms, halls, the library and the cafeteria; cleanliness and orderliness of the school; and display of student work.

School study team members tape recorded interviews and focus group comments for use as they wrote their reports; tapes are archived at the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Rutgers' policies governing research in schools required that all participants be informed that participation in the project was voluntary, that individuals could refuse to participate or withdraw consent and stop taking part at any time and that refusal to participate would not involve any penalties or loss of benefits to which participants were otherwise entitled.

School study teams conducted interviews and focus groups using protocols that stipulated questions for discussion; protocols differed according to roles of interviewees or focus group members. Protocols were based on models used by J4K research in other states, modified to fit the limited time available for school visits in this study; school study team members were trained in their use. All protocols asked respondents to reflect on the school's success on the GEPA in terms of instructional reform efforts; curriculum and goals; staff selection and capacity building; relationships and communication among students, teachers, community members and administrators; instructional programs, practices and arrangements; recognition, intervention and adjustment for teachers and students; and monitoring and the gathering, analysis and use of data. Teams also observed in classrooms using a protocol based on previous research on good instruction.

After the second day of data-gathering, each school study team's members collaborated in writing a report based on comments of people interviewed (either spontaneous or in response to interview questions) and classroom observations. When all reports were completed, school study team members and the other researchers met to discuss commonalities; a single researcher then analyzed all six reports and synthesized their findings.

Findings

Findings of this study are best interpreted in terms of the three clusters of conditions and practices outlined in Figure 1. The three clusters include one that contributes to school success in terms of school culture, one that contributes in terms of the school's organization of curriculum and instruction and one that focuses a variety of other facilitating practices to support the first two clusters of practices. Relations of conditions and practices within and among the three groupings will become more evident as we look at each factor across the six schools.

Conditions and Practices that May Contribute to School Culture

School Cultures that Respect and Motivate Teachers and Students

All of the schools shared a culture of seriousness about the teaching enterprise and student work. Staff evinced tremendous respect and support for students, as shown in everyday discourse as well as teachers' efforts to understand and assist all of their students, teacher collaboration to determine optimal learning experiences for individual students and teacher willingness to use free time to help students. Respect for students was reflected back in student respect for staff. Teachers also saw their schools as safe places in which they could experiment and take risks.

Staff tended to describe their school as a team or a family, metaphors for a nexus of cordial and effective relationships among administrators, teachers, other staff, students and parents. These relationships were sometimes formal, as in involvement of all stakeholders in committees that make important decisions about school goals, and sometimes informal: teachers had rich collegial relationships with one another, teachers treated students with respect and affection, teachers and administrators cooperated in productive ways (teachers often described the principal as "like a parent") and parents were viewed as valued resources and supportive of and sometimes active in school programs.

Buildings were clean and filled with examples of student work; students were orderly, even during power outages and false fire alarms; in the classroom, students stayed on task and paid close attention to their teachers.

Teacher Professionalism and Collegiality

Teachers in these schools tended to see themselves as accomplished professionals, knowledgeable in content and pedagogy, and in some cases expert enough to provide professional development for their colleagues. They were respectful of

their profession and their colleagues, comfortable taking risks and willing to spend some of their free time working with students. In particular, teachers reported a high degree of collegiality: they collaborated in designing lessons, critiquing one another's pedagogy, analyzing student needs and planning instructional approaches for particular students. In most schools, collegiality was fostered by class schedules that built in common prep periods and other time for teachers to collaborate. In one school, three language arts teachers taught each other's classes for one week each year to expose all students to their individual strengths, such as play-writing and narrative poetry. Other teacher collaboration was much more informal, before or after school or over lunch.

Three of the schools formalized teacher collaboration by using team teaching: teachers of mathematics, science, language arts and social studies (and in at least one school, special education) taught the same students in adjoining classrooms, shared prep time and lunch periods and held frequent team meetings. These teachers described team teaching as "exhausting sometimes," but effective in increasing communication among teachers, coordinating instructional approaches, helping to prevent students from "falling through the cracks," focusing help on particular students, helping teachers know what's going on in other subjects, facilitating joint planning, preventing teachers from becoming isolated and helping students retain what they learn. A fourth school used a different kind of team: classes were large and additional rooms were unavailable, so each class was taught by a team of two teachers with the same subject specialty. Staff thought that this arrangement, too, was highly advantageous.

Conditions and Practices that May Contribute in terms of school organization of curriculum and instruction

Effective Curriculum and Instruction

Staff in all schools described activities that had closely aligned their curriculum and materials to state standards. Most schools allowed flexibility in teaching the curriculum so long as teachers accomplished the goals. One school, however, used a fairly rigid district-wide curriculum that required every teacher to do the same thing at the same time.

Staff reported that instruction was student-centered, hands-on and inquiry-based, and concentrated on cooperative learning, individualized instruction, manipulatives, open-ended questions, real-world applications and peer and self evaluations. During class observations, school study teams noted use of hands-on activities, manipulatives, group work, peer tutoring. They also noted peer editing and revision in language arts and peer grading with rubrics in mathematics. But they did not observe a high degree of student-centered instruction and, in fact, noted many instances of teacher-directed approaches. These included proceduralizing open-ended questions, and having teachers read passages directly to the students (this may have been due in part to the proximity of GEPA testing).

Effective Test-Preparation and Multi-Grade Emphasis on the GEPA

GEPA “consciousness” was very high in four of the schools, where signs and teacher comments constantly reminded students about the test; some schools even held pep rallies and distributed T-shirts urging students to “Beat GEPA.” In these four schools, much energy was devoted to aligning curriculum with standards and infusing-GEPA-like questions in local assessments; special preparation included after-school and weekend classes and, in one instance, a daily class period to prepare students for the test. Above all, staff noted that these schools treated GEPA as a multi-year challenge and began preparing for it – in formal or informal ways – in grade 5 or before. In contrast, schools in the two affluent communities downplayed the test, secure in the knowledge that their students would perform well without any specific preparation or exhortation.

Effective Programs to Identify and Assist Students With Low Test Scores

All schools were diligent in identifying students who needed help and in providing that help. All, regardless of their emphasis on GEPA, used GEPA-like tests (e.g., the 7th-grade TerraNova) that identify lagging students. In some schools, particular attention was paid to students who were close to the cut-off score, either over or under. Staff – sometimes a formal committee, sometimes an informal group including teachers and guidance counselors and, in one instance, parents – reviewed test results and data about performance in earlier grades. Then, they discussed students’ needs and provided such assistance as basic skills programs in smaller classes, special classes, cooperative learning groups, mentoring, individual instruction, after-school assistance (in one case, a six-week summer session), tutoring by high school students, GEPA-like warm-up activities and advice to parents about getting outside tutors; some schools paired those deficient in writing with good students for peer editing. If test results showed that many students were weak in a particular cluster – like geometry – teachers revised their curriculum and methods to strengthen the weak area, in some cases after an expert was called in to review curriculum and methods.

Other Facilitating Practices that Support the First Two Clusters of Practices

Effective Principal Leadership

All schools had principals who were active leaders: with a clear vision, deeply engaged in instruction, supportive and respectful of teachers, willing to help and listen, accessible, dedicated to continuous improvement and zealous in visiting classes and engaging in dialogue with teachers. Principal leadership was closely bound up with the school climate; for example, teachers, who reported that the school allowed them to experiment and take risks without fear, attributed that climate to the principal and other administrators. In several cases, the principal had a long history with the school, having taught there for many years before becoming principal. Principals and teachers often cited this history as accounting for the feeling of family in the school. Teachers also tended to see principals as the glue that united the various strands that made the school effective.

Class Schedules That Support Effective Instruction and Teacher Collaboration

Class schedules in these schools varied widely – 41-minute classes, 135-minute literacy blocks, block schedules, rotating schedules that move a class to a different time each day – but they all had been carefully shaped to suit instructional needs as the staff saw them; they also provided time and structures that facilitated teacher collaboration.

Strong Community Support

All six schools had strong relationships with the community, though in some cases it is very difficult to get parents to come to school. Communication between school and home tended to be frequent, timely and effective. Parents tended to monitor their children's progress and participate in school activities, though less so as their children got older. Some schools encouraged teachers and students to provide community outreach and help students develop social consciousness by sponsoring clubs that raised money or recruited volunteers to assist local organizations or needy families. Bonds with the community were especially strong where some teachers and parents had attended the school as children. Staff of schools in more affluent communities commented that parental support could be very intense, and sometimes needed to be addressed by school administrators.

Strong District Support

District offices tended to be supportive, with superintendents or supervisors who took a direct interest in the school and helped school staff when problems arose. Comparison of interviews with school and district staff showed no serious disagreements about goals, strengths, successes or continuing problems.

Recognition of Teachers and Students for Quality Work

All six schools were dedicated to recognizing teacher and student success, but Schools E and F, because they were in affluent communities accustomed to excellence, tended to make recognition more private, like letters or cards to teachers or parents. The other four schools were careful to identify and celebrate even small successes by students and teachers, for example by running contests for students, identifying students of the month and naming teachers of the year.

Means for Teachers to Influence Policy

Teachers in all schools felt they played a vital role in helping to set school policies, especially those concerning instruction, grading, communication with parents and discipline. In Abbott schools, the role was formal because each had a site-based management committee with influence over all matters except teacher evaluations, hiring and firing. In other schools, the impact was confined to consultation or participation on committees that recommended policies.

Thoughtful Teacher Selection, Development and Retention Policies

These schools typically had few openings for teacher positions; when they did, they tended to look first at part-time teachers already employed in the school, partly because they were already steeped in the school's unique culture. In all but

one school, decisions about new staff were virtually always made at the school level; the role of teachers in the selection process varied.

Staff reported a lot of opportunities for professional development from a variety of sources, ranging from school and district experts to external providers, and teachers tended to take advantage of those opportunities. In all six schools, teachers chose what professional development offerings they wanted (which were not necessarily the ones that would have benefited them most) and were likely to be supported by school administration.

Teacher retention was no problem in these schools. Teachers liked their jobs and wanted to stay (one teacher moved to another part of the state, but still commuted 1.5 hours to her inner city school).

Effective Mentoring of New Teachers

These schools tended to provide new teachers with more mentoring help than the one year required by the state and to go further in facilitating smooth entry into the profession and the culture of the school. For example, one school assigned new teachers a retired principal who stayed with the newcomer for the equivalent of 20 days (spread over the teacher's first two months on the job) and assigned someone from the building to have frequent meetings with the new teacher. Another school offered training for the entire week before school opened and a strong, two-year mentoring program. The culture of collegiality at these schools provided frequent opportunities for informal monitoring, in which teachers observed each other's classes or helped out when they saw a new teacher struggling.

Data-based Decision-Making Regarding Instruction

All schools analyzed state and other test results by clusters or strands and provided reports so principals, supervisors and teachers could determine weak areas for individual students or entire classes. One school tested students every eight weeks, enabling teachers to reassess their plans and change teaching strategies based on results.

Future Research

There are four kinds of future research that would add to our knowledge of practices that contribute to student achievement:

Improved Research on School Conditions Supporting Student Achievement

Future best-practice studies in New Jersey schools should:

- include more schools; the National Center for Educational Accountability's criteria for nationally validated state best practice studies stipulate that they include at least ten high-performing and five average-performing schools;

- send three-person study teams to schools, in order to visit science, as well as language arts and mathematics, classrooms and spend much more time in classroom observation in general; and
- include three days of visits to schools, one early in the school year, one in the middle and one shortly before the March administration of the GEPA.

Data Mining for School Conditions

This research involves integrating quantitative data about student achievement with school conditions and looking for correlations that relate the two. For example, researchers might examine the extent to which specific conditions (such as time for teachers to jointly plan lessons or observe each others teaching) exist in schools and correlate them to the performance of students in the specific content domains.

Research on Instructional Approaches that Promote Student Achievement

This approach requires getting below the school level by identifying teachers whose students consistently score at high levels and identifying what they do, including how they approach teaching; how they establish classroom cultures conducive to learning; how they help individual children; and how they prepare students for the test over the course of the year.

Research on School Improvement Implementation

Lists of best, or effective, practices have existed for decades, but it has proved difficult for other schools to adopt the practices, sometimes because schools have seen them as ends, rather than as means to an end. Increasing interest in J4K-NJ reports provides new opportunities for research into the most effective ways to promote meaningful and sustained adoption of best practices.

Capsule School Visit Reports

School A

Abbott: No

Region: Northern

Grades: K-8

Enrollment: about 1,350

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 150

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 11 percent

Students in Special Education Programs: about 7 percent

Mobility: about 19 percent

Students in Poverty: about 54 percent

School A is surrounded by small, well kept private homes. The school population is very diverse. The principal says, “our strengths lie in our diversity.” Students come from 36 different language backgrounds and they are very driven. Students are competitive, hard-working, confident, street-smart and eager to achieve. They understand that if they don’t work hard and do well, they won’t go on to the next grade.

There is obviously a lot of learning going on in the school: students in classrooms all seem to be busy and engaged in their lessons; there is student work on the bulletin boards; halls are quiet. The tone is warm and friendly. Classes are very large, but teachers say there are very few discipline problems because of support from the administration.

The principal appears to be the catalyst for much of the school's success. He is involved in every aspect of the school, visits classrooms every day and discusses what he sees with the teachers. He has created an atmosphere in which teachers feel free to experiment without fear of failure or blame. In consultation with teachers, he moves them around to find the classroom in which they can be most successful. He has an open-door policy, encourages teachers to speak with him about their concerns and answers their questions when they arise.

One teacher said, "We are passionate about what we do here." Teachers see themselves as part of a team with each member contributing to the whole. They are happy to be working at the school and are committed to its – and the students' – success. The school schedule provides time for collegial planning (all teachers in grades 4-8 have common prep periods). Teachers work well together, learn from one another and are happy to share ideas. They feel comfortable in asking other teachers for help. They describe themselves as competitive, in a "good way." The pressure to succeed "keeps us going." They are proud of their community: "A lot of us grew up here. We have a role; we want to give pride to the kids."

Everyone takes responsibility for the success of students. Teachers really know their students, their strengths and their weaknesses. They also know which students need redirection and are willing to give them extra help.

Experienced teachers informally mentor and help new teachers, in addition to the formal mentoring program required by the state. The principal sometimes covers classes of new teachers so they can observe a more experienced colleague.

Teachers also impact school policy through many committees they can join. A Quality Assurance Task Force has a more direct and official voice in building policy. The principal chooses one teacher from each grade and specialty area – experienced staff who are respected by their peers – for this committee. These "grade leaders" meet 3-5 times a year, or more if necessary, and make suggestions to the principal over breakfast.

There is a district curriculum, tied to state standards, which every school follows. It is a concise overview of the books and skills each teacher is to follow, broken down by grade and marking period. Goals are broken down by timeline and everyone does the same thing at the same time. Quarterly district tests, which mirror state tests, are based on this curriculum and give teachers a clear picture of how their students are doing.

Instructional practices vary from teacher to teacher. The principal uses his knowledge of individual teacher strengths and weaknesses to make class assignments and is flexible in his expectations. "I don't believe in one thing as the answer." Recognizing teacher

needs, he tries to reinforce their strengths and provide support where they are weak. He is concerned that the district curriculum is being covered in a timely fashion. Using teacher plan books, the principal monitors the inclusion of state standards in their lessons. Teachers document the specific standards that were met for each lesson in their plan book.

The school tries to deal with students as individuals. Pre-testing is used to identify student strengths and weaknesses. The principal encourages more teacher/student interaction and less teacher lecture. Students are encouraged to provide solutions, to be creative and to think. The school's underlying philosophy encourages students to use critical thinking skills, in the belief that this process will help them in their adult lives.

The school is completely focused on state tests. The language arts and math supervisor are constantly changing the curriculum to better align it with state tests. The format of district language arts tests was changed to mirror the format of the GEPA and grades 3 and 4 tests. Because most of the GEPA is writing, the focus now emphasizes writing skills, open-ended questions, picture prompts, persuasive essays and revising and editing. There is a 90-minute literacy period in the morning followed by an additional period of instruction in language arts four days a week. Preparations for the GEPA begin well before the eighth grade. Beginning in the early grades, there is an emphasis on writing in all subject areas; students learn to answer open-ended questions.

School B

Abbott: Yes

Region: Northern

Grades: K-8

Enrollment: about 1,200

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 150

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 22 percent,

Students in Special Education Programs: about 19 percent

Mobility: about 21 percent

Students in Poverty: about 87 percent

This school is an old, but newly refurbished, three-story building in a large city. The building is immaculate, with living plants in the hallways – an environment, one teacher said, that influences everyone who walks through. Teachers are proud of their school's cleanliness (one said it “honors” the students) and contrast it with other schools in the city. Student work, much of it reflecting group effort, is exhibited throughout the halls.

The school is a community of learners, an extended “family,” with a tradition of respect and caring for teachers and students. There is a great deal of camaraderie among staff, who appear to be very supportive of each other (“We share everything with one another.”) Teachers report that staff members treat students with concern, kindness and patience, strive to give them a sense of responsibility and self-worth and are “relentless” in trying to help them. The students respond with politeness and respect for staff (holding doors open, lifting boxes, thanking them, etc.).

Teachers and district-level staff attribute the sense of family – and much of the school’s success – to the principal, who is a very strong and supportive presence in the school. She has worked in the school for 31 years, the last 11 as principal. As a teacher, she taught 11 of the current teachers, plus the parents of many current students (“I couldn’t have been a successful principal here if I didn’t start by teaching here.”). The principal has an “open door” policy, is involved directly with children and consults her staff “on everything.” She says, “I have never kept a secret from my staff.” Staff praise her leadership: “She goes out of her way to help, so you go out of your way to help.” They all talk about how essential she is to the school, while she says “they don’t really need me.”

The principal visits classrooms a minimum of three times per week and is very positive and energetic (“We celebrate life in this building.”). She leads a campaign to celebrate all achievements of teachers and students. Her weekly newsletter praises teachers’ achievements, large and small. There is a Teacher of the Year Award and some classes have Student of the Month awards. Overall, teachers say, there is a “sense of being valued for what you do.”

Because class sizes are large and there are no additional classrooms, the school assigns two teachers in every classroom. One is technically the primary teacher, and the other is referred to as the reduced class size teacher, but both are cooperatively responsible for everything related to the class. The presence of a second teacher seems to be effective in keeping students on task and in providing special assistance to a few students while the main lesson continues.

The school is completely focused on state tests. The principal says that “every child and parent” knows about the GEPA. Halls and classrooms contain signs about “beating the GEPA.” The school holds a dinner for 8th-grade parents 3-4 weeks before the test, a GEPA “pep rally” for students and parents just before the test and celebratory parties and barbecues after the test. One 8th-grade classroom devoted much of its blackboard space to lists of GEPA clusters and the number of points assigned to each, plus lists of vocabulary words, presumably in preparation for the test. In grades 6-8, there is a period devoted to GEPA preparation daily, and extended day and weekend programs re-emphasize the lessons. All classroom tests mirror the GEPA format, to help students become familiar with the test design.

From grade 4 up, instruction is done in clusters duplicating those on the GEPA test. A block of time is set aside for each cluster that appears on the test. In grades 6-8, there is a daily period devoted to GEPA preparation. Grade 6 and 7 students take frequent district assessments that mirror the GEPA, and help is provided to those who don’t do well. There are extended day programs (including pre-algebra in the morning) and an extended week program on three Saturdays just before GEPA week. Students are assigned to a group in the extended programs based upon the cluster in which they show weakness in the regular classroom. These programs, led by regular classroom teachers, are optional, but over 500 students participate.

The curriculum, materials, daily lesson plans, themes, professional development and virtually everything the school does is based on state standards. Teachers say they are very familiar with standards and indicators for their grade level. They report that they stress open-ended questioning, inquiry-based learning, individualization and hands-on activities.

The school recently changed from block scheduling (80-minute classes) to one-hour periods in order to provide all four core subjects every day; the change has been supportive of academic achievement.

New teachers are first assigned a “20-day mentor,” a retired principal who stays with the new teacher for the equivalent of 20 days, spread over a two-month period. In addition, each new teacher has a “full mentor” for a year, as dictated by the state, someone from the building who has frequent lunch and other meetings with the new teacher. Teachers select their own mentors, based on advice from the principal.

School C

Abbott: Yes

Region: Northern

Grades: 6-8

Enrollment: about 400

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 150

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 27 percent,

Students in Special Education Programs: about 11 percent

Mobility: about 14 percent

Students in Poverty: about 87 percent

Built as a non-public school in 1912, School C is surrounded by private homes and a few four- and five-story apartment buildings. The small school building, though clean and well cared for, contains no auditorium, gym, library or lunchroom; every day, even in rain or snow, students must walk together to a church two blocks away to acquire some of the missing services. The school’s extended day program runs from 7:00 AM to 4:00 PM, but students are welcome as early as 6:00 AM. This provides additional time at the beginning and end of the school day to offer programs for students-at-risk and or for high-achieving students.

Teachers have the freedom to create a soothing classroom environment; some play classical music softly in the background, others have running fountains. Motivational signs hang on the walls of the classrooms and the hallways. This is a technology school, and teachers are comfortable with a variety of equipment. To support project learning, teachers use audio-visual materials, streaming video, VCR’s and laser discs.

The school was created 10 years ago as a high-tech school, in collaboration with a high tech corporation. The school’s first principal hand-picked the entire staff from two elementary schools (partly based on who was willing to help develop the school) and involved them in planning and designing the school. From the start, the school boasted

state-of-the-art computer labs and gave home computers to every student in the seventh grade.

The original staff is still largely intact, and their sense of ownership and collegiality has become the culture of the school. They are warm, dedicated and enthusiastic; they see themselves as a family, completely committed to what they are doing and to the success of every student. Teachers do things together, in and out of school. Many are products of the city's schools who wanted to return to give back to their community. It is not necessary to hire new teachers because nobody leaves. Teachers believe that "the school is viable. It listens to us." They have a tremendous sense of pride in the success of their students and expect every child to achieve. They have a long-range vision of their students' success and are concerned about their students long after they have left the school. Parents are not as involved as they could be, but are very supportive, seeing the school as the institution that will lead their children to better lives.

Collaboration is built into the school schedule. Some grades have a daily prep period, while others have a collaborative prep period three or four times a week, facilitating discussion of methods or individual student needs.

The school's small size enables it to approach both teachers and students in individualized ways: creative scheduling that maximizes individual strengths of teachers and early identification of student weaknesses provision of personalized help. Every teacher is on a committee and has access to the principal and input into decision-making and school policy. Every child is known; nobody gets lost in the crowd.

The principal is supportive, knowledgeable and available to both teachers and students (she frequently breakfasts with students in her office). Staff members believe they have created an environment in which students feel safe, protected and nurtured. The staff has developed programs, curricula and teaching practices that are reexamined and refined on an ongoing basis. Constant collaboration among administration and staff ensures that programs address individual needs of students in the most effective way possible.

The school's instructional practices aim to meet individual needs of every child. Teaching strategies are tailored to address individual student differences. By attending professional development workshops that stress the multi-sensory approach to learning, teachers are prepared to enable their students to maximize their achievement. The school never gives up on students who do poorly; instead student needs are identified early and support is provided early. The teacher builds on every achievement, no matter how small and students are told, "You're on the way to many great things." Teachers believe that every student must succeed and that they should not settle for less. Multi-disciplinary projects serve to reinforce specific skills and to connect classroom activities to real life. Nothing is taught in isolation. Teachers believe that projects, rather than tests, demonstrate student mastery.

The curriculum, developed by teachers within the district, is aligned with state standards, as are materials selected to support instruction. Teachers have the freedom to make their

own adjustments as to scope and sequence. The curriculum has benchmarks, and students are tested every eight weeks. As a result, teachers reassess their plans every eight weeks and can change their teaching strategies based on test data.

GEPA is taken very seriously. The teachers requested and got a cessation of class interruptions for the month prior to the administration of the GEPA. The district held a GEPA rally on a Saturday and students were given motivational T-shirts. Motivational signs decorate the walls of the staircases.

The school's emphasis on language arts includes a 90-minute literacy block each morning, followed by 45-minute periods in which teachers work with groups of 12-15 students with specific needs, using the WRAP (Writing and Reading Appreciation) program. In addition, topics in language arts and social studies classes are paired, giving students the opportunity to read novels about subject matter discussed in social studies classes.

A six-week summer session is provided to help at-risk students. There is a special program that pairs LEP students with the teachers they will be assigned to in the fall. This design supports a smooth transition to the school and enables teachers to identify student weaknesses early in the year.

School D

Abbott: No

Region: Central

Grades: 7-8

Enrollment: about 300

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 150

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 2 percent,

Students in Special Education Programs: about 24 percent

Mobility: about 16 percent

Students in Poverty: about 24 percent

This is the only middle school in a community where about 50 percent of students live in apartments and others live in trailer parks. Students are highly diverse thanks to a nearby military base, but students embrace their differences and are very accepting of each other. The socio-economic status of the parents varies widely.

The principal has been at this school for almost 40 years, 38 as a teacher and two as principal. Staff share a strong sense of collegiality. Many teachers have taught in the school for many years; some grew up in the community; some former students are now colleagues. This community background may help explain teacher generosity and consideration toward needy students: teachers buy them presents at Christmas and provide them school supplies if they can't afford to buy their own. Teachers describe a secure environment where they and students are not afraid to take risks and say that they spend free time with students, after school or at lunch.

Collegiality is formalized in a site-based management committee, composed of the principal and 8-10 staff members, that works out solutions to school problems. The committee discusses all issues except teacher evaluations, hiring and firing.

Classes are team-taught, which enables teachers to collaborate with colleagues who teach the same students; collaboration may involve content, classroom management, implementation of lessons or individual student strengths and weaknesses. Teachers appear to donate substantial free time for such activities as supervising student-to-student tutoring, mentoring students and participating in committee meetings.

The school offers heterogeneous classes and accelerated classes for language arts and math in each grade; in language arts, classes are small (18 or fewer). There are two periods of English daily, one of them devoted to reading. The language arts co-chair thinks that the concentration on reading helps students on the GEPA, “the best reading test I’ve ever seen.” Staff said that mathematics classes stress manipulatives, open-ended questions, real-world applications and peer and self evaluation. Their goal for science classes is to enable students to experience the way scientists work.

The school employs a rotating class schedule, so classes are taught at a different time each day. Some teachers said that they thought that this was a good idea because students learn better at different times of day (for example, right after lunch isn’t a good time to teach a class).

The school relies heavily on technology, particularly on TIENet, a Web-based, instructional management system that aids teachers in assessing student needs, identifying appropriate instructional techniques, locating resources/activities, reassessing skill development and reporting student progress. The school has used TIENet to construct quarterly benchmarks on tests; the software then reports results by class, student, skill, etc.

Staff said that all grade 7-8 teachers are certified and experts in their subject area, most with a degree in their subject. In grades 5 and 6, where each grade has two teachers per school, one specializes in mathematics and one in language arts, and they teach their specialization subject to the other class as well as their own.

The school administers the TerraNova test in grade 7 to identify students who may have trouble with the GEPA. A few teachers said they focus on students who have scored just below or just above proficient and provide those students with extra support. The school also reviews GEPA essays from previous years to see what makes a good essay and what will make it better. A variety of programs helps students prepare for the GEPA, including after-school workshops beginning in January (about 80 students attend); homework clubs; and peer tutoring (within the school and with middle school students tutoring elementary school pupils) during lunch and homeroom periods.

Staff say that the district is now holding elementary school teachers accountable for preparing students for the GEPA by implementing curriculum mapping (aligned to the

GEPA and state standards) in elementary grades. Whereas elementary school teachers used to teach every page in the textbook, they now map out skills as a guide, including suggested pages in the textbook. “We have built a bridge over the chasm between the elementary schools and middle school,” the principal says.

School E

Abbott: No

Region: Northern

Grades: 6-8

Enrollment: about 1,000

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 300

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 1 percent,

Students in Special Education Programs: about 11 percent

Mobility: about 3 percent

Students in Poverty: about 1 percent

School E is the sole middle school in a wealthy community with very low mobility. Parents are strong supporters of their children and the school and, if anything, put too much pressure on their children to excel academically and participate in school and community activities. Students enjoy coming to school and arrive with such a range of background knowledge (about foreign travel, art, classical music, films) that teachers say they often learn from them. Parents are very involved in their children’s academic success and provide very useful feedback to the school about classes and policies.

Staff describe a school environment where everything is well thought out, carefully planned, evaluated and changed if necessary; nothing occurs in isolation or without planning; and there are no surprises. Teachers are very serious about what they do, and their work ethic is very high. They receive all of the materials they need and have ample opportunity for professional development. They provide help for individual students before and after school.

Staff share a culture of respect for their peers, their work and their students. The principal and assistant principal are former teachers in the school, and they treat the teachers like family; their office doors are always open. They have tremendous respect for teachers and take their issues seriously. Teachers have plan books but no one ever asks to see them. The administration is supportive of teachers who take risks and do new things. Teachers have a highly collaborative relationship; they share planning and preparation of lessons (sometimes at 7 AM meetings); share materials, observe each other’s classes and “steal” ideas; and confer with one another before school, during lunch and after school. Teachers stay because they are “genuinely happy with the culture of the building.”

Teachers expect the highest achievement from the students. Here, “good enough is not good enough.” If a student is having problems, teachers troubleshoot until they figure out what to do: test for a learning disability, contact the family and provide extra help.

Students are generous in devoting time and effort to one another and the community. The grade 8 peer leader program engages over 220 students in school and community service groups, including the Peer Leader Outreach Program, ESL Peer Leaders, Mentors of Grade Six, Mediators, PALS (Pre-K and 3rd Grade), Personal Improvement Planners (one-to-one mentoring with sixth and seventh graders), Students of Art Respond. What If Students Helped? and Peers for Animal Welfare and

Teachers new to the district, regardless of how long they have taught, receive four days of professional development in the summer that is designed to familiarize them with the school's instructional model. All teachers are evaluated by building administrators, who observe classes and then work with the teacher to develop a professional growth (enrichment) plan or, in the case of a weakness, a professional improvement plan.

Curriculum is reviewed on a regular basis so it is "appropriate, relevant, up to date and not stagnant." The teachers have a lot of input in creating the curriculum and many of them work summers to write it. The state standards determine the curriculum and are used as benchmarks for performance. There is great flexibility in the curriculum as long as the teachers accomplish the goals.

The school pays little overt attention to the GEPA, though there have been considerable efforts to make sure that students get plenty of practice on GEPA-like questions. Students are not anxious about the test, because they see it as easier than the work they do every day in their classes. It is taken for granted that all students will score at least proficient on the test. Standardized test scores are not analyzed or reviewed by individual teachers and have little impact on what teachers do. Results are not used to change the curriculum or for class placement.

There are nine periods in a day, each 41 minutes long, although the curriculum is designed for 60-minute periods. The teachers feel this is ideal because it forces them to "push the kids to do more" in less time. Students cooperate because they know they will have to finish everything at home that they do not complete in class. Instruction is characterized by teacher collegiality, outstanding delivery of content and individual support.

Grades 6 and 7 are team-taught, with three teams in each grade. The schedule is structured so that team members have a daily meeting time to coordinate their activities and ensure that no student falls through the cracks. The three teachers sharing a discipline also meet to plan content and pedagogy and share work related to specific lessons. For example, the three 8th grade language arts teachers share their expertise in playwriting, film and narrative poetry by teaching each other's classes for a week.

The school discourages undue competition by using "quiet recognition" to honor individual achievement of teachers or students. There is no honor roll because there was too much pressure about "who was not on the honor roll." Recognition takes the form of notes to students and their parents or letters and private thanks to teachers. Copies of any written accolades are placed in teacher personnel files.

School F

Abbott: No

Region: Southern

Grades: 7-8

Enrollment: about 600

Grade 8 Enrollment: about 300

Students in Limited English Proficient Programs: about 1 percent,

Students in Special Education Programs: about 15 percent

Mobility: about 5 percent

Students in Poverty: about 5 percent

This is the sole middle school in a wealthy community with a long tradition of excellence (in academics, the arts and sports), strong belief in the value of education and a high degree of social coherence. The superintendent says the town's commitment to its children is "phenomenal." Many teachers live in town or went to school there; some parents move back to town to send their children to the same schools they attended. The school has new leadership (the principal and assistant principal are new this year), but a strongly dedicated and professional staff, with high morale. The superintendent says it is the strongest school in the district, partly because teachers are completely dedicated to the middle school mission and know how to meet the needs of the age group.

The school is large, bright, airy, attractive and clean; the library is huge, well-staffed and well-equipped. It is located on the same campus as the high school and district administrative offices, so supervisors are physically and psychologically close. Originally built for grades 5-8 in 1970, it underwent major renovations four years ago and converted to grades 7-8 three years ago. Several staff, including the superintendent expressed awe that the school had weathered these wrenching changes, plus changes in leadership, without losing its morale or momentum.

The school has just returned to team teaching after 20 years without it: the intent is to help children "in the middle." It seems to be succeeding in preventing students from slipping through the cracks. The team consists of four core subject teachers, plus a special education teacher (an especially valuable member), who collaborate across content areas to address early identification of problems and assistance to meet individual student needs. The new system has increased communication among teachers, who teach in classrooms near one another, have team meetings once a week, have common prep time for two periods every six days and have the same lunch period. Teaming is "exhausting sometimes," but helps teachers know what's going on in other subjects, facilitates joint planning, prevents teachers from becoming too isolated and helps kids retain what they learn.

While team teaching is too new to help explain the school's success on the GEPA, the collegiality that is helping team teaching succeed is well-established in the school culture. The coherence of the faculty can be seen in the fact that when the principal asked each

teacher to name one colleague he or she would most like to team-teach with, every teacher in the school was named, except one.

The principal visits one class every day for an informal observation and follows up with a note recognizing the teacher's strengths ("That lesson was truly amazing"). The principal says that conversations after these visits "can be more productive than evaluation."

In mathematics, district teachers have identified "big ideas" to be taught at each grade, beginning in grade 4; state standards are infused into big ideas. The school emphasizes hands-on activities, in-depth analysis of different topics, teacher-written curriculum, problem solving, open-ended problems, a variety of assessments, use of a computer lab and writing about mathematics. There are five mathematics tracks in grades 7 and 8; in grade 7: basic, on-level, enriched, accelerated and honors algebra; in grade 8: basic, prealgebra, algebra, honors algebra and honors geometry. All mathematics curriculum "covers all the bases," not just basic skills; it focuses on fewer topics, but deeper ("teachers really bought into this"); teachers don't repeat topics, but keep rehearsing content of grades 4-6 to keep topics fresh in mind of students.

Language arts goals are to address "four pillars in each unit – reading, writing, listening and speaking" using a whole-language philosophy. There is an extensive vocabulary program in grade 7, using a unified list for all students. The school is attempting to dovetail grammar instruction in grades 7 and 8, to foster better articulation between grades. Writing is incorporated into reading units with the aim of generating writing topics from literature; there is one accelerated class per grade level. One goal is that students should be able to write a five-paragraph essay; teachers concentrate on the essays' introduction and conclusion. Language arts teachers say they feel a need to read orally as much of a book as possible in class.

Support for new teachers includes a strong, two-year mentoring program and training for the entire week before school opens. If a teacher is having problems, the supervisor or principal directs them to appropriate professional development or gives him or her opportunities to visit other classes and work collegially with other teachers.

The district analyzes state assessments and TerraNova tests (which it uses to familiarize students with GEPA-like items) by strands or clusters, compares scores to schools with similar demographics where possible and gives information to teachers. The analysis identifies students with weaknesses that will hurt their GEPA performance and students close to the cut score.

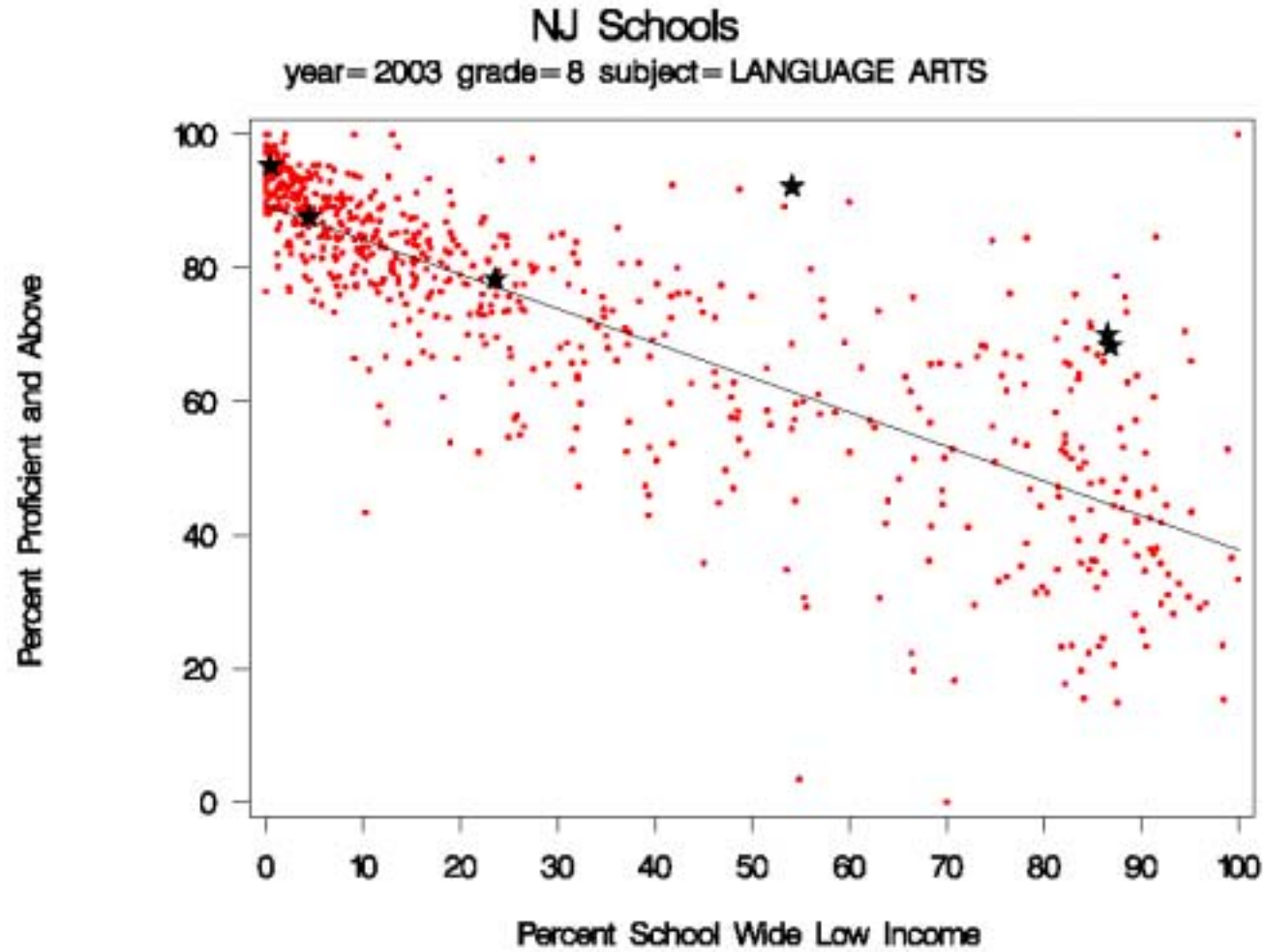
The school's success seems to be largely a function of its remarkable community, which provides "wonderful students," strong parental support and an ethos of respect for education and culture. Partly because of the community and the school traditions it has fostered, the school has attracted a highly professional, dedicated and caring teaching staff and administrators who recognize the teachers' excellence and give them license to innovate. With so many high achieving students, the school can devote its energy to its

middle-level students, through the use of programs tailored to the needs of individuals, as indicated by assessment results and teacher observation.

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APPENDIX 1

The Six Subject Schools Compared to All Schools in New Jersey on GEPA Scores, 2003



NJ Schools

year= 2003 grade= 8 subject= MATHEMATICS

