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Schools that work

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On paper, the schools appear troubled: low-income students, low state test scores. But a closer look reveals 13 are doing better than expected.

Annabelle Siedschlag trusted that her children's school, Dayton's Bluff Elementary in St. Paul, could rid itself of the problems plaguing it in the late 1990s: Poor discipline. Low test scores. Bad morale.

The challenges are not uncommon at schools such as Dayton's Bluff that serve mostly low-income students. But Siedschlag had faith in the teachers she said nurtured students, and she thought things would get better.

They did. A new principal arrived in 2001 and renewed the school's energy. Expectations became clear. Students respected teachers. And staffers now go out of their way to support parents.

"My sons are always aching to go to school," said Siedschlag, whose five children have attended or are now at Dayton's Bluff. "(Teachers) don't lie about caring. You know they care.

"The school has grown a lot," she said. "It's come a long way."

Evidence of that turnaround can seem elusive. In fact, the East Side school typically appears only mediocre when the state Education Department releases test scores for all Minnesota schools.

But those numbers don't tell the whole story. Schools with large numbers of students from low-income families — or who move often, are learning English or have other special needs — almost always fare worse on standardized tests, most educators agree.

The Pioneer Press analyzed three years of test scores from all 731 Minnesota elementary schools to predict how well each school should do when its percentage of low-income students is taken into account — effectively leveling the playing field between the haves and have-nots.

The result: Dayton's Bluff emerges as one of 13 schools that are beating the odds, are doing better than predicted and seem to have found a way to overcome education's biggest challenge — teaching high numbers of poor students well.

Also on the list are St. Paul's Farnsworth Magnet, Roosevelt Magnet and Museum Magnet/Rondo, along with schools in Brainerd, Duluth, Rochester and other outstate cities. St. Paul's Prosperity Heights Elementary and Garlough Elementary in West St. Paul just missed the list but are on trajectories that indicate they are making strong strides.

School visits and interviews showed that the factors seen as critical to success at Dayton's Bluff also are found at many of the other schools: They have strong principals and a cohesive staff who offer students consistency and structure. They emphasize reading and writing above all else. And they focus instruction on the needs of individual students rather than trying to reach some average child.

These approaches would be effective at any school, said Mistilina Sato, an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Minnesota, but are "really difficult to enact successfully."

"A lot of people can be doing these things — but it's about how you do them," she said.

Dayton's Bluff's success can be a lesson for other schools where poverty hinders students' ability to learn.

STABILITY AND STRONG LEADERS

Dayton's Bluff used to post some of the worst test scores in the state. Chaos seemed to rule, and there were times when as many as eight of 10 staffers would call in sick as morale plummeted.

"We were a school in crisis," said Marilyn Wojtasiak, the school's design coach, who reviews test scores and helps the staff focus lessons on students' personal needs.

School district officials overhauled the school in 2001. The principal left and teachers were required to reapply for their jobs. Only about

one in three returned that fall.

The new staff rallied around new principal Von Sheppard, who has since left the school; cracked down on bad behavior; and worked to create a stable environment for students to learn.

Since then, test scores at Dayton's Bluff have gone up an average of 207 points, or 17 percent.

Before the upswing, as many as two-thirds of sixth-graders couldn't read past a second-grade level. Now, about four of the school's 45 sixth-graders aren't reading at their grade level — and about 40 percent of kindergarteners are reading at a first-grade level.

The student population remains much the same. Almost all receive free or reduced-price lunches — an indicator of poverty — and almost one-third require extra help with English.

While living on a low income can be unpredictable, life within the school's walls is stable and consistent. For instance, all students get breakfast at school, even if they show up late.

Principal Andrew Collins and his teachers monitor the hallways every morning, greeting kids and forming what Collins calls the first line of defense — a unified effort to identify problems and help students before the day starts.

"Hey, there — are you doing OK?" the 6-foot-10 Collins asks one morning this spring, crouching down to a boy's eye level. "You look tired today."

They talk quietly, and Collins pats the boy on the back.

"You can just tell by their body language," said Collins, who came to Dayton's Bluff this school year. "Sometimes they just need a hug. Sometimes they need much more help than that. It's all about how their day starts. If it's chaotic, if it's loud, it follows them right into the classroom."

The scene — and motivation — can be found at other schools identified by the Pioneer Press as doing better than predicted in its analysis.

At Harrison Elementary in Brainerd, eager kids hug Steve Lundberg as he strolls down a hallway and stops to poke his head into classrooms. The principal checks in with a harried single dad who's picking up his kindergartner, the oldest of three kids.

"That's a tough situation there," Lundberg reflected.

This is clearly Lundberg's school: He knows all 290 students at the aging, two-story brick building. At the end of the day, he perches on the front steps to say goodbye to hordes of students who hug him before climbing aboard school buses.

Teachers say Lundberg's leadership and the small student body foster a tight-knit community that allows them to connect with students and parents.

"It's important to be able to identify at-risk kids early on," Lundberg said. "You've got to show them you love and care for them before they will begin the learning process."

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

These successful schools have focused on basics — reading, writing and math — as they educate their at-risk students. They also have shifted to small-group learning and one-on-one instruction.

"We used to teach to this mythical middle student," said literacy coach Paul Wahmanholm, who has taught at Dayton's Bluff for eight years. Now, "we got away from this one-size-fits-all approach and focused on individualized instruction."

Lori Goulet's first-graders start their day at Dayton's Bluff with a morning meeting and time reading books selected for their abilities.

Goulet listens to Tahari Lankford read "Tricks with a Kite," marking words he gets right and ones he needs help with. Then she questions the boy to see how well he understood what he read. She tells him his strengths — and points out where he needs more work, such as making sure to read slowly enough to pronounce properly.

"You use a lot of strategies," she said, "like finding smaller words in bigger words and sounding them out."

Dayton's Bluff students know their goals and are told how they're progressing to reach them. Bulletin boards in classrooms and hallways post student work along with samples that meet state standards in those subjects.

"We had a pretty lengthy debate over that," said design coach Wojtasiak. "Some of us were afraid it might hurt their self-esteem. But you need to give them a target."

SOME SCHOOLS SACRIFICE

The schools visited by the Pioneer Press found different ways to allocate teacher time and resources to focused learning.

At Prosperity Heights, the librarian doubles as a literacy teacher. The school's behavioral aide runs an after-school math program and takes kids on bike rides and other outdoor jaunts after lessons.

"Everybody is part of the team and everybody is responsible for what these students accomplish," Principal Sharon Freeman said. "We do a lot of juggling here and have a creative schedule that we stick to. That's what has worked for us."

Juggling often means sacrifice. At Dayton's Bluff, students don't attend music, art or science classes; teachers instead incorporate those subjects into other lessons.

Third-grade teacher Virginia Kressin did that during a unit about water. Students learned about precipitation, condensation and evaporation and read two books, writing a response to one and creating a performance to retell the other. And each child crafted a colorful mask to represent water's different forms — from waterfalls to rainbows.

"How would you describe water using alliteration?" Kressin asks, quizzing her students on literary terms as they decorate their masks.

Puzzled faces mull the answer until Chue Fue pipes up. "The water is whirling?"

He's right. What about personification?

"The water is full of tears," he proudly replies, confident he nailed another tough question.

Some experts worry, however, that such pushes for literacy could lead to the loss of subjects such as science and social studies.

Fred Storti, a principal for 27 years, said federal education standards and the testing that measures them have pushed reading and math to the forefront, particularly for schools working to improve performance of higher-poverty students and those learning English.

"This emphasis is good to a degree, but quite frankly, I worry about the curriculum becoming just reading and math," said Storti, now executive director of the Minnesota Elementary Principals' Association. "There's only so much time in the day, so schools need to make tough choices on what they offer."

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The Pioneer Press analysis also identified schools that are falling short of predictions when teaching high numbers of low-income students. Two in St. Paul — Wellstone Elementary and Maxfield Magnet — have tried to incorporate successful strategies from Dayton's Bluff and the other schools exceeding expectations.

"We can do better," said Wellstone Principal Christine Osorio, who has pushed the school to focus on literacy. "There are places really beating the odds, and we need to be one of them."

Schools sometimes find that teaching alone is not enough. Ensuring children are ready to learn also has become a priority, said Yolanda Murphy, the former Dayton's Bluff assistant principal who now leads Battle Creek Elementary in St. Paul.

"If a kid has an abscessed tooth, they're not going to be able to learn," Murphy said.

The gym at Roosevelt Magnet is filled every fall and spring with donated clothes that meet the school's uniform requirement, and volunteers serve as students' personal shoppers.

Staff members at the West Side school have helped Shanta Fears, the mother of a first-grader, find food shelves. And when her phone service was cut off, administrators referred her to a service to get it back on.

"So long as you work with them, they'll work with you," Fears said.

Families and students at Dayton's Bluff benefit from the school's involvement in Achievement Plus. The partnership between the school district, local governments and private nonprofit organizations aims to help students in low-income neighborhoods by targeting social, emotional and health issues that affect learning.

Achievement Plus partners have spent approximately \$7 million since 1997 to remodel Dayton's Bluff and build an adjoining recreation center where families get information about housing opportunities, attend literacy programs or receive health and dental services, in addition to using its theater, dance studio and gym.

Collins, the Dayton's Bluff principal, admits it is a struggle to get parents involved. So the school tries to include parents in regular assemblies, such as monthly "Students of the Month" ceremonies that always include a performance by a band or other student group.

"It's not only important for the parents to be there, it's important for the kids to see them there," Collins said. "Once the student knows that the parent and teacher are on the same page ... it helps not only academically, it helps if any behavioral issues come up."

For some kids at Dayton's Bluff, teachers and staff become almost surrogate parents, said Siedschlag, the mother of five. She does her part and tries to volunteer often to help other children.

"It's like a home," Siedschlag said. "And that's the way I think a school should be."

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