



Best Practices in High-Performing Schools

Fiscal Year 2019

Report to the Legislature

As required by Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, Subdivision 4

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Table of Contents

For more information:.....	2
Legislative Charge.....	4
Introduction.....	4
Analysis.....	4
Conclusion	15

Legislative Charge

This report is consistent with the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4, which states, “Consistent with the requirements of this section, beginning June 20, 2012, the commissioner must annually report to the public and the legislature best practices implemented in those schools that are identified as high performing under federal expectations.”

Introduction

This report summarizes responses from school leaders concerning the practices that may have contributed to the high performance of students in these schools; however, it is important to note that a conclusive causation between the identified implementation of best practices and high student performance cannot be made. The evidence-based practices implemented in such schools and outlined in this report may inform improvement efforts in other Minnesota schools as well as give the public and the legislature a solid understanding of where resources need to be targeted.

Analysis

History

In 2018, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) used the North Star accountability system for the first time. After extensive engagement with stakeholders around the state, MDE built the North Star system in compliance with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Passed in late 2015, ESSA is the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The reauthorization prior to ESSA was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which had been in effect since 2002.

In its original form, NCLB did not call for recognition of schools for high student performance. However, midway through the law’s existence, the U.S. Department of Education began granting states ESEA flexibility waivers. Minnesota was one of the first states to receive such a waiver. One aspect of receiving the waiver was the creation of a school recognition system based on the Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) system, which was Minnesota’s accountability system under the waiver.

Under ESSA, as under the original version of NCLB, the federal ESEA does not require recognition of schools for high student performance. During the stakeholder engagement process that led to Minnesota’s ESSA state plan, MDE staff heard regularly from stakeholders that there was a desire to continue to recognize schools, as well as significant interest in both broadening and deepening the recognition process.

Broadening the recognition process could include expanding the scope of recognition beyond the measurements in the North Star system that lead to identification of schools for support. The efforts to broaden recognition are ongoing and may lead to a wider range of approaches in coming years.

Deepening the recognition process includes, in part, doing more to solicit information from schools that are recognized for high student performance. This year's iteration of this legislative report is one effort to collect this information. In addition to surveying schools about evidence-based practices from a non-exhaustive list developed by MDE and now used by schools, districts, MDE staff, and the Regional Centers of Excellence, this report also summarizes themes from open-ended questions posed to school leaders about which practices they used and how they supported the use of those practices.

Recognition in 2018

In 2018, schools could be recognized for high performance in one or more of six indicators from the North Star system. These indicators were:

- Progress toward English language proficiency (specific to English learners).
- Math progress (at elementary and middle schools).
- Reading progress (at elementary and middle schools).
- Four-year graduation rates (at high schools).
- Seven-year graduation rates (at high schools focused on credit and dropout recovery).
- Consistent attendance (at all schools).

If a school's student population was in the highest 5 percent of schools in the state for a given measurement, the school was recognized for that measurement. Additionally, if one or more student groups at a school performed at the same level as the highest 5 percent of schools overall, the school was recognized for the performance of that group, even if the school's overall population did not perform at that level. The student groups used for this were:

- American Indian and Alaskan Native students.
- Asian students.
- Black students.
- Hispanic students.
- Multiracial students.
- English learners.
- Students in special education.
- Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Whether looking at a school overall or a specific student group, data from the previous three years was averaged together to determine whether the school would be recognized. Consistent with the minimum group sizes used to identify schools for support, data from a year was included only if the population in question had 20 or more students included in the calculation of the measurement.

This process resulted in 524 schools being recognized for at least one indicator.

Survey of Recognized Schools

In late November and early December of 2018, the principals of the 524 recognized schools were surveyed. The survey used was adaptive, limiting questions to only the specific indicator(s) for which the school was recognized. This survey generated 129 responses, for a response rate of 24.6 percent.

For each indicator, the survey listed the corresponding evidence-based practices included in MDE's current, non-exhaustive list meant to help schools identify practices with a track record of success. These practices all meet the strongest definition of "evidence-based" laid out in ESSA and by the U.S. Department of Education. Survey respondents were asked to indicate which of those evidence-based practices they thought contributed most significantly to their students' performance or to list other practices not on MDE's list that they saw as helpful.

Respondents were asked to identify the three practices they thought had the largest impact. The practices on MDE's list were offered as options, and schools could also name their own practices not on MDE's list. This meant a school's three practices could come entirely, partially, or not at all from the practices identified by MDE. This provides MDE and others with information about which other practices those in the field are finding useful, creating opportunities for further exploration and to expand the understanding of what is working well.

For each indicator, respondents also had the opportunity to provide two open-ended responses describing (a) how they supported the use of the practices they identified and (b) what else they thought was important for MDE to know about the steps they took to support student performance on that indicator. While these open-ended responses were optional, many respondents took the time to add them.

Common Themes for All Indicators

Three themes emerged from the survey responses for all indicators:

- Adult consistency.
- Differentiated support.
- Setting priorities.

Adult consistency

Survey respondents across all of the indicators described the importance of adults being consistent in how they carry out the best practices. This idea of adult consistency is supported by other research on the science of implementation, and to see it reflected unsolicited by survey respondents affirms the value of focusing on ways to increase adults' consistency in carrying out whichever practices a school is working to use.

More specifically, many respondents discussed the importance of one or both of professional development and collaboration. These appeared to be some of the most commonly cited systems for promoting adult consistency. This was true for instruction-focused indicators such as math achievement as well as for connection-focused indicators such as consistent attendance.

Respondents who discussed professional development often described ongoing professional development – through professional learning communities (PLCs), regular coaching, and dedicated meeting time throughout the year – rather than one-off trainings. Examples include:

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “PD [professional development] and PLC support with culturally relevant pedagogies and academic vocabulary instruction.”
- “We adopted a new math program...that is supported by ongoing PD by district and site based coaches.”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “100% of teachers have had professional development in Restorative Practices. We use daily positive (class meeting) circles in every classroom to build community, social emotional learning skills, and create a forum for discussion.”

PLCs also factored heavily in many responses related to collaboration, although not all schools referenced PLCs when discussing collaboration. This aligns with existing research suggesting that PLCs can be helpful when used well, although the simple presence of PLCs is not sufficient to create change. Examples of comments about collaboration include:

- “Established a regular weekly time for the [middle school] math teachers to meet as a PLC with a specific structure and purpose. Collaborative process for curriculum development and selection...”
- “PLC (grade level teams) take time to plan instruction, analyze data, and determine interventions for students in the area of reading... Our PLC Leadership team met once a month to share ideas and strategies that their [grade-level] PLC found effective.”
- [with respect to seven-year graduation rates in credit and dropout recovery schools] “Collaborative Inquiry Teams meet regularly and discuss the progress of all students represented by the team.”

Differentiated support

Adult consistency does not mean rigidity. To the contrary, many respondents – including several of those who discussed how they built consistency in adult practice – described how they make sure that students and, when relevant, families get the support that is most likely to lead to student success. Many respondents referenced the use of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), a structure that can be used in both academic and behavioral contexts to support differentiation of support. Others described specific classroom techniques, and still others discussed regular practices undertaken outside of class time.

Examples include:

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “WIN (What I Need) Time focus[ed] on direct skill and language acquisition and development.”
- [with respect to math progress] “Our MTSS program has really helped us focus our instruction to meet the unique needs of each of our scholars. We are seeing nice growth and are able to make instructional changes much quicker.”
- [with respect to reading progress] “Our staff is extremely skilled in their small group instruction. Students’ needs are met, whether they are working with a group based on ability or specific skill. Teachers are completing observational and monthly assessments to gauge student progress.”

- [with respect to four-year graduation rates] “We are a rural school and we know where everyone is at on credits, what their progress reports state, and if there are concerns, have constant communication with the student, parents, and staff. If we see a student get behind in credits, we find alternative options for credit recovery.”
- [with respect to seven-year graduation rates in credit and dropout recovery schools] “[Teams] identify additional supports for students, planning for students who are on track, ahead, or needing to maintain. Students who are in danger of not graduating register in the spring for summer school and/or independent study. The goal is to over-communicate the next step and get a commitment from students so they have a clear plan to return and graduate.”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “Many parent meetings to be supportive and help problem solve issues that keep students from attending.”
- “We never operate under the assumption that kids want to miss school. Every kid who has an attendance concern is supported rather than punished. Though we follow the county practices, we always work closely with families.”

Significantly, most of the descriptions of the use of data here involved the classroom data that staff collected throughout the year. This pattern reaffirms the importance of focusing on local data, especially with respect to individual students. Annual statewide measurements are limited in their ability to provide the necessary amount of information to effectively differentiate support. This suggests that schools and districts who are seeking to improve their use of data would be well-served to evaluate the quality of the data their own staff are collecting with an eye towards providing individualized support to students.

Setting priorities

Also running through the responses for all indicators was the idea of intentionally bringing additional time, money, staff, and/or attention to the specific area being targeted for success.

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “Our instructional leadership team partnered with our EL teachers, who in turn worked with every grade level to identify specific instructional strategies to focus on the area of mathematics vocabulary.”
- [with respect to math progress] “This involved districtwide discussions, planning, and selection of an evidence-based program, identifying a process for progress monitoring based on research, and a focus on building the infrastructure within our system.”
- “Reading has been our site goal for the past few years. All staff emphasize the importance of reading and model love of reading.”
- [with respect to four-year graduation rates, answering the question, “How did you support the use of these practices?”] “Monetary support along with making it a priority.”
- [with respect to seven-year graduation rates in credit and dropout recovery schools] “The day program has been increasing advisory time and making more concerted efforts to...create more visibility regarding students who graduate during the year. That way other students see that it is possible.”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “Providing transportation to all students, feed students with at least 2 meals, we care about our students.”

- [with respect to consistent attendance] “We take the time required to establish positive relationships with all of our families, particularly our families of color. We flex our schedules to align with theirs whenever possible to ensure that we have opportunities to meet face-to-face. Our Assistant Principal and a number of our teachers are highly accessible to parents through phone and text when dealing with families of all students, but particularly those families who need the support. We strive to have a true partnership among our students, families, and staff for the benefit of the child.”

Given the resource constraints that schools and districts face, the question of what to prioritize is a critical one. The indicators for which schools were recognized are also among those used to identify schools for support. A given community, district, or school might choose to focus on one or more areas not recognized in this report and be seeing success in those areas that doesn’t happen to be captured by the measurements used here. The process of setting those local priorities in an open way that is intentionally inclusive of all in the community – and especially those from historically underserved populations – is an important responsibility of local decision-makers. A community might decide that the measurements used by the state for accountability purposes are not the ones most relevant to their students; it is vital that such a decision be made by the whole community rather than a small number of people.

Common Themes for Instruction-Focused Indicators

Most of the responses to the questions about progress toward English language proficiency, math progress, and reading progress focused on instruction. In these cases, adult consistency, differentiated support, and the setting of priorities were most often deployed in service of teaching standards and implementing specific instructional techniques.

Standards

Standards are meant to be the backbone of academic and language development content taught in schools. While a school might choose a specific curriculum, the expectation is that the school evaluate the curriculum relative to standards and, where necessary, supplement the curriculum to ensure that all standards are taught to the required depth. Respondents mentioned many different curricula and resources that they used, to the point that no one curriculum stood out as being especially common among these schools. That lack of a single standout curriculum further reinforces the importance of teachers knowing the standards and being able to consistently teach them while differentiating support.

Examples include:

- “We incorporated speaking and writing [two major areas of English language development standards] into most [English learner] pullout instruction times.”
- “We have mapped out our curriculum into two categories, Saxon math curriculum and Core Math to ensure depth of standards while focusing on varying levels of [depth of knowledge]. Our Saxon curriculum offers an ample amount of spiraling which we feel is beneficial to students to revisit concepts, while our Core Math emphasizes the depth of the standards.”

- “The use of our PLT [Professional Learning Team, another term for a PLC] was vital to our student math progress. During our PLTs, we used the Dufour guiding questions:
 - What do we want our students to know? – We identified the standards and learning outcomes.
 - How will we know if they know it? – We created common formative assessments.
 - What will we do if they don’t know it (yet!)? – We met in small groups to reteach and provide guided practice with strategies.
 - What will we do if they know it? – We looked at ways to extend the standard and provide enrichment opportunities.”
- [with respect to reading progress] “The review of our curriculum and the standards to make sure we are covering all needed areas.”
- “Last year, staff identified that our previous program was lacking in the area of reading comprehension [one component of the reading standards], so sharing best practice strategies in this area was a focus. So far this year, staff feel like our new reading program has more of a focus on comprehension strategies.”

Discussion of standards and curriculum featured particularly heavily in the responses about math progress. Since most of the schools recognized for math progress were elementary schools, other elementary schools working to improve their students’ math progress might consider working with their teachers to review the math standards and ensure that what is being taught fully captures the depth of those standards.

Instructional techniques

If standards are the core “what” of instruction, the techniques adults use to help students master the standards are the “how.” As obvious as it may be to state, adults who both know the standards and how to teach them effectively are more likely to see student progress than adults who are experts in the content but not well-versed in the best ways to help students learn them.

Teachers can call on a wide range of instructional techniques to best meet students’ needs. The specific techniques will vary by grade level, subject, and students’ pre-existing levels of mastery. Ensuring that all teachers are developing the appropriate skill with the right techniques for their context is often one of the key goals of the professional development and collaboration work that build adult consistency. Often, experimentation and learning from others is key to building effectiveness with these techniques.

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “Our school has been focusing on strategies for classroom teachers to use that provide more visuals and opportunities to have conversations with peers.”
- “[O]ur teachers have worked hard to develop purposeful math talk discussions around what students are thinking. Teachers have also worked hard to develop the capacity to ask deeper thinking questions.”
- [with respect to math progress] “Our school has in place a very effective PLC structure, utilizing a rotating plan/do/study/act cycle that supports the analysis of data to identify the most effective teaching strategies.”
- “We use a consistent written response format in all classes 5-8. Spelling, vocabulary, and grammar are taught in all grade levels. Students use textbooks that are a grade level above in all grades.”

- “Our intervention teachers did a complete overhaul of reading instruction to our most struggling readers starting 2 years ago. Their work in this is transforming how we help our neediest readers. It’s beginning to trickle into classrooms where teachers are beginning to use their strategies. We are giving intense intervention very early – K and 1 [kindergarten and first grade]. Our data is promising – showing less need and number of students needing intervention.”

This last example is significant for multiple reasons. First, the spread of techniques from intervention teachers (who often have additional training, experience, and/or specific expertise in their area of intervention) to other teachers serves the dual purpose of building adult consistency and expanding the impact of intervention teachers beyond the specific students with whom they work. Second, the attention to students’ experiences before they reach tested grades speaks to the importance of deep attention to students beyond the specific confines of a statewide measurement.

Common Themes for Connection-Focused Indicators

Graduation and consistent attendance, based on the responses to this survey, proved to be more about connection than about specific instruction. (The major exception, as noted later in the detailed survey results, is the number of respondents around four-year graduation rates who noted credit recovery and other intervention options as important practices.) For the most part, responses in these areas focused on relationships and school climate.

Additionally, some responses from those recognized for progress toward English language proficiency echoed these themes (in a way that was less common in the other instructional-focused indicators). This may indicate the importance of treating support for English learners – and potentially other historically underserved populations – as a combination of instruction and connection.

Relationships

Across all of these indicators, proactive and meaningful relationship-building stood out as critical to success. The relationship between adults in the school and students was brought up most frequently, although significant attention was also paid to the relationship between adults in the school and families, especially when discussing consistent attendance.

Examples include:

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “It helps to have a strong relationship with the families and community. We also have a high participation rate in extracurricular opportunities, which we believe has helped with our motivation.”
- [with respect to four-year graduation rates] “Meeting with students in a one-one setting allows for honest dialogue about the students’ goals and the pathway to completing these goals.
- [with respect to seven-year graduation rates in credit and dropout recovery schools] “Building trusting and supportive relationships with students from the time they start with us is key to maintaining

connection until they graduate... Our goal is to have every student able to identify at least one trusting adult at school who will always be there for them—most students can name several.”

- [with respect to consistent attendance] “We dedicate time to intentionally develop and maintain positive relationships between students and between students and staff... Our goal is to be proactive with behaviors and relationships to eliminate the potential behavior pitfalls before they can occur.”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “We have a great relationship between our teachers and families. Our teachers go out of their way to make students feel valued.”

Much of the attention in the NCLB era focused on the amount and quality of instruction that students received. Moving into a post-NCLB world, it is becoming clear that attention also needs to be paid to other dimensions of student experience, including their relationships (and those of their family) to their school and the adults there.

School climate

In addition to the specific relationships between people, many respondents also wrote about the importance of the broader school climate. This includes ensuring that school is safe and welcoming, that students and families see people like themselves represented regularly and positively, and that the school feels like part of the community.

- [with respect to progress toward English language proficiency] “[We created] a welcoming and inclusive school environment that allows all students to feel as though they are the fabric of our school community.”
- [with respect to four-year graduation rates] “Strong community and family support.”
- [with respect to seven-year graduation rates in credit and dropout recovery schools] “Students may be transient, but they know that we are always waiting for them...”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “None of these initiatives would have been successful without working as a staff to make sure we were creating a warm and welcoming environment for families once they got to school.”
- [with respect to consistent attendance] “The school climate and culture must provide a safe and collaborative environment where students truly feel that they are accepted and cared for. When this type of culture exists, where students feel valued, there will be a reduction in absences and truant behaviors.”

Especially when working to improve the connection of those from historically underserved communities to school, ensuring that the school climate is safe, welcoming, and representative is critical.

Detailed Survey Results

The tables that follow display, for each indicator, the percentage of respondents who indicated that a given evidence-based practice was among the three most important to their students’ success in that area. Since respondents could indicate up to three practices, the sum of percentages will be much more than 100 percent.

Progress Toward English Language Proficiency

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Explicit academic vocabulary instruction	68.8%
Culturally relevant pedagogy	50.0%
Structured opportunities to produce outputs in English	43.8%
Dedicated writing instruction	31.3%
Other (1)	25.0%
Bilingual or dual-immersion programs	12.5%
Ethnic studies programs	6.3%
Student home language in core instruction	6.3%

Math Progress

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Establish mathematics goals to focus learning	55.3%
Facilitate meaningful mathematical discourse	42.1%
Elicit and use evidence of student thinking	34.2%
Implement tasks that promote reasoning and problem solving	34.2%
Build procedural fluency from conceptual understanding	31.6%
Other (1)	26.3%
Support productive struggle in learning mathematics	15.8%
Use and connect mathematical representations	10.5%
Pose purposeful questions	7.9%
Other (2)	5.3%
Other (3)	2.6%

Reading Progress

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Abundant reading material and reading opportunities in the classroom	56.8%
Small groups and individual instruction, using a variety of grouping strategies, most often with flexible groups formed and instruction targeted to children’s observed and assessed needs in specific aspects of literacy development	54.1%
Activities that build reading fluency and stamina with increasingly complex text	43.2%
Intentional, research-informed instruction using increasingly complex tasks that build comprehension, knowledge, and strategic reading activity	37.8%
Discussion of the ideas in texts and how to construct text meaning across texts and disciplines	29.7%

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Intentional and ambitious efforts to build vocabulary and content knowledge	21.6%
Deliberate, research-informed efforts to foster literacy motivation and engagement within and across lessons	10.8%
Ongoing observation and assessment of children’s language and literacy development that informs their education	10.8%
Collaboration with families in promoting literacy	8.1%
Research- and standards-aligned writing instruction	8.1%
Other (1)	2.7%

Four-Year Graduation Rates

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Other (1)	75.0%
Other (2)	41.7%
Check and Connect	25.0%
Early warning intervention and monitoring system (EWIMS)	25.0%
Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR)	16.7%
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	16.7%
Other (3)	8.3%

The most common “Other” practices submitted by schools were: (a) connecting students falling behind academically with processes for credit or standards recovery; and, (b) building strong relationships with students.

Seven-Year Graduation Rates in Credit and Dropout Recovery Schools

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Other (1)	80.0%
Other (2)	60.0%
Early warning intervention and monitoring system (EWIMS)	20.0%
Other (3)	20.0%
Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	20.0%
Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR)	0.0%
Check and Connect	0.0%

The most common “Other” practice submitted by schools was maintaining enough flexibility around schedule and learning options to be able to personalize the experience to students’ needs.

Consistent Attendance

Practice	Percentage of Respondents
Other (1)	55.6%
Social and emotional learning	44.4%
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	39.7%
Check and Connect	34.9%
Restorative practices	23.8%
Other (2)	15.9%
Other (3)	1.6%

The most common “Other” practices submitted by schools were: (a) communication and engagement with families; (b) relationship-building; and, (c) tracking attendance in order to respond early to absenteeism and celebrate attendance.

Conclusion

Schools recognized for their students’ performance on progress toward English language proficiency, math progress, reading progress, graduation rates, and consistent attendance reported several common themes. Many schools explicitly worked to build adult consistency through professional development and collaboration; differentiate support for students and families; and made success in the area for which they were recognized a priority. Of those recognized for instruction-focused indicators, many directed this consistency, differentiated support, and/or priority toward standards and the use of specific instructional techniques. Of those recognized for connection-based indicators, they directed their work toward relationships and school climate. These findings affirm much of what has been established in implementation science and the study of conditions for learning.

Additionally, the surveying of districts surfaced the frequent use of credit recovery, relationship-building, flexibility, engagement with families, and tracking of either credit completion or attendance in order to respond quickly to emerging student needs as high-potential practices for further investigation and promotion.