

**High Performing, High Poverty Schools:  
A Preliminary Literature Review  
May 9, 2002**

In January I attended a presentation on how a high school in Ellensburg raised WASL writing scores. One of the presenters shared a strategy for motivating students to write better on the WASL. She notified all the local businesses that normally employ high school students, that she would be happy to provide their WASL scores so that they could make better summer hiring decisions. She commented that such a strategy was not as effective for youth in generational poverty because they were not motivated by money. She referred to a book by Ruby Payne called [A Framework for Understanding Poverty](#).

I was struck by the idea that better understanding the culture of poverty might help in our quest to better educate the poor. So I read Payne's book and began formulating possible research questions. After reading several other sources, I finally settled on a research question: What factors distinguish high poverty, high achieving schools? This evening, I am presenting a preliminary review of the literature on this topic.

**A Sketch of Recent History on the Question**

Recent history on this question begins with the Coleman study published in the wake of the "Great Society" movement in 1966. In this groundbreaking and enormously influential study, Coleman determined that factors beyond the control of educators had far more influence on student learning than anything educators could control. The finding relevant to my question is that children of poor parents tended to have low school achievement. Educational professionals and the general public began to believe that children living in poverty simply could not learn. This deep seated belief has become a

part of our culture. The backing of research has provided educators with a built in excuse for the failure of children in poverty.

Reaction to Coleman's findings began almost immediately. Harvard's Dr. Ron Edmonds led a small team of researchers who documented two high poverty schools that did not fit Coleman's findings. These schools significantly out performed neighbors with high income levels. Based upon these anomalies, Edmonds convinced the U.S. Department of Education to grant one million dollars to identify more high performing, high poverty schools. Edmonds dubbed these schools "Effective Schools" and launched the beginning of what we have come to know as the "Effective Schools Research." The decade from 1966 to 1976 saw many studies intended to describe effective schools. The next phase of the research, which extended into the late 80s sought to identify the characteristics of effective schools. During the 90s, we have seen a body of research aimed at specifically identifying high poverty, high achieving schools meeting a particular threshold of both poverty and achievement. For example, a body of case studies known as the "90/90 schools," meaning schools of 90% or greater poverty whose students score in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile or above, became part of the literature. Today, the literature has become more prescriptive, seeking to replicate the characteristics found in effective schools in those with poor results.

I will close this brief historical sketch by reference to the famous "Pygmalion" study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968. Although not a part of the reaction to Coleman, this study has taken on significance recently. As you may recall, Rosenthal and Jacobson found that teacher expectations made a huge impact on student achievement, both positive and negative. Researchers today are finding that the Coleman

study has produced a cultural Pygmalion effect, namely that we *expect* children in poverty to perform poorly and so they do. These researchers are uncovering 90/90 schools and other high performing, high poverty schools all over the nation in an effort to break the negative Pygmalion cycle for children in poverty.

### **Findings**

In general, the effective schools research has found the following factors present in high performing schools:

1. A safe and orderly environment
2. A climate of high expectations
3. Strong instructional leadership and emphasis
4. A clear and focused mission
5. Opportunity to learn/ time on task
6. Frequent monitoring of student progress
7. Constructive home and school relations

Study after study turns up lists, varying in length up to 15 or so characteristics, very similar to this one. Some ignore instructional leadership but include things that can only come about as a result of instructional leadership. For example, organizing the schedule for maximum time on task or insuring a smooth continuity of curriculum can be listed as characteristics of high performing, high poverty schools, but these characteristics cannot exist in any school without some leader or group of leaders making them happen.

Research on high performing, high poverty schools tends to fall into one of three camps. I call the first camp “fatalists.” These researchers, following Coleman, tend to view reform in terms of the larger society, contending that schools cannot hope to make a

difference in the lives of poor children without control over their home lives. I term the second camp “raving optimists.” These researchers tend to look for the outstanding exceptions, the 90/90 schools for example, do case studies of these schools, look for the common characteristics, and expect other schools to follow suit believing that, if one school can do it, there is no excuse for the others. In fact, a notable recent study, done by Samuel Casey Carter in 2000, is called, “No Excuses.” Casey’s group is challenging educators to abandon the excuse provided to them by Coleman. The third camp, I call cautious optimists. This group tends to be the most thorough, thought provoking, and scholarly. Granting that some high poverty schools show tremendous results and that, despite these anomalies, it is indeed much more difficult to produce great results with children in poverty, they seek to strike a rational balance—not bludgeoning schools that fail to produce phenomenal results as some of the raving optimists seem to do, but providing solid research of programs and practices that show promise in helping struggling schools to improve. Susan E. Mayer, author of What Money Can’t Buy: Family Income and Children’s Life Chances, written in 1997 is an excellent example of the “cautious optimist.”

### **Identifying High Performing, High Poverty Schools and Further Research**

I will conclude my presentation with some comments about identifying high performing, high poverty schools and ideas for further research. Until recently, there has been no way of clearly identifying high performing, high poverty schools. For example, the editors of the 1999 report Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations used a method of state self-reporting to identify schools. That is, they asked the chief officers in each state, equivalent to our Superintendent of Public Instruction, to

identify the high performing, high poverty schools in their respective states. When they realized problems with this method of identifying schools, they undertook another project: they used the U. S. Department of Education database to develop an online tool for use by researchers in identifying high performing, high poverty schools. After using their tool to identify “high flying schools” for themselves, they produced another report in 2001 called Dispelling the Myth Revisited: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Analysis of “High-Flying” Schools. They identified 4,577 high performing, high poverty or high minority schools nationwide. Of these, 3,592 schools fit my research question. On a disappointing note, this report did not effectively include Washington because our state did not report free and reduced price lunch data in 2000. Another incredible finding is that of the 4,577 schools identified, nearly a quarter of them, 1,069 schools, are in Texas.

This online tool will be invaluable to researchers who must first identify high performing, high poverty schools in order to study them. It also provides the opportunity for researchers to do some quantitative research on the characteristics of these schools. Such research is sorely lacking. There are many qualitative studies showing some patterns in the characteristics of high performing, high poverty schools, but little quantitative data to show that any of these factors occur in all, or even a majority of such schools. Indeed, such studies have been logistically impossible, at least through 2001 when the first reasonable means of identifying all of these schools nationwide was developed.

**Conclusion**

My research into high performing high poverty schools has proven extremely interesting and motivational. Based on the attached bibliography of 20 sources, I highly recommend a full study, which I may take on myself. As school administrators and aspiring school leaders, many of us working in high poverty school districts, we should all at least become familiar with the literature on this topic and implement promising findings in our districts. Thank you. I would be happy to take your questions.

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