

Policies of Effective Schools

“Student learning was shown to depend more on the people providing educational services than on school facilities and supplies.” ERS, Inc.

Overview

Policies of all effective schools therefore have common themes and threads that define the very nature of the school, the type of people who lead and work in them, as well as what those people are expected to do. School effectiveness research shows exemplary pupil performance to result from many policies, behaviors, and attitudes, that together shape the learning environment (ERS, 1985). While these policies will vary from school to school, district to district, and state to state, there are many similarities. This Policy Brief will identify those common characteristics policies of effective schools employ.

First and foremost all policies must be well defined, well written, and well communicated. Well-defined means that each educational body undertaking the drafting of a policy to address and issue must do their research. Every issue in education is complex, multifaceted, and interconnected. Why the policy is being written must be well understood. Recently, a school in Colorado had to redefine their definition of “fighting.” Why, because this school was about to be label a “dangerous school” under the No Child Left Behind Act. Think about it. In the context of the public school, what is a clear definition of fighting? Do the research and homework to get all the facts and background before drafting the policy.

Well written means clear and to the point. After reading the policy, there should be no doubts about what it means, what it address, and what are the expectations.

Well-communicated means top down. Every stakeholder has been briefed. Communication is the translation between the written format and implementation. For a good example visit Fayetteville, N.C. Sherwood Park Elementary School’s web site ([http:// www.ccs.k12.nc.us/swpes/default.htm](http://www.ccs.k12.nc.us/swpes/default.htm)). And, most importantly, it means applied consistently, universally and equally (Arnold, 2000). If there are exceptions to the policy, then they must be defined by the policy.

Characteristics of Effective Schools Policies

Effective schools all have policies that define:

- High expectations for student performance,
- Strong instructional leadership,
- An orderly school climate,
- An emphasis on basic skills,
- Careful and continuous monitoring of student progress,
- Support the premise that all students are eminently educable,
- Support a greater sense of control over the learning environment.

Characteristics of Effective School Policies that Define Leadership

School effectiveness is the product of a unified effort marked by district wide, building-wide integration of attitudes, goals, policies, and programs that promote learning (ERS, 1985). Research consistently points to leadership from

school administration as a critical component of this integration (Schwartz, 2001). The synthesis of research on effective educational leadership provides the following points:

- The Principal is the key implementer of policy,
- Must set clear goals,
- Devise a specific plan to reach the goals,
- Direct school/district resources toward achieving those goals,
- Create an school/district environment that supports goal attainment.

The research also provides essential personal characteristics of effective educational leaders:

- Task-oriented,
- Well organized,
- Skilled in work delegation,
- Set/Communicate high goals for school, staff and students,
- Spends a significant amount of time outside their office and inside the school and classrooms, and
- Skilled at getting things done.

Characteristics of Effective School Policies that define staff

Policies that deal with school personnel have shown greater relationship to student achievement than measures of facilities and supplies. A review of the policies, from effective schools concerning staff, demonstrated common characteristics. Staff characteristics that provide a positive effect on student achievement fall into the following categories:

- Higher educational attainment,
- Greater understanding of content area,
- Higher degree status,
- Greater verbal ability,
- Resourceful, flexible, supportive,
- Higher salaries, and
- Professional development.

While greater educational attainment and higher degree status corresponded with better student performance, research also indicated that ongoing teacher involvement in continuing their own education (professional development) and expertise enhancing activities was as important

as formal degrees or number of credit hours possessed. Research did not show a significant relationship between student achievement and a teacher being certified or tenured. Therefore policies concerning staff should contain language that addresses the above characteristics, with particular attention to professional development.

Characteristics of Effective School Policies that define School Climate

School environment should be supportive of learning process. The climate should be purposeful, orderly, and cooperative. The building administrator should make a concerted and consistent effort to structure the physical environment to reflect the school's positive goal-oriented philosophy, including a well-kept interior and appearance. Other key features of the climate in effective schools include:

- Decision making structures that involved teacher input,
- Highly collaborative relationships among staff,
- Clear, firm, and consistent enforced discipline,
- Strong and effective school governance, and
- Policies that foster school spirit.

Characteristics of Effective School Policies that define Parent and Community Relations

The review of research regarding the level and nature of parental involvement in creating effective schools is conflicting. While some research suggested that unstructured increased parental participation was seen in declining schools, structured parental involvement, esp. in relation to reading was positive. As with all policies, leadership is a critical component in their implementation, esp., in the arena of parental and community relations. Administrators adept at community relations demonstrated the following skills:

- Related with parents in a comfortable and often informal manner,
- Used innovated interaction vehicles,
- Used a wide variety of communications media,
- Addressed community issues, and

- Took specific steps to enhance public relations.

Characteristic of Effective School Policies that address Goal-Oriented Instructional Programs

The research indicates that there is little apparent relationship between a particular instructional program employed by a school or district and school success. What the research did indicate is that effective schools developed systematic plans and policies to upgrade student proficiency in basic skills areas and to address student-learning difficulties.

- The plan should provide for a cohesive instructional program that is both school and district wide.
- There should be continuity of instruction across grades.
- The plan should provide for continuously evaluation of student progress.
- Standardized achievement tests are better indicators for student progress and placement.
- The plan should support coordinated and cooperative efforts between all staff and administrators.
- The plan should provide for remedial and individual attention for those students not performing satisfactorily.

References

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