



Lessons in Reading Reform

Finding What Works

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SUMMARY

The San Diego Unified School District, the nation's eighth-largest, launched an ambitious program of literacy reforms in 2000 aimed at narrowing reading achievement gaps. Known as the Blueprint for Student Success, the program ran through 2005. The reforms succeeded in boosting the reading achievement of students who had been identified as lagging behind at the elementary and middle school levels. The key element that seems to have driven this success was a significant amount of extra student time spent on reading, with a possible collateral factor being widespread professional development for district teachers. The combination was neither cheap to implement nor a magic bullet. But in elementary and middle schools it demonstrably worked. In high schools, with one exception, it did not.

This study summarizes our statistical evaluation of all of the Blueprint reforms over the five-year period, drawing lessons for educators about why some elements of the Blueprint succeeded and how they could be implemented elsewhere. Elements that appeared particularly helpful were extended-length English classes in middle school and an extended school year for low-performing elementary schools. Even in high schools, we found that students who participated in triple-length English classes were more likely to be promoted to the next grade. There were several goals that the Blueprint interventions did not achieve. But neither did the interventions confirm the fears of many Blueprint detractors—such as that extra time spent on reading would degrade student performance in other subjects or

would cause student burnout, all to the detriment of their entire school careers. The Blueprint appeared to have little or no bearing on student success in completing high school college preparatory work.

One of the lessons of the Blueprint is that specific changes in both state and federal government policy could foster these kinds of ambitious reforms elsewhere, at the school district level. California could continue its recent trend of collapsing categorical funding into more flexible mechanisms that give individual school districts freedom for reforms that boost achievement in the most appropriate way. At the federal level, the Department of Education could ease its Title I waiver requirements, so that districts could use that money for reforms that target not only low-income students, but also low-performing students, regardless of school or neighborhood.

A key aspect of San Diego's reform program was that it was comprehensive and coherent. Interventions often were applied in two or more of the elementary, middle, and high school grade spans. Further, professional development was delivered uniformly, with a single focused goal, to teachers throughout the district. But perhaps the most important lesson for education policymakers is that many of the reforms took several years to bear fruit. Most notably, the peer coaching system for teachers did not typically generate positive gains in the first year or two, but did appear to do so by the later years. An obvious lesson here is that school district leaders everywhere, when they implement reforms, must show considerable patience in their quest for improved student literacy.

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