

Study finds 10 traits of school success

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A new study by the Donnell-Kay Foundation and Augenblick, Palaich & Associates has identified 10 school characteristics that seem to help close the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The study, "Profiles of Success: Eight Colorado Schools that are Closing the Achievement Gap," was released Tuesday at the news conference hosted by state Education Commissioner Dwight Jones.

The 10 traits identified by the study are:

- A culture of high expectations and accountability for all students
- Targeted assessments and intensive data use
- Individual support for struggling students
- Active engage of teachers in school leadership and decision making
- Substantial time for planning and professional development
- A commitment to core academic subjects without ignoring the arts and humanities
- Stable and consistent leadership
- Small learning communities
- Flexibility to use resources
- An economically integrated student body

The study drew its conclusions from in-depth examination of eight schools: South Park Elementary School, Cesar Chavez Charter School and Pueblo School for the Arts & Sciences (all Pueblo District 60), Valley View K-8 School (Mapleton Public Schools), Cedaredge Middle School and Hotchkiss High School (Delta County Schools), Carson Middle School (Fountain-Fort Carson School District 8) and Janitell Junior High School (Widefield School District 3).

The baseline criterion for selecting schools was that schools' economically disadvantaged students outscored the state average on the CSAPs in at least two subjects for at least three consecutive years.

That filter produced a list of 39 schools (see full list below). From that, the researchers selected eight schools for further study. The eight were chosen in order to provide variety in location, governance, size and grade levels served. (The eight schools also selected based on not being "too poor" or "too rich." Economic integration "helps bring all kids up," said researcher Any Berk Anderson of Donnell-Kay.

The researchers noted that the findings are consistent with those of a number of other studies elsewhere.

Van Schoales of The Piton Foundation, which helped fund the study, noted that the report didn't find any advantage in a particular curriculum or school structure. Instead, coherence and focus were most important.

“It seems we can learn from what we know,” Jones said, putting the findings in the context on ongoing discussions about education reform. “It’s our hope that other schools will look to these common traits as best practices to raise achievement for their own students.” He said the study will be given to every school district in Colorado and incorporated into a best-practices guide the department will produce later this year.

The report listed these implications for other districts and schools:

- Schools and students benefit when districts set clear expectations, measurement standards and accountability procedures
- Districts should give students more time to learn
- Districts should look for ways to provide greater autonomy
- Incentives for teacher retention and recruitment are helpful
- Students are less likely to fall through the cracks in smaller learning communities
- Choice opportunities can encourage economic integration of schools

Schools that met the multi-year, multi-subject filter of the Profiles study: Mountain Ridge Middle School (Academy School District 20); Pagosa Springs High School (Archuleta County School District); CEC Middle College Program (Denver Public Schools); Ridgeview and Stetson elementary schools (Falcon School District 49); Aragon Elementary School, Jordhal Elementary School and Fountain-Fort Carson High School (Fountain-Fort Carson School District 8); Roy Moore Elementary School and James Irwin Charter Middle School (Garfield School District RE-2); Bear Creek Elementary School and Falcon Bluffs Middle School (Jefferson County Schools); Orchard Ave. and Taylor elementary schools (Mesa County Valley School District 51); Monte Vista Senior High School (Monte Vista School District C-8); La Jara and Manassa elementary schools (North Conejos School District RE-1J); Belmont, Beulah Heights, Carlile, Columbian, Goodnight, Heritage, Highland Park, Minnequa, and Sunset Park elementary schools (all Pueblo School District 60); Sierra Vista Elementary School, Sky View Middle School and South Mesa Elementary School (all Pueblo School District 70); Trinidad High School (Trinidad School District 1); and Woodland Park Middle School (Woodland Park School District RE-2).

Donnell-Kay and Piton are Denver foundations that both fund and produce research on education issues. Augenblick is a Denver consulting firm that has done a wide variety of work on educational issues by many clients. The report was produced in collaboration with the state Department of Education.

(Full disclosure: Donnell-Kay is a funder of Education News Colorado, and Piton is a funder of HeadFirst Colorado, the companion website to EdNews.)

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