

Restructuring the Urban Elementary School

By providing immediate intensive interventions when learning problems occur, the Success for All program has improved the achievement of students at an inner-city Baltimore elementary school.

Photographs by Stacie Fitzhugh



What would happen if we decided to ensure that every child in every school would reach the 3rd grade on time with adequate basic skills, no matter what? If we decided that no child would be assigned to special education for a learning problem unless he or she were seriously handicapped? If we decided that no child should need to be retained in grade or relegated to long-term remedial services? How could we design an urban elementary school that would simply refuse to accept the idea that even a single child will fail?

These questions were posed to us in 1986 by Kalman Hettelman, special adviser to Baltimore's school board president, Robert Embry, and to school superintendent Alice Pinderhughes. "Forget about cost, about regulations, about the way we've always done things," Hettelman said. "What would it take to see that every child in an inner-city Baltimore elementary school will succeed?"

After a long series of meetings with school district staff and a thorough review of research on effective programs for students at risk, we designed a program that we believed could do the job. The name we chose for the program was the same as the promise we made: "Success for All."

Prevention and Intervention

Our program is built on two essential principles: *prevention* and *immediate, intensive intervention*. That is, major learning problems must first be prevented by providing children with the best available classroom programs and by engaging parents to support school success. When learning difficulties do appear, corrective interventions must be immediate, intensive, and minimally disruptive to students' progress in the regular program. That is, students should receive extra help early, when their problems are small, to allow them to catch up with their classmates so they can continue to profit from regular classroom instruction. Instead of letting students fall further and further behind, Success for All hopes to give students whatever help they need to keep up in the basic skills.

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During the 1987-88 school year, we implemented Success for All at Abbottston Elementary, a Baltimore City school of 440 students, almost all of whom are black and 80 percent of whom receive free lunches. The elements of Success for All as it exists at Abbottston are described below.

Program Elements

Reading tutors. One of the most important elements of Success for All is the use of tutors to support students' success in reading. One-to-one tutoring is the most effective form of instruction known (see Slavin et al. in press). At Abbottston, these tutors are certified teachers with experience in Chapter 1, special education, or primary reading. They work one-on-one with students who are having difficulty keeping up with their reading groups. Students leave their homeroom classes to work with tutors for 20-minute sessions during times other than reading or math periods. In general, tutors reinforce the regular reading curriculum, rather than teaching different objectives. For example, if the regular reading teacher is working on long vowels, so does the tutor. However, tutors also identify learning deficits and select different strategies to teach the same skills.

During daily 90-minute reading periods, tutors serve as additional reading teachers to reduce group size for

reading to about 15. Reading teachers and tutors exchange brief forms giving information on students' specific deficits and needs and meet regularly to coordinate their approaches with individual children.

The project facilitator makes initial decisions about reading group placement and need for tutoring based on informal reading inventories (the Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty and the Criterion Test of Basic Skills) given to each child by the tutors. After this, reading group placements and tutoring assignments are based on eight-week assessments, which include teacher judgments as well as more formal assessments. First graders receive priority for tutoring.

At Abbottston, six tutors are provided for grades K-3, a total of approximately 300 students. Each works with 11 students per day. Tutors work with the same students for at least eight weeks, at which time tutoring assignments are often changed based on the assessments. Because tutoring services are concentrated in 1st grade, approximately 40 percent of 1st graders receive tutoring at a time.

Reading program. Students in grades 1-3 are regrouped for reading. That is, students spend most of the day in heterogeneous, age-grouped classes about 25 students in size, but during a

Reading teachers and tutors exchange brief forms giving information on students' specific needs and meet regularly to coordinate their approaches with individual children.



At Abbottston School, six tutors concentrate their efforts on the 300 students in grades K-3, each working with 11 students per day. First graders take priority; thus, about 40 percent of first graders receive tutoring at a time. Students remain in their homerooms during regular reading and math lessons and leave their homerooms to work with the tutors for 20-minute sessions.

regular 90-minute reading period they are regrouped into reading classes of 15 students all at the same reading performance level. For example, a 2-1 reading class might contain 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade students all reading at the 2-1 level.

Regrouping allows teachers to teach the whole reading class without having to break the class into reading groups. We do not expect reduction in class size to increase reading achievement by itself (see Slavin 1988); but it does ensure that every reading class is at only one reading level, thereby eliminating workbooks, dittos, or other follow-up activities needed in classes with multiple reading groups. This regrouping is a form of the Joplin Plan, which has been found to increase reading achievement in the elementary grades (Slavin 1987).

The Abbottston reading program itself (Madden et al. 1987) is designed to take full advantage of this 90-minute period of direct instruction. The reading program emphasizes development of basic language skills and sound and letter recognition skills in kindergarten and uses an approach based on sound blending and phonics starting in 1st grade. (Kindergarten students who show readiness are accelerated into the 1st grade program.) Students in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and 1st grade use Peabody Language Development kits to help them build essential language concepts. The K-1 reading program has replaced the district's basals with a series of phonetically regular minibooks and emphasizes oral reading to partners as well as to the teacher, instruction in story structure and specific comprehension

skills, and integration of reading and writing.

When they reach the 2-1 reading level, students use a form of Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) with the district's Macmillan basal series. CIRC provides cooperative learning activities built around story structure, prediction, summarization, vocabulary building, decoding practice, writing, and direct instruction in reading comprehension skills. Researchers have found that CIRC produces statistically significant increases in students' reading comprehension and language skills (Stevens et al. 1987).

Eight-week reading assessments and individual academic plans. Every eight weeks, reading teachers assess each student's progress using curricu-

Every eight weeks, reading teachers assess each student's progress. The project facilitator uses assessment results to determine which students should receive tutoring and to suggest modifications in students' programs.

lum-based tests. The project facilitator uses assessment results to determine which students should receive tutoring, to suggest modifications in students' programs, and to identify students who need other types of assistance, such as family interventions or vision/hearing screenings. On the basis of these eight-week assessments, the project facilitator develops Individual Academic Plan (IAPs) for each student. These plans indicate areas of weakness to be addressed by classroom teachers or tutors.

Preschool and kindergarten. Abbottston School provides a half-day preschool for 4-year-olds and a full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds. The preschool and kindergarten are developmentally appropriate for young children. The curriculum places a heavy emphasis on the development and use of language, while providing a balance of academic readiness and nonacademic pursuits such as music, art, and movement activities. Readiness activities include the Peabody Language Development kits and a program called Story Telling and Retelling (STAR) in which students retell stories read by the teachers (Karweit 1988). Prereading activities begin in the second semester of kindergarten.

Family support team. A Family Support Team composed of two social workers and one parent liaison work full-time in the school. The parent liaison and one of the social workers are provided by the school system, while the other social worker is selected and funded by the Baltimore City Department of Social Services.

The Family Support Team works to involve parents in support of their children's success in school; they make home visits, provide parenting workshops, ask parents to work as volunteers in the school, and give parents strategies for helping their children at home. Also, they provide assistance when students are not working up to their full potential because of problems at home; for example, when students are not receiving adequate sleep or nutrition, need glasses, are not attending school regularly, or are exhibiting serious behav-

ior problems. In many cases, the Family Support Team makes referrals to social agencies.

Program facilitator. A program facilitator works at the school full-time to oversee (with the principal) the operation of the Success for All model. The facilitator helps plan the program, assists the principal with scheduling, and visits classes and tutoring sessions frequently to help teachers and tutors with problems such as classroom management, implementation of curriculum, and coordination with one another and with the Family Support Team. The program facilitator may work with individual children to find promising strategies for teaching them. She helps teachers and tutors deal with behavior problems or other problems and coordinates the work of the Family Support Team with those of the instructional staff.

Teachers and teacher training. The teachers and tutors in our study are regular Baltimore City teachers. They received detailed teacher's manuals developed for the program, supplemented by two days of inservice at the beginning of the school year and several brief inservice sessions throughout the year on topics such as classroom management, instructional pace, and implementation of the curriculum.

Special education. Every effort is made to deal with students' learning problems within the regular classroom, with the help of the tutors. Special education resource services are still provided for students previously assigned to special education, and we maintain self-contained classrooms for seriously handicapped students. Because no students have been assigned to the resource program, Abbottston has lost its special education resource teacher.

Advisory committee. An advisory committee composed of the building principal, the program facilitator, teacher representatives, one of the social workers, and Johns Hopkins staff meets weekly to review the progress of the program and to identify and solve problems ranging from scheduling, grading, and logistical problems to

problems with individual classes or children.

Evaluation Results

At the end of the first year, we evaluated Success for All by comparing Abbottston students to those in a nearby school matched on socioeconomic status and historical achievement level. Individual children were matched on the basis of standardized test scores.¹

Preschool and kindergarten. Abbottston preschool children scored significantly higher than control children on the Test of Language Development (TOLD) Picture Vocabulary

and Sentence Imitation Scales, and on the Merrill Language Screening Test's Comprehension scale, with effect sizes² ranging from +.44 to +.66.

Abbottston kindergartners outscored control students on the TOLD Sentence Imitation and Grammatical Completion scales, the Woodcock Letter-Word Test and Word Attack scales, and the Merrill Language Screening Test. Effect sizes ranged from +.47 to +.71 except for Word Attack, where the effect size was +3.74.

1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. Figure 1 depicts the differences in mean reading scores between Abbottston stu-

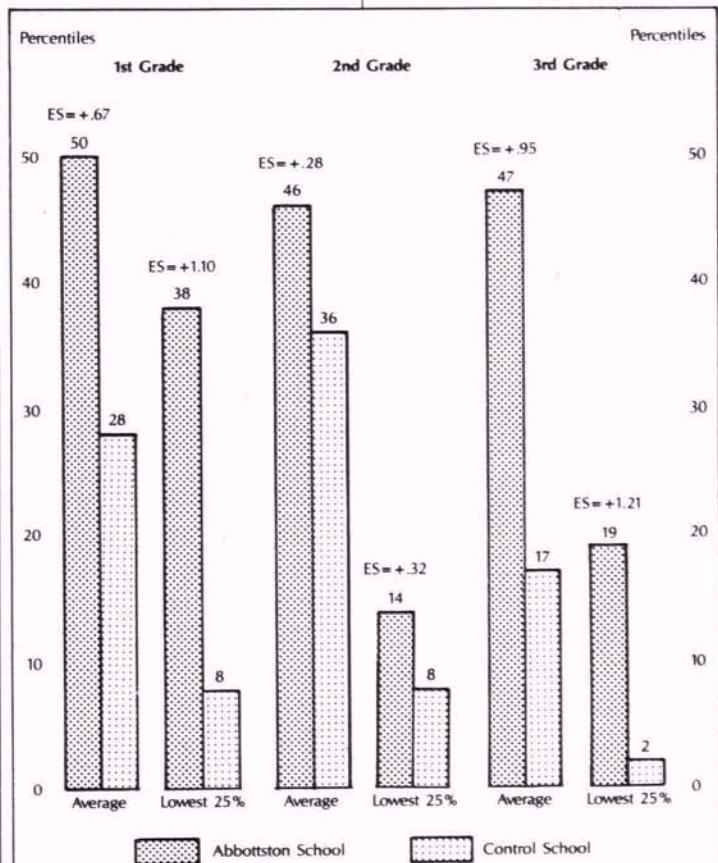


Fig. 1. Mean Reading Scores for Abbottston (Success For All) and Control Schools

dents and control students in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. (The scores in question are across scales taken from the individually administered Woodcock and Durrell reading inventories.) Abbottston 1st graders scored at an average grade equivalent of 2.0 (50th percentile), in comparison to 1.5 in the control group (28th percentile). Effect sizes averaged +.67. At the 2nd grade level, Abbottston students also outscored control students by a statistically significant margin, with effect sizes averaging +.28. The average score of Abbottston 3rd graders was 3.6 grade equivalents (47th percentile), while control students averaged 2.4 (17th percentile). Effect sizes averaged +.95. Note that in the 1st and 3rd grades, the lowest 25 percent of Abbottston students outscored the average control students.

On the California Achievement Test, statistically significant positive effects were found at the 2nd and 3rd grade levels.

True Effectiveness?

It is somewhat premature to discuss the full importance of Success for All. The program's true effectiveness cannot be fully assessed until this year's preschoolers finish 3rd grade, or, even better, until they move into middle and high school.

It is far too early to claim that the particulars of the Success for All program are all necessary or optimal. As the program develops over time, there will certainly be many changes. As of this writing, a language arts/writing program and a mathematics program are being added, and the family support model is being revised. Studies are under way to evaluate the reading curriculum by itself (without the other services); to evaluate a streamlined, less expensive form of the program; and to evaluate the effects of the program in the poorest school in Baltimore.

Yet what is more important than the technical details of our approach is the commitment to the success of *all*, the idea that we will simply not tolerate failure. On that philosophical cornerstone educators are building many dif-

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ferent approaches. We hope that someday there will be many effective means of ensuring the success of every child. □

1. Fall Boehm and Metropolitan tests were used to match preschool and kindergarten students, respectively, and spring California Achievement Tests were used to match students in grades 1-3. For more details on the research procedures and the findings so far, see Madden et al. 1988.

2. *Effect size* is the proportion of an individual standard deviation by which an experiment group exceeded a control group. For example, an effect size of +1.0 would indicate that an experimental treatment raised student scores by the equivalent of about 100 points on the SAT Verbal or Quantitative scale, by two stanines, or by 15 IQ points.

Authors' note: This research was supported in part by grants from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (No. OERI-G-86-0006) and from the Abell Foundation. However, any opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent OERI or Department of Education policy.

We would like to thank the following individuals for their assistance in planning

and carrying out this research: Kalman Hettelman of the Baltimore City Mayor's Office, Alice Pinderhughes, Clifton Ball, Charlene Griffin, Carla Ford, Nancy Gimbel, James Sarnecki, Cornelius Johnson, and Deborah Wortham of the Baltimore City Public Schools, and Robert Stevens and Lawrence Dolan of The Johns Hopkins University.

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