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Study Shows Test Gains In 'Accelerated Schools'

By Debra Viadero
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Accelerated Schools, a school improvement program designed to bring challenging curricula to disadvantaged students, appears to have paid off in some of the schools that tried it early on, according to an independent study.

The study, released last month by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., a nonprofit research organization in New York City, is based on eight years of test-score data for 3rd graders in eight schools across the country that were using the program in the early 1990s. The researchers compared any year-to-year test-score improvements that students made in the three years before the schools adopted the program with the gains made in the five years following its launch.

What the authors found was that students began to rack up significant gains four to five years into the program.

"These findings demonstrate the potential of the Accelerated Schools approach as it was implemented early in its development, to improve student achievement," the report says.

The improvements, which tended to be greatest among the middle-performing students, were about as big as those that researchers find in experiments gauging the effects of teaching children in smaller classes.

But both the program vendors and the researchers said the study might have underestimated its effects for several reasons.

First, they noted, in the early days in the program's history, the practice was to first help schools develop more collaborative governance structures and then, a year or two later, turn to improving classroom instruction. Schools joining the program now, however, tackle both instructional and governance improvements from the start.

"With the changes that we've made, we're seeing results much earlier on," said Gene S. Chasin, the director of the National Center for Accelerated Schools, based at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

The second reason that improvements may be underestimated, the vendors and researchers say, is that the research team included test scores for all the students in the schools studied, even those students who were new to the schools and had not yet had a full dose of the program.

"If you're thinking about what difference a reform can make on a big scale, you really have to contend with the fact that there's a lot of student mobility," said Fred C. Doolittle, the deputy director of the research company's department of education, children, and youth, which oversaw the study.

Founder's View

Program developers disagreed with the researchers' decision to include all students' scores, largely because some evaluations of other comprehensive school reform models do not include students who are new to a school.

"Implicitly, people will compare these results with results for kids who are stable and who have been in the same school for many years," said Henry M. Levin, the Accelerated Schools' founder. He stepped down as the director of the organization in 1999, but continues to work closely with it.

He said the test-score gains, nevertheless, were a bonus for the program.

"We see them almost as a byproduct of what we're trying to do, which is bring in as much gifted-and-talented, enrichment activities as schools have the capacity to do," said Mr. Levin, a professor of education and economics at Teachers College, Columbia University.

With 700 "actively affiliated" schools, Accelerated Schools is one of the nation's most popular programs for comprehensive school improvement. Interest in such programs—and in research on their effectiveness—has grown since 1997, when Congress created the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, a grant program for schools and districts seeking to adopt proven, schoolwide improvement models. The federal program got another boost last month when Congress, in its bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, gave it a five-year extension.

In a separate appropriations bill, Congress voted last month to increase funding for such efforts from \$241 million in the 2001 fiscal year to \$310 million this year.

Although many of the reform programs have research backing them up, independent researchers did few of those studies. In contrast, the Ford Foundation footed the bill for the MDRC's study of Accelerated Schools. The researchers selected the schools they studied from a list of nearly 100 that the program developers had cited for their adherence to the model.