

# **National Staff Development Council Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant**

## **Louisiana Staff Development Council's End of Grant Report June 30, 2001**

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**Special thanks to the principals, faculties, and staffs of all the schools visited during this study, and to the superintendents and central office personnel who support their work and help to create their success stories:**

Barbe Elementary, Calcasieu Parish – Cheryl Hutchins, Principal  
Carter C. Raymond Junior High, Rapides Parish – Dorothy Verrett, Principal  
G. T. Woods Elementary, Jefferson Parish – Evelyn Soniat, Principal  
Grand Coteau Elementary, St. Landry Parish – Charles Chavis, Principal  
J. S. Slocum Elementary, Rapides Parish – Rena Linzay, Principal  
Mamou Upper Elementary, Evangeline Parish – Sherral Tezeno, Principal  
Northeast Elementary, St. Landry Parish – Leroy Miller, Principal  
Pineview High, Claiborne Parish – Felton Evans, Principal  
Pioneer Elementary, West Carroll Parish – Woody Tyson, Principal  
Ruston Elementary, Lincoln Parish – Eric Carter, Principal  
Sicily Island Elementary, Catahoula Parish – Charles Miller, Principal  
South Street Elementary, St. Landry Parish – Mary Dupre, Principal

**Great appreciation is also extended to**

Bill Schroyer at William E. Schroyer Psychometric Services

Clif St. Germain and Michael Guillot at The Center for Academic Excellence

**for the data they compiled in the *Comparative Cohort Analysis of Louisiana School Performance Scores (1998-1999 and 1999-2000)*. This data made it possible to identify schools for this study.**

And finally, we want to recognize  
The **National Staff Development Council** for providing the funding, support, and leadership that made it possible to conduct this study.

**NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL**  
**Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant**

**Louisiana Staff Development Council's**  
**End of Grant Report**  
**June 30, 2001**

**Proposal title (question to investigate):**

What role does staff development play in assisting schools with a high percentage of children in poverty to attain exemplary academic achievement?

**Purpose of the proposal:**

Using school performance scores from the Louisiana Accountability System, twelve "Academically Above Average" schools with a poverty index between 80-100% were selected by the Louisiana Staff Development Council to target for in-depth analysis on the role of staff development in their success stories.

**Procedure for the investigation:**

Project investigators were officers of the Louisiana Staff Development Council (LSDC) who made on-site visits to each of the twelve schools. They interviewed the principal and conducted at least one focus group session with teachers, using a list of prepared questions to ensure consistency. In addition, these project investigators (Dale Hair, Betty Kraft, and Amy Allen) walked through each school, visiting classrooms and talking informally with teachers, parents, counselors, and others as the opportunity presented itself.

**Overview of this report:**

The purpose of this report is to provide more in-depth information on the findings of this study. While the primary purpose of the investigation was to discuss the role of professional development in the schools' accomplishment, other factors were also compelling and will be addressed as well.

**The report is organized into seven main sections:**

1. A chart and map providing information on the schools selected.
2. Rationale for schools selected for this study.
3. General impressions of the LSDC investigators who visited the schools.
4. A listing of the common success factors (with specific examples) that were found in all the schools visited.
5. A listing of the success factors found in many (but not all) of the schools.
6. Conclusions
7. An appendix with the data collection tools used during the site visits.

**TABLE OMITTED  
FROM THIS VERSION**

**Louisiana Schools Selected for the  
2000-2001 NSDC Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant  
(Listed in order of poverty band)**

**Map of Louisiana on this page.  
No electronic version available.**

## **II. Rationale for Schools Selected for this study**

When the application for this grant was first submitted, twelve schools from across the state were targeted for this study. The criteria for participation were that the schools would have 80-100% of the students on free or reduced lunch, and that they would be classified as “Academically Above Average” (a ranking second only to the top ranking “School of Academic Excellence”) based on the 1999 School Performance Score (SPS). The SPS score is determined using a matrix of four factors – the state criterion-referenced test (LEAP), a norm-referenced test (ITBS), attendance, and dropouts.

In February, while collection of data for this project was in process, the 2000 School Performance Scores were released. At that time, some of the schools originally targeted as a part of the study had not maintained their “Academically Above Average” ranking and were replaced with other schools. Thus those in this study have two years of academic success using the state’s criteria.

It is important to note that a total of twenty Louisiana schools qualified for participation (according to data from the *Comparative Cohort Analysis of Louisiana School Performance Scores*). We selected only twelve of the twenty. Some of these had only primary grades (PK-2) and thus had minimal test information. Others were not selected in an attempt to get as broad a statewide representation as possible. High schools have not been a part of the state’s Accountability mandates until this year, and thus did not have data available and were not selected. The only “high school” in this study is a PK-12 school.

## **III. General impressions of the LSDC investigators who visited the schools**

All three of the project investigators found this experience to be a most joyful and rewarding one! While many “bulleted lists” exist describing factors that have been found to be critical in school success, seeing these things come to life in a real school is a powerful, first-hand experience. In addition, the contrast between these schools and high poverty, low performing schools is very informative.

While the primary purpose of this grant was to investigate the role of professional development in the school’s academic success, other factors emerged as well. All the success factors will be discussed now.

## **IV. Common success factors found in all the high poverty, high performing schools visited**

1. **A variety of approaches to professional learning are present** (coaching, mentoring, examination and reflection around student work and instructional practices, visitation to other classrooms and other schools, conferences, workshops, serving on curriculum committees, etc.). Regardless of the approaches used, however, each faculty expected to continue to grow and learn collaboratively with their professional colleagues. **Specific examples:** At G. T. Woods Elementary teachers work in grade levels to examine student work and discuss ways to modify instruction to better meet student needs. At South Street Elementary, student success was initially launched with grants written for extensive after-school workshops and classroom follow-up. And at Pioneer

Elementary, the small faculty (including 3 mother-daughter teams!) meets at school regularly on Sunday afternoons to plan lessons for the week and share ideas.

2. **The principal and entire staff have a strong sense of efficacy** – they believe in the power of teaching and their own ability to ensure that every student learns, regardless of the obstacles. In fact, the teachers could be described as “human bulldozers,” ready to “level” any mountain put before them!

**Specific example:** At Barbe Elementary a constantly revolving clientele mean that only 47% of the students are the same from year to year! Yet the teachers say that, regardless of how long they have the opportunity to teach each child, he or she will leave Barbe with improved knowledge and skills. At J. S. Slocum Elementary the faculty credit high expectations and hard work for making the difference. In fact these very words were used by most of the schools!

3. **Instructional leadership and faculty collaboration are key.** In every school there was at least one individual (often the principal) who knew what was going on in the classrooms and took personal responsibility to oversee the instructional program as their primary job responsibility.

**Specific example:** At Ruston Elementary, the school’s principal took groups of faculty to visit both high performing and low performing schools in the area so they could see for themselves the factors that made a difference. He then drove them around the community so they would better understand the challenging situations that faced the children daily. And he led a study group using Ruby Payne’s book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. At Raymond C. Carter Junior High, the principal and faculty investigated several “proven” programs and worked diligently together to implement them in their school. At J. S. Slocum, a year-long faculty study involved rotating through the classrooms of one grade level per month to learn and share strategies for successful student learning. The resulting collaboration was outstanding!

4. **The schools spent a great deal of time and attention on data analysis**, especially looking at student test results to determine not only areas of broad, common needs, but also areas of specific strength and weakness for each student. Assessment is ongoing, and a variety of ways to measure student performance are used.

**Specific example:** At Mamou Upper Elementary, teachers gather over the summer to spend extensive time analyzing disaggregated test data looking for areas of weakness for various grade groups and for each individual child on each teacher’s roster for fall. At Raymond C. Carter Junior High, a similar analysis occurs, resulting in an IEP-type program plan for every child in the school.

5. **The entire faculty demonstrated great flexibility in trying different approaches to meet student needs** – grouping and structuring, use of materials, a variety of instructional strategies – all with an eye toward continuous assessment. Is it working? Are the students learning better this way?

**Specific example:** Grand Coteau Elementary has written grants and received funding for technology to enhance instruction in a variety of subject areas. Not only do the technology programs motivate students, but teachers have analyzed the curriculum and use software to cover gaps in textbook information and that needed by students on the state standards. Northeast Elementary combines targeted assistance using Title I funds with extensive parent involvement to ensure that every child’s needs are met.

6. **Standards-based instruction was pervasive throughout all the classrooms** and teachers could readily discuss how the lessons for the day fit into the overall picture of the subject area standards.  
**Specific examples:** Teachers at Sicily Island Elementary, one of the schools with the greatest gains in school performance during the year, document standards addressed on all of their lesson plans weekly. At G. T. Woods Elementary, teachers can easily discuss their daily lessons and how these relate to the big picture of the content standards for each subject.
7. **All schools had excellent school-wide discipline** characterized by a shared sense of responsibility for all the students. There was a general understanding that children of poverty often come from homes without a great deal of structure or academic support. Structured classroom procedures and high expectations were considered the foundation for success.  
**Specific examples:** From the smallest school visited (Pineview Elementary) to the largest (South Street Elementary) – students were on-task and well-behaved. Discipline and love were seen as partners for student success.
8. **Student learning was the school’s greatest priority** – more than teacher preferences. School decisions (staffing, scheduling, curriculum, etc.) were always determined by asking the primary question, “Will this benefit the students first and foremost?”  
**Specific examples:** There are too many specifics to cite one or two here! This factor was very pervasive.

## V. Success factors found in many (but not all) of the schools visited

1. **Teaching faculties were generally stable.** Eight out of the twelve schools visited indicated that their faculties had changed very minimally in the past 4-5 years. The other four schools had some change, mostly as a result of school growth. This factor is interesting because so many high poverty, low performing schools point out that they are unable to maintain any faculty stability. Since teachers in the low performing schools leave for better placement locations as soon as they have “paid their dues,” this ensures that their faculties are consistently young, fairly inexperienced, and often uncertified. So why do the teachers at equally high poverty schools stay?
2. **Parent involvement.** Six schools considered parent involvement to be a major factor in their success. Four indicated that it was important, but not a major factor. And two schools indicated that getting parents involved was still a challenge; but not an excuse for lack of student achievement. The determining factor/s in whether parents were involved seemed to be (1) that the teachers were actually a part of the community in which the students lived, or (2) that the school had a key individual – a parent liaison – who was a part of the community and was able to get parents involved.
3. **The size of the schools was small,** creating a close-knit sense of community among the faculty. Six schools had fewer than 255 students; three schools had between 250 and 400 students; and three schools had between 400 and 500 students. The smaller schools were quick to point out the importance that their small size had made in their school’s ability to meet the needs of individual students and to work collaboratively toward common goals. Growing schools often cited recent growth as a factor that was beginning to erode their sense of community and common focus.

4. **Extra time given to math and reading** through special reinforcement programs, scheduling, or tutors. In all but two of the schools, the principal and teachers credited a variety of programs that reinforced the basic reading or math instruction (Accelerated Reader, Deep-In Math, Project READ, Spalding Reading, the Shurley Method, etc.) for giving students multiple opportunities to learn and be successful. The two schools that didn't mention this may be doing it, but didn't cite it as a major success factor. Sometimes double-block scheduling, the use of computers, or tutors hired with Title I funds for at-school or after-school assistance were mentioned as ways to give extra reinforcement. Clearly the message was that time and other resources were variables that could and should be harnessed to achieve the goal.
5. **Technology.** There was evidence of the use of computers, whether in the classrooms or coordinated in a computer lab in all of the schools. However, only three schools actually mentioned technology as one of the important aspects of their success story. When asked, almost every school indicated that they had received recent technology training either through their district or the Department of Education (In-Tech). Evidence of a variety of software for reading and math was prevalent.

## VI. Conclusions

The purpose of this mini-grant was to explore the role that professional development plays in high poverty, high performing schools. It was obvious that all of the schools involved in this investigation had addressed professional development in a way that was definitely in alignment with the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development. The following factors existed in all the high poverty, high performing schools visited:

1. **Staff development was definitely results-driven.** On the surveys and in the focus groups, the principal and teachers in every school indicated that they felt that their school's professional development was definitely linked to improved student learning. The focus of all learning for the faculty was on the ultimate goal of improving student achievement. Analyzing student data was the first step and driving force in the process.
2. **Many forms of job-embedded staff development were evident.** Most common among these were coaching, study groups, portfolios for teachers, serving on curriculum committees, examination of student work, sharing of lessons and strategies for teaching, classroom visitation as well as visits to other schools. Less common was the use of case studies or action research in a formal sense. Learning for teachers was a part of the school day.
3. **Staff development emphasized a balance between content (what teachers teach) and pedagogy (how teachers teach).** Both were seen as important.
4. **Faculty collaboration was viewed as critical to improved practice.**
5. **An instructional leader guided the learning process for teachers and provided the resources needed.** All schools were true communities of learners.

In addition to the common factors related to professional development, one other factor was obvious in the success stories of all of these schools. The factor to which I am referring is the attitude of the principal and teachers, a palpable “can do” spirit! Determining which came first – a positive attitude or a successful professional development program – is a “chicken and egg” question. Most principals and faculties of the schools we visited said that both were important. The tenacity of the entire faculty to get the job done meant that student or faculty failure was not an option!

**Final Conclusion: Although other factors (such as attitude) are important in creating a climate for success, quality professional learning provides the focus and drives the process that ultimately leads to high student achievement – especially for schools with high percentages of children living in poverty.**

**So what does the conclusion of this study mean for those who are currently working in high poverty, low performing schools? What can we learn from the success stories?**

In a landmark study of professional development, Dr. Thomas Guskey at the University of Kentucky posed this question: “Which comes first...changes in teacher attitude, changes in professional practice, or changes in student learning?” While most might guess that the order listed in the question is the preferred order, Guskey’s results did not support that theory. In fact, he found that changes in teacher practice lead to changes in student learning, which then impacted teacher attitude.

Guskey’s research and the findings of the Louisiana Staff Development Council’s mini-grant provide encouragement for those who view professional learning for educators as an avenue for student success. Within the powerful, personal stories of each of these schools, both attitude and aptitude (knowledge and skill) were needed to make their dream a reality.

# APPENDIX

## **Contents:**

- 1. Professional Development Survey – used to gather information and sometimes to launch the conversation during the focus group interview.**
- 2. Focus Group Questions – used by all the interviewers to ensure inter-rater reliability in the data gathered from each school.**

**Professional Development Survey  
Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant**

**School:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade Levels:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Parish:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Name of Principal:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Number of Faculty:** \_\_\_\_ **Number of Students:** \_\_\_\_ **Community Type:** \_\_\_\_\_

1.A. What types of professional development are used at your school? Check any that are used.

<b>Check below:</b>	<b>Percentage:</b>
____ Conferences away from school site	_____
____ Workshops/Training	_____
____ Peer Coaching	_____
____ Study Groups	_____
____ Case Studies	_____
____ Professional Portfolios for Teachers	_____
____ Action Research Projects	_____
____ Serving on curriculum committees	_____
____ Study/reflection/discussion centered on student work	_____
____ Visitation to other schools (observation)	_____
____ Visitation/observation in classrooms within your school	_____
____ Other : Please indicate: _____	_____
TOTAL = 100%	

1.B. In the right-hand column above, please indicate the percentage of time that the models you have checked are used during the year. The total should equal 100%.

2. At the present time, how closely do you think the professional development at your school or district is linked to changes in teachers' behaviors? Circle one:

<b>Not Linked</b>				<b>Very Closely Linked</b>
1	2	3	4	5

3. How closely do you think the professional development at your school/district is linked to improved student learning? Circle one:

<b>Not Linked</b>				<b>Very Closely Linked</b>
1	2	3	4	5

4. What evidence do you have that professional development and student learning are linked?

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**Louisiana Staff Development Council**  
**Questions for the Focus Group Leader**  
**Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant**

**Inter-rater reliability:** It is very important that all interviewers follow the format below to ensure that the same information is collected from each school targeted in this project. Please be sure to take accurate and detailed notes. You may want to designate someone as a note-taker, or use a tape recorder and transcribe later.

1. With the Louisiana Accountability legislation, everyone is interested in schools that are achieving academically. The fact that YOUR school has been able to maintain its “Academically Above Average” status for the past two years with a student population that is at or above the 85% poverty level makes your school especially interesting. What factors do you credit for this accomplishment? (If any responses are unclear, respond, “Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_, or tell me what you mean when you say \_\_\_\_\_.”)
2. I am very interested in the role that staff development, or teacher learning of any type, may have played in your accomplishment. (Have focus group participants complete the *Project ADVANCE Mini-Grant Professional Development Survey* individually and then discuss it as a group. Notice if the responses of the participants were similar or different. Your goal is to get a feel for how the group as a whole is in consensus.)
3. If the answer to the following question has not been clarified previously, please probe further: How are regular opportunities for collaborative work built into the school day? (Example: Planning lessons together, studying samples of student work for clues to better teaching strategies, problem solving, etc.)
4. If the answer to the following question has not been clarified previously, please probe further: How are teachers connected to other professionals beyond the school? (Example: Workshops/conferences, professional reading, visitation to other schools, use of technology, networks, etc.)
5. Do workshops/conferences attended by teachers deal primarily with learning actual content knowledge (i.e. deeper understanding of math, science, writing, etc.) or with teaching strategies (i.e. Cooperative Learning, using math manipulatives, classroom management, etc.) or both? Explain. (What percentage is “content” versus “pedagogy?”)
6. What kinds of classroom assessment do teachers use to monitor gains in student achievement on an ongoing basis? How is this information connected with goals established for the class or for individual students?

7. In what ways does the school principal and/or district central office provide leadership in helping teaching and learning to improve? How is “risk-taking” rewarded?
8. Has professional development at this school changed over time? If so, in what way?
9. What have I NOT asked about your professional development, or your school’s accomplishment that I need to know?