

Polk Bros Foundation Center for Urban Education: Research-Based School Development

Through government and foundations grants, the Center has organized structures to increase literacy and math progress across the curriculum. The structures are research-based and have been developed through research and evaluation conducted in conjunction with major funding from the US Department of Education. External evaluations by the Urban Institute and the Annenberg Foundation have confirmed the effectiveness of the Center's structures as models for effective professional development to improve school progress.

Because of the Center's work to strengthen literacy in the content areas, it is well prepared to support the transition to the nonfiction reading and writing emphasized in the Common Core State Standards. The Center has organized planning "blueprints" to guide the design of units that develop core concepts as well as literacy competencies. The Center's website provides a comprehensive online resource center for parents, administrators, teachers, and agencies. Nonfiction texts from the site are in use in initiatives to assess and strengthen reading comprehension, and guides from the site have been included in published teacher education texts. More than 16,000 educators used the site in 2011, representing 80 countries and all 50 states.

The Center brings these research-based structures and resources to the school partnerships it builds. The Center works primarily with Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In the 2010-11 school year, schools implementing the Center's structures with fidelity achieved gains at a substantially higher rate than those of the average of CPS schools on ISAT composite.

Core Elements of the Center's Work

Major grants enabled the Center to develop the following core elements of its work, all of which are research-based.

Comprehensive School Development

The Center was identified as a provider for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRDP). Although the Center continued to work with schools with ongoing progress, with the CSRDP program, the Center worked with schools identified as in need of remediation. During the CSRDP program and subsequently, the Center has provided comprehensive school development support to 19 schools that demonstrated improved achievement, moving out of probation. The Center has continued to provide comprehensive development for schools, working collaboratively to build capacity and increase achievement.

Collaborative School Development

Through funding from the Polk Bros Foundation, the Center has established a comprehensive approach to school progress that aligns with the five fundamentals of school progress and emphasizes coherent programs that integrate parent education and involvement to support individual, student, and family development. The Community School Learning Leadership Network, established in 2006, provides ongoing support for Community Schools through workshops and resources that scaffold the collaboration of principals, teachers, parent leaders, and agency partners. The Center's work emphasizes adult education to support the capacity development of the persons who enable students to achieve their potential.

Job-embedded Professional Development

The Urban Teacher Corps, funded directly by the US Department of Education, established the Center's teacher development strategy: structured job-embedded learning for pre-service and in-service teachers. The DeWitt Wallace Foundation recognized the Center's model as a "lighthouse" for teacher education. Completion rate for the program was 99.9%, and the retention rate for working in urban schools for 5 years is 85%, including 17 individuals who have taken leadership roles in school administration.

Meaningful Parent Involvement Based on Parent Priorities Supports Student Achievement and School Progress

Parent education has been a vital part of the Center's work, including the creation of parent resource centers and the development of parent education courses. Support from Kraft General Foods enabled the Center to organize Community Corps, through which teams of parents worked with school administrations to organize school-based initiatives in which parents developed leadership capacity and core competencies as they planned and carried out school-wide initiatives. Polk Bros Foundation grants have enabled the Center to work collaboratively with agencies and schools to strengthen parent involvement in Community Schools.

Thinking across the Curriculum

The Center emphasizes thinking in all its programs and resources. Writing, drawing, using graphic "thinkers"—all are ways to give students time to think more—and learn more. The Center emphasizes thinking logically in progressions based on Bloom's Taxonomy, and at the same time prioritizes the importance of different kinds of knowledge, including knowledge about learning itself. Benjamin Bloom's Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation provide the Center's framework for linking the processes that students learn to the concepts they develop through thinking.

Writing/Thinking/Learning

Reading, Writing, Thinking Chicago, funded by the Lloyd a Fry Foundation, the Center has applied the principles of Language Experience and the vision of Paolo Freire to develop students' vocabulary, knowledge base, and writing competence, established the Center's record of academic achievement as pre- and post-tests confirmed that students' vocabulary and concept knowledge increased. The Center's emphasis on writing across the curriculum probably is a contributing component to the achievement gains accomplished through Algebra Connections and the Center's comprehensive school development work.

Core Content/Concept Focus

Through funding from the Joyce Foundation, the Center organized Core Schools, an initiative that developed a four-quarter framework for social studies learning emphasizing focus questions and related concepts to be learned through reading, illustrating, and writing about persons, places, choices, changes, continuing the model developed by Hilda Taba. Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of Commerce enabled the Center to develop exemplary units and guides to link literacy, math, and social studies learning. That work expanded to include science as the Center took responsibility for whole-school development. The Center applied this model in the development of curriculum resources for the Burnham Centennial, which are in continuing use through the Center's workshops and website.

Integrate Principles and Best Practices of Special Education in All Classrooms

The Center has emphasized differentiated instruction and the gradual release of responsibility in all its work—developing planning and assessment structures and methods that are designed to enable all learners to make greater progress, including gifted students. Funding from the Office of Special Education Programs, US Department of Education, supported the development of a collaborative professional development structure embeds principles of special education in instruction and formative evaluation.

Set Quarterly and Weekly Priorities Aligned with Core Requirements

One of the principles of special education applied across the Center's work is "chunking" content—focusing on one major concept or process at a time and developing it with depth, using a gradual release of responsibility across the week rather than within isolated lessons. With the advent of Understanding by Design's "backward mapping" model, this approach became "mainstream" as curriculum development shifted from isolated skills or facts to teaching to "enduring" ideas. The Center organizes "calendars of learning" that provide a blueprint for focus each week on competencies that align with state and—as of 2011—common core standards.

Formative Evaluation with Strategic Scaffolding of Learning and Assessment

The weeklong focus on one main concept or process with the gradual release of responsibility emphasizes daily "checking for understanding", scaffolding a gradual release of responsibility as students increase competence, with weekly formative evaluation and response—so that students demonstrate learning on Thursday and the teacher responds to strengthen and expand learning through Friday "fix and finish well" activities. The Center emphasizes formative evaluation of student learning through research-based strategies: student-generated written responses to questions and graphic organizers. Through a three-year grant from the Institute for Education Sciences, the Center conducted research in integrating literacy in math instruction that resulted in significant gains by students in grades 5-8 as measured by ISAT.

Contextual Math

Funding from the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois State Board of Education enabled the Center to develop a four-quarter math framework and method to increase student math achievement. The method, "Community Math," involves students in collecting and analyzing data about their community and city, and presenting their findings and analysis in booklets and reports. Schools participating in those initiatives demonstrated positive gains on the ITBS test of math.

Visual Learning Increases Achievement

Drawing—from the representation of a core vocabulary term through the illustration of a period of history or the symbolic representation of a poem's theme—is a core instructional strategy of the Center's work. Funds from the Annenberg Foundation enabled the Center to create an integrated arts structure, a structure that was recognized as a "breakthrough" model by that foundation. Schools participating in that initiative demonstrated significant gains in reading achievement, and subsequent research in the field has confirmed that the use of visual art contributes to gains in student learning of reading and writing. The Center applies the use of drawing in content learning from texts and from actual visuals--the Center has developed strong partnerships with Chicago museums in support of student learning, linking the learning of concepts to the museum's use of visual representation. This method was studied in the research of the Center director, which concluded that students gained more concept knowledge when using graphic organizers and drawing in science and social studies.

Graphic Organizers Scaffold Learners and Inform Teachers

Graphic organizers have been determined to support students' learning of concepts, reading, writing—and thinking. The Center has designed graphic organizers to scaffold learning across the curriculum. They are designed to guide students' thinking and support students' writing to expand learning.

The Center has innovated in the use of graphic organizers to assess students' status and identify ways to respond to learning needs and increase learning challenge. The Center's graphic organizer for problem solving was the basis for significant gains in achievement on ISAT math tests in a three-year study funded by the Institute for Education Science.

Center Director

Barbara Radner, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Polk Bros. Foundation Center for Urban Education at DePaul University. She brought to this position first-hand experience as a teacher and program administrator in a Chicago public school, and experience in outreach as director of outreach for Field Museum. Her first-hand knowledge of curriculum was demonstrated in her authorship of two social studies series, one of which became the most used social studies texts in the United States. Dr. Radner completed her masters degree and doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, completed an M.S.T. in early childhood education with a specialization in reading and a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in teacher education. She works directly with teachers, parents, principals, and students to ensure that the work of the Center aligns with the priorities and develops the possibilities of urban education.