

Needles in a Haystack: Lessons from Ohio's high-performing, high-need urban schools

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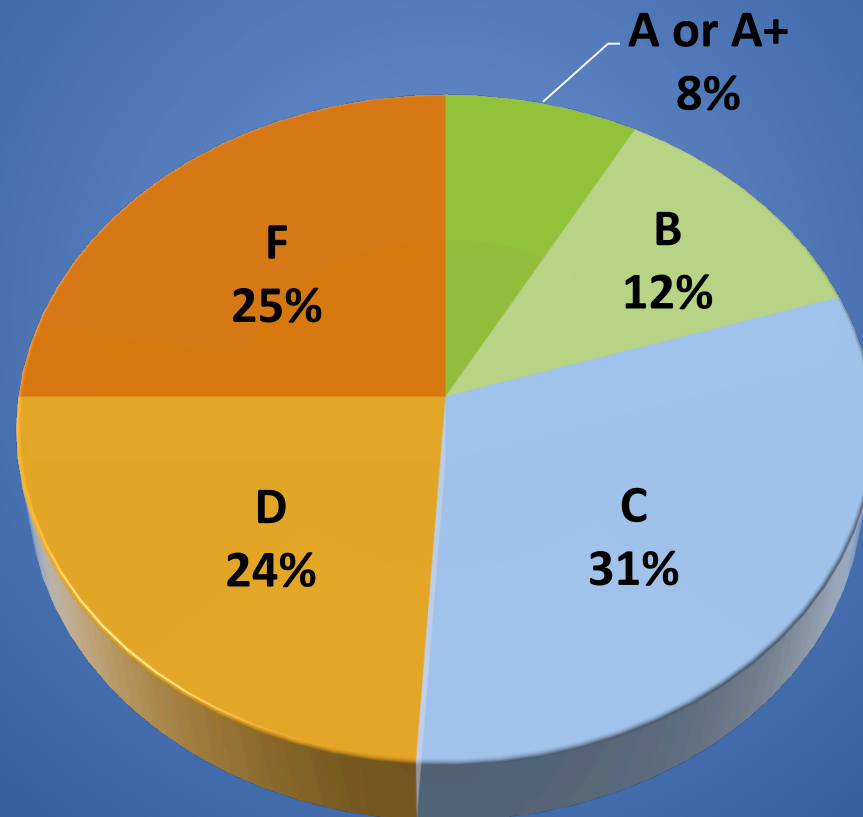
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Urban School Performance is Lagging

"Big 8" District & Charter Students by School Designation



Source: Ohio Department of Education,
2008-09 Local Report Cards

Identifying the Needles

- Public elementary and middle schools where:
 - Performance on state assessments is consistently moderate to high (80 or better “Performance Index” score)
 - Students are making annual academic progress (met or exceeded “value-added” expectations)

816 schools statewide met these two criteria

Identifying the Needles

- Of those 816, we sought schools that:
 - Served a predominately low-income student population (75% or more of the students are “economically disadvantaged”)

55 elementary and middle schools remained

16 are located in the “Big 8” – these became our sample for Needles schools.

Research Team

- Quentin Suffren
 - Chief Academic Officer, The Learning Institute
 - Experience as literacy curriculum specialist, curriculum coach, teacher, writer, and editor
- Theodore J. Wallace
 - President, The Paremos Group
 - Experience as principal, college instructor, education analyst, writer, and editor

Traits of Needles Schools

1. Schools of choice
2. Staff exhibit leadership and ownership over school policies and practices
3. Teachers and leaders make no excuses for what they or students “can’t do”
4. Expectations are data-specific, teachers have autonomy to meet their goals

Traits of Needles Schools

5. Behavioral management policies are clear and consistent, feature positive incentives, deeply embedded in the school culture
6. Teamwork defines these schools – few, if any, “independent contractors”
7. Little turnover among administrators and teachers

Traits of Needles Schools

8. Staffing results from meticulous recruitment and culture of high expectations that attracts and retains talent
9. Schools engage parents and develop relationships with them
10. Staff regard their contracts as the floor, not ceiling, of their teaching responsibilities

What Policy Lessons can be Learned from Needles Schools?

Policy Lessons

- Encourage and expand school choice to ensure that poor youngsters have real access to quality schools
- Encourage school-based principal training programs

Policy Lessons

- Adopt a “tight-loose” approach to accountability – set clear, data-specific goals for schools then relax mandates, slash regulations, and cut strings
- Discourage administrative churn in high-performing schools

Policy Lessons

- Empower schools to hire and retain the best talent available
- Reduce bureaucratic barriers and constraints through “innovation zones,” contract waivers, regulatory waivers, and other strategies to free schools up to succeed