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An Update on Student Retention Issues

This newsletter, published periodically as part of the League's student retention study, provides information on various aspects of the dropout problem, legislative issues relating to the crisis, prevention programs, and ways to encourage student retention.

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Accelerating Remediation

Jessica, a student at a national exemplary elementary school, has all the ingredients for success: good grades, good teachers, and parents who care about her education. After only a few weeks in school, she was placed in accelerated classes for gifted youngsters where her performance skyrocketed. At age seven, Jessica knows she wants to go to the same college as her older sister.

Corey attends an elementary school that is surrounded by a poverty-stricken neighborhood. Corey's mother does not have time to worry about her son's education; she is more concerned about how to feed the family for the next week. Corey is falling behind in his classes and it looks like he'll have to repeat third grade. The remedial classes he has been placed in do not seem to make a difference. In fact, Corey is falling further and further behind his classmates.

The "Coreys" face an entirely different situation. Instead of the caring and nurturing environment that gifted students experience,

What's Inside

According to Henry Levin, a Stanford University economist, traditional remedial programs are failing to bridge the academic gap disadvantaged students face. Instead of challenging students to learn and succeed, such programs rely on endless memorization and book-work. Students must also endure the stigma of being labeled "remedial." As a result, learning expectations are reduced or become non-existent. The student develops a low self-esteem, equating learning with drudgery. To combat the dropout problem, Levin and his colleagues have developed an accelerated learning method - a program which builds on the strengths of elementary students and teachers. This method, when properly executed, is producing startling results-- raising test scores and school morale, and keeping students in school who might have otherwise dropped out.

This *Achieve!* will examine Henry Levin's accelerated learning model as a method to keep disadvantaged elementary students in school.

TRADITIONAL ACCELERATED PROGRAMS AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

In the past, accelerated programs have been strictly reserved for "Jessicas"-- gifted or highly-motivated students identified on the basis of test scores, class performance, and teacher recommendations. Participants in accelerated programs encounter higher academic expectations and cover more material than students in a regular class. The special attention given to these students is a primary factor for their academic success.

Government Publications Texas State Documents

A PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS RESEARCH LEAGUE



1117 Red River ★ P.O. Box 12456 ★ Austin, Texas 78711 ★ 512-472-3127

January 15, 1991

✓ FEB 26 1991

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disadvantaged students find themselves confronted with negative attitudes about their performance from teachers, administrators, and parents. Henry Levin of Stanford University explains, "The combination of low social status and low expectations treats such students as educational discards." Disadvantaged children will not excel in a mentally unrewarding environment.

REMEDICATION BREEDS REMEDIATION

"Smart kids get to participate; remedial kids get to memorize."(Michelle Fine, *School Success For Students at Risk*, 1988)

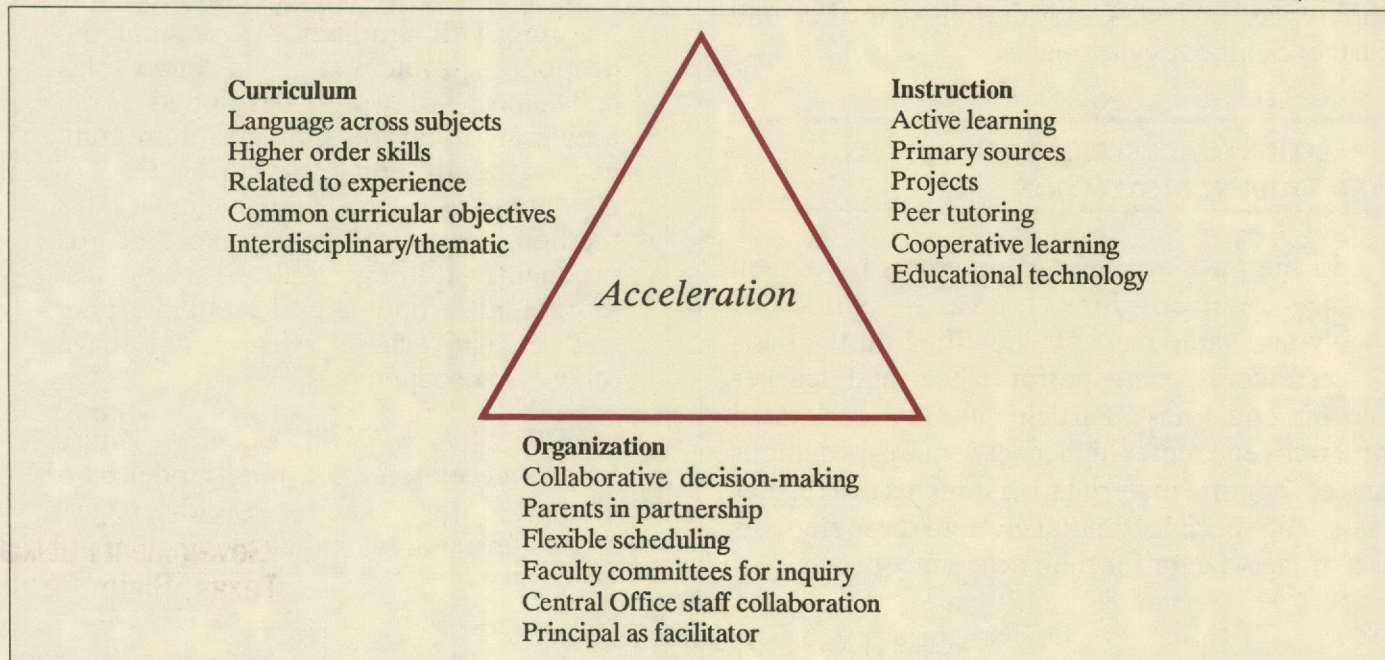
Current programs for disadvantaged students focus on remediation as the primary means to reduce academic deficiency and to keep students in school. However, remediation is under fire by researchers as growing numbers of disadvantaged students fail to return to the regular classroom. While some programs show an increase in overall test scores, Levin and his colleagues assert that such increases are nominal and not actually indicative of student performance or enhancement. Levin argues that raising a student from the 15th to the 20th percentile does not promise classroom success or insure that the

student will stay in school. In fact, researchers claim that remedial programs:

- reduce the learning expectations of students, resulting in lower social status and lower self-esteem;
- fail to provide deadlines, causing students to fall further behind; and
- portray learning as a joyless experience with endless repetition and memorization.

STATUS QUO-- NOT THE ANSWER

Caught in the fervor of reform, legislators are passing more mandates to upgrade educational quality. Enacting higher standards for students appears to be the logical answer to a deteriorating educational system. However, as tougher standards are passed, school districts are failing to provide programs or incentives to aid students already behind in school. The change from the Texas Assessment of Minimal Skills (TEAMS) test to a test more indicative of higher order thinking skills (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test) is a prime example of the fixation with higher standards without providing the programs to help students who are behind. As a result, more



students are falling to the wayside. Students labeled as low-achievers:

- view themselves as failures,
- see school as a punishment, and
- eventually drop out.

CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT

Researchers have long insisted that labeling disadvantaged students as low-achievers only perpetuates the negative image that has been cast upon them. Eventually even the child begins to believe the label. Changing the educational environment from a negative to a positive atmosphere appears to produce successful results. Robert Richardson of the Stanford Accelerated Learning Center explains that "affective reactions to learning and learning situations may either reinforce the process or inhibit it; in extreme negative cases such reaction may totally impede the process." **In order for students to learn effectively, they must feel they are a vital part of**

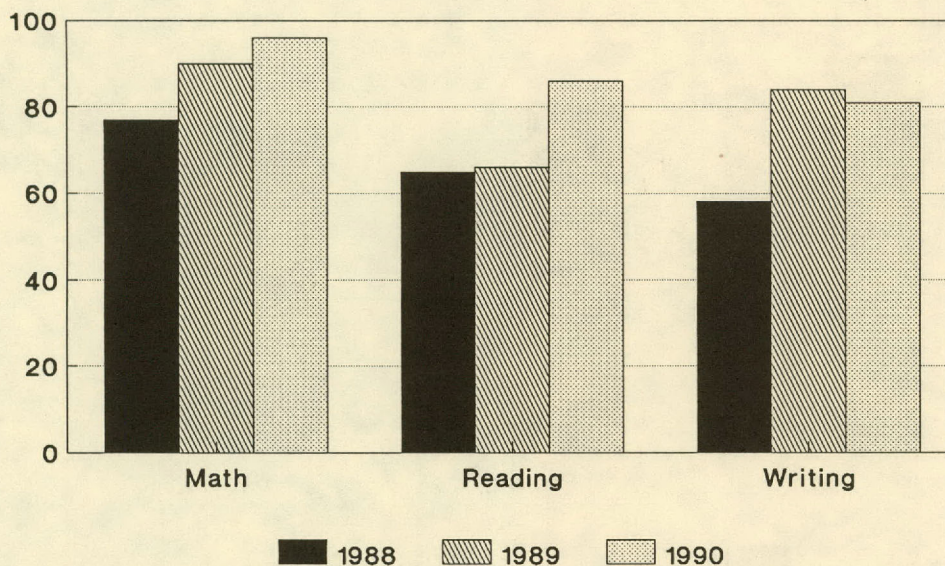
the process rather than an expendable portion of the system.

ACCELERATED LEARNING FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Accelerated learning has emerged on the forefront of educational programs designed to keep disadvantaged students in school. Based on the philosophical approach that students will learn if they are given the attention and time, accelerated learning creates an environment that makes education an adventure. Similar to the 1980's effective schools movement, accelerated programs subscribe to the idea of maximum adolescent development through challenge, initiative and responsibility. The programs' primary focus is to bring all children up to their appropriate grade level so that at-risk elementary students will be able to enter the secondary school's "educational mainstream."

Levin has identified five basic objectives crucial for program success:

TEAMS- Grade 3 Percent of Students Mastering



Hollibrook Elementary

- placing high expectations on students, teachers, and parents;
- giving teachers the power to make decisions concerning the students and their classroom based on their best judgement;
- providing stimulating and exciting instruction through active learning;
- setting deadlines so that the student will have a firm completion date; and
- involving parents and the community in the child's learning process.

- that we're going to make progress." A major component of accelerated schools is rebuilding the students' self-image and self-esteem so that they will feel empowered and able to succeed. Levin's model augments this concept, identifying student and teacher strengths and reinforcing them through three strategies:

- providing teachers and school staff with the ability to make key decisions based on their experience and the needs of their school;
- unifying the teachers, parents and community toward the common goals of the school: placing the children back into the educational mainstream; and
- building on the strengths of all participants-- teachers, students, and parents-- to provide valuable resources.

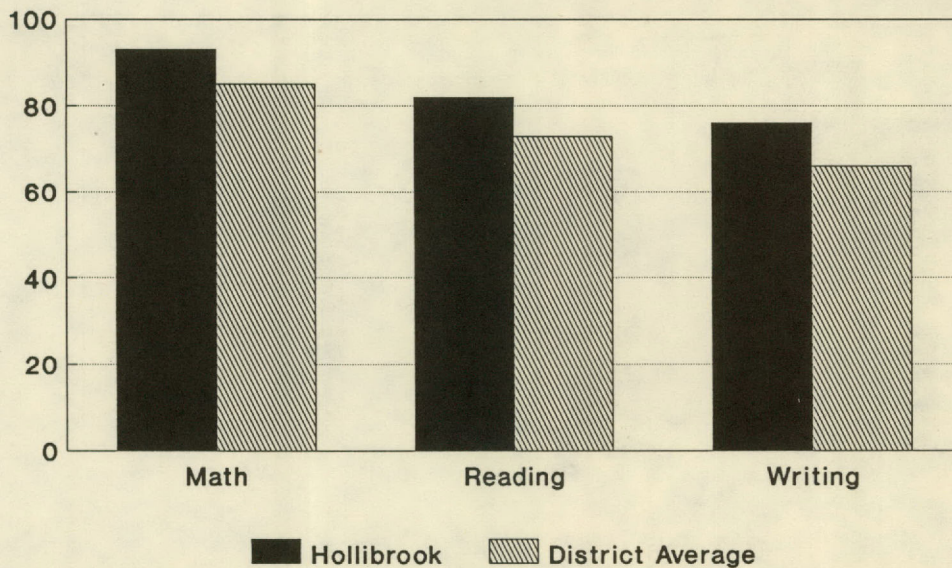
THE PHILOSOPHICAL MODEL

Unlike many instructional methods which prescribe concrete tactics to help the student, Levin's program features a philosophical base which promotes the student's strengths. Levin explains, "It's when we start to realize that these kids in their own way are also gifted and talented and can benefit from a different kind of education

PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY

An accelerated program's success depends primarily on the principal's and the staff's ability to

1990 TEAMS Scores- Grade 3 Hollibrook v. District Averages



Disaggregated by socioeconomic status

Hollibrook Elementary-- A Texas Success Story for Accelerated Learning

In an area of extreme poverty, Hollibrook Elementary in Houston stands as a tower of hope. With all the odds against the school, the principal and staff have undertaken a restructuring which is producing amazing results. Prior to adopting Levin's model, Hollibrook fit all the criteria for a school at risk. Situated in a poverty stricken neighborhood which is predominantly Hispanic, more than 80% of the students are on free or reduced-cost lunches. Before the implementation of Levin's accelerated model, attendance rates were down and test scores showed that students had no real mastery of basic skills. Using the accelerated learning method, Hollibrook has improved the morale of the school and its participants, while showing a dramatic increase in TEAMS scores. In a single year, students' overall reading scores jumped from an average of 60% to 82% (nine percentage points above the district average.) Reading scores for students with limited English proficiency also increased, in some cases as much as 55%. Many might call this turn around a small miracle, but Hollibrook principal Suzanne Still attributes the school's success to Levin's model and to a staff dedicated to making this innovative method work for their school. Hollibrook's experience using Levin's three principles illustrates how accelerated programs can be adapted to fit the needs of any school.

Upon arriving at Hollibrook, Still found herself faced with the enormous problem of low staff morale. Previously, teachers had followed implicit rules that did not allow for their input in school affairs. After a year of staff and teacher training which focused on decision-making and professionalism, Still proposed the new accelerated learning model as a means of improving morale and, more importantly, student performance. After a staff discussion of the program, there was 100% agreement in favor of implementation. The staff collaborated as a whole, making a concrete decision which cemented their active participation in school affairs.

Confronted with the problem of involving reluctant parents, teachers at Hollibrook decided that instead of having the parents come to school, they would go to the parents. Armed with coffee pots and baked goods, teachers and staff went to the surrounding barrio in a project called "gente a gente" (people to people). The first meeting attracted only 12 participants, but by the end of the year, attendance increased to 70 people and meetings were moved to inside the school. Parents, once intimidated by education, felt comfortable coming on campus.

Parents were also encouraged to participate in their child's education with Hollibrook's implementation of the Parents Center. Here parents receive counseling or take classes in child care, home management, or even reading. Other incentives to use the facility included the provision of daycare, magazines or books, and a haven away from home pressures. Employing a social worker has also proved to be a drawing card. Parents feel like they are welcome to participate in the school and are more enthusiastic about their child's education.

The principal noticed that despite the gains in test scores and overall academic performance, the Hollibrook students were missing some of the little extras that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were getting. To help fill the "social gap," Hollibrook implemented Fabulous Fridays. Friday afternoons following lunch, students pick a class to attend from three general areas: integrated academics, life skills or fine arts and crafts. Classes include photography, ballet, calligraphy, and first aid. After four weeks, pupils are able to choose a different class. By using the strengths and skills of teachers, parents, and people from the community, the school is able to provide a program that benefits the students socially as well as academically.

The Hollibrook model is just one of many that is working successfully to keep students in school. As one observer noted about Hollibrook, "Its not just some great reform in education; its simply the way schools should be."

design a program to meet students' needs. Studies have consistently shown that a successful program at one school will not necessarily succeed in another setting. In addition, researchers and educators agree that the best decisions for a school are made by teachers who interact with students on a regular basis. In a recent survey conducted by *The Executive Educator*, 87% of the administrators polled said that school decisions were best made at the building level. Often top-level administrators, enthralled by their own enthusiasm for a project, implement programs which are not suitable for a particular school setting. **In-house educators must modify and adapt a program to fit their students.** Flexibility in curriculum, instruction and organization is the key ingredient to the success of an accelerated program.

learning methods, accelerated programs move away from "book-learning." Instead, programs include hands-on experience and group projects, increasing students' problem-solving abilities. The student finds that problem solving activities can be applied to life situations.

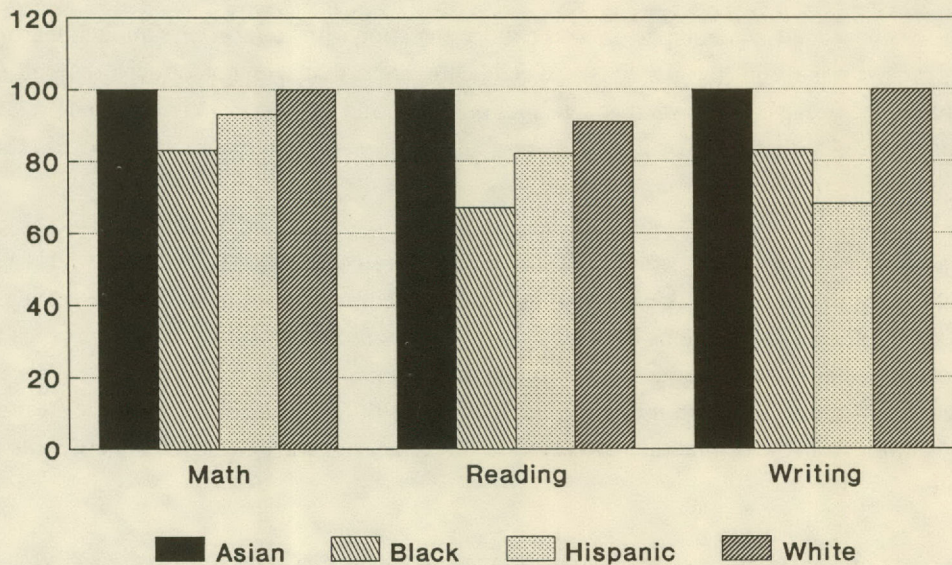
In one social studies class, students took a "jaunt around the world." To teach about the seven continents, the teacher laid large maps of each continent on the classroom floor. Students planned a class itinerary and studied each of the places their trip included. The students learned not only about the location of continents, but also demographics, geography, and cultures.

Instruction coincides with the curriculum to provide active learning experiences. By actively participating in class, the students grasp the instructional concept. Participation reinforces the material and allows the students to apply the concept. For example, one teacher formed a student corporation to produce popcorn to illustrate a working enterprise. Students

COMPONENTS OF THE ACCELERATED MODEL

Curriculum emphasizes language and verbal development in all subjects, including math and science. While including some traditional remedial

1990 TEAMS Scores- Grade 3
% of Students Mastering by Ethnicity



Hollibrook Elementary

purchased stock in the corporation, elected a board of directors, and manufactured the product. Students marketed the popcorn to fellow classmates, and in doing so earned money for field trips. The corporation was so successful that the students opened up their own bank account and are currently planning a visit to Washington, D.C.

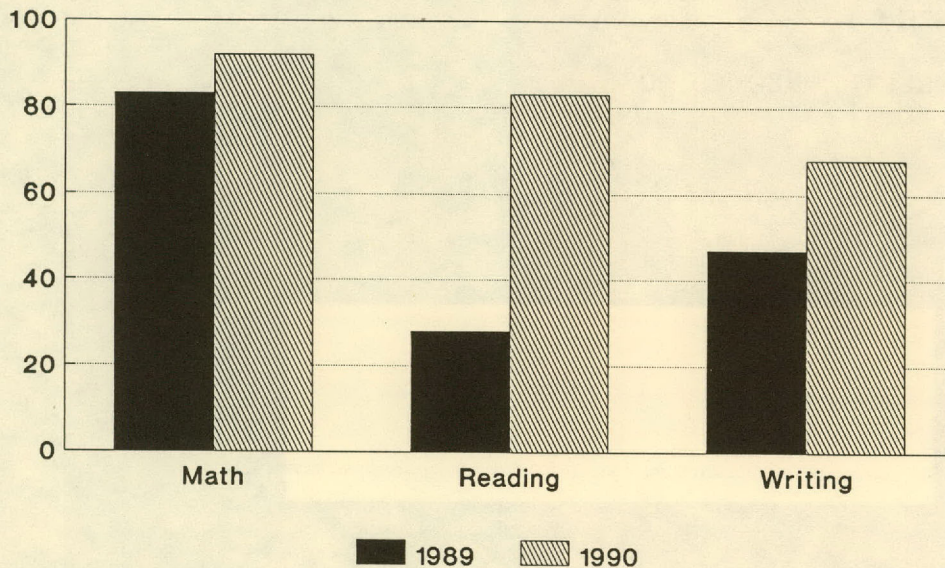
Finally, **organization** provides the backbone of the structure. Teachers, staff, and parents work together in small problem-solving task forces that deal with different facets of the school. Each task force focuses on a "school vision" which may reflect a problem the school faces. For example, one accelerated school found that while students had no problem with math computations, word problems and mathematical application were stumbling points. Through an inquiry process, the group compiled a list of underlying factors that might have caused the problem and developed several ways in which the problem could be resolved.

Small student-teacher ratios also play an important organizational role; in smaller classes, students receive more one-on-one attention. The teacher has more time to offer each student and the opportunity to develop a working relationship. In turn, students no longer feel overlooked or unimportant.

BUSINESS PARTICIPATION

In addition to regular school funds, a significant amount of money for accelerated programs comes from the private sector. Corporations, like Chevron, provide capital that can be used for classroom resources such as hand-held calculators, study-aids, or computers. In low-income communities, these funds are especially important in supplying items that are otherwise unattainable by students. Other businesses have contributed by taking part in classroom projects or donating items for special school activities. One supermarket contributed display cases for a mock grocery store so children could learn the value of money.

TEAMS- Grade 3 Performance of LEP Students



Limited English Proficiency

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Besides providing revenue, businesses can also aid accelerated schools through active participation. Bill Kolberg, President of the National Alliance of Business states that, "Systemic change in education will only come from an intensive, cooperative community effort with involvement from small and large businesses and all facets of the educational process including teachers, administrators and school boards." In many cases, support from the business community will act as a catalyst for school change. In particular, IBM's Project A + has introduced the accelerated concept through lectures and workshops that have allowed Austin school administrators to learn about the technique, and in some cases experience it first-hand.

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Texas Research League
P. O. Box 12456
Austin, Texas 78711

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Mr. Michael Smith
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