

School District of Philadelphia

Empowerment Schools Initiative: Raising Achievement by Removing Barriers

In September 2008, Superintendent Arlene Ackerman launched the Empowerment Schools Initiative to address the urgent needs in longstanding underperforming schools. The initiative provides a comprehensive plan for addressing the issue of low academic achievement in the 95 schools in Corrective Action II status (determined by Adequate Yearly Progress) in the 2008 and/or the 2009 school year. Through a combination of targeted interventions at the school site and personalized support at the district level, the Empowerment Schools Initiative aims to transform low performing schools into high achieving ones, by removing barriers from the teaching and learning process.

The 95 Empowerment Schools are comprised of 57 elementary, 11 middle and 27 comprehensive high schools across ten different geographic regions. They are divided into two tiers: Empowerment I and Empowerment II Schools, determined by performance data across the following areas: academic performance, graduation and dropout rate, student and teacher attendance, parent involvement and school climate. In response to the needs of these schools, additional resources in the areas of curriculum and instruction, student and family services, leadership development and operational support have been redirected to the 40 Empowerment I and 55 Empowerment II Schools to boost student achievement.

In the first year of implementation, 54 schools showed improvement in reading and/or mathematics, 17 schools met 80% or more their performance targets, and 20 schools met Adequate Yearly Progress. To ensure better results for more schools in 2009-2010, the program model was modified to provide a laser-like focus on instruction to yield dramatic results.

Students in Empowerment Schools experience smaller class sizes, additional counselors and receive support from a Student Advisor, who focuses on attendance and truancy. Those in Empowerment I Schools receive a full-time nurse and a Social Service Liaison, who integrates city and state support agencies into the school community. Parent Ombudsmen serve as advocates for parents and supports for principals, in an effort to increase parent and community engagement.

Teachers in Empowerment Schools receive instructional support from School-Based Instructional Specialists, who provide professional development, model lessons and lead collaborative planning efforts across disciplines and grades. In September 2009, a targeted reading and mathematics intervention program was implemented in all Empowerment Schools, providing intense support for struggling students. Schools also receive support from an Empowerment Support Teacher, a full-time substitute assigned to each building (two are assigned to high schools), providing classroom coverage while teachers receive professional development, ensuring continuity of instruction and preservation of on-going, site-based professional development.

Newly appointed and Empowerment I principals receive mentoring from a School Leadership Support Specialist. These former principals provide guidance, assist principals in the coordination of resources, and model best instructional leadership practices. Empowerment School Principals also benefit from monthly professional development sessions on instructional leadership, operational management and effective supervision.

Upon successful implementation and integration of targeted interventions and resources, the School District of Philadelphia anticipates a hallmark year for every Empowerment School, accelerated achievement and ensured success for all students.

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