

COUNCIL FOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE
Long Standing Reform Effort Improves Schools
An Independent Evaluation of the League of Professional Schools



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A long-standing school reform program in Georgia, known as the League of Professional Schools, has succeeded in improving the performance of its member schools. The League of Professional Schools is a Georgia based reform effort that emphasizes teacher participation in informed decision-making within schools. More than 100 schools throughout the state have enrolled themselves in the League. The Council for School Performance, which is housed within the Applied Research Center in the School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University, found a pattern of higher performance in League elementary schools than in similar elementary schools. Using the indicators of student achievement from the Council for School Performance elementary school reports, researchers found that schools participating in the League of Professional Schools performed better on all indicators and significantly better on one-third of the indicators. The evaluation concludes that this broad-based reform effort had specific and measurable impacts on student performance.

What is the League of Professional Schools?

The League of Professional Schools is a school renewal effort, focused on democratic education, that has three guiding principles. League schools create a covenant that describes the school's beliefs about good teaching and learning and then use shared governance and action research to bring the covenant to life throughout the school. Elementary, middle and high schools voluntarily join the League and agree to adopt its educational philosophy. Currently there are more than 100 member schools, 70 of which are elementary schools, across Georgia. The League provides a network of schools for educators to communicate and learn from each other. Also, the League staff offer technical assistance and on-site guidance. While schools learn from one another, each school creates its own yearly action plan that outlines goals and assessment methods. University of Georgia professor Carl Glickman and colleagues created the League in 1990, in response to what they saw as a need for democratic reforms in schools. Shared governance, one of the League's guiding tenets, provides teachers and others within a

school with democratic procedures to identify priorities for improvement, to develop a program to meet those priorities, and to assess the program's success. In 1984, a local principal asked Glickman to use his school as a testing ground for these ideas. Soon after, other schools wanted to be a part of these reform efforts, prompting the creation of the League of Professional Schools.

Background on the Evaluation of the League of Professional Schools:

In October 1996, the League of Professional Schools approached the Council for School Performance to conduct an independent evaluation of their school reform effort.

Evaluating this type of reform effort is especially difficult for three reasons. First, schools need to have been in the League long enough for the implementation of shared governance and action research to have an impact on student performance. Elementary schools have made up the largest proportion of League members since the League was founded. Therefore, League elementary schools that joined prior to 1995 were evaluated. Second, the League of Professional Schools is a school-wide reform that is targeted to the specific needs of each participating school. Because the efforts may be focused on reading in one school and technology use in another and because these priorities can change over time, the impacts can occur across a wide range of performance measures. Third, the League schools must be compared to schools that are similar. It is important to select comparison schools that have students with similar social and economic backgrounds due to its impact on academic performance. League elementary schools were matched with comparison schools based on three factors that explained 75% of the difference in academic performance: percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, the socioeconomic background of the students, and the racial composition of the schools. Another factor that must be considered in selecting comparison schools is the voluntary commitment of school leadership to school improvement. Membership in the League requires a strong commitment and it may be the educators' commitment to improving student academic achievement that impacts performance, not the implementation of League principles. To rule out commitment as the source of the differences between League schools and the comparison schools, League elementary schools were compared to schools with educators that were other school improvement

efforts. As with the League, these programs focus on developing skills and processes for systemic school improvement, but do not focus on specific instructional interventions.

How do League schools differ from non-League schools?

Since the principles of the League school reform effort emphasize shared governance, teachers in League schools should be spending more time in school participating in staff development and working on school governance issues. The research confirmed these expectations. As compared to non-League elementary schools, League elementary schools were significantly more likely to have:

- a higher proportion of their teachers participating in staff development above the 10 planning days.
- a higher proportion of their teachers participating in school governance.

Do schools in the League of Professional Schools perform better than others?

The results of the evaluation showed that, in general, participation in the League increased teacher education and staff development and raised academic performance.

Table 1 shows that League schools had higher test performance than non-League schools.

Table 1

| Academic Performance Indicators | League Schools | Non-League Schools |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Percent of 3rd graders scoring above the national average on ITBS in Reading | 44.5 | 42.4 |
| Percent of 3rd graders scoring above the national average on ITBS in Math | 53 | 50 |
| Percent of 3rd graders scoring in the top quarter on ITBS in Math | 27.7 | 23.7 |
| Percent of 3rd graders meeting state goal on CBA in Reading | 64.3 | 63.4 |
| Percent of 3rd graders meeting state goal on CBA in Math | 72.5 | 71.1 |

| | | |
|--|------|------|
| Percent of 3rd graders meeting state goal on CBA in Science | 42.5 | 39 |
| Percent of 3rd graders meeting state goal on CBA in Social Studies | 57.6 | 51.8 |
| Percent of 3rd graders scoring at/above the quality standard on CBA in Math | 30.7 | 28.6 |
| Percent of 3rd graders scoring at/above the quality standard on CBA in Science | 8.8 | 7.6 |
| Percent of 5th graders scoring above the national average on ITBS in Reading | 53.4 | 50.4 |
| Percent of 5th graders scoring above the national average on ITBS in Math | 53 | 49.3 |
| Percent of 5th graders scoring in the top quarter on ITBS in Math | 26.4 | 23.5 |
| Percent of 5th graders meeting state goal on CBA in Reading | 78.7 | 75.7 |
| Percent of 5th graders meeting state goal on CBA in Math | 70.7 | 68.7 |
| Percent of 5th graders meeting state goal on CBA in Science | 48.1 | 45.2 |
| Percent of 5th graders meeting state goal on CBA in Social Studies | 41.1 | 35.7 |
| Percent of 5th graders scoring at/above the quality standard on CBA in Math | 28.4 | 26.5 |
| Percent of 5th graders scoring at/above the quality standard on CBA in Science | 10.5 | 10 |
| | | |

ITBS is the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; CBA is the curriculum-based assessment.

In fact, League schools outperformed non-League schools on all 18 indicators of academic performance. One-third of these had a statistically significant difference, which are shown in bold on the above table.

Is the League program responsible for these higher performance scores?

One way to find out whether the League itself is responsible for the differences in performance is to analyze the performance measures based on the extent to which the League principles were actually being carried out within each school. The League staff distinguished the levels of implementation among the League schools and designated each elementary school as being at a high, medium or low implementation level. Implementation level refers to how much the school was using the League principles and implementing its individual action plan. Usually the level of implementation was a function of how long the school had been a member of the League.

The research confirmed that teachers at high implementation League schools spent more time in staff development and more time working on school governance issues. In these schools, 95% of teachers participated in staff development beyond the 10 planning days, as compared to 84% of teachers in non-League schools. Seventy-one percent (71%) of teachers in high implementation League schools participated in school governance, as compared to only 50% of teachers in non-League schools.

Then researchers did further analysis with those schools that were considered to have a high implementation level. The following graphs show the differences between test performance for League schools and non-League schools. In addition, high implementation League schools had 43% of their third-graders scoring above the national average on the ITBS in math, compared to only 29% in non-League schools.

Figure 1.

League vs. Non-League Elementary Schools: 3rd Graders' CBA Scores

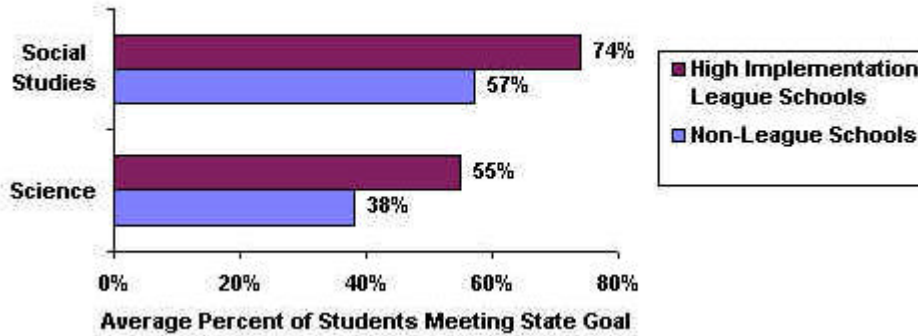
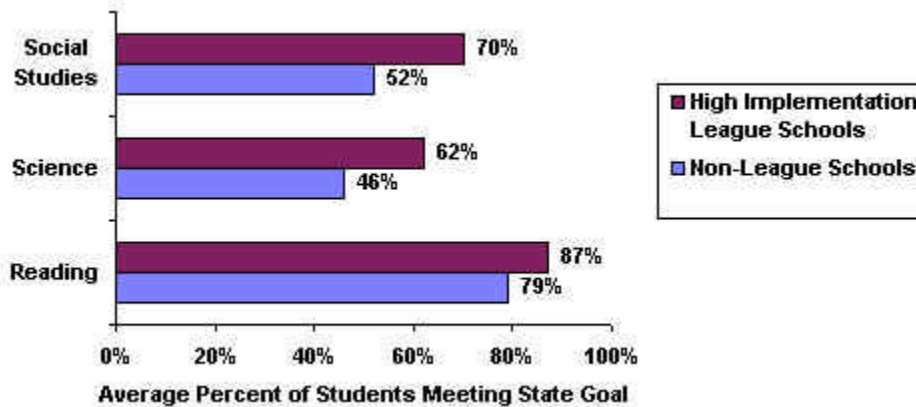


Figure 2.

League vs. Non-League Elementary Schools: 5th Graders' CBA Scores



What can be learned from the results of this evaluation?

One of the most significant findings of this research is that it provides evidence that school reform can work. Even more significant is the fact that this reform effort, the League of Professional Schools, is not specifically aimed at raising test scores. Nor does it aim to improve performance in specific academic areas. Rather it is a broad-based

school reform effort, intending to influence the teaching and learning process. The results of this evaluation show that this kind of reform, across school and school districts, can positively affect these processes, resulting in higher student achievement.

This study indicates a need to establish more school reform networks of public schools that are voluntary and ongoing, coordinated and facilitated by universities and other educational agencies, to connect schools that share a similar philosophy, purpose, and commitment to change. A second implication is that such improvements have come through the democratic participation of all members of a school-- across roles and grade levels-- and not from district or state mandates and directives. This is not to say that other reform efforts are not as effective, but that we have evidence that this one is.