

# SCHOOL HEALTH & QUALITY OF LIFE

## A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

BY KIM O. YAP

**A**n elementary school in a Midwest state, having been reconstituted following years of chronic low performance, embarks on a schoolwide effort to improve students' test-taking skills. Teachers and administrators believe that a major contributing factor to low test scores is that students are not testwise. Increasing testwiseness will raise test scores.

A middle school in the South provides targeted, focused instruction to its borderline students—those who score just a point or two below the proficiency level. By pushing these students over the threshold, the school will easily show adequate yearly progress and be identified as a satisfactory, if not high-performing, school.

A high school in the West mounts an intensive effort seeking parental assistance in ensuring that students show up for mandated testing. The effort is intended to avoid a previous disaster of failing to meet accountability requirements because not enough students took the mandated tests.

Arguably, these interventions are not totally without merit. Teaching students appropriate test-taking skills, for example, is likely to increase the validity of assessment. Providing intensive instruction to borderline students would increase the academic achievement of that segment of the student population. When an increased number of students participate in statewide testing, the results will be more representative. Thus, each of these efforts has the effect of enhancing the validity of test results and consequently the validity and fairness of the accountability system.

However, the fact is that interventions such as these—which may or may not address the root causes of low performance—appear to be proliferating as a result of high-stakes accountability pressures. The reasons, I suspect, are entwined with a desire to raise not just test scores at the school but also living standards in the community.

In a larger sense, these and other interventions are more than school improvement efforts. For in reality, there is a symbiotic relationship between the school system and its surrounding community. With rare exceptions, a distressed school finds itself in a distressed community. And a distressed

community learns more often than not that its schools are not making the grade.

In rural America, the symbiotic relationship between the health of the school system and the quality of life in the community is particularly strong. The rural school is the center of the community. As the school thrives or declines, so does the community.

Rural or urban, communities with low-performing schools are well aware of the fact that failing schools have consequences far beyond depressed student achievement. There are economic consequences that impinge on the quality of life in the community. It is no wonder that failing schools are making every attempt to reverse the trend, including interventions that do not address the root causes of low academic achievement—the absence of effective pedagogy and a rigorous curriculum aligned to state standards.

Thus, the impetus of school improvement is not only a desire to raise the bar of academic achievement, but also a wider societal concern for a community's quality of life. The recent spate of school reforms initiated by education leaders, increasingly including mayors and governors, stems from not only educational concerns but also economic interests.

Nationally, the link between education and the economic well-being of citizens is well recognized. Indeed, it is the foundation of many federal education policies. For instance, the Title I program—the largest federal investment in education—remains an essential part of the war on poverty. For nearly four decades, the program has provided supplemental funding to improve schools in poor communities. More recently, the nation was declared at risk of losing its economic competitiveness as a result of “a rising tide of mediocrity” among its school systems. Waves of reform efforts soon followed the clarion call for improvement. With public and private funding, in school districts large and small, a variety of school reform models were designed and implemented to boost academic achievement. For rural America and other underserved populations, increased access to quality education is made available through distance learning technology bolstered by federal support and incentive. The Star Schools program, for example, has provided instruction in core

subject areas, teacher professional development, and services to the most at-risk populations, including incarcerated youth.

At the regional and community level, the link between school health and quality of life appears incontrovertible. In survey after survey, respondents indicate that the quality of schools is a key consideration when they decide where to live. Similarly, business and industry take a close look at academic institutions in the community when they make locational choices. Proximity to good schools—which implies the availability of a well-trained workforce—ranks high on their list of priorities. Generous public expenditures on education enhance the attractiveness of a community to business and industry.

Thus, the quality of public schools has a dominant influence on business and industry, as well as individuals, as they decide where to locate. Both public officials and private homeowners believe that good public schools boost property values.

However, what is insidious about this is that it is the *perceived* quality that counts. The public, including individuals as well as business and industry, often judges the health of a school system by broad strokes, temporary indicators. Categorical labels such as those used in accountability systems substitute for more comprehensive empirical evidence. For instance, when a school falls short of making adequate yearly progress for any of a large number of reasons, it is perceived to be a failing school. This happens—more often than one might expect—to schools that had been judged to be exemplary under the same accountability system just a year or two before.

Moreover, the fan-spread phenomenon is a self-fulfilling prophecy. As new business and industry move into a community with schools perceived to be of high quality, employment in the community grows, resulting in a stronger tax base to support its public school system. A well-supported school system further strengthens school quality and renders the community even more attractive to new business and industry (and their employees), creating what is called the Matthew effect—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

As a community becomes more attractive to firms and individuals, home prices soar. Infrastructure gets updated and quality of life improves for its residents. School quality plays an ineluctable role in the competition for a better quality of life.

There is, however, a downside. In a climate of high-stakes accountability pressures, a community's desire to safeguard the reputation of its schools, and consequently its quality of life, can create a perverse incentive. Witness the recent rise in requests for waivers and modifications under the No Child Left Behind Act. Some of the changes have the effect of lowering academic standards instead of raising them. Others have sought a delay in implementing higher standards. More serious, surrogate, or spurious reform efforts may be conceived

and implemented to create positive indicators of school health in the hope of preventing an erosion of quality of life.

To ameliorate the perverse incentive resulting from accountability pressures, it is perhaps instructive to look at the etiology of state and federal policy. Current federal accountability measures are primarily based on a moral perspective that people are responsible for creating and solving their problems. Thus, if states and local districts have created low-performing schools—schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress—they are also responsible for turning these schools around. Shame and sanctions would follow should they fail to do so within a prescribed timeframe. On the other hand, local districts are more apt to look at the situation from a compensatory perspective: People are not blamed for their problems but are held responsible for solving the problems.

In this perspective, low-performing schools are largely a result of the types of students (e.g., students unprepared to benefit from instruction for a variety of reasons) enrolled at those schools, for which the schools should receive no blame. Shame and sanctions are, therefore, not appropriate consequences in a

situation largely beyond their control. They are, however, responsible for improving the academic achievement of the students. In this perspective, support and positive inducement—focusing on reward for success rather than punishment for failure—may work better as a

policy instrument to improve schools.

On another front, setting absolute standards on school performance, as No Child Left Behind requires, further reinforces the perception that the accountability system stacks the cards against low-performing schools. Looking at growth and incremental gains may be a better way to hold low-performing schools accountable as they try to improve themselves. The advent of various value-added assessment systems—which take into account growth rather than absolute standards to be met—provides a means of correcting this perceived inequity and, in doing so, stemming the potential rise of perverse incentives to circumvent state and federal accountability requirements. ■

*Kim O. Yap directs the Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment at NWREL, providing oversight of its numerous research, evaluation, and assessment activities, including the national preliminary study for experimental research on culturally based education for American Indian and Alaska Native students. He earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in educational psychology at the University of Hawaii. He holds a bachelor's degree in languages and literature from Nanyang University, Singapore.*



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➤ Expert Opinion: Andrew Porter and Value-Added Assessment