

ACHIEVEMENT GROWTH IN ILLINOIS SCHOOLS: ONE ILLUSTRATION

An illustrative example of effective leadership impacting academic outcomes is Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center Elementary School in Chicago, where the Five Essential Supports surveys have been in use for many years. Chavez’s student population is 98% low-income students of color, primarily Latino. As demonstrated in *Figure 2* below, in 2009, only 15% of Chavez students were scoring at a level predictive of an ACT composite score of 21 or higher in 11th grade. By 2014, 36.7% were on track for an ACT composite of 21 or higher (*dashed blue line*). During that same period, the percent of Chavez students scoring at or above Illinois statewide averages on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test improved from 23% to 46%

despite high rates of poverty and difficult second-language-learning challenges (*solid black line*). This display also enables the reader to see Chavez students’ improvements over more than a decade on multiple ways of portraying student performance on the ISAT - corrected for 2006 changes in the test and 2013 changes in benchmarking. Chavez not only increased the percent of its students at or above cut scores on state tests, it sharply reduced the percent of students in the state’s bottom quartile while increasing the percent of students performing at state grade level. This was all achieved while neighborhood levels of poverty and minority status remained constant.

Fig. 2. Chavez PK-8 Elementary: ISAT – All Subjects/All Grades Tested
Change in Grade Equivalents: 2001-2006= **+0.37**; 2006-2009= **-0.15**; 2009-2014= **+0.93**

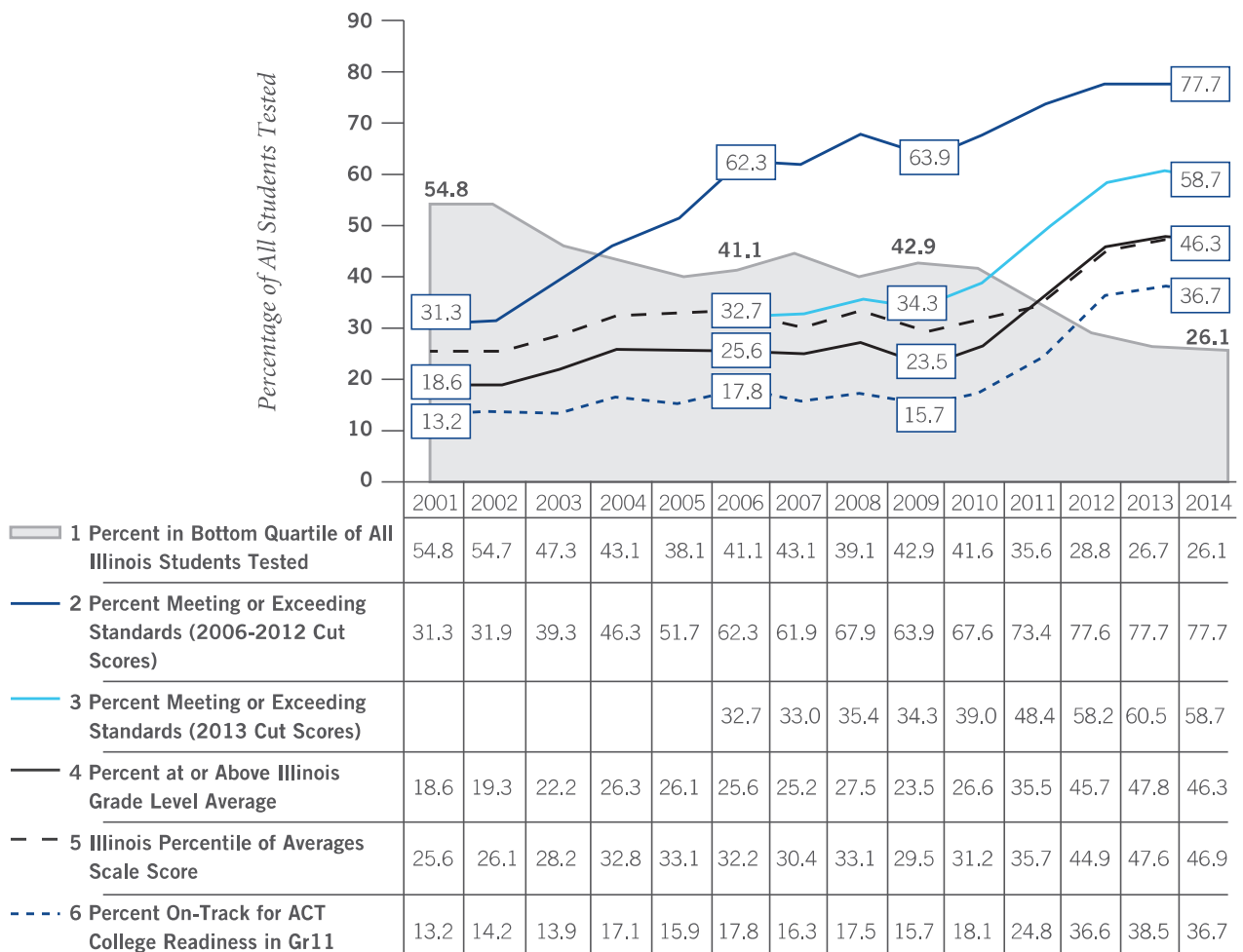
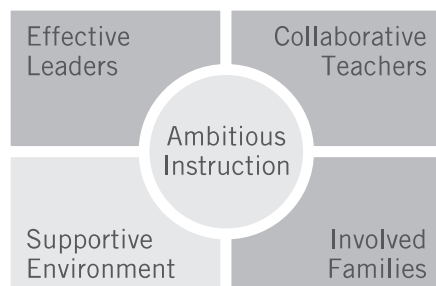


Fig. 3. Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center Elementary School 2014 Five Essential Supports Performance



- STRONG** **Ambitious Instruction:** *Classes are challenging and engaging*
- VERY STRONG** **Effective Leaders:** *Principals and Teachers Implement a Shared Vision for Success*
- VERY STRONG** **Collaborative Teachers:** *Teachers Collaborate To Promote Professional Growth*
- VERY STRONG** **Involved Families:** *The Entire Staff Builds Strong External Relationships*
- STRONG** **Supportive Environment:** *The School Is Safe, Demanding, and Supportive*

School improvement is challenging work. Without strength in multiple areas, schools often struggle to improve. Researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research used 20 years of evidence to define five essential components of organization and climate related to improving schools. What they found is compelling. These researchers showed that schools strong on these Essentials are more likely to:

- Improve student learning and attendance year after year
- Graduate students from high school
- Improve student ACT scores
- Get students into college
- Keep their teachers

In fact, schools strong on at least 3 out of 5 Essentials are 10 times more likely to improve student learning.

Source: 2014 Survey results for Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center ES. Produced by UChicago Impact

How do we explain Chavez’s success? According to the annual surveys administered by Chicago Public Schools, Chavez Elementary Schools has built strong organizational capacity in each of the five areas described by the Five Essential Supports. *Figure 3* above presents how the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research describes the results of Chavez’s annual survey report from 2014.

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research argues that *effective leaders* are critical to making progress in the other four domains. Further, they do not limit effective leadership to the principal, instead recognizing more broadly the other leaders within the school—administrative team, grade-level leaders, subject-matter leaders, special education leaders, and others—and their continually developing ability to support the school’s organizational and instructional improvement.

“ Among even the most promising candidates, there is considerable distance between *wanting* to be a transformational leader and actually *becoming* that leader. The challenge for principal preparation programs is to help candidates bridge that gap.

CURRENT ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS HIGHLIGHT NEED FOR IMPROVED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

As is true nationally, Illinois' school leadership reform initiatives have been fueled by concerns about inequities in student learning outcomes. PA 096-0903, for example, was the legislative outcome of two state reports: the 2008 *Illinois School Leader Task Force Report* and the earlier 2006 report commissioned by the Illinois Board of Higher Education: *Blueprint for Change*. These reports shared a fundamental concern about the quality of student learning in Illinois, and a belief that improved school leadership could be a key lever in improving student learning outcomes.

The 2008 School Leader Task Force Report began its opening argument under the heading **Staying Focused on Student Learning: The Need for a System Approach to Leadership Preparation**. It went on to say:

Illinois schools have many things to be proud of, but our students are losing ground against the rest of the nation on key indicators of student achievement. The most recent (2007) results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that only 32.2% of Illinois fourth-graders and 29.8% of eighth graders are proficient in reading. Not only are 29 states above Illinois in each of those categories, but Illinois lost ground against the average gains of the rest of the states over the past four years, 2003-2007. In fact, Illinois lost ground against national averages over the past four years not only in fourth and eighth grade reading, but also in fourth and eighth grade mathematics—all four of the student achievement measures reported in a current study by *Quality Counts* (January 2008, p. 5).

Earlier in this report, we presented data of another kind, showing one high-poverty school's steady improvements over more than a decade. We should remain mindful that *throughout the state*, only a small percentage of schools are performing well above the levels predicted by race, family income and zip code. However, it is clear from Chavez Elementary School and other Illinois examples that our students have the *ability* to learn, if we can organize and lead schools to *support* that learning. As Effective Schools researcher Ron Edmonds asked in 1977:

How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I suspect that you have reasons of your own for

preferring to believe that basic pupil performance derives from family background instead of the school's response to family background (Edmonds, 1977 in Lezotte).

The good news is that we have examples of such exceptional schools across the state—but they remain a small minority. We in Illinois have the opportunity to grow many more such schools, but we have to grow the leadership necessary to create them, and that will take a statewide effort. The effort is warranted, we believe, by the challenges that our state is now facing. **Appendix E** provides a link to resource data to support each of the following observations:

- Except for Chicago Public Schools and a few northern districts, since 2001 achievement on NAEP, ISAT and ACT in most areas of Illinois has flattened or declined in comparison with state and national norms.
- While overall statewide achievement has increased modestly in recent years, achievement among White and African American students has flattened or declined in comparison with statewide norms.
- For the most part, these trends have been driven by achievement declines outside of Chicago.
- For example, while 8th-grade NAEP reading scores outside of Chicago have declined statewide from 2003 to 2015, the 8th grade reading scores in Chicago have increased a substantial 9 points in that same period. The overall 8th grade Illinois gain of five points in mathematics for 8th grade NAEP scores from 2003 to 2015 are more than accounted for by Chicago's increase of 21 points for that period—without which, the state as a whole would be flat or in decline.
- Across regions, flattening and declining achievement is closely associated with rising percentages of students who come from low-income households.
- Schools have the ability to increase instructional effectiveness at scale despite demographic factors that typically predict lower achievement. For example, low-income enrollments in Chicago have remained at around 85% for more than a decade while achievement scores have increased significantly. Each of Illinois' three