Descriptive Examples of Six “Beating the Odds” Schools in Oregon
An Exploratory Study

Overview

The proposed study aims to describe the local conditions and practices implemented in six Oregon schools that have performed significantly better on 2014–15 Smarter Balanced Assessments in multiple subjects and grade levels than similar schools. The study will collect data on the characteristics of “beating the odds” schools, with an emphasis on how they use assessment data to analyze student learning gaps and make adjustments in instruction to address the identified student learning gaps (H.B. 2680, 2015). This study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of six “beating the odds” schools in Oregon?
2. What is the assessment approach used by the study schools, e.g., types of assessment used, how assessments are used to identify student learning gaps, how assessments are used to inform instruction, etc.?
3. What are the perceived benefits and challenges encountered by the study schools? How do the schools address identified challenges?

Framework for “Beating the Odds” Schools

The need to implement high quality assessment and teaching practices in struggling schools has generated interest in understanding the characteristics of schools that have higher levels of student achievement than expected compared to schools that have similar social, economic, and academic characteristics (Abe, Weinstock, Chan, Meyers et al., 2015). The design of this study included a quick review of the literature to identify characteristics of “beating the odds” schools. A framework of these characteristics are listed in Table 1 (Chenoweth, 2015; Wilder & Jacobsen, 2010; Wilcox, Schiller, Durand, Zuckerman et al., 2015). This list of characteristics guided the design of the study as well as selection and development of data collection measures.

Study Design

Researchers will use a mixed methods design to collect data from multiple informants on the processes, types of support, and internal resources that participating schools leverage to promote positive academic outcomes for each student. They will conduct document reviews, an online survey, and strategic interviews to establish the history and context of instruction and assessment work taking place in the selected schools. Focus groups in two or three schools will yield richer information from teachers who directly implement strategies in the classroom. Overall, the study will provide in-depth examples from different user perspectives to create a holistic picture of how policies or practices are played out in the real world. The remainder of
this section describes the participants, measures, and data analysis procedures for the proposed study. The interview and focus group protocols are in attachment A.

Table 1
Characteristics of “Beating the Odds” Schools

1. Instruction
   - Including high expectations for every student
   - Responsibility for performance
   - Customized instruction and interventions
   - Student engagement strategies
   - Ongoing curricular improvement and maximum use of instructional time.

2. Leadership
   - Strong district/building/instructional leadership
   - Focus on learning and growth
   - Commitment to give change time
   - Persistence

3. Assessment
   - Regular, systematic use of assessments and analysis of data
   - Identifying what is working and what is not
   - Using data in the classroom to drive improvement

4. Professional learning
   - Ongoing, job-embedded
   - Collaborative professional development

5. Collaboration
   - Shared goals among teachers, principal, other staff members, and parents
   - Problem solving at all levels
   - Strong staff communication

6. School climate
   - Clear school mission, order, safety, and discipline
   - Academic supports
   - Student motivation
   - Administrative and collegial support
   - Time for collaboration and teamwork
   - Student and teacher mobility
   - Connectedness and strong, positive relationships, including personal, social, and home–school
   - Salaries and job satisfaction
   - Dedicated and like-minded teachers.

(Beating the Odds, n.d.; Chenoweth, 2015; Wilder & Jacobsen, 2010; Voight, Austin, & Hanson, 2013; Wilcox, Schiller, Durand, Zuckerman et al., 2015)
Participants
The Oregon Department of Education will identify and recruit a purposeful sample of six schools (two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools) based on several considerations. Compared to similar schools, all schools will have performed significantly better on 2014–15 Smarter Balanced Assessments in multiple subjects and grade levels. The selected schools will include rural and urban schools; span elementary, middle, and high school grade levels; and serve students that represent diversity in background characteristics and academic support needs.

Study participants will include administrators, certified teachers, specialists, and other education professionals who work in the six Oregon schools. Researchers may also interview heads of English language arts (ELA) and math departments and/or district administrators who directly support the schools to verify or gather additional data for the study.

Measures and data sources
Researchers will use multiple measures including document reviews, an online teacher survey, interviews, and focus groups. Prior to any data collection, researchers will obtain approval from its Office for Human Research Protections, Institutional Review Board to ensure all data collection, management, and storage procedures adhere to federal guidance on protection of study participants.

Interviews. Researchers will conduct telephone or in-person interviews with school administrators to collect data on the systems and high leverage practices that participants implemented to increase student achievement. The interview questions will align with the constructs outlined in the “beating the odds” framework. When possible, researchers will verify information on district supports with district administrators and selected district personnel who are directly involved in school operations.

Focus groups. Researchers will conduct focus groups with teachers and specialists from a subset of selected schools. The focus groups will collect data from teachers and other educators on how they use assessment data to identify student learning gaps and inform instructional decisions. The focus groups will also document staff members’ perceptions and experiences about the successes and challenges related to implementation.

Teacher survey. Researchers will administer a survey to classroom teachers, specialists, and other educators who are involved in assessment, instruction, and reporting responsibilities in the six study schools. The survey will include fixed response items that allow the calculation of scale scores, and open-ended questions to gather the participants’ perspectives on what practices they implement that promote students’ academic success.

The surveys will collect information on the participants’ background as well as their perceptions of the instructional practices, leadership, professional development, and overall
collegial environment in their school. The survey will also record information about the use of assessment data to inform instructional decisions. Researchers will make the surveys available on-line and in paper form. To maximize response rates, the schools will be encouraged to administer the surveys during regular staff meetings.

Documents. Researchers will review existing documents including policies, rules, and procedures, strategic or school improvement plans, assessment plans or guidance documents for lessons learned from previous years.

Data analysis procedures
Researchers will use quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures to identify common themes and differences among the study schools. They will use triangulation of the findings from the interviews, focus groups, and survey data to identify areas of agreement and areas of disagreement within and among schools.

Survey data analysis. Researchers will clean the data and eliminate incomplete and duplicate responses. Once data are cleaned, researchers will analyze and report frequencies and percentages for survey items as well as cross tabulations, conduct in-depth comparisons among sets of questions to identify trends or relationships, and analyze content for open-ended questions. Analyses will be conducted for the overall sample, by school, and by the participant’s position (e.g., ELA teacher, math teacher, etc.). The survey results will be reported in table formats and graphic displays organized around the constructs of the “beating the odds” framework. The researchers will document and take into account response rates and will redact personally identifiable information to protect participants’ privacy.

Interview and focus group data analysis. First, researchers will clean and redact any personally identifiable information from the data. After cleaning the data, researchers code data from the telephone interviews and focus groups separately. They will use content analyses procedures to identify common themes on the strategies, challenges, and lessons learned related to the “beating the odds” framework, with a particular focus on use of assessment practices (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Document analysis. Researchers will use content analysis procedures to code and synthesize common themes to describe the assessment systems employed by the districts and catalogue supports provided to teachers on using assessment to inform instruction. The researchers will use triangulation procedures to verify statements and themes identified through survey, interview, and focus group data.
References


Attachment A
Interview protocol for Administrators

Open-ended questions

1. Can you describe the leadership structures and practices at your school, and how effective you think they are, and why? What role do you have in supporting learning? What role do teachers have in school leadership? What role do students, parents, and/or community partners play in supporting learning?

2. Does your school (or district) have a comprehensive assessment plan that is currently in use? (Obtain a copy)
   a) How have you implemented the plan at your school?
   b) Are teachers aware of the plan? If so, to what extent?

3. What types of assessment data do you use to make decisions at the school level (examples include screening assessments, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, local assessment, statewide assessment, other)? How do you use these assessment data (e.g., types of decisions)? Can you provide examples?

4. Through district-wide professional development, approximately how many hours of professional development in the past three years have focused on instructional and assessment practices? At the building level, approximately how many hours of professional development in the past three years have focused on instructional and assessment practices?

5. Has there been any additional professional development, staff meeting, or department time focused on the administration, collection, and intended use of assessment data?
   a. If so, what types of assessment was covered e.g., formative assessment data, local assessment data (unit tests, interim assessments, etc.), statewide assessment data?
   b. How is/was the professional development delivered and by whom? Resources?

6. What types of assessment do teachers use? (Examples include screening assessments, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, local assessment, statewide assessment, other?) How do teachers use these student assessment data in the classroom (e.g., monitoring progress, identifying learning gaps, identify students who are falling behind)? Can you provide examples?

7. In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths facing teachers related to using assessment to identify student learning gaps in math or ELA classes? Using assessment to adjust instruction to address student learning gaps in math and/or ELA classes? Can you share an example? [make sure to clarify types of assessment]

8. In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing teachers related to using assessment to identify student learning gaps in math and ELA classes? Using assessment to adjust instruction to address student learning gaps in math and/or ELA classes? Can you share an example? [make sure to clarify types of assessment]

(Adapted from Guiterrez, 2014; Oregon Department of Education, 2013)
Focus group protocol for teachers and specialists

Open-ended questions

1. Can you describe the leadership structures and practices at your school, and how effective you think they are, and why? What role do you have in supporting learning? What role do teachers have in school leadership? What role do students, parents, and/or community partners play in supporting learning?

2. Does your school (or district) have a comprehensive assessment plan that is currently in use?
   a. Are teachers aware of the plan? If so, how do you use the plan?

3. What types of assessment do teachers use? (Examples include screening assessments, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, local assessment, statewide assessment, other?) How do teachers use these student assessment data in the classroom (e.g., monitoring progress, identifying learning gaps, identify students who are falling behind)? Can you provide examples?

4. Through district-wide professional development, approximately how many hours of professional development in the past three years have focused on instructional and assessment practices?
   a. At the building level, approximately how many hours of professional development in the past three years have focused on instructional and assessment practices?

5. Has there been any additional professional development, staff meeting, or department time focused on the administration, collection, and intended use of assessment data?
   a. If so, what types of assessment was covered e.g., formative assessment data, local assessment data (unit tests, interim assessments, etc.), statewide assessment data?
   b. How is/was the professional development delivered and by whom? Resources?
   c. Are there any assessment administration guidelines based on standardized procedures?

6. In your opinion, what are the greatest strengths of teachers related to using assessment to identify student learning gaps in math or ELA classes? Using assessment to adjust instruction to address student learning gaps in math and/or ELA classes? Can you share an example? [make sure to clarify types of assessment]

7. In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing teachers related to using assessment to identify student learning gaps in math and ELA classes? Using assessment to adjust instruction to address student learning gaps in math and/or ELA classes? Can you share an example? [make sure to clarify types of assessment]

(Adapted from Guiterrez, 2014; Oregon Department of Education, 2013)