

PROJECT EXCEL

Final Report Fall 1999 - Spring 2003

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**Fairfax County Public Schools
Office of Program Evaluation**

FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

At the request of the Superintendent, Project Excel was created in spring 1999 as one of the school division's major initiatives to promote high student achievement for all children. More specifically, Project Excel was designed to address a major concern that the selected schools would not likely reach state accreditation standards, unless additional resources and incentives were instituted by the division. The twenty elementary schools with the lowest scores on the initial Schoolwide Achievement Index (SAI) were identified for participation in Project Excel. In 1999, Excel schools' pass rates on most of the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests were below the 70 percent level required by the state for accreditation beginning in 2006. The twenty participating elementary schools enrolled the highest percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price meals (FRM) and students receiving English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) services—students who had performed as a group lower than students at other Fairfax County schools on past measures of academic achievement.

This final evaluation report is based on test data collected throughout the four years of Project Excel, from the 1999-2000 through the 2002-2003 school years. The evaluation began in the project's first school year, 1999-2000, in response to a request from the Superintendent for the Office of Program Evaluation (OPE) to evaluate all new division-level programs. This final report examines the performance of all grade levels, including the performance of the first cohort of full-day kindergarten (K) students (1999-2000) as third graders on the Standards of Learning tests, Virginia's assessment used for decisions about accreditation and No Child Left Behind status.

The resources, opportunities, and expectations provided to schools through Project Excel are consistent with current divisionwide Targets 1 and 2 which state, "All students will be reading at grade level by the end of second grade;" and "All schools will meet or exceed the Virginia Standards of Accreditation, as measured by the SOL tests in mathematics, science, English, and history and social science." The initiative has three main program components—accountability, increased learning time, and an enhanced academic program. Appendix A in the full report lists the twenty schools participating in the Project Excel initiative.

Accountability

The primary accountability for Excel schools is the expectation that they meet state accreditation standards, which are based on the SOL tests. In addition, Excel schools are expected to show annual progress on the SAI, an index developed by Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) that combines SOL and Stanford Achievement Test results for grades 3-6 to communicate measurable goals for individual schools.

Based on year-to-year improvement on the SAI, Excel schools have an opportunity to earn financial awards. For FY 2003, the cost of SAI bonuses was \$1.1 million. At the other end of the accountability spectrum is the expectation that schools that do not make substantial progress by the end of the four-year evaluation period may face a variety of consequences to promote greater school success. Consequences ultimately will be determined by the Superintendent, but reflective of the views of school, cluster and division staff, and empirically-based best practices.

Increased Learning Time

Excel schools were funded to increase the amount of time available for student learning in two ways. First, in all Excel schools, kindergarten is full-day instead of half-day. Second, in Excel schools learning time is greater than in most elementary schools, which is accomplished by eliminating Monday early closing, adding 2.5 hours to the school day. For FY 2003, the costs of full-day kindergarten and extending the school day were \$6.6 million and \$5.4 million, respectively (School Board's Approved Budget, FY 2003).

Enhanced Academic Programs

All Excel schools were funded to strengthen their academic programs by implementing technology-based phonics in kindergarten and first grade and an "instructional model" in one or more grades, K-6. To implement technology-based phonics, Excel schools could choose one of two commercially available integrated learning systems aimed at improving early reading skills: the Computer Curriculum Corporation (CCC) SuccessMaker program or the Waterford Early Reading Program (Waterford). Prior to implementation, both learning systems were investigated by Instructional Services (IS) and deemed appropriate for use at Project Excel schools. As a second means for enhancing their academic programs, most Excel schools reduced class sizes while keeping their existing curriculum intact. Additional models were chosen by fewer schools. For FY 2003, the cost of instructional models was \$1.4 million. This cost covers materials, training, and additional staffing needed to implement the models. Appendix B in the full report provides a more comprehensive discussion on the Project Excel components and associated costs.

Purpose of the Evaluation, Evaluation Questions, and Evaluation Design

The purpose of the evaluation is to determine the success of Project Excel and to increase the likelihood of its success by reporting progress data at regular intervals to program staff, the Superintendent, and the School Board. At the request of the Superintendent, the evaluation focuses on student performance on local and state tests. The evaluation questions are of three types:

- Descriptive: the extent to which Excel students met established performance standards, and identification of school effectiveness factors;
- Year-to-year comparative: the extent to which Excel students showed annual improvement; and
- Year-to-year comparative: the extent to which Excel students performed similarly to non-Excel students at the next 20 most educationally at-risk schools (N20) schools.

This report addresses seven specific evaluation questions related to student achievement, as follows:

1. To what extent do Excel students meet performance standards for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade?
2. To what extent do Excel students show annual improvement in average scores for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade?
3. To what extent have Excel schools reached their SAI progress goals?
4. Where do Excel schools stand with respect to the state accreditation standards?
5. Compared to the next 20 most educationally at-risk schools (N20) in FCPS, do Excel schools show greater year-to-year improvement on the SOL or Stanford Achievement Tests, Form 9 TA, Abbreviated (Stanford 9 TA) tests?
6. To what extent do Excel students who remain in the same school for two years make greater gains on the SOL tests than non-Excel students who remain in the next 20 most educationally at-risk schools in FCPS for two years?
7. What school-level factors are associated with continuous improvement in student achievement as measured by the SAI? (Added in the last year of the evaluation)

The N20 schools were initially selected as the “next” (above the Excel schools) most educationally at-risk schools in FCPS, as measured by the SAI. The N20 schools were most similar to Excel schools in overall percentage of ESOL students. However, they were different from Excel schools in overall percentage of FRM students and in initial (higher) academic performance.

Findings

Concern over the selected schools meeting school accreditation standards was a compelling reason for initiating Project Excel. After four years, 14 of the 20 Excel schools have met or exceeded the state’s provisional accreditation benchmarks to be reached by 2006. A second reason for initiating Project Excel was to narrow the “achievement gap” between the most at-risk students (Excel) and less at-risk students (N20). This report indicates, particularly for K-2, academic gains over time, including positive effects on reading skills for the highest at-risk groups—FRM and ESOL students. At the upper elementary, academic gains and a narrowing of the achievement gap were observed. A summary of more specific findings follows:

At kindergarten through second grade:

1. The majority of kindergarten students throughout the four years of the evaluation performed at high levels on the Early Childhood Assessment Package (ECAP)

assessment: Excel kindergarten students most often met or exceeded the defined benchmark level of performance (Table G-1 in the Appendix).

2. Performance in spring 2003 was higher than initial levels in 2000 on the first grade Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for students in the highest at-risk groups (FRM and ESOL students). Overall, increases were seen in the percent of students reaching or exceeding the grade level benchmark (Table G-2 in the Appendix).
3. Also at first grade, spring 2003 performance was higher than performance in spring 2000, although there were fluctuations in performance in the interim years on the first grade Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (SDRT) (Table 4).
4. At second grade, there was an increase on the DRA text levels between 2001 and 2003 (Table 5). This is the second cohort receiving full-day kindergarten to show progress on the second grade DRA.
5. Also at second grade on four of six subtests, spring 2003 Stanford 9 SA scores equaled or surpassed the spring 2000 scores, although there were fluctuations in performance in the interim years (Table 6). However, for FRM students gains were made in all content areas (Table G-8 in the Appendix).

In sum, phonetic analysis was a strength as measured by the SDRT at grade 1. Vocabulary and language appeared to be areas in need of additional focus for Project Excel schools. In mathematics, Project Excel students appeared to have greater skills in procedures than in problem solving as measured by the Stanford 9 SA at grade 2 (Tables 4 and 6).

At grade 3 through grade 6:

1. Between spring 1999 and spring 2003, Excel schools showed greater increases in SOL pass rates than N20 schools for all grade 3 tests and three of four grade 5 tests. The gaps between Excel and N20 schools were smaller in spring 2003 than they were in spring 1999 when Excel began by one to ten percentage points, depending on the grade and content area (Table 7). Similarly, the gap narrowed by two to four percentage points between fall 1999 and fall 2002 Stanford 9 TA test results at grade 4 (Table 8).
2. Excel and N20 students who remained in their school from grade 3 to grade 5 showed equal academic gains (Table 9). Also, FRM and ESOL students in Excel schools showed similar grade 3 to grade 5 gains to the FRM and ESOL students in N20 schools (Tables I-3 and 4 in the Appendix).
3. The fact that Excel schools edged closer to N20 schools on both the SOL and Stanford 9 TA tests suggests that the SAI, the system of bonuses, and additional resources are associated with improved outcomes.

Although Excel students made progress as a whole, not all schools experienced the same levels of success. Eleven of the 20 Project Excel schools averaged at least the minimum standard of 3

SAI points gain per year across the four years of the evaluation. Seven of these schools exceeded this level, with most (5 of 7) averaging the highest possible SAI standard (5 SAI points per year) from baseline to the fourth year, and two schools averaging the second highest standard (4 SAI points per year) during the same period. Conversely, nine schools did not average the minimum expectations and performed at a level equating to 2.3 SAI points gain per year.

It should be noted that many of the students accounting for the SAI performance during the 2002-2003 school year (grades 4-6 students) did not experience full-day kindergarten, a primary impact initiative at Excel schools. When SOL performance of Excel grade 3 students (2003) who experienced full-day kindergarten was compared with the performance of baseline grade 3 students (2000) at Excel schools who did not experience full-day kindergarten, the data show that performance improved in all content areas (Table 7). Schools showing the greatest gains (Gold performance) on the SAI also showed the greatest gain on the SOL tests (Table 11).

Conclusions

The current evaluation data paint a picture that is both encouraging and challenging. While the evidence suggests that much has been accomplished, it also appears that important work remains to be done. Full-day kindergarten and technology-based phonics (i.e. Waterford and/or CCC) appeared to impact student achievement positively. Notwithstanding, additional intervention should focus on ensuring that achievement gains for FRM and ESOL students at the primary grades (K-2) are maintained and increased at the upper elementary grades (3-6). In addition, vocabulary-building and language skills should be addressed at the early grade levels; and, students should be provided more opportunities to apply mathematics skills to real life examples.

By design, the evaluation focused primarily on student outcomes. As a result, extensive achievement data are provided, but information about the context in which the outcomes were achieved is limited. Based on the findings from the previous year's interim report, a recommendation was offered to improve the understanding of the achievement findings: "Endorse the development and use of appropriate interventions for individual Project Excel schools that have not made continuous progress over the past three years, such that the end result is improvement of educational conditions and outcomes for students." From this recommendation, a diverse committee of school staff from cluster and central offices developed an instructional audit process for seven schools. The instructional audit process will yield reports on contextual conditions (e.g., quality of instruction, level of parent involvement, and relevance of staff development) that may have impacted student achievement over time. The reports also will include recommendations and strategies for improving the learning environment at the audited schools. Such a process or a variation of this process has potential for use at other schools interested in studying their learning environments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings presented in this final evaluation report, the Office of Program Evaluation offers the following final recommendations:

For the School Board and the Superintendent

1. If expansion of the Excel model is intended, consider focusing on schools with high percentages of ESOL and FRM students, since these students showed the greatest academic increases.
2. Review the results from the instructional audit process to discern additional needs for improvement that may have policy or funding implications.

For Instructional Services, Clusters, and Excel Schools

3. Continue to monitor academic achievement at Project Excel schools through the Quality Programs Assurance System (QPAS) Review reports, using instruments and lessons learned through the evaluation and instructional audit process.