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ERIC J. COOPER

17 IPS schools lead way to better test scores

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Though the latest ISTEP test scores in Indiana and Indianapolis Public Schools are disappointing, there is reason to hope for better results in the future, thanks to a new federal law that provides additional funding for education.



The new No Child Left Behind Act is indeed an investment in children and in the educators who serve them, providing an additional \$1 billion for teacher recruitment and professional development.

A recent national survey conducted by the National Alliance of Business shows that "virtually all Americans support induction programs to pair new teachers with proven veterans . . ."

And, "More than three-quarters indicated that developing the professional skills and knowledge of teachers throughout their careers must be a high national priority."

Four years ago, IPS began a system-wide focus to improve literacy achievement for students K-12. The aim has been to improve reading, writing and mathematics and to close the achievement gap between affluent children and poor and minority children. It reinforces other IPS efforts to streamline operations and strengthen accountability.

Since the beginning of the project, several solid advances have been achieved: Schools meeting the state performance standards increased from two to 43; IPS secured a \$16.4 million grant from the Lilly Endowment to help facilitate system-wide transformation in all 76 IPS schools; and through a Carnegie Corp. grant of \$250,000, a plan to create smaller, more effective units within the high schools was set in motion.

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During the 2000-01 school year, 17 "vanguard" schools were selected to be leaders in identifying "best practices" in IPS and to demonstrate their application so that other schools can collaborate to promote better learning for both educators and students.

Though testing is only one indicator of the state of education in Indiana, the latest ISTEP scores indicate there is much work to be done. Averages are still disappointing, overall trends are mixed, and gains in one place or grade or year too frequently are offset by declines in others.

But the IPS vanguard schools show that when educators are treated as professionals, when they take action to grow professionally, and when they are assisted in improving their command of content and pedagogy, students will achieve the high standards set by the state.

Each year, the ISTEP scores are reported to the public as a percentage that passed a state standard; they are compared to one another and to district and state averages. There is a drawback to such comparisons: They do not compare a school with itself to gauge progress. If one examines the vanguard schools compared to themselves over four years, it is clear that, despite fluctuations, the trend is up and that these schools help lead the entire district higher.

While on average, the state passing rate has fallen since 1998 by 1.2 percent, the vanguard schools show an average increase of 10.4 percent, with seven of the elementary schools having double digit gains. This increase occurred with limited funds. As IPS increases its investment with funds from the Lilly Endowment and new federal resources, it may very well generate significant acceleration of the work that is under way.

The educational transformation of IPS has begun.

Cooper is executive director of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education at the Council of Great City Schools, Washington, D.C., and the University of Georgia in Athens.

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