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OPINION

TODAY'S EDITORIAL

Hey, governors, learn what our city schools do that works

August 17, 2003

Our position is: *Indianapolis Public Schools' program to transform education can be applied throughout the nation.*

How to improve low-performing schools will be at the top of today's agenda for those attending the National Governors Association conference, which runs through Tuesday at the Indianapolis Downtown Marriott.

That focus is welcome, for it intensifies the spotlight on something educators nationwide need to know: What are schools doing that works?

National education groups say improving student performance involves numerous factors -- everything from students' physical and mental health, early-childhood literacy, and tougher math and science requirements to more teacher training and changes in the structure of school campuses.

Local folks might be surprised to learn of one school system that's not only investigating these areas but seeing results: Indianapolis Public Schools.

Now, IPS admittedly still faces enormous problems. Its test scores are woefully low, its dropout rate too high, and far too many of its graduates lack the skills necessary to hold a job or even function in society. Those failures have been documented by this editorial page and others for years. Less well known, however, are the bright spots within IPS.

In fact, the NGA has selected School 103, Francis Scott Key Elementary, to make a presentation to state governors today as part of the meeting theme "Reaching New Heights." Last month, the Eastside school received an Excellence in Education award from Mayor Bart Peterson for its Bridges to Success program, which boosted various services to students with dramatic results.

School 103's 50-percent drop in the student-suspension rate is attributed to its new mental health services program. Its vaccination rate for kindergartners and eighth-graders shot up to 100 percent as a result of improved physical health services. And student performance on the state's ISTEP tests soared, thanks to a partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs to offer two months of after-school tutoring sessions to prepare students for the exams. In fact, School 103 was one of only 15 schools nationwide recognized for their achievement.

The after-school tutoring played a major role in higher ISTEP scores, but School 103 also attributes the improvements to teaching in small groups, increasing parental involvement and setting goals the students were encouraged to believe they could achieve.

While School 103 has accomplished much, its parent, IPS, has begun an aggressive district-wide program geared toward "transforming education in

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Indianapolis." Funded in part by a \$16 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, IPS' battle plan will unfold on three fronts:

- **Literacy:** IPS is launching a major initiative to increase student literacy. Starting with third grade, educators aim to ensure students are reading, and continue to read, at or above grade level. This effort will complement IPS' five-year partnership with the National Urban Alliance to boost reading skills by helping educators craft and implement literacy plans in their districts. In fact, IPS' early success with that effort has led educators from school districts nationwide to Indianapolis to learn more about it.

- **Math and science:** Starting with the class of 2003, all high school students are required to complete three years of mathematics, beginning with algebra, and three years of science. Teachers also are being trained to incorporate math and science into their lessons to help students apply in the real world what they're learning.

- **Small learning communities:** IPS is breaking down its five high schools into "small learning communities," using a \$2.2 million federal grant for staff development. A \$11.3 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will be used to create 10 new small high schools in Marion County and convert IPS high schools to new layouts. Numerous studies have shown that lower student-teacher ratios and the smaller size and more intimate layout of these alternative schools boost grades and the retention of knowledge, curb inappropriate behavior, lower dropout rates, improve safety and create tighter bonds between pupils and teachers.

IPS' goal is to convert each high school into a complex comprised of several small schools, including three to six career centers and a freshman academy.

School districts across the country are facing numerous challenges, from a lack of qualified teachers to state budget deficits that threaten funding. The problems are especially acute for inner-city districts.

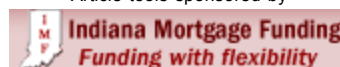
How to turn around those schools and better the lives of millions of children is a national dilemma, one that's imperative for the nation's governors to address.

Crime, poverty, tax revenue shortfalls, lost jobs and economic blight don't occur in a vacuum. A poorly educated populace plays a major role in all of these social ills.

It's encouraging to see IPS, for all its problems, helping lead the way toward solutions.

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