

Going Beyond the Test Score Bump at Shamrock Gardens Elementary School

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This article is a summary of a yearlong study to be published in an edited volume printed by Harvard Educational Press, forthcoming in Fall 2014. The study utilizes administrative records from North Carolina and CMS, media reports, and in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators.

In 1997, when North Carolina first launched its school rating system, Shamrock Gardens had one of the lowest scores in the state. The school looked like it had been forgotten, the grounds were overgrown with weeds, walls were peeling paint, and instructional materials were left over from previous generations. Staff turnover was high, scores were dismally low, and few people with options chose to work or send their children there. Soon after, the school became part of the state's first efforts to take over failing schools.

In 2014, in contrast, school gardens are flourishing, the walls have fresh paint, the library is colorful and filled with computers and new resources, and parents are volunteering in classrooms staffed by highly effective teachers. Test scores have risen and enrollment is increasing. All the sanctions brought on by low academic performance have been removed, and a seven-year-old partial magnet program focused on "gifted" education has a waiting list and in 2013, Magnet Schools of America identified Shamrock Gardens as a 'school of excellence'.

So how did this dramatic change occur?

The Challenges of School Reform

School reformers generally have strong opinions regarding the importance of school level policy levers to accomplish change, but the evidence of such reforms is mixed. A recent Institute of Educational Sciences study revealed that 88% of interventions produced weak or no positive effects.¹ While there has been a tremendous amount of funding devoted to determining how to turn around a low-performing school, the IES study shows that when it comes to improving educational outcomes, particularly in high-poverty schools, we have few strong evidence-based models. With the number of high-poverty schools increasing nationwide,² the need to better

understand successful reform mechanisms for high-poverty schools is paramount, and Shamrock Gardens provides a good case study.

The general consensus from interview respondents for this study is that the majority of the reforms enacted at Shamrock Gardens since 1997 did little to improve student learning. Because of the absence of evaluations of the reforms we will never know, with certainty, what reforms drove or stunted the success of Shamrock Gardens. However, findings suggest that several different efforts converged over a ten-year period to place Shamrock on a success trajectory.

In the present era, standardized test scores measure school success or failure. By this metric, Shamrock has shown steady improvement from a composite rate on North Carolina's End-of-Grade tests of 44% in 1998 to 67% in 2011. These scores are neither above the district average nor noteworthy compared to other schools with comparable student demographics—just under 90% low-income and more than 90% nonwhite. But on the ground, the school's transformation has been dramatic—a new library, thriving gardens used for instruction, an active PTA, and a fully staffed school. Both White and Black middle-class parents are enrolling their children for the first time in decades, particularly from the more affluent neighborhoods within the school boundary, therefore creating a more racially and socio-economically diverse learning environment.

So What Happened?

While the district adopted the nationally prevailing focus on testing and prescribed curriculum and instruction at high-poverty, low-performing schools, Shamrock Gardens took a different path. While there was an emphasis on achievement, school administrators also focused on building a stable, experienced staff. Supporters also sought to reintegrate the school—attempting to attract middle-class families living within and sometimes beyond the school attendance boundaries.

In addition to focusing on standardized test preparation (which can raise scores quickly), the Shamrock Gardens community engaged in the difficult work of transforming school culture. In

addition to improvements in the physical environment, changes have been made to the underlying educational infrastructure of the school. They have included widespread implementation of rigorous curricula, a gifted magnet program that is integrated throughout magnet and non-magnet classrooms, small class sizes, data-informed instruction, engaged community and parent volunteers, strong leadership, and systematic teacher collaboration. These changes have been generally supported by the larger district through increased flexibility and resources. School level improvements have led to changes in school culture and modest but steady increases in test scores, which together have slowly encouraged middle-class families to enroll in the school, creating a more diverse learning environment. This virtuous cycle has become a success trajectory.

I describe this three-phase process in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 presents the trajectory of Shamrock Gardens in phases. Phase I, from 1997-2005 is dominated by structures imposed upon the school, including accountability-based labels and mandated reform efforts. This phase resulted in a high number of interventions, high cost and low success. Phase II, from 2006-2011 was an important transition time for Shamrock Gardens, characterized by supportive structures and multiple initiatives by community members and staff. This was a period of a high number of interventions, high financial costs, but continuous academic improvement. Currently, Shamrock Gardens seems to be moving into Phase III of the success trajectory. The accountability-triggered structures of Phase I have ended and many of the supportive structures of Phase II are no longer in place, both because of tightening state and local budgets and because the school no longer receives the funding and district support that comes with low academic achievement. With structural improvements in place, the present period is dominated by individual agency at the school level in an effort to continue to improve academic achievement with fewer interventions and lower per pupil expenditure.

Figure 1. Shamrock Garden’s School Success Trajectory

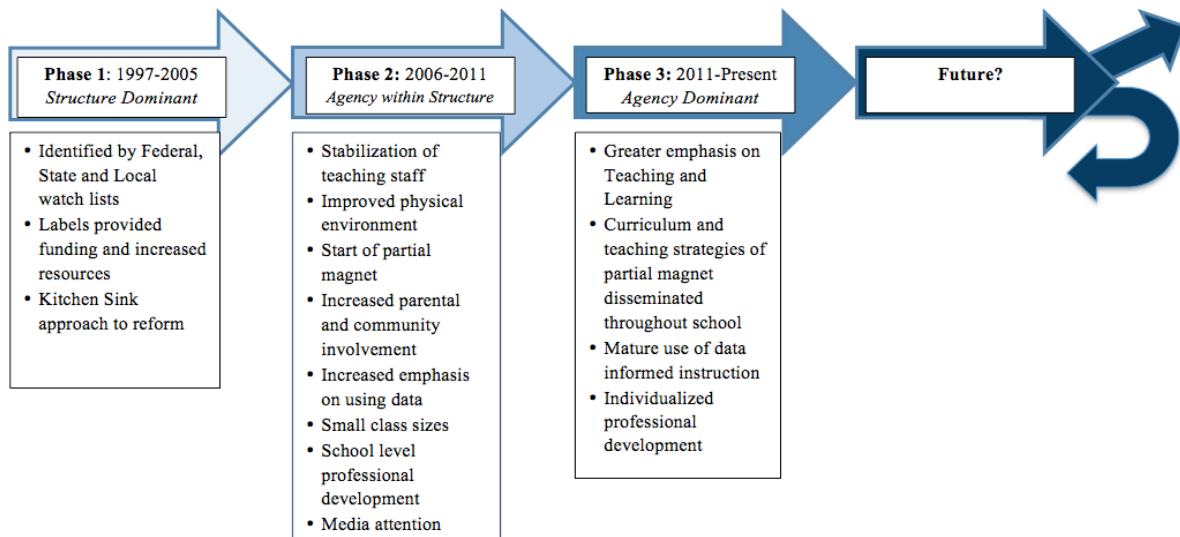
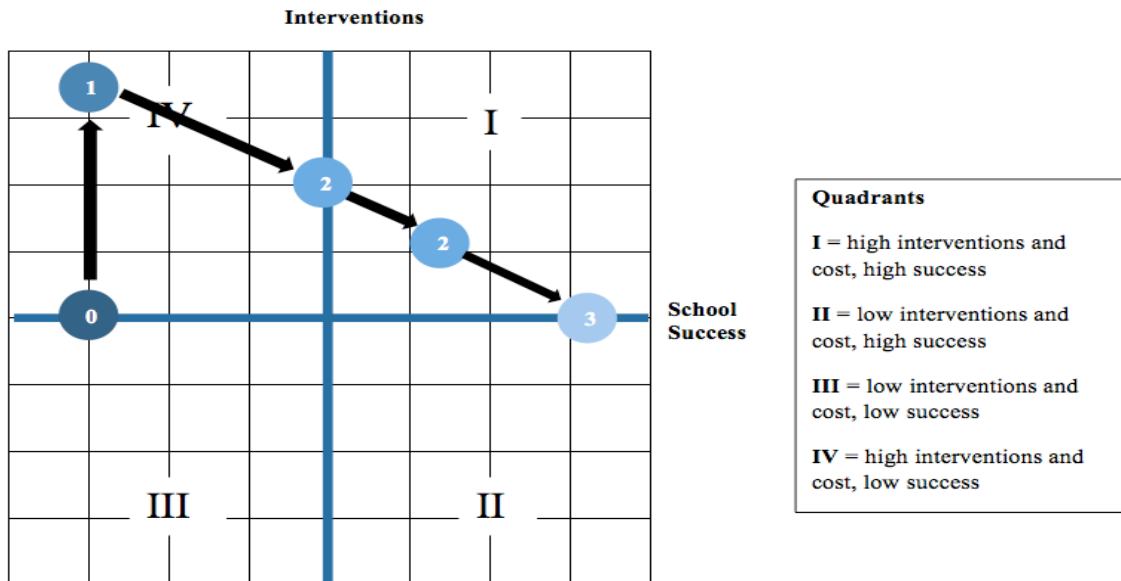


Figure 2 suggests the relationship among the intensity and costs of interventions and their success over time. These reforms seem to have created a tipping point in the school reform process. As the partial magnet matured, the curriculum materials and instructional strategies were adopted in all classrooms, which led to improved instruction and academic outcomes across the school. Simultaneously, parent volunteers brought in additional resources to support family nights, enrichment opportunities, and campus beautification. Even as district-level resources began to diminish, the culture and the parent volunteers remained. Taken all together, the pieces fell into place.

The overall finding is that the synergy of actions among many individuals, over time, within a supportive structure, placed Shamrock Gardens on a success trajectory. These reform efforts did not bear fruit in one year and did not originate from one person. Rather, for Shamrock Gardens, reform has taken time, sustained efforts, trust, strong leadership, adherence to basic educational principles (small class sizes, rigorous curriculum, data-informed and flexible instruction), teacher collaboration, community involvement, and district level support. End of grade test scores cannot begin to adequately measure this dynamic process and while important, cannot be the sole indicator of success.

Figure 2. Shamrock Garden’s School Success Trajectory, Success and Intervention Quadrants



While the story of Shamrock provides a strong case study of sustained school reform within a large urban district, an important unanswered question remains—what will Phase IV look like? More importantly, Shamrock Gardens’ story also raises the question of whether its success can be taken to 'scale'. Shamrock is somewhat unique in that it is a small school (typically less than 500 students) and located in a naturally diverse school boundary area. However, the individual pieces of the success trajectory are not elusive, and findings suggest that with sufficient district support, reform efforts can be replicated. Given the likely demographic shifts in student populations, the normative and political climate in the district, and the legal framework in which CMS leaders will make their decisions about the district’s future, Shamrock Gardens’ success trajectory provides an important case study of an approach to urban education improvement that is feasible.

¹ “Randomized Controlled Trials Commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences Since 2002: How Many Found Positive Versus Weak or No Effects,” Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, accessed October 12, 2013, <http://coalition4evidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/IES-Commissioned-RCTs-positive-vs-weak-or-null-findings-7-2013.pdf>.

² “The Condition of Education 2013,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013037.pdf>.

Biography



Amy Hawn Nelson is currently the Director of Research for the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute and the Director of the Institute for Social Capital, Inc. (ISC). The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute is a nonpartisan, applied research and community outreach institute, seeking solutions to the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing our communities. ISC is an Integrated Data System committed to advancing university research and increasing the community's capacity for data-based decision making. A Charlotte native and proud graduate of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Hawn Nelson is a career educator with experience as a teacher, mentor, coach and school leader. Hawn Nelson's myriad experiences at the school level inform her work as an educational researcher. She is an active member of the community, serving several youth and music-oriented organizations in Charlotte.