

Success for All shows long-term gains, cost-effectiveness

“Success for All provides the strongest educational benefits for the dollar for reading.”

JUST AS ONE immunization does not protect most people from a disease for life, one educational intervention in the lives of at-risk youngsters does not ensure academic success through high school and beyond. Early interventions often need a boost from later ones to keep these youngsters learning at the level of their peers. Sometimes even frequent and sustained “boosters” do not do the trick.

A few reform efforts, however, have been credited with having longer-term effects. Specifically, the Abecedarian and Perry Preschool projects have been cited as contributing to lower retention and higher graduation rates and better socialization as students move through middle and high school. In 1999, the Tennessee experiment on class-size reduction also showed similar results in a statewide study.

Now, another widely used educational program for teaching at-risk youngsters is being added to that short list. It is Success for All (SFA), the school-reform program developed at Johns Hopkins University in the late 1980s and now used in 1,800 schools with more than one million children in the United States and several other countries. Even through middle school, SFA students fared better than students from comparable schools in a control group.

Specifically, as they were followed through eighth grade, students who had been in elementary schools using SFA had higher reading and math scores, fewer placements in special education classes and were retained less frequently, meaning that they completed eighth grade at younger ages.

The study also looked at the cost of Success for All. It concluded that, though the program is expensive, its results were no more costly than those incurred by school districts that shied away from such interventions, but assigned more students to special education classes and remedial programs.

“From a policy perspective, our results indicate that a nationally disseminated elementary school program may deliver enduring educational benefits to the students it serves at no additional cost,” according to *The Long-Term Effects and Cost-Effectiveness of Success for All* (Report 53) by Geoffrey D. Borman and Gina M. Hewes of Johns Hopkins University.

Using test and other student data provided by the Baltimore City Public Schools, the study followed students from the original five SFA schools and compared them to students from five comparable schools used as controls.

The study also looked at the lowest-performing members of the two groups —those who scored in the 25th percentile or below on a pretest given to all students in the study. For these students, SFA produced similar long-term effects. These students were about seven months ahead of similar students in the control group in reading; they also scored higher in math assessments, though those results were not statistically significant.

The Cost of Success

Like the three projects mentioned above, Success for All is relatively costly. In fact, a study of 26 reforms identified SFA as among the most expensive such reforms, costing between \$70,000 and \$270,000 for first-year materials, personnel, and training in a typical school. Another study estimated that SFA costs from \$260,000 to \$645,000 per year—making it the costliest school reform.

The study used various measures, including SFA's own estimates, to determine the cost of the program. It also used the average per-pupil expenditure in the United States (\$5,330 for the 1998-99 school year) and the average per-pupil cost of special education (\$6,404).

The study used several methods to gauge the cost-effectiveness of SFA. One was to add the cost of regular and special education, plus SFA programs for those students studied, over grades K-8. Because fewer SFA students used special education classes and because they were retained less—meaning they spent fewer years in these grades—the total cost of SFA students was about \$1,300 less per student for all of their elementary and middle school years.

Given the long-term effects of SFA, the study concluded that the reform was indeed cost-effective. The price of delivering the program's enduring benefits was no greater, and in some instances less, than what the control schools spent.

In another measure, the study computed the cost of reading and math gains, based on the total cost of the SFA program, the number of students and the average number of years students participated in SFA. According to this measure, "Success for All provides the strongest educational benefits for the dollar for reading," the study concluded. The results were not quite as good for math achievement.

Despite the long-term effectiveness and the cost effectiveness of SFA, the study's authors caution that it, like the other reforms mentioned, is not the "great equalizer" that Horace Mann saw as the role of American education. Nor is it "the education equivalent to the polio vaccine," the authors said, but rather one preventive measure that can be used with at-risk children, though one that retains its effectiveness longer than many.