

Study: Reform program helps close learning gap

By Katherine Shek

Low-achieving minority students enrolled in schools implementing a popular comprehensive reform program have shown gains in reading that represent as much as three months of additional learning per year, an independent evaluation has found.

Schools utilizing the components of the America's Choice School Design program realized performance gains among Hispanic students in grades 4-8 of an extra 2.9 months of learning in reading annually, says the analysis, conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. African-American students in grades 4-8 gained an extra half a month in learning per year.

Gains for lower grades were less pronounced, with Hispanic and black children in grades 1-3 gaining an additional 1.2 months and two-fifths of a month, respectively.

"The lowest performing students are really gaining significantly," said Jonathan Supovitz, a senior researcher at the University of Pennsylvania. "Over time, Hispanic students started to close the [achievement] gap with white students."

Based on Stanford 9 test data, minority students showed the largest learning gains

in schools with America's Choice, Supovitz said at an event organized Friday by the American Youth Policy Forum.

Few gains for whites

But the report showed white students did not experience significant additional performance gains in reading compared with their peers in non-program schools.

America's Choice, one of the nation's more well-known comprehensive school improvement programs, is based on 16 years of research in Asia and Europe by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). The program—currently used in 547 schools—emphasizes matching academic standards with instruction and assessment in reading and math.

America's Choice also stresses intensive professional development for educators and extensive onsite technical assistance.

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education examined 11 years of student performance data from Rochester, N.Y., where the program was first implemented in 1998. The research center compared learning gains before and after the program's existence.



Susan Rucker, Mississippi's associate state superintendent for innovation and school improvement, said some of the state's schools have adopted the reform initiative this year, renaming it "Mississippi's Choice Program."

The program costs \$70,000 per school, and Mississippi provides half of that amount through the No Child Left Behind Act's professional development funds. Schools foot the remaining amount with NCLB money allotted for local programs.

For more information on the evaluation, visit www.cpre.org.

