



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES  
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### **All Students Can Succeed**

*By Jerome De Lisle, PhD*

When it comes to education, all right-thinking parents want the very best for their child. Parents routinely seek out high-performing schools in the hope that their children will become top-performing students. And one can hardly fault the parent who pursues her child's best interest by dutifully navigating the academic options available within her means.

But there is a higher level of consideration, one that places the individual interest of any particular parent or student in the broader context of the development of the overall national education system. While the elite minority of high-achieving students—and their parents—are to be commended for their collective effort, closer attention must be paid to the gap between high-achievers and the body of students who commonly fail to achieve at a high level.

Many educators are confronting the issue of inequality, whether that results from circumstances outside the control of families such as geographic location. Such differences are both inefficient and dangerous in the short term and produce serious unintended social and economic consequences in the long term.

An initiative spearheaded by The University of the West Indies (UWI) aims to reduce those inequalities and create a high-performing, equitable national primary education system. The overarching question is how to improve the level of education across the entire national system, so that all parents can take advantage of better opportunities for their children.

In Trinidad and Tobago, social stratification dominates the character of the national education system, and creates a tendency for disadvantaged students to concentrate in specific schools. That concentration amplifies weak student performance in those schools, which, in turn, magnifies inequalities among schools.

The role of the principal can be critical for addressing inequality and managing improvement. The good news is that, in the conversation among school principals, there is a welcome gradual shift from the traditional focus on merely administering student examinations to a more progressive focus on institutional self-evaluation. The old student-testing paradigm is evolving into a school-improvement paradigm.

However, in order to improve the entire school system, different approaches are needed, because principals in high-poverty schools can't simply do the same things that other principals are doing and expect the same results. For principals in high-poverty schools, the first step is to see their schools as different. And one useful way of presenting that difference is through school performance data.

That's the focus of an Academic Performance Index, or API, designed by researchers from UWI. The API was used in a 2013 study designed to identify high-poverty primary schools with increasing school performance scores. Data from an annual National Test administered to pupils at Standards 1 and 3 was used to monitor and compare standards. Researchers found significant levels of improvement in several schools across the national system for the period 2005 to 2013.

One of the most notable areas of improvement is in early primary education performance. Before the national test system, students in Standards 1 to 3 recorded weak performance and low attendance. Teachers also had high absenteeism compared to upper primary school, when pupils were required to prepare for the national Secondary Entrance Assessment or SEA. Therefore, one benefit of the National Test was to concentrate achievement at an earlier stage of primary education.

The study is heartening because it reveals the great effort by some primary school principals to improve the lives of children in communities facing challenges. Not only do these principals promote a thinking curriculum for students and professional learning for staff, but they also respond to the social needs of students.

Findings suggest that there has been not only a general improvement but also a few rapidly improving high-poverty schools. Two female principals in Tobago stand out. Both promote better data use and improved pedagogy. They have used several strategies including a variety of assessments coupled with increased family and community involvement. Their schools demonstrated significant improvements in performance over the period.

By collecting, interpreting and presenting relevant data on educational achievement, researchers have been able to create opportunities for principals to quantitatively evaluate their schools' performance relative to the performance of their students, and relative to other schools. Accurate and clearly presented data is a mirror through which principals can more effectively monitor and evaluate their own school leadership. Such research-driven insight is a valuable tool for any leader tasked with producing objective improvement in institutional performance.

With the right kind of institutional support, school performance feedback data could propel principals to build better-performing primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. As our society improves its capacity to take long-term consequences on board in considering current choices, we will progressively develop the ability to make long-term development of an equitable education system an immediate priority.

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