

literacy

lessons

learned



 **Impact Tulsa**<sup>®</sup>

LITERACY LESSONS LEARNED  
INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS

2016

# INTRODUCTION



**ImpactTulsa** has identified third-grade reading proficiency as one of six critical outcomes to measure the progress of student performance in the region. A major goal as the collective impact organization in the work is to align resources with successful, evidence-based educational practices and cost-effectively scale improvements across the Tulsa area.

Identifying and scaling best practices is complex. The partnership represents 15 school districts and postsecondary institutions representing over 170,000 students from communities that are geographically, demographically, economically and ideologically diverse. A one-size-fits all approach to teaching and learning will not work.

Therefore, with the support of educational partners, ImpactTulsa investigates common elements associated with success across multiple environments, recognizing that the specific implementation of those best practices will be unique to the circumstances of particular student populations and communities.

In Spring 2015, ImpactTulsa and its school-based partners investigated reasons for the variance in reading performance across schools. ImpactTulsa identified high-performing schools whose reading proficiency rates were outperforming expectations given the many economically disadvantaged students served and conducted school visits and staff interviews.

The initial set of school visits identify characteristics that contributed to the high student achievement.



TO HAVE THE  
FUTURE WE WANT,  
EDUCATIONAL  
EXCELLENCE FOR ALL  
OF OUR CHILDREN  
MUST BECOME OUR  
TOP PRIORITY TODAY.

**From 2015 informative school visits, the following lessons were learned and remain relevant today:**

### **Organize the school around a common vision of reading success**

Key drivers of success include principals who champion the importance of reading, teacher leaders who willingly embrace change and parents who are supportive of education and the school.

### **Establish high expectations**

Educators act on the fundamental belief that all students are capable of academic success and will demonstrate constructive behavior.

### **Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate**

Teachers embrace opportunities to learn from each other and share best practices.

### **Deliver personalized, student-centered learning**

Strategies that individualize instruction maximize progress for students at all levels.

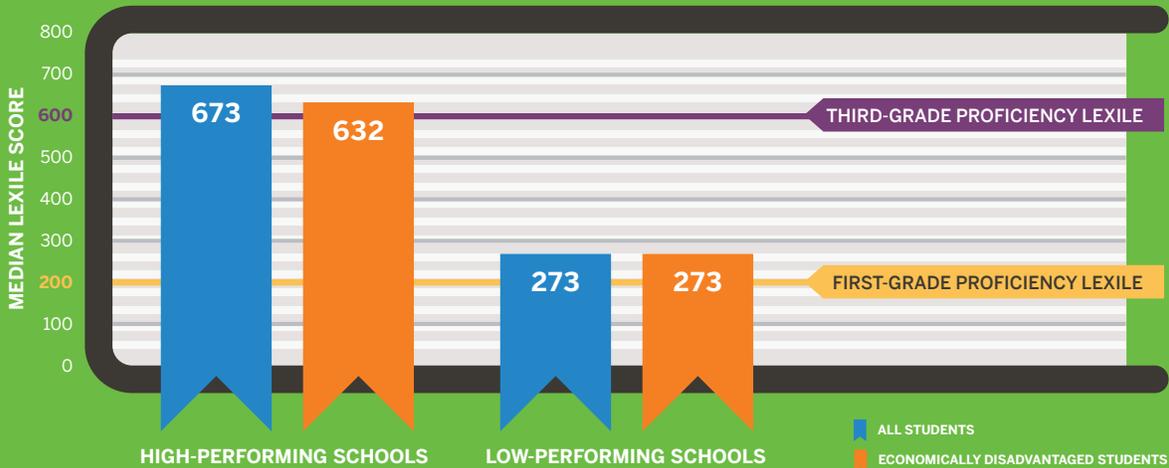
### **Instill a data-driven culture**

Administrators, teachers and students are all routinely involved in tracking reading performance.

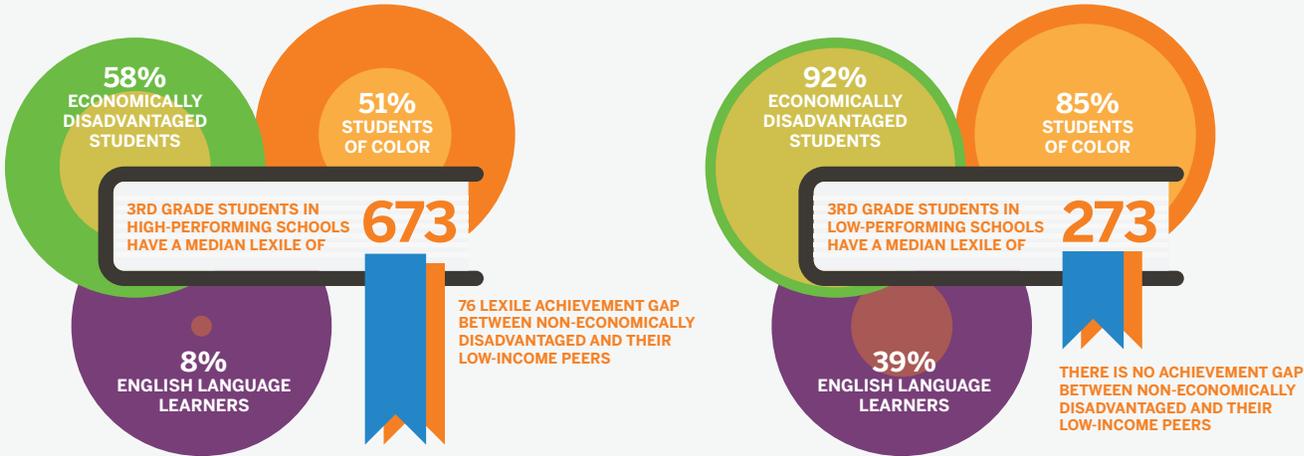


ImpactTulsa sought to further understand how schools were increasing the reading proficiency of third-grade students in different settings. In Spring 2016, another set of school visits and staff interviews were conducted, this time in schools that were both high-performing and low-performing in relationship to the number of economically disadvantaged students they served and other demographics. The aim was to determine the differentiation of practices between the two sets of schools.

### Third-Grade Median Lexile Reading Outcomes for High and Low-Performing Schools, Spring 2015



### Demographic Snapshot of High-Performing and Low-Performing Schools



# 2016 LITERACY LESSONS LEARNED

1



## POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

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Adult attitudes and behaviors in high-performing schools intentionally promote high expectations for students and active parent participation.

2



## DATA-DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

Page 07

Data-driven PLCs empower teacher leadership, utilize data results to monitor student progress, and capitalize on the benefits of collaboration to encourage the teaching profession to use a cyclical process of inquiry and action.

3



## FIDELITY TO SCHOOL-WIDE COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY PROGRAM

Page 09

The most successful schools ensure teachers are engaged in on-going, targeted professional development to effectively implement a comprehensive literacy program.

4



## EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Page 11

Teachers continually monitor student progress through frequent evaluation of work products and provide targeted instruction that is designed for the student.

5



## DEDICATED, HIGHLY TRAINED SPECIALISTS

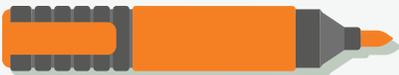
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Though schools utilize different curriculum materials and intervention strategies, high-performing schools all have access to well-trained, dedicated specialists to provide direct instruction to the lowest performing students.

## PRACTICE 1: POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE



**“Many of my colleagues, including myself, transfer our own children to our school because we prefer them to be taught by our peers. We have the mindset that we should only do things for our students that we would consider good enough for our own kids.” – Teacher**



One of the characteristics of a successful school environment is the attention paid to climate and culture. Adult attitudes and behaviors in high-performing schools intentionally promote high expectations for students and active parent participation.

A teacher characterized her high-performing school by saying, “The bricks are warm. When you walk in, you feel it.” Other comments reflect an attitude that the staff makes decisions based on “what’s best for kids” and we “don’t give up on kids ever.” Teachers and administrators state that building rapport with students sets the tone for strong schools since students “try their hardest to perform when they know you care.” These observations are consistent with national research. Culture that helps students develop a sense of belonging, trust in the people around them and in the belief that teachers value their intellectual competence have a positive influence on student achievement outcomes. (Aronson and Steele, 2005)<sup>i</sup>.

Various school-wide programs for classroom management, character development and positive climate (i.e., Great Expectations, Seven Habits



of Successful Students, Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports)<sup>ii</sup> are embraced in high performing schools and in all cases, effective teachers have bought-in to their programs' language and methods to leverage the lessons both in and outside the classroom. Teachers apply high expectations to students and to themselves with comments like "It starts at the bottom. Everybody in the building does their job." Consistent routines and procedures across grade levels also tend to make students and parents comfortable and lead to student success. Teacher commitment to positive approaches and high expectations stabilize the climate even with administrative turnover and shifts in student demographics.

Teacher relations are based on trust, mutual respect and collaboration that is both informal and formal. Materials, ideas and support are shared freely. A high level of teacher retention is also noted to have a stabilizing effect on school culture and norms. From changes in student demographics, teacher turnover, and/or administrative leadership are not unusual in our sample schools. Administrators in low-performing schools cite that after such changes, it takes 4-5 years for teachers "to get on board" and parents to fully engage. Teachers in low-performing schools vocalize more frustrations around students' lack of background knowledge and parental homework support. They also find a need for increased timely special education testing. Students are more likely to be retained or socially promoted in low performing schools.

"It starts at the bottom. Everybody in the building does their job." - Teacher

**PRACTICE 2:****DATA-DRIVEN, TEACHER-LED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC)**

Both teachers and administrators credit data-driven PLCs as transformational in high-performing schools – empowering teacher leadership, utilizing data results to monitor student progress, and capitalizing on the benefits of collaboration to elevate the teaching profession into a more scientific, professional endeavor benefiting students. Teachers who are engaged in on-going PLCs report that they are trained to use data to inform instruction, monitor student progress, create instructional groups and reteach. They report that PLCs led by teachers build trust among teachers while leading to better communication and frequent sharing of instructional techniques.

Administrative support for PLCs and scheduling common planning time for collaboration are necessary components. Teacher leadership that emerges through such PLCs provides mentoring for new teachers and can remain a positive force even if there are administrative changes. Professional learning communities have been found to serve as a powerful means of professional development because of the elements of being collaborative, data-driven and peer facilitated focused

on classroom practice.<sup>iii</sup> “True collaboration” was described by teachers in one school as working together within and across grade levels constantly sharing ideas and coaching each other from formal PLC time to informal lunch time discussions.

All schools report that they dedicate time to PLCs. However, those led by administrators rather than teachers or based on book studies rather than dynamic research regarding student performance in the classroom, lack effectiveness. As a result, in these schools there is scant mention of data by teachers and plan time is individual planning time rather than a common time for grade-level teams to collaborate about how to improve student mastery. When new teachers are instructed in how to use formative assessments but it is not modeled by experienced faculty in PLCs, it does not become the normative behavior in the schools. Without well-functioning PLCs, there are missed opportunities to understand the benefits of data-driven instruction to identify real-time student needs.

**“As the principal, I keep a series of data boards in my office for each classroom that tracks each students’ progress in our reading program and various interventions. When I meet with teachers weekly, we review the data boards along with other materials.”**  
– Principal



**“True collaboration”** was described by teachers in one school as working together within and across grade levels constantly sharing ideas and coaching each other from formal PLC time to informal lunch time discussions.

## PRACTICE 3: FIDELITY TO SCHOOL-WIDE COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY PROGRAM



A variety of literacy curriculums and strategies are utilized throughout our sample schools. Regardless of the program, the most successful schools ensure that every teacher is trained and works with fidelity to implement the strategies of their selected program. Teachers are engaged in on-going, targeted professional development to effectively implement a comprehensive literacy program.

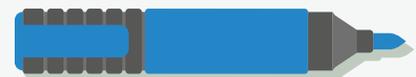
They have opportunities to observe other teachers and collaborate with peers and new teachers are continually mentored by experienced colleagues. Since high-performing schools have fidelity to one suite of instructional strategies, all staff share a common language and alignment that they can enrich and expand without distracting from the core. Teachers who need help with interventions can draw from the expertise of the team.

Time invested in literacy is also correlated to student achievement.<sup>iv</sup> It is no accident that students score well on reading tests when teachers say their focus on reading is “bell to bell.” High-performance schools make intentional decisions to dedicate a significant amount of time daily, 90 to 120-minutes, to uninterrupted reading

instruction. This school-wide focus on reading is across all grade levels and the building schedule revolves around this priority. During protected reading blocks, students are not pulled out for any reason. There are no assemblies or intercom interruptions, and every student is engaged in literacy lessons. This restricted time allows for small group instruction, centers and stations, and the formulation of skills groups so students can move among teachers as necessary. Teachers report that time for independent student reading, along with skill development activities, help students build stamina and focus.

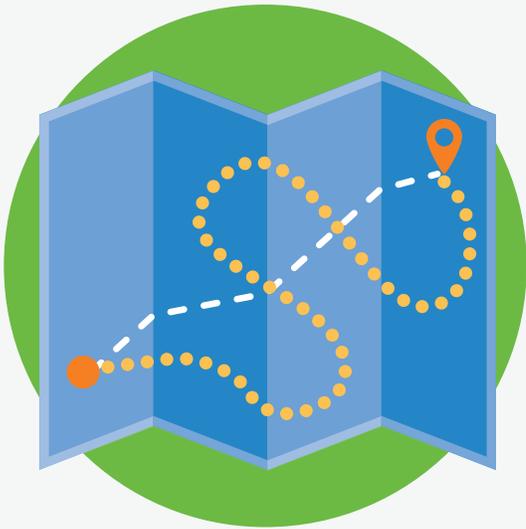
Student performance is strongest in schools where the entire school is committed to common goals that are communicated and shared among all in the learning environment. When schools lack consistency in how reading is taught across classes and grade levels reading proficiency rates tend to be lower. Materials and strategies that are implemented based on individual teacher preference or experience lead to fragmentation and a lack of alignment between grade levels. Even when a variety of materials and computer programs are available, student skills are better addressed through a comprehensive literacy strategy adopted school wide that is reinforced with quality teacher training.

**“In my school, all teachers are able to participate in the foundational professional development by the reading program that we use! Our principal makes PD a priority. As a newer teacher, I benefit from my veteran colleagues who have used the literacy program for a number of years and offered tips when I had trouble teaching a skill to my students. I feel lucky to even be able to observe the teacher next door sometimes to see how her students connect and grasp the lessons.” – Teacher**



Since high-performing schools have fidelity to one suite of instructional strategies, all staff share a common language and alignment that they can enrich and expand without distracting from the core.

## PRACTICE 4: EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION



“As a teacher, it is important to be in tune with your students. If my students are not understanding something in my classroom, I recognize that they may need to hear that lesson in a slightly different way. This is where the power of my grade-level team and PLC comes into play!” – Teacher



Teachers in high-performing schools internalize that “every child learns differently and you must understand them” and then “tailor instruction” to be an effective teacher. To minimize frustrations, it is important to intervene early if a student is having difficulty so teachers continually monitor student progress through frequent evaluation of work products and provide targeted instruction that is designed for the student.

Teachers who utilize differentiated instruction minimize whole group instruction maximizing small group instruction as well as fluid, flexible groupings. Students are encouraged to maintain their own record of progress so they will always be aware of what they need to learn and celebrate their progress.

To organize around meeting the needs of all students in a grade level, teachers familiarize themselves with curriculum standards, develop benchmarks that can help them track student progress and then utilize a variety of strategies to help students grow their skills. As a result of such collaboration and buy-in, one school saw significant improvement and was “reinforced with a 300-point increase in one year on state reading testing”.



Lower performing schools reported that they have historically utilized “a lot of whole group instruction” and are slow in “getting everybody on board with the process” of learning the mechanics of small group and differentiated instruction. Teachers, particularly in low-performing schools, highlight the importance of early learning for students of poverty or with limited English skills. One teacher noted that “less than half of my students attended Pre-K. Students who went to Pre-K are far advanced.” Early learning experiences in literacy and numeracy not only prepare preschoolers for a kindergarten curriculum that has heightened expectations of prior knowledge, but also help identify early learners who need additional support to ensure they have positive learning experiences later.

To organize around meeting the needs of all students in a grade level, teachers familiarize themselves with state curriculum standards, develop benchmarks that can help them track student progress and then utilize a variety of strategies to help students grow their skills.

## PRACTICE 5: DEDICATED, HIGHLY TRAINED SPECIALISTS



**“In our school, we have seen amazing growth for our lowest-achieving students by providing direct one-on-one reading intervention providing 30 minutes of daily support. Of the students served, a very high percentage (98%) of students demonstrating reading competency on OCCT testing after completion of such intensive intervention.” – Principal**

Schools that exceed expectations in reading are unequivocal in their focus on literacy. As a matter of fact, sacrifices in other curriculum areas and scheduling challenges are sometimes tolerated to dedicate the time, personnel, and intensity to literacy instruction as the overriding priority. Though the schools utilize different curriculum materials and intervention strategies, the high-performing schools all have access to well-trained, dedicated specialists to provide direct instruction to the lowest performing students.

Student needs are triaged so that the most at-risk students receive the most intervention with lessons that are specifically selected/designed for each individual. Instruction is differentiated based on results obtained through periodic assessment of skills that is shared with students so they become invested in their own progress, hopefully building confidence and motivation. High-performing schools also typically provide specialists to individualized instruction for English Language Learners (ELL) both during class time and pullout sessions.





The availability of specialists is a significantly differentiating element between schools in our study. While high-performing schools have the benefit of full-time specialists, other schools share specialists and instructional coaches with other schools, thereby serving a very small number of students without as much coverage or consistency. Without full-time literacy or ELL specialists, these schools use volunteer tutors for their intensive interventions, which are not always available or able to produce consistent results. When Title I and district funds are invested in literacy specialists, the results are promising but tend to be poor when funds are spent only on reading materials and manipulatives.

Student needs are triaged so that the most at-risk students receive the most intervention with lessons that are specifically selected and designed for each individual.

# CONCLUSION

ImpactTulsa is fortunate to partner with educators and schools in the Tulsa-area who demonstrate excellence and can serve as environments for innovation and models of best literacy practices. We are also fortunate to have committed teachers, leaders and districts who want to maximize every opportunity to help students become successful learners and citizens. Challenges due to state funding cuts and growing numbers of students from linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged families should not discourage us from continuously reexamining everything we are doing and vigorously capitalizing on what works for all of our students. Efficiencies can come from aligning services from our non-profit agencies working with students and families and taking advantage of on-going professional development with our university partners. We have a lot to learn from each other, and by aligning our work and sharing what works, we can catapult our community forward to give all children a quality educational experience.

## NEXT STEPS

The study of achievement data and educator interviews over the last two years has led to an identification of where many of our strengths and weaknesses exist and some valuable information about instructional practices and approaches that work.

ImpactTulsa will disseminate the lessons learned throughout the partnership and bring together administrators and teachers serving students with similar demographics to strategize and discuss cross-learning opportunities about how to increase reading proficiency.

ImpactTulsa will also work with partners to collect additional information about the influences of early childhood experiences and the readiness for kindergarten that contribute to third-grade reading achievement.



# APPENDIX

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### WHY FOCUS ON LITERACY?

For the second consecutive year, ImpactTulsa's research methodology has incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify practices associated with strong assessment performance in third-grade reading. Reading competencies set the stage for continued learning and are important markers for later success. As research has shown, students reading on grade level in third- grade are four times less likely to drop out from high school, with this number increasing to thirteen times for low-income students.<sup>v</sup>

#### QUANTITATIVE METHODS: UNDERSTANDING THE LITERACY DATA

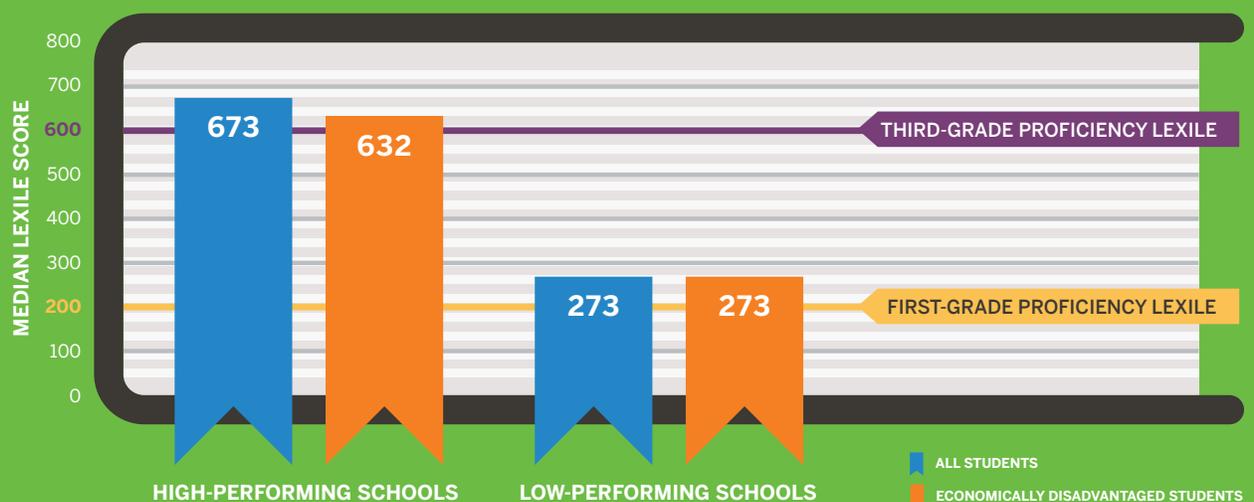
The third-grade Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT) reading scores and their corresponding Lexile scores have been compared across schools in the Tulsa area 15 district partnership and disaggregated according to socioeconomic level based on Free and Reduced Lunch eligibility as well as race/ethnicity, English Language Learner and Special Education status. A regression analysis was conducted to measure third-grade performance after accounting for the influence of socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic background, and ELL status to reach a more nuanced measure of the value added by schools. A two-year analysis of 2014 and 2015 assessment data outcomes adds increased reliability and a longitudinal view. By looking at test scores, schools were identified as outliers if they scored above or below others with similar demographic characteristics. Six schools were selected – four with high- performance within their economically disadvantaged demographic bands and two with low-performance within their economically disadvantaged demographic bands.

This year's high-performing schools all scored above expectancy levels on Spring 2015 reading assessments, with a median reading Lexile of 673 (600 is on-grade level proficiency for 3rd grade)<sup>vi</sup> serving 58% of economically disadvantaged<sup>vii</sup> students. They had a total population of 262 third-grade students, including 8% English Language Learners, 49% White students and 51% Students of Color. Their economically disadvantaged students had a median Lexile of 632 compared to non-economically disadvantaged students with a median Lexile of 708, illustrating a narrow achievement gap of high performing students.

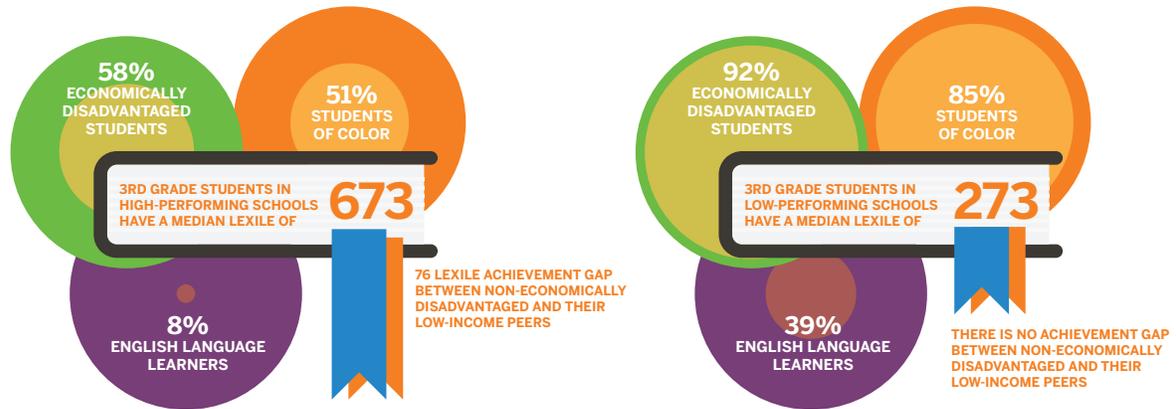
In contrast, the student population of the lower performing schools were significantly more economically, racially and linguistically diverse with more students who qualified for ELL. They had a median reading Lexile of 273, which is below grade-level and equivalent to first-grade reading proficiency.<sup>viii</sup> They had a total population of 175 third-grade students, including 39% English Language Learners, 92% economically disadvantaged, 15% White students and 85% Students of Color. The median Lexile for economically disadvantaged students was 272 and for non-economically disadvantaged students was 274, showing there is actually little socioeconomic distinction between students in the school.

This significant difference between the two sets of schools allows us to better understand the practical challenges associated with student diversity and the impact poverty contributes to the learning environment when more than 50% of the students in a school are low income.

### Third-Grade Median Lexile Reading Outcomes for High and Low-Performing Schools, Spring 2015



## Demographic Snapshot of High-Performing and Low-Performing Schools



### QUALITATIVE METHODS: UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL CULTURE AND INSTRUCTION

To identify the aspects of practice and culture that characterize the schools and help distinguish them from others with similar demographics, ImpactTulsa research staff invited practitioners from our partner K-12 districts and local higher education teacher education programs with us for school visits. The teams interviewed K-3 teachers, instructional specialists and administrators to get a first-hand feel for the culture, climate and organization unique to each school. The six participating schools were from four different partner districts.

A set of pre-determined interview questions were used consistently for different respondent groups such as administrators and teachers. The interview teams were also given a school tour to observe the layout and get a sense of the school environment. Comments and impressions from the interviews were gathered to discern commonalities and differences. The teams debriefed and collaborated to identify the lessons learned. Several themes identified this year were also noted in last year's interviews, which underscores that some practices produce consistent results over time and within different venues.

<sup>i</sup> Aronson, J., & Steele, C.M. (2005). Stereotypes and the fragility of human competence, motivation, and self-concept. In C. Dweck & E. Elliot (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation* (pp. 436-456). New York: Guilford.

<sup>ii</sup> Great Expectations is a professional development program for teachers and administrators to create harmony in school buildings and create a productive environment for student learning. Seven Habit of Successful Students is based on Stephen Covey's widely recognized approach to being effective in attaining goals and building character. PBIS means Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports and it is a proactive approach to establishing behavioral supports and social culture for students to achieve social, emotional, and academic success.

<sup>iii</sup> Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey and Company

<sup>iv</sup> Gewertz, Catherine (2014, January 22). Fla. Pushes Longer Day, More Reading in Some Schools. *Education Week*, 33, 18, 12-13. Retrieved August 22, 2016 from the World Wide Web: [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/01/22/18florida\\_ep.h33.html?qs=reading+instruction+time+blocks](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/01/22/18florida_ep.h33.html?qs=reading+instruction+time+blocks)

<sup>v</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012, "Double Jeopardy: How 3rd Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation."

<sup>vi</sup> Scholastic Reading Counts considers a 600-700 Lexile to be the on-grade level proficiency range for third-grade students.

<sup>vii</sup> Economically disadvantaged students are identified by eligibility to receive free and reduced priced lunch services within their schools.

<sup>viii</sup> Scholastic Reading Counts considers a 200-300 Lexile to be the on-grade level proficiency range for first-grade students.



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