

BRIGHT SPOTS

Quality Teaching



Success for All Foundation, Baltimore, MD

“Kids are very social beings,” says Robert Slavin, chairman of the board of the Success for All (SFA) Foundation. “When kids are excited, active and proud of what they’re doing, they are motivated to learn more. And they much prefer cooperative learning to sitting in rows.”

Slavin’s belief that educators can succeed when they work “with the grain” of children’s innate sociability is at the core of SFA’s approach to transforming the culture of high-poverty schools. The foundation was the top-rated applicant for an Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up award from the U.S. Department of Education. The \$50-million award will more than double the organization’s reach, from 1,000 schools with 500,000 students in 2011 to 2,100 schools serving 1 million students by 2015.

“Reading is our most essential focus,” says Slavin, who co-founded SFA in 1987. “When children are held back, especially in inner-city schools, it is invariably because they have poor reading skills. If you see schools as a means to address poverty and inequality, then reading is the place to start.”

Building commitment

SFA designs its programs to yield results the first year. “When teachers see first-graders achieve at significantly higher levels than in the past, this builds a commitment to something they’ll fight for,” says Slavin. “They put their heart and soul into making it work.”

Students at SFA schools spend 90 minutes daily on uninterrupted reading and writing instruction. They work in teams based on their reading level, not their age or grade. Frequent assessments of progress help them move quickly to higher-level groups. A school-based, full-time literacy coordinator identifies when additional supports or new interventions are needed.

Teachers at SFA schools report fewer discipline problems, in part because students and teachers learn social problem-solving skills. School-based teams

WHO THEY ARE

By 2015, SFA will reach:

- 1 million students (500,000 in 2011).
- 2,100 high-poverty schools, rural and urban (1,000 in 2011).
- 63,000 teachers (30,000 in 2011).

\$140 average cost per student per year over first three years.

\$60 cost per student beginning year four.

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of students, families, educators and community organizations also work on education-related challenges, from getting glasses for children to helping a child attend more regularly. They find creative solutions, such as asking a nearby classmate's parent to walk a child to school when that child's parent is unavailable. "Many parents live in desperate circumstances in which every day is a random event. They love their children and want them to succeed," says Slavin. "We offer help that isn't punitive."

Sustaining and growing

SFA requires schools to obtain support from at least 75 percent of teachers on a secret ballot before beginning the program. "Teachers are willing to devote their energy to something when they know their colleagues are behind it, that they're taking this on together," says Slavin. "Then, when predictable disasters happen — such as cutbacks in funding or turnover among superintendents, principals or teachers — they defend what's important to them."

Because it is highly structured, SFA's approach is also highly replicable. Weekly lesson plans and teaching scripts support team-based cooperative learning activities that feature common goals, student accountability and recognition of group success. Students work together to develop progressively more sophisticated skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. In the first year, teachers receive an intensive 24 days of on-site training to help them use SFA's evidence-based curricula.

Keeping costs manageable

Funds from the i3 program will allow SFA to provide start-up grants of \$50,000 to up to 800 schools to help them defray first-year costs usually totaling \$120,000. Remaining costs, as well as second- and third-year costs of \$40,000 and \$30,000 respectively, are covered by schools' Title I funds.

The SFA Foundation itself is structured to be financially sustainable. Fee-for-service income for materials and training at participating schools covers most of its costs. "Our philosophy is that program dissemination has to be self-funding because grants come and go," says Slavin, noting that SFA uses grants primarily for program development, research and evaluation. Case in point: the i3 grant is paying for an independent evaluation by MDRC, a New York-based research organization. Results will be tracked over three years among kindergarten, first-grade and second-grade children at 25 SFA schools and 25 randomized control schools.

Funding from the i3 award is also supporting 20 regional SFA coaching centers that will help school administrators and teachers implement the program successfully. "We designed Success for All to be scalable at the outset and took as a principle that we wouldn't put anything in the model that couldn't be replicated," says Slavin. "You don't need the best principal, teachers or kids, or extraordinary amounts of money. We're building depth of leadership at the school level in different ways so that we can respond flexibly with back-up talent as needs arise — so schools can succeed in more than one way."

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

In independently commissioned studies, SFA:

- **Reduced black-white achievement gap by 50% in 3 years.**
- **Put students one full grade ahead of control group over a decade.**

SFA schools achieved a 7.1% or better increase in scores at proficient or higher on Ohio Advancement Test Reading in 2006–2010 (compared to a 1.4% gain in all Ohio public schools).

HIGHLIGHTS

Success for All:

- **Promotes extensive cooperative learning.**
- **Offers 90 minutes daily reading and writing instruction.**
- **Frequently assesses student progress.**
- **Relies on school-based, full-time literacy coordinators.**
- **Creates school-based teams of students, families, educators and community organizers.**
- **Provides a highly replicable model.**
- **Requires initial support from 75% of teachers on a secret ballot.**