

**Executive Summary of the
External Evaluation of the Good Schools
Making the Grade Initiative**

by

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Stephen Sills, and Sharon Lewis

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Introduction

The Skillman Foundation established the Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative in 2004 to reward Detroit schools that were doing well and encourage others to improve.² Despite the many difficulties facing Detroit and its educational systems, including economic downturns and declining school enrollments, many schools and educators were offering exceptional learning experiences to Detroit children.³ As one early planner noted:

We knew that there were good schools, schools that were trying really hard and schools that were doing really well, and part of the reason for getting involved was to...acknowledge that there were really good schools in spite of all the [bad]press.

The awards program has three distinctive features:

- It awards schools that have made significant improvements in achievement as well as high performing schools.

¹ Dr. Mary Ann Millsap, Dr. Sharif Shakrani, and Ms. Sharon Lewis are the National Advisors to the Skillman Foundation's Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative. Dr. Kerry Vachta was the Principal Investigator for the second and third year of the three-year evaluation of *Making the Grade* at Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies. Dr. Cheryl Neely was the Project Manager. Dr. Stephen Sills was the Principal Investigator during the evaluation's initial year. Unless otherwise cited, all data appearing in this paper were contained in their evaluation reports. The authors are deeply indebted to Ms. Marie Colombo, the Skillman Foundation Senior Program Officer for Knowledge Management who oversaw the evaluation.

² Created in 1960, The Skillman Foundation is a private philanthropy whose chief aim is to help develop good schools and good neighborhoods for children. Though grants are made throughout Southeast Michigan, most grants are directed at six Detroit neighborhoods and toward innovative and successful schools throughout the city of Detroit. Earlier Detroit-based education initiatives funded by the Foundation include the Comer Schools and Families Initiative (1994-2003) and the Schools of the 21st Century (jointly funded with the Annenberg Challenge Grant and others).

³ For well over a decade, Detroit Public Schools (DPS) has experienced revolving-door superintendents, declining enrollments, teacher strikes, overall poor academic performance, and critical press. The most recent superintendent (the second in three years) was fired in December 2008, and in March 2009, the Michigan governor appointed an emergency financial manager to take charge of the system's ailing budget. DPS enrollment continues to decline at the rate of about 10,000 students a year, from 153,034 in 2003 to 83,812 in 2009.

- It is open to all schools in Detroit – public, charter, religious, and private – not only to public schools.
- It assesses schools on multiple indicators of school success, not only on indicators of student performance.

More explicitly, the purposes of the Initiative are to:

- Publicly identify, recognize and reward good schools;
- Help parents identify good schools and make informed decisions using unbiased data regarding public, charter, private, and religious schools;
- Encourage more Detroit schools to apply the Good Schools Indicators and improve student performance;
- Create and share knowledge of best practices related to the nine Indicators of Student and School Success with educators and parents; and
- Create opportunities to improve interactions among all Detroit school systems.

Awards to elementary schools began in 2005, with middle schools added in 2006 and high schools in 2007. From 2005 through 2008, individual awards ranged from \$10,000 to \$100,000. Beginning in the 2009, individual awards ranged from \$7,500 to \$75,000. Over the first six years of this seven-year initiative, the Skillman Foundation has awarded more than ten million dollars in grants to schools.⁴

This paper describes the Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative and its evaluation. The Initiative is an awards program, not an educational reform initiative. It is designed to help parents make informed decisions about schools, to encourage schools to improve, and to improve interactions among all school systems in Detroit. The paper discusses each purpose of the Initiative, and also examines implementation in awarded schools and the impact of the Initiative.

Making the Grade Initiative

Creating the Initiative

To create the program, the Skillman Foundation called upon four experts in school reform to serve as National Advisors.⁵ The National Advisors designed an awards program based upon the effective

⁴ Skillman Foundation website, “The Foundation awards \$2.5 million in Good Schools Grants” June 3, 2008. Also Skillman Foundation memorandum (Tamalon Overton), June 2010.

⁵ The four National Advisors are Ed Joyner, Sharon Lewis, Mary Ann Millsap, and Sharif Shakrani. Dr. Joyner was involved in the first design year, while the remaining three have worked with the initiative since 2004. Dr. Joyner is the former Executive Director of the School Development Program at the Yale University Child Study Center. Sharon Lewis was Assistant Superintendent for Research, Development, and Coordination in Detroit before becoming the Director of Research for the Council of Great Cities Schools. Mary Ann Millsap is a former Principal Associate and Vice President at Abt Associates Inc. and directed the five-year Implementation and Impact Evaluation of Detroit’s Comer Schools and Families Initiative. Sharif Shakrani is the former Deputy Executive

schools research and the federal Blue Ribbon School program (2000-2001). As one National Advisor reported in a spring 2007 interview:

...we wanted to have an application that was comparable to a national recognition program that had to be a really solid, thoughtful piece of work and would have integrity. It was not just, you know, “oh here, you got high test scores, here’s a star.” ...We wanted to be able to have something where schools had to do a self study. They had to really look at where they were, where they were going, what they wanted to do.

To inform the design and build public support, the Foundation created a Community Task Force representing all major stakeholder groups, including representatives of each school system, parents of Detroit school children, the Detroit Parents Network, the City of Detroit, the Chamber of Commerce, New Detroit, Detroit Urban League, the NAACP Detroit Branch, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the state board of education, and the state department of education. For the first three years, the Community Task Force met twice per year to review the design and organization of the Initiative. The Task Force provided input on the indicators of school success at each level – elementary (2005), middle school (2006), and high school (2007). Additional input was secured for the high school application from focus groups of principals, teachers, students, and postsecondary administrators. As one Task Force member recalled:⁶

Some of the most fascinating discussions on the front end were having all different schools together with conversation about measuring schools and what to look at. Look at the board, look at management, look at instruction, look at curriculum.

Applying for Awards

To receive a Good Schools *Making the Grade* award, schools must first meet student success thresholds to be recognized. Throughout its history, the Skillman Foundation has recognized High Performing and Improving schools.⁷ What distinguishes **High Performing** schools is that at least 75 percent of the students must have met or exceeded acceptable achievement standards in at least two subjects and 60 percent in the third.⁸ **Improving** schools must have at least a 10 percent increase in the number of

Director of the National Assessment Governing Board and is currently co-Director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University.

⁶ Interview conducted by a National Advisor in November 2008.

⁷ All schools are encouraged to take the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), and any school that uses the MEAP must use those data, including all public and charter schools. Schools that do not use the MEAP must use a nationally recognized norm-referenced test. Other indicators for student success include student attendance for all schools as well as Michigan Yes! and adequate yearly progress (AYP) for public and charter schools.

⁸ The subjects are mathematics, English/language arts or reading, and science.

students meeting acceptable achievement standards over the prior year in at least two subjects. Starting with the 2010 awards, the Foundation included as Improving schools those where at least 60 percent of their students have met or exceeded acceptable achievement standards in two subjects. From 2005 through 2009, the Foundation included **Aspiring** schools in its awards. Aspiring schools were eligible if at least 60 percent of their students met or exceeded acceptable achievement standards in two subjects (called Aspiring to High Performing schools), or if the proportion of students meeting the achievement standards has increased by at least five percent over the prior year in two subjects (called Aspiring to Improving schools). In 2007 and 2008, **Emerging** high schools were recognized. Emerging high schools were high schools that had not made sufficient academic gains but had reached thresholds on such measures as the high school graduation rate and ninth grade promotion rate.⁹

Schools that meet the student success thresholds are then invited to complete applications focused on Indicators of School Success that require schools to assess themselves against what would be considered best practices. The Indicators of School Success have remained unchanged over time. To make the application a thoughtful and reflective process, schools are given 21 pages to present both quantitative and qualitative data on each of the following indicators:

- Leadership and Educational Vitality
- Data-Driven Decision Making
- Challenging Curriculum and Instruction
- Student Focus and Supports
- School Culture
- Professional Community
- School, Family and Community Partnerships

To ensure a fair application review, explicit criteria were established to review applications. All student performance data were independently verified, review panels were staffed by people with no connections to the schools, and each application received at least three independent reviews. Members of review panels and others were then trained to conduct site visits to each school, using a common set of interview and focus group questions and a common summary report format. Awards are made based upon the quality of the written application and the results of site visits to each school.¹⁰

After the first awards were made in 2005, the Skillman Foundation began concerted outreach activities to the broader community. These included a weekly Comcast television program (and later a monthly PBS program), radio spots, the annual Good Schools Guide, Yak's Corner in the *Detroit Free Press*, the

⁹ When it became apparent that only examination high schools met the award qualifications, the Foundation created a new category within the *Making the Grade* Initiative to encourage non-exam schools to improve.

¹⁰ Site visits are made to all High Performing and Improving elementary and middle schools and to all high schools that submitted applications.

Skillman Foundation and the Good Schools Resource Center web-sites, and such large-scale community events as the annual Good Schools rally.¹¹

Evaluation Design

In the summer of 2005, the Skillman Foundation awarded a three-year contract to the Evaluation Research Unit of Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies to conduct an external evaluation of the *Making The Grade* Initiative. The evaluation was to assess how well the purposes of the program were being met and to examine the implementation and impact of the award.

The design was a multi-method/multi-level evaluation, involving both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data sources for the evaluation included:

- Interviews with principals of awarded schools, foundation staff, National Advisors, Good Schools Resource Center personnel, and Community Task Force members (2006-2008)
- Site visits to awarded schools with interviews and observations (2006-2007)
- Review of end-of-year financial reports from awarded schools (2006-2008)
- Web-based Survey of principals in awarded schools (2005-2006)
- Program data on number of eligible, applied, and awarded schools (2005-2008)
- Survey of 362 teachers in schools with 2007 awards as High Performing or Improving schools (2008)
- Telephone survey of 496 randomly dialed Detroit parents/guardians of school-aged children (2007)
- Evaluations surveys of the Skillman Foundation's Technical Assistance Workshops (2008)
- Parent focus groups in four select schools (2008)
- Individual student achievement data for children in Detroit Public Schools (DPS)(2004-2008)
- Individual student enrollment data in DPS schools (2004-2008)

After collecting and analyzing the data collected, Wayne State University submitted data briefs and mid-year and annual reports to the foundation. This report summarizes their efforts, as well as research conducted by Dr. Sharif Shakrani on the effects of student mobility on student achievement in *Making the Grade* schools. Interviews of key personnel conducted by Dr. Mary Ann Millsap in the fall of 2008 are included in the analysis and footnoted when used.

Purpose: Identify, Recognize and Reward Good Schools

¹¹ In 2008, for example, 60,000 copies of the Good Schools Guide was produced, with 35,000 included as inserts into the Metro Times. Yak's Corner was inserted into every Tuesday edition of the *Detroit Free Press* (320,000 copies). In 2009, the Good Schools Guide is going directly to schools that participate in the Newspapers in Education program that reaches around 50,000 students. Also in 2008, the Good Schools rally at Chene Park had close to 3,000 attendees. We should also note that in March 2009, the Council on Foundations awarded the Bronze award of the Wilmer Shields Rich Awards Program to the Skillman Foundation for the 2008 Good Schools Guide. The award criteria include overall impact; message and design effectiveness, organization of content, and outreach strategies.

Good Schools *Making the Grade* as a Credible Awards Program

For all school systems – public, charter, Catholic, and Lutheran – *Making the Grade* is a welcome addition to Detroit. As one interviewee reported in spring 2007: “This is a very, very important initiative for the district.” Administrators of the other school systems also strongly support the program:¹²

The message that the Skillman Foundation has articulated is that what is most important is how any school performs. It’s [about] building performance. That has made a difference for all of us now.

For High Performing schools, the Skillman Foundation award has become a status symbol.

The award is prestigious. There’s no question about it. Principals want it for their building so they can say that they are doing what they are supposed to do, that students are achieving.

Numerous interviewees felt the recognition by the Skillman Foundation was at least as important as the funding provided in fostering an ethic of excellence. As one interviewee mentioned in a spring 2007 interview:

One is, there’s a financial incentive there. But I think even more importantly, it’s a prestige thing for the schools for somebody external to say you’re doing a good job. You’re doing great things for kids. And educators by and large really value being recognized for what they do for kids. So I think it’s helped create an incentive and a dynamic to help recognize excellence and help schools and leaders say, you know, we’re set apart, something special here. I think that can help them stimulate a culture of excellence at their schools.

In the fall of 2005 and again in the fall of 2006, principals of newly awarded High Performing and Improving schools were asked in a web-survey to assess the procedures and requirements of the application and site visit process. Principals reported that the application process was labor intensive, but also comprehensive and necessary. It also helped them look at data in meaningful ways. Among respondents from each school category – public, charter, private, and religious – there was general agreement that the process was fair for their type of school. In the first two years, time was reported as the major impeding factor in completing the application, especially for Improving schools. In 2006, Improving schools spent nearly twice as much time on average as High Performing schools in completing their applications.

When surveyed in the spring of 2008, teachers in the High Performing, Improving, and Emerging schools that won awards in 2007 were exceptionally supportive of the *Making the Grade* Initiative. When given the statement: “The Skillman Foundation does a good job of identifying and awarding the best schools in Detroit for Good Schools awards”, 62 percent strongly agreed with the statement, and another 35

¹² Quotes are taken from interviews with various school system representatives, conducted by a National Advisor in November 2008.

percent agreed, for a total of 97 percent.¹³ Respondents were also well-informed about the Initiative, as more than 60 percent reported that they had been involved in the application writing process.¹⁴

Concerns about how Schools Are Identified

The Aspiring School Category. While the categories of High Performing and Improving schools are well-regarded, the Aspiring school category was less so. One reason was that completing the application was seen as too intensive relative to the amount of the financial award. For the first two years of the Initiative, Aspiring schools were not required to complete the extensive self-assessment of the Indicators of School Success. When this requirement was added beginning with the 2007 award cycle, some eligible Aspiring schools found the application so cumbersome and time consuming that they did not apply.

A second reason was a stigma attached to the award itself. As two different school system administrators described it:¹⁵

Some principals don't want to apply as Aspiring schools. They can certainly use the dollars but they don't want to do that right now. I don't have another name for the label, but there is a stigma. Most principals are not proud of the Aspiring label.

Two of our schools are not applying this year [for 2009 Aspiring awards]. One said that the application was too much work for an Aspiring school. They are also going through accreditation this year [a process that occurs once each seven years]. The principal of the other school has a real issue with the "Aspiring" category.

The stigma was particularly strongly felt among those schools that had once been High Performing, but whose achievement scores have dropped enough below that threshold to leave them eligible only as Aspiring to High Performing. In a recent case, a formerly High Performing school refused to apply for the Aspiring category out of concern that the Aspiring school level "might render such negative publicity in our school community that it could drive away many of the well-informed families that we have."¹⁶ The principal considers her school to be high performing, and believes student mobility may have

¹³ There were no significant differences across award levels (High Performing, Improving, or Emerging) or grade levels (elementary, middle school, or high school). Thus, teachers in Emerging high schools were as likely to rate the Initiative as effectively identifying good schools as those in High Performing schools.

¹⁴ While there were no significant differences by level (elementary, middle, high school) in preparing the grant application, a higher proportion of teachers in the Emerging high schools reported being involved than teachers in High Performing and Improving schools. This seemingly anomalous finding may be explained by school size. The three Emerging schools included in the survey each enrolled no more than 200 students each. It is also possible that teachers who were more involved with Making the Grade were more likely to respond to the survey than those who were not involved. No non-response bias study was undertaken to test this hypothesis.

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by the National Advisor in November 2008.

¹⁶ Letter to Carol Goss, dated November 4, 2008.

temporarily lowered the school's student achievement scores. She suggested that the Aspiring awards be renamed "Professional and Parent Development Grants" because they were to be used for these purposes. It should be noted that although the label may be seen as a stigma, the principal's concern also indicates strong buy-in for the Initiative and a recognition of the weight the award carries in the community.

Beginning with the 2010 awards, the Aspiring school category was dropped. Schools with at least 60 percent of their students scoring proficient on two of three subjects could apply under Improving schools, but dropped from consideration were those schools where five percent of their students had gains in two subjects.

Measuring and Rating Academic Achievement. While school systems are supportive of the use of student academic outcomes, several respondents criticized the use of achievement tests and wanted a more holistic measure of student learning. As one respondent noted in 2007:

The most challenging issue that I have I've had from the very beginning. I do understand that the Initiative is supposed to identify the good schools in Detroit, but the biggest criticism I have... is the differing evaluations amongst the different schools, in other words, what test results are being looked at and the overemphasis on individuals students' test results which in my way of thinking is not how you evaluate the quality of a school.

Some school system representatives also suggested that all student and school indicators should be considered simultaneously rather than requiring schools to meet student performance levels first. The Skillman Foundation Board of Trustees maintained that measures of student outcomes must take precedence. As one of the National Advisors reported [referring to the use of test scores as an initial threshold]:

That came basically from the Skillman Board. They want to recognize students that are doing well. What's the purpose of school? Educating kids. And so the underpinning for recognizing is how well they are educating kids.

Measuring academic outcomes has been another challenge, as not all schools use the same student achievement tests. All schools that administer the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) are required to use those test results; this includes all public and charter schools. Some representatives of the non-public schools have contended that the process favors public schools (that is, DPS and charter schools) because it is designed around the tests the public schools are required to take, whereas non-public schools must adopt testing programs to fit their own models. On the other hand, public schools must also achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by federal legislation (No Child Left Behind), but there is no equivalent requirement for other schools.

Eligible schools that do not apply. In the first few years of Making the Grade, some schools that met the student achievement eligibility criteria have not applied for recognition. Typically, a higher proportion

of those eligible for High Performing and Improving awards submitted applications than those eligible for Aspiring awards. For example, for elementary and middle schools applying for 2009 awards, all eligible High Performing schools applied, and about 80 percent of eligible Improving schools applied, as did 62 percent of eligible Aspiring schools. The non-applying schools are primarily DPS and charter schools. Until the 2009 award cycle, all eligible Catholic schools had applied, except for one school in 2006, and all eligible Lutheran schools have applied.¹⁷ By 2010, schools' response to Making the Grade was extremely high. Ninety-eight percent of eligible schools applied, the highest proportion in the history of the program.

In the spring of 2008, the external evaluators interviewed the principals in five schools that did not apply for 2007 awards. Three were DPS schools and two were charter schools. One qualified as an Improving school, three were eligible as Aspiring schools, and one would have been designated as an Emerging high school. The Improving school did not apply because of physical plant issues that resulted in their moving to another building. The principal indicated that they would readily apply if they qualify again. Among the "eligible as Aspiring" schools, one school did not apply because the principal was new. Another school did not apply because the principal thought the self study was too much trouble for the money. The third school had been recognized as High Performing earlier and chose not to apply as Aspiring. The principal believed the award was important but didn't want word spreading that their student performance had fallen. The principal of the Emerging high school was not aware of the *Making the Grade* Initiative. She thought the grant was associated with the *Good Neighborhoods* Initiative and her school does not lie within a designated Good Neighborhood. Had she been aware of the school's eligibility, she reported that she would have submitted an application.

Purpose: Help Parents Identify Good Schools

To find out which of the many outreach activities were most effective and to obtain initial impressions of the Initiative, a telephone survey of randomly selected households in Detroit was conducted in the spring of 2007, after two years of awards to elementary schools and one year of awards to middle schools. (High schools first received awards later that spring.) Reported analyses were limited to parents (or guardians) of children attending schools in the city of Detroit. To elaborate on survey findings, focus groups of parents were conducted in four awarded schools (two High Performing, one Improving, and one Aspiring school) located in Skillman-designated *Good Neighborhoods* in the spring of 2008. While these data are limited in scope, they help illuminate survey findings.

Parent Awareness of *Making the Grade* Initiative

Of the almost 500 Detroit parents surveyed in the spring of 2007, half had heard of the *Making the Grade* Initiative. As one would expect, parents with children attending awarded schools were significantly more likely to be aware of the initiative (63 percent) than those whose children were attending schools that received awards in subsequent years (45 percent) and those whose schools have

¹⁷ Interviews conducted by the National Advisor, November 2008.

not received awards (48 percent). Parents whose children attended schools that were recognized as High Performing or Aspiring to High Performing were more likely to know about the initiative than those whose children's schools received Improving or Aspiring to Improving designations.

Among parents participating in the spring 2008 focus groups, the parents of children attending the two High Performing schools were aware of the Initiative and knew that their schools had been recognized. Fewer parents in the Improving and Aspiring schools were aware of the Initiative and knew that their schools had received awards. These anecdotal findings may be a reflection of the award itself (e.g., High Performing schools receive more publicity and a larger award), but may also reflect internal dynamics in the schools. In the Improving school, for example, all four parents in the focus group were concerned about the lack of communication between administrators and parents in the school. Three of the eight parents in the Aspiring school knew about that award. When the school was later recognized as Improving, all eight parents were informed of the recognition and four attended the awards rally.

How Parents Learn about the *Making the Grade* Initiative

The most frequently cited information sources were their children's schools, newspapers (where the Good Schools Guide first appeared), and TV news. Most parents heard about *Making the Grade* from their child's school, ranging from about half (47 percent) of the parents whose children attended schools that had already received awards to one-third (33 percent) of the parents whose children attended schools that have not received awards. The newspaper and TV news were the next most frequently cited sources, each mentioned by up to 20 percent of the parents. Only parents in schools that have received awards (either before or after the survey) indicated that they had watched either the weekly Comcast program showcasing individual awards schools or the monthly PBS television program, with fewer than 10 percent of parents in awarded schools checking those items. TV programming is no longer funded by the Foundation.

Parents' Assessment of *Making the Grade* Initiative

As shown in Exhibit 1, most parents surveyed were supportive of the Initiative, both to help them identify effective schools for their own children and as a school reward strategy. More parents of children attending previously awarded schools endorsed these statements than did parents of children attending schools awarded after the survey or parents of children attending schools that have not received awards. Parents of students in previously awarded High Performing schools did not rate these items significantly higher than parents of students in recognized Improving or Aspiring schools.

The parents who participated in focus groups, by contrast, had varying views depending upon the award status of their school. Parents at both High Performing schools were strongly positive about their school, and reacted to their schools' designation with pride and support. Parents at the Improving school praised the school's multi-cultural focus but were critical of the quality of instruction their children received and the lack of communication with parents. Parents at the Aspiring school were very

Exhibit 1`**Detroit Parents' Assessment of the Making the Grade Initiative**

Survey Item	Percentage of Parents Who:				
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Good Schools Initiative is a good way to motivate schools to improve.	60%	31%	1%	4%	4%
The Good Schools Initiative does a good job recognizing good schools in the city of Detroit.	36	41	3	9	11
The information provided by the Good Schools Initiative is useful in helping me decide what school I want my child to attend.	35	37	4	10	14

Source: CATI Survey of Detroit Parents, spring 2007. n= 243, with missing n ranging from 22 to 29.

positive about the elementary school program but somewhat concerned about the middle school program and preparation of students for high school.

Student Mobility and Student Stability in High Performing and Improving Schools¹⁸

Parents move their children from one school to another for a variety of reasons, many of them economic. But they may also move their children if they are dissatisfied with the school. Conversely, they may find means to keep their children in a particular school if they are especially satisfied with it. Student stability and student mobility rates in the High Performing and Improving elementary schools in 2005 (the first year of awards) were compared with the average school in Detroit for the 2005-2006

school year (the year after the award).¹⁹ School enrollment data were available for seven High Performing schools and 14 Improving schools.²⁰

¹⁸ Shakrani, Sharif M. (November 2008). Student Mobility and Stability Study: How Did Recognized Schools' Mobility and Stability Data Differ from Other Schools in Detroit? Paper prepared for the Skillman Foundation.

¹⁹ The stability rate is calculated as the number of students enrolled in the fall less the number of those same students enrolled at the end of the school year, divided by the number of students enrolled in the fall. If 500 students were enrolled in the fall and 400 of them were in the school in the spring, the stability rate would be (500-400)/500 or 80 percent. The mobility rate is calculated as the number of students who arrive in the school after the initial fall count plus the number of students who leave the school before the last count divided by the average of the total fall and spring enrollments. If 500 students were enrolled in both fall and spring, but 100

High Performing schools had significantly higher stability rates (85 percent vs 68 percent) and lower mobility rates (25 percent vs 64 percent) than the district average. None of the High Performing schools had lower retention rates than the district average. Improving schools had somewhat higher stability rates (73 percent vs 68 percent) and lower mobility rates (52 percent vs 64 percent) than the district average, with 12 of the 13 Improving schools having lower student mobility rates than the district average.

Purpose: Encourage More Detroit Schools to Improve Student Performance. Create and Share Knowledge of Best Practices

The Skillman Foundation created the Aspiring schools category to serve as incentive for schools with a good foundation to become High Performing or Improving schools. As described by one National Advisor in a spring 2007 interview:

We have this other category, called Aspiring schools, because what we really want to do is to make sure we're not just recognizing schools that are doing well or improving but we want to get other schools to want to get into those categories. The idea was that these schools, with some assistance, would be able to move into those other categories.

In 2005 and again in 2007 and 2008, direct grants were made to Aspiring schools, with the stipulation that funds be used for professional development. The Skillman Foundation also funded the Good Schools Resource Center at Marygrove College in December 2004 to support the *Making the Grade* Initiative and to provide professional development to the Aspiring schools. In the 2005-2006 school year, the Resource Center hosted two major conferences and a series of off-site workshops, open to all awarded schools. While well-regarded, neither the conferences nor the workshops were well attended. For Aspiring schools awarded in 2006, the Resource Center redesigned its activities to provide on-site technical assistance, the model preferred by school personnel. Instead of direct grants, Aspiring schools were to receive consultant services in their schools, beginning in the fall of 2006. For a variety of reasons, few schools participated and services ended in December 2006. As with the conferences and workshops, the quality of professional development received on site was rated uniformly highly among recipients.

students had left the school in the meantime and 100 new students had entered, the mobility rate would be $(100+100)/500$ or 40 percent.

²⁰ The High Performing schools included five DPS schools, two DPS exam schools, one charter school, and one private school. The Improving schools included 13 DPS schools, one charter school, and one parochial school. Analysis was limited to those schools with enrollment data, so one private school and one parochial school were not included in the analysis. One DPS High Performing school was also not included as it closed in the 2005-2006 school year.

Amid growing concerns regarding declining enrollments, all 2007 and 2008 awardees (not only Aspiring schools) were required to attend one-day trainings on marketing strategies using the school's recognition by the Skillman Foundation as a tool to promote the school and increase enrollment. Schools that proposed using their award funds for technology or enrichment programs were required to attend additional one-day trainings. These workshops, provided by the Skillman Foundation, also received positive reviews.

Of the 64 Aspiring schools to receive awards from 2005 through 2007, by 2008, one-third had moved into higher award categories. Six applied for and became High Performing schools, and 15 became Improving schools.²¹

In November 2008, the Skillman Foundation awarded a two-year, \$1.9 million grant to Michigan State University's College of Education to create an education resource center out of Youthville Detroit. At least 15 MSU faculty and staff members will work with the Resource Center, helping an estimated 100 public, private and charter schools in the city.²²

Purpose: Create Opportunities to Improve Interactions among All Detroit School Systems

The Detroit Public Schools have a long-standing relationship with the Skillman Foundation, but for the charter, private, and religious schools, the *Making the Grade* Initiative was their introduction to the Foundation and to each other. The Foundation created the opportunity for schools to them to work with other school systems. They reported being very pleased to be working together.²³ As three respondents reported:

I don't know that I can say enough about how appreciative we've been. The trust has been built that was not here five years ago....It's a community of education now. We are getting to know each other. This is winning something because you did something special. How more American can you get than that?

The very fact that the Catholic, Lutheran, private, charter and public schools could be recognized was a good thing. When I got around the table with other principals from all those different constituencies, it was great.

Before I'd say it was more you're for DPS or you're against DPS. And for the Skillman Foundation to step out and say it's not about that anymore, it's about who does well for kids, regardless of the structure, is such a significant change that that overshadows everything else in my opinion.

²¹ Note: There may be no direct connection between the performance of Aspiring schools and professional development.

²² Detroit News, January 9, 2009.

²³ Interviews conducted by a National Advisor in November 2008.

Overall, it appears that constructive relationships have formed among the Lutheran and Archdiocese schools, between the religious and charter schools, and between DPS and the religious schools, but that the charter and public school systems report little direct contact.

The Skillman Foundation has also supported the school systems in taking a more active role in the Initiative. The Detroit Public Schools offers workshops in grant writing, works with school teams in preparing applications, and ensures financial accountability from awarded schools. The Archdiocese works with its schools to create school improvement teams, promote best practices, and provide professional development. With its September 2008 Skillman Foundation grant, the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA) worked on application preparation with over 20 charter schools, and has plans underway to work with its Aspiring schools, using the Indicators of School Success as best practices.²⁴

The *Making the Grade* Initiative has also influenced how school systems operate. The Archdiocese reports that it provides much more data to its schools and that management within the school system has become more cohesive. The schools are now joined in a consortium, along with the Lutheran schools, to pool resources for professional development and to make joint purchases to stretch dollars further. They also now coordinate Title I funding and *Making the Grade* awards to strengthen the impact of the dollars.²⁵

Implementation of the Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative

The Award in Schools

Principals of High Performing and Improving elementary schools awarded in 2005 were interviewed in 2006, and principals of High Performing and Improving elementary and middle schools awarded in 2006 were interviewed in 2007. High school principals were interviewed in 2008, after the first year of their award.

Among the 2005 awardees, across school types (public, charter, private), almost all High Performing schools (7 of 8) used their funds for computer technology, while a large number of Improving schools (8 of 15) used the award to implement or sustain after-school programs and /or extracurricular activities for children. Two Improving schools used their funds to build partnership with parents through workshops and support groups. The 22 awarded elementary schools linked their awards (directly or indirectly) with indicators of school success. About 60 percent focused on “challenging curriculum and instruction”, with the rest targeted on “student focus and supports” (20 percent) and “school culture” (20 percent). In focusing on curriculum, for example, one school emphasized math across the

²⁴ Review of funded proposals on file at the Skillman Foundation.

²⁵ Interview with a National Advisor, November 2008.

curriculum, improving the capacity of teachers, and providing new resources in math content in all subject areas:

...we wanted to have more books that have reading content in math....Most of the time the problems they see in everyday real life are things you have to think through and you have to read through the problems. So, therefore, we wanted more reading content in mathematics. We would have also more professional development within the math area because some teachers felt they needed the extra support.

For those schools with new awards in 2006, most High Performing schools (10 of 13) concentrated their funds on technology. Two schools supported extracurricular academic projects, one supported an entrepreneurial education program, and one funded Chinese language instruction. Among the Improving schools, half (8 of 15) also used their funds for technology, a big shift from the year before. Correspondingly, half as many schools (four instead of eight) used some funds for after-school and performing arts projects. As with the previous year awardees, most (74 percent) linked their awards with the challenging curriculum and instruction indicator, although schools spread their funds across multiple Indicators of School Success, with 3.5 Indicators, on average, targeted.

Some principals who received awards in 2006 expressed disappointment in the amount of funding they received, stating that they were confused when they received less than \$100,000 as a High Performing school or less than \$50,000 as an Improving school.²⁶ While the principals did not want to seem ungrateful for their award, they had assumed that schools would receive the upper limit of the award category. Confusion over funding levels and lack of transparency in determining grant amounts have troubled schools in subsequent years as well.²⁷

All high schools focused on improving standardized test scores and student performance in core subject areas. Unlike the High Performing elementary and middle schools that invested heavily in computer equipment, high schools chose more diverse projects. One High Performing high school, for example, used its funds for a variety of purposes – professional development in technology for teachers, equipment for the music program, lab equipment, and resources for the science/robotics team. The other High Performing high school purchased computer software for foreign language programs and interactive tutorials for writing. Among the Emerging high schools, three used their funds to purchase such supplemental materials as calculators for math class and paperback novels for English. The other Emerging high school used its funds for its computer lab, computer software, professional development, and after-school programming for students.

To measure how deeply the *Making the Grade* award has reached into individual classrooms, teachers in a stratified random sample of 2007 awarded schools were surveyed in 2008. Over 80 percent of

²⁶ The application notes that awards are “up to” pre-specified levels. Award amounts are based on a formula that takes into account school enrollment and the proportion of students on free or reduced price lunch.

²⁷ As reported by school system administrators in interviews with a National Advisor, November 2008.

teachers in the 2007 awarded schools reported that funds were used for students in their classes (Exhibit 2). Over 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the award was used to purchase resources and support professional development (Exhibit 3). High school teachers were less likely than elementary and middle school teachers to agree with these items.

Exhibit 2

Teachers' Report on Their Use of the Good Schools *Making the Grade* Award

Survey Item	Percentage of Teachers Responding "yes"
Was the award used to fund activities, equipment or resources that <i>your students use</i> to improve their performance in your classes?	85%
Was the award used to fund activities, equipment or resources that <i>you use</i> in your classes?	83

Source: Survey of Teachers in High Performing, Improving, and Emerging Schools, spring 2008. n = 341, with missing data on 33 teachers.. Italics added for emphasis.

Exhibit 3

Teachers' Report on the Implementation of the Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative

Survey Item	Percentage of Teachers Who:			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Good Schools award made it possible for my school to purchase resources to improve classroom instruction and student achievement.	59%	34%	5%	1%
The Good Schools award make it possible for me and other teachers to participate in professional development activities.	48	44	7	1

Source: Survey of Teachers in High Performing, Improving, and Emerging Schools, spring 2008. n = 341. Missing data runs from 9 to 19 teachers.

Challenges to Implementation

Five principals from the 2005 awardees and two of those from 2006 noted challenges in implementation that they felt diminished potential impact in their schools. The challenges included:

- teacher layoffs (including the teacher responsible for overseeing the library/media arts center in one school),
- school closings and school relocations,
- difficulty obtaining purchasing authorization from school district officials, and
- re-wiring issues.

Each challenge created delays in implementation and some, such as relocating from recently re-wired buildings, had cost implications as well. Staff lay-offs, brought about by declining enrollments and budget shortfalls, were particularly problematic. As one principal reported in 2006:

They are beginning to lay off Ed Techs [Educational Technology specialists] and phase them out....All of this technology will go to waste without [them]. Our Ed Techs make it possible for us to keep this computer lab going, but without them, we can't....Skillman has revamped this whole room. It's wonderful. But we really need Skillman to put their foot down with the board and help them understand that some programs and staff are important to a good school and can't be cut.

Enrollment has continued to decline in Detroit schools since these interviews in 2006. Fewer resources and fewer staff are available, some awarded schools have closed, and other awarded schools have had an influx of teachers and students from closed schools.

Impact of *Making the Grade* Initiative

From 2005 through 2010, 245 schools received at least one award. All school types – public, charter, religious, and private – are represented among the awardees. The number of awards to High Performing and Improving elementary schools increased from 24 schools in 2005 to 39 schools in 2010. [In 2010, three elementary schools were added under the expanded criteria for Improving schools, so the comparable increase from 2005 to 2010 is 24 to 36 schools, a 50 percent increase.] The number of awards to High Performing and Improving middle schools in 2006 to 2010 increased from 8 to 19 (Exhibit 4). [Also in 2010, two middle schools were added under the expanded criteria for Improving schools, so the comparable increase from 2006 to 2010 is 8 to 17 schools, doubling the number of schools.

Exhibit 4

Number of Elementary and Middle Schools Winning Making the Grade Awards, 2005-2010

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Elementary schools						
High Performing	9	9	5	11	3	12
Improving	15	9	17	22	8	27
Middle Schools						
High Performing		3	3	3	9	5
Improving		5	7	4	10	14

Note: Because the Making the Grade award is a three-year award, the elementary schools listed in 2005 through 2007 are unduplicated schools. Some elementary schools that won awards in 2008 through 2010 had also won awards in earlier years. For middle schools, for 2006 through 2009, the numbers are unduplicated counts of schools.

As reported earlier, one-third of the 64 Aspiring schools to receive awards from 2005 through 2007, had moved into higher categories by 2008. Six applied for and became High Performing schools, and 15 became Improving schools.

Impact on School District Policy

The Skillman Foundation successfully used evidence from Good Schools *Making the Grade* to counter DPS plans to close schools and lay off staff. In January of 2007, the Detroit Public School Board introduced a controversial plan to close 52 schools in the fall of that year. As one non-DPS administrator said:

I think it really exacerbated the issue that here's this outside third party recognizing excellence, rewarding [a school] with a hundred thousand dollars and then, on the other hand, you've got its governing structure scheduling [the school] to close.

The Skillman Foundation challenged the plan for its potential impact on both the *Making the Grade* Initiative and the *Good Neighborhoods* Initiative, as five High Performing schools and 12 Improving schools were initially slated for closure. One school official discussed the collaborative efforts between DPS and the Skillman Foundation to reach a resolution that would remove designated Good Schools *Making the Grade* from the proposed school closing list:

We worked together with the Skillman Foundation to come up with recommendations that would take many of those schools off that list and that worked. Skillman definitely understood the economic challenges that our school district is in and worked very diligently on understanding what we needed to do and gave us a list of recommendations to consider in regards to those Good Schools that were on the initial proposed list. It worked out.

None of the five High Performing schools were closed, although eventually seven Improving schools were. The Foundation also incorporated new language into its *Making the Grade* application to ensure that High Performing schools would not be closed in the future.²⁸

Boards of Education, the Archdiocese, Charter Authorizing Agencies, etc., of successful High Performing schools must agree to keep the school open for at least three years from the year the initial grant is awarded.

The Skillman Foundation has continued to work with the Detroit Public Schools to minimize the effects of school closings on award-winning schools. In the fall of 2010, DPS will close an additional 32 schools, of whom six were eligible for awards in 2010. Of the six, one was a candidate as a 2010 High Performing school.

²⁸ Good Schools: *Making the Grade* Elementary School Application Package, 2008-2009, page 21.

The Archdiocese and Lutheran schools have also faced school closings. Of the 15 Catholic schools operating in the fall of 2004, enrollment declines resulted in three school closings (including one Improving school), and one new school opening. Of the six Lutheran schools operating in the fall of 2004, four have closed their doors, including two that were Aspiring schools in 2005.²⁹

Impact in Schools (Principals' and Teachers' Perceptions)

Principals of many 2005-awarded schools perceived that the *Making the Grade* award had an important impact on the school. Most comments relate to access to greater technology and its impact on student engagement, as the several voices below attest.

We would not have the level of technology that we currently have. We now have virtual classrooms and the capability to go on-line a lot to do different things such as research.

Students are excited about the technology and using the computers to do research on the internet.

Without Skillman, we would not have been able to utilize the lab to the extent we do now. All students have hands-on experience with the technology. We are moving forward into the 21st century with modern technology.

Other impacts cited by the principals included:

- creating more advanced science curricula that resulted in more students' science projects earning blue ribbons,
- implementing a conflict mediation program that resulted in fewer school expulsions and a decreased number of teacher requests for disciplinary meetings with parents, and
- increased use of data in decision making. For example, several schools were disaggregating MEAP scores to look at objectives for learning to help teachers -develop differentiated instruction techniques.

Several school system administrators also noted that schools have increased their use of data. As one reported:³⁰

None of the schools used data before. Now they ask for detailed reports in certain areas of math and reading. We [also]use data more to ensure eligibility for Title I funds.

In 2008, teachers in High Performing, Improving, and Emerging schools were asked to assess the impact of the *Making the Grade* award in their schools. Almost all teachers (94 percent) agreed or strongly

²⁹ Interview by a National Advisor, November 2008.

³⁰ Interview conducted by the National Advisor in November 2008.

agreed that the award had improved opportunities for students, and almost as many (93 percent) agreed that the *Making the Grade* award raised the morale of school staff and had a positive impact on students (Exhibit 5). There were no statistically significant differences across grade level in teachers' assessments of the Initiative or in the impact of their school's award on teaching and learning.

Exhibit 5

Teachers' Assessment of the impact of the *Making the Grade* Initiative

Survey Item	Percentage of Teachers Who:			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Overall, the award has improved opportunities for my students	52%	42%	5%	1%
The Good Schools award raised the morale of school staff.	51	42	7	<1
The recognition my school received as a Good School has made a positive impact on my students	46	47	6	1
Overall, the award has improved my working conditions.	43	45	12	1

Source: Survey of Teachers in High Performing, Improving, and Emerging Schools, spring 2008. n = 341. Missing respondents range from 10 to 14 teachers.

Impact on Student Outcomes

Schools maintaining their award status. High Performing schools generally maintain their status at high levels, but Improving and Aspiring schools are just as likely to decline in status as they are to increase. The proportion of High Performing elementary schools that have maintained their status two years after award is remarkably stable over time – ranging from 60 percent to 67 percent. These elementary schools include neighborhood and charter schools as well as exam schools. All High Performing middle and high schools that received awards in their first year of competition (2006 for middle schools and 2007 for high schools) maintained their high performing status. These are the exam schools in Detroit. The middle schools awarded in the second year of middle school awards who maintained their status is 67 percent, mirroring the rate of elementary schools.

Student performance at the award level. Fluctuations in academic achievement over time also occurred when examining student performance (that is, the percentage of students meeting proficiency standards) across all schools within each award category. Improving and Aspiring schools were typically unable to sustain the gains associated with their awards.

High Performing elementary schools from 2005 maintained their proficiency standards from 2005 to 2007, while Improving schools and Aspiring schools, for the most part, showed losses, especially in

English/language arts and mathematics. Even with the losses, Improving and Aspiring schools were performing at or slightly above the district average in 2007(Exhibit 6).

Among the 2006 awardees, all award categories of elementary schools had fewer students meeting proficiency standards in 2007 than in 2006, with the largest losses among Aspiring schools (down 13 percentage points in math on average) and High Performing schools (down an average of 12 percentage points in ELA). Awarded schools, on average, outperformed the district in English/language arts in 2007, but only High Performing schools consistently exceeded district average proficiency levels (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 6

Percentage of Students Meeting Proficiency Standards in 5th Grade among 2005 Awardees (2005-2007)

School Type	English Language Arts			Math			Science		
	2005	2007	Difference	2005	2007	Difference	2005	2007	Difference
District Average (all DPS schools with a 5 th grade)	54%	51%	-3	45%	44%	-1	49%	56%	+7
High Performing (N=7)	73	73	0	73	72	-1	78	77	-1
Improving (N=13)	60	53	-7	51	45	-6	60	58	-2
Aspiring (N=25)	58	51	-7	50	46	-4	52	59	+7

Source: MEAP data aggregated at the school level and then averaged across schools. For each school, the percentage achieving proficiency in 2005 was subtracted from the percentage in 2007, so improvements would be positive and declines would show up as negative. Then the mean of the resulting differences were calculated across schools to get the mean difference in percentage achieving proficiency from 2005 to 2007. Only public and charter schools are included, and analysis is limited to those schools for whom data were available at both time points. District-level data are for DPS schools only.

Exhibit 7

Percentage of Students Meeting Proficiency Standards in 5th Grade among 2006 Awardees (2006-2007)

School Type	English Language Arts			Math			Science		
	2006	2007	Difference	2006	2007	Difference	2006	2007	Difference
District Average (all DPS schools with a 5 th grade)	57%	52%	-5	47%	44%	-3	59%	56%	-3
High Performing (N=8)	72	60	-12	62	56	-6	77	73	-4
Improving (N=9)	62	54	-8	45	44	-1	57	54	-3
Aspiring (N=4)	57	60	+3	52	39	-13	51	47	-4

Source: MEAP data aggregated at the school level and then averaged across schools. For each school, the percentage achieving proficiency in 2005 was subtracted from the percentage in 2007, so improvements would be positive and declines would show up as negative. Then the mean of the resulting differences were calculated across schools to get the mean difference in percentage achieving proficiency from 2005 to 2007. Only public and charter schools are included, and analysis is limited to those schools for whom data were available at both time points. District-level data are MEAP data on DPS schools only.

Among the 2006 middle school awardees, the High Performing middle schools maintained their high levels of proficiency over the two years. They are all examination middle schools. Among the Improving and Aspiring middle schools, the proportion of students meeting proficiency standards remained stable in English/language arts and science, but declined in mathematics. Awarded schools in each category had more students meeting proficiency standards than the district average (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8

Percentage of Students Meeting Proficiency Standards in 8th Grade among 2006 Awardees (2006-2007)

School Type	English Language Arts			Math			Science		
	2006	2007	Difference	2006	2007	Difference	2006	2007	Difference
District Average (all DPS schools with a 8 th grade)	47%	49%	+2	39%	39%	0	43%	49%	+6
High Performing (N=3)	96	94	-2	94	92	-2	95	96	+1
Improving (N=3)	56	57	+1	55	47	-8	59	57	-2
Aspiring (N=3)	76	75	-1	68	60	-8	81	78	-3

Source: MEAP data aggregated at the school level and then averaged across schools. For each school, the percentage achieving proficiency in 2005 was subtracted from the percentage in 2007, so improvements would be positive and declines would show up as negative. Then the mean of the resulting differences were calculated across schools to get the mean difference in percentage achieving proficiency from 2005 to 2007. Only public and charter schools are included, and analysis is limited to those schools for whom data were available at both time points. District-level data are MEAP data on DPS schools only.

Student Stability and Student Achievement. Multiple reasons may account for the shifts in student achievement from one cohort of students to the next. Given the high mobility rate of students in Detroit, researchers explored the relationship between student stability and achievement in the High Performing and Improving elementary schools from 2005.³¹ In this analysis, student stability is represented by the number of students who remained in a school at the first enrollment count of the next school year as a percent of the total enrollment count in September. Math, science, and English/Language Arts performance is compared for three cohorts of fifth graders – those in 2005, 2006

³¹ Shakrani, Sharif M. (November 2008). Evaluation of the Relationship between Student Mobility and Academic Achievement at Skillman Recognized Elementary Schools, 2005-2007. Paper prepared for the Skillman Foundation.

and 2007. Overall, students attending High Performing schools do not seem to be affected by high mobility rates; mobile students perform as well as stable students in those schools (perhaps due, at least in part, to parents of high achieving students seeking out strong educational opportunities for their children who may have been performing above students in their schools of origin.) Among students enrolled in Improving schools, higher mobility rates were associated with lower achievement in mathematics but not in science or English/Language Arts until 2007. In 2007, the stable students performed better than mobile students in both the High Performing and Improving elementary schools studied. This may be due, at least in part, to the closure of many schools in Detroit and the influx of a higher than usual number of students into these schools in 2007. Overall, the results indicate that stable students in Improving schools tend to achieve academically at higher levels than the mobile students who transferred into those schools at the beginning of the year.

Ripple Effects

The *Making the Grade* Initiative has also been adopted by the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Community Foundation. Several schools used their *Making the Grade* application to secure other grants, including three schools receiving grants from the Toyota Foundation and two schools winning National School Change awards from Fordham University.³² Presentations about the program have been made in the annual meetings of National Association of Black School Educators and Grantmakers for Education, as well as in a learning summit “Building Blocks of Change: Social Determinants in Youth Development,” sponsored by Grantmakers for Children, Youth, and Families.

Conclusions

Despite a politically ineffective public school system, declining school enrollments, and critical press, some schools in Detroit have performed well and others have shown marked improvement. To recognize those schools, the Skillman Foundation has created a credible and fair awards program – The Good Schools *Making the Grade* Initiative – that is recognized by parents and endorsed by schools. All school types – public, charter, religious, and private – are represented among the awardees. By and large, *Making the Grade* has enhanced morale in awarded schools and bolstered cooperation across school systems in Detroit.

The *Making the Grade* Initiative has become an integral part of Detroit’s educational landscape. High quality education is now firmly established as a citywide and state priority. The language of *Making the Grade* appeared in the former-Mayor’s State of the City address and in the former-Superintendent’s speeches. Copies of the Skillman Foundation *Good Schools Guide* are prominently displayed in reception areas and front offices of the school systems. As one school system representative noted:

I think Skillman has become an integral part of Detroit as a whole. At this point in time, I don’t think there’s anywhere you can go in Detroit and not see the name Skillman.

³² Interview conducted by the National Advisor in November 2008.

There is more work to be done. Detroit schools continue to need support and innovation to further impact student achievement. *Making the Grade* has not transformed education, but it has affected attitudes and public policy in school systems serving one of the nation's most challenged cities.