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# How a Great City School District is Improving Student Achievement, Increasing Equity and Closing Achievement Gaps

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Lindsey Devers Basileo, PhD  
Principal Investigator  
Department of Research and Evaluation  
LSI Applied Research Center

## SUMMARY: Improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps

- Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) and Learning Sciences International's (LSI) partnership, called Schools for Rigor® (SFR), focused on building capacity of leadership, rigorous instruction and student academic teams at 22 schools
- All SFR students gained the equivalent of an additional 11 days of learning in reading and six days in math
- Year-two SFR students gained the equivalent of an additional 21 days of learning in reading and 10 days in math
- All high school SFR students gained the equivalent of an additional 61 days of learning in reading and 42 days in math
- SFR schools reduced achievement gaps over a period of 162 school days

## BACKGROUND: Building the skills of tomorrow

DMPS began their partnership with LSI in 2016-17 to build capacity to prepare today's students and educators for a future in an increasingly global economy and society. DMPS wanted to ensure their schools deliver and sustain high levels of professional and academic performance. Des Moines has large refugee community with over a hundred languages spoken in the school hallways. Their goal was to make rapid progress towards becoming a national model for urban education. During the 2016-17 school year, six DMPS schools became

demonstration sites for Schools for Rigor, hereafter called year-two schools. In the 2017-18 school year, 16 additional schools, hereafter called year-one schools, joined the journey.

*My work with LSI this year has really shifted my thinking... . So many times, we underestimate what students can do. The work we're doing with Schools for Rigor is helping us to confirm that students can do the work.*

- District Administrator

## SAMPLE: Serving diverse learners

In the 2017-18 school year, approximately 890 teachers in 22 schools participated in LSI's Schools for Rigor initiative, which included the Ignite Core Instruction™ professional development training. These sites served 10,431 students. The demographic characteristics of students were 49% female, 51% male, 31% Hispanic, 19% Black, 34% white, 27% English learners (EL), 17% students with disabilities (SWD), and 82% students with free or reduced-price lunch (FRL).

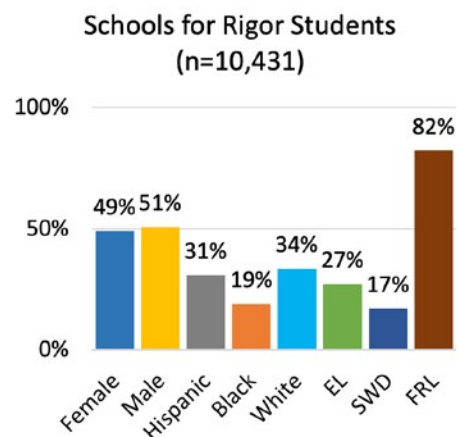


Figure 1. Demographic Characteristics of SFR Students

## PROGRAM DESIGN: Building the capacity of leadership teams and teachers

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Through LSI's professional development series, Schools for Rigor leaders and teachers learned techniques to engage in rigorous student-centered teaching in all phases— planning, delivery, reflection, and adjustment. LSI-trained school leadership coaches were assigned to each school to help support the principal in the implementation of the series. Year-two schools had an LSI-provided leadership coach. Year-one schools used a district employee certified by LSI as a coach.

The LSI leadership coach focused on coaching the principals and leadership teams at year-two schools and helped train and support district coaches. LSI guided leadership teams in breaking down standards into smaller targets and ensuring

planning time for teachers to create tasks to get students to higher levels of thinking. Teachers also learned how to form and cultivate student academic teams where students challenged each other to use higher-level thinking. Students were guided to own their learning and take responsibility for their progress. By participating in academic teams, students developed the academic, social and emotional learning skills necessary to think critically and independently, as well as work effectively with others.

*We have a no-hand-raising rule in our school right now. We also have a new rule: teachers aren't allowed to tell students the answer, they can only ask questions. I see wonderful things happening.*

– District Results Coach

## RESULTS: Schools for Rigor students outperform by statistically significant margins

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[What Works Clearinghouse](#) (WWC) Design Standards were used by a [certified WWC reviewer](#) to assess the effectiveness of Schools for Rigor and the Ignite Core Instruction series. The evaluation met WWC Design Standards With Reservations. Schools for Rigor (SFR) students were matched to like-students in the district served by schools who were not participating in the professional development series and who had similar pretest scores in the Fall. All findings presented are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Treatment intervention effect sizes were computed. Effect sizes are useful to measure the strength of an intervention on student

achievement. It represents the number of standard deviation units by which the intervention group outperforms the control group. They are also used to calculate learning rates and additional learning days.

Learning rates reveal how much more SFR students learned compared to the average gain otherwise expected within the same timeframe. Put simply, the learning rate is the treatment effect divided by the average gain otherwise expected. Similar calculations were used to gauge how many extra days of learning were gained and how much SFR students closed achievement gaps. Sample sizes (n) in the Figures only include

SFR students; however, all SFR students were matched to the same number of control students to estimate the program impact. For more details

on the methodology and calculations used see Appendix A.

Schools for Rigor (SFR) students gained an additional 11 days of learning in reading and six days in math.

Students at all SFR schools had a statistically significant improvement. SFR students had a 7% improvement in reading and 3% improvement in math over the gain otherwise expected within a period of 162 school days. This improvement translates into an additional 11 days of learning in reading and six days in math for SFR students.

*Students are working together, they're processing together, and they're really challenging each other. I find myself stepping back and just watching the learning happen.*

- 4th Grade Teacher

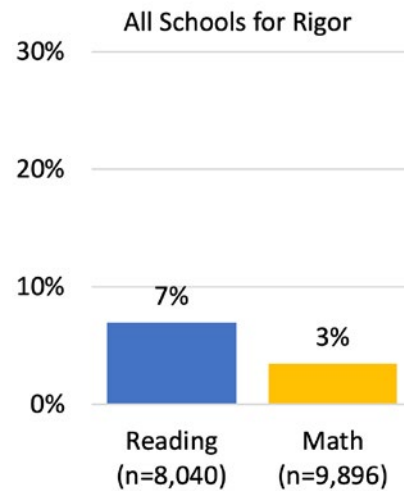


Figure 2. Learning Rates of Students at SFR Schools

Year-two Schools for Rigor students gained an additional 21 days of learning in reading and 10 days in math during the second year of implementation.

Schools for Rigor (SFR) students in year-two schools had larger learning gains- a 15% improvement in reading and 6% improvement in math over the gain otherwise expected within a period of 162 school days. This translates into an additional 21 days of learning in reading and 10 days in math. Year-two SFR schools had an LSI leadership coach directly coach the principal and leadership teams at these schools. Additionally, students had teachers in their second year of LSI professional development.

*What we've seen in our most recent trends of academic data is that in our year-two Schools for Rigor subgroup gaps are actually closing. We met and exceeded our goals for black males.*

- Associate Superintendent

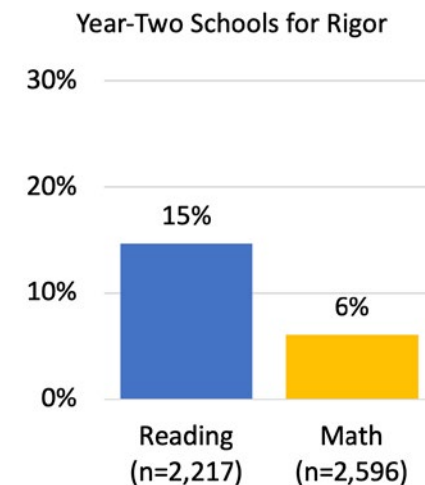


Figure 3. Learning Rates of Students at Year-two Schools

## High school Schools for Rigor students gained an additional 61 days of learning in reading and 42 days in math

High school students had the largest learning gains. Two high schools received the treatment—one first-year and one second-year school. Schools for Rigor (SFR) high school students achieved a 37% improvement in reading and 26% improvement in math over the gain otherwise expected within a period of 162 school days. This translates into an additional 61 days of learning in reading and 42 days in math for SFR students.

*Everyone supports each other; everyone works with each other, everyone helps each other. We leave no child behind.*

– High School Teacher

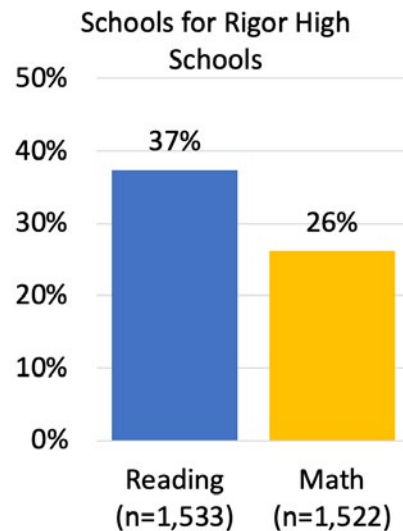


Figure 4. Learning Rates of SFR High School Students

## Schools for Rigor schools reduced achievement gaps within 162 school days

- SFR schools reduced the black-white achievement gap by 7% in reading and 6% in math over a period of 162 school days.
- SFR schools reduced the SWD:No-SWD achievement gap by 6% in reading and 5% in math.
- SFR schools reduced the EL:Non-EL achievement gap by 6% in reading and 4% in math.

*Schools for Rigor fosters inclusiveness— instead of EL or special education students being pulled out into isolation, these students work in their academic teams within mainstream classrooms.*

– Associate Superintendent

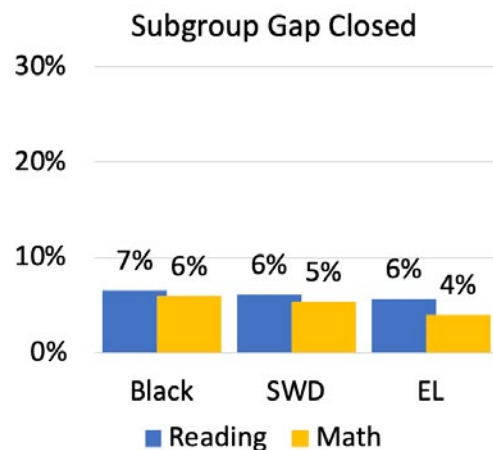


Figure 5. Percent of Achievement Gaps Closed by Subgroups

## CONCLUSION: DMPS expanded equity by closing achievement gaps

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Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) began their partnership with LSI in 2016-17 to build capacity to prepare educators and students for a future where critical thinking, social, and emotional skills are essential. The results of this analysis show that DMPS is forging the way to rigor, increasing equity and quickly closing achievement gaps.

While this study is essential in demonstrating their success, the real victory is observing how students learn in their classroom. We invite you to watch the learning unfold in this [video of Des Moines Public Schools](#).

**If your district is interested in improving rigor and closing achievement gaps, [contact your local LSI Director of District Partnerships](#).**

# Appendix and References

## Appendix: Methodology and Calculations

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### Quasi-Experimental Design Matching Procedures

Since random assignment was not possible, propensity score matching was used to create a comparable control group by matching Schools for Rigor (SFR) students to like-students in the district who did not receive the treatment (Thoemmes, 2012). While propensity score matching has its limitations, it is the best method available to match like treatment students to a control in the absence of a true control group. SFR students were matched, using an exact match on grade level and nearest neighbor matching on scale scores for the Fall reading and math NWEA assessments (tolerance < .20). Other covariates in the model included gender, race, ethnicity, students with disabilities (SWD), English learner (EL), free and reduced-price lunch (FRL), and gifted status. This study focuses on achievement specific to the 2017-18 school year as this was the first-year implementation of the Ignite Core Instruction professional development series.

Out of 8,270 treatment students who took both the Fall and Spring reading assessments, 97% were matched to a similar control student. Out of 10,060 treatment students who took both the Fall and Spring math assessments, 98% were matched to a similar control student. WWC requires that Quasi-Experimental Designs demonstrate equivalence of the analytical intervention and comparison groups to Meet WWC Group Design Standards With Reservations. WWC standard is to use Hedges'  $g$  formula to compute effect sizes. It is defined as the difference between the mean outcome for

the intervention group and the mean outcome for the comparison group, divided by the pooled within-group standard deviation of the outcome measure (WWC Procedures Handbook, 2017, p. 13). Hedges'  $g$  at baseline indicated equivalence of groups ( $g < .25$ ) on the Fall scale score in reading ( $g = .033$ ) and in math ( $g = .024$ ). To provide more precise estimates of the effects, the Fall scale scores were included in all models to remove any pre-intervention difference between the groups. The outcome of interest used in the analysis was the NWEA Spring scale score.

Students within SFR schools were assigned to the invention as a group; thus, data for analysis are based on the individuals within clusters. Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used to adjust for clustering of students within schools (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Covariates in the model included: Fall scale score, gender, race, ethnicity, students with disabilities (SWD), English learner (EL), gifted, and free and reduced-priced lunch (FRL) status. Additionally, one school-level characteristic was included in the models to control for poverty. Specifically, a Distressed Communities Index was incorporated as a measure of poverty, and it includes a factor of seven different indices of poverty combined across five years (The Economic Innovation Group, 2017). Multicollinearity was investigated, and all correlation coefficients were less than .38. Accordingly, there were not abnormally high intercorrelations among the independent variables which could erroneously weaken or strengthen the statistical power of the models.



## Estimating the Magnitude of Effects

Hedges' *g* was also calculated to assess the magnitude of the intervention effects estimated from the HLM analyses. The equation used was slightly different than the Hedges' equation noted for baseline equivalence as it incorporates the adjusted group mean difference from cluster analysis divided by the unadjusted pooled within-group standard deviations of the post-test (WWC Procedures Handbook, 2017, p. E-9). All treatment model effect sizes are noted below and 'ns' indicates values that were not significant.

	Hedges' <i>g</i>	
	Reading	Math
<b>All</b>	.030	.022
<b>Year-Two</b>	.063	.038
<b>HS</b>	.054	.046
<b>ES</b>	ns	.031
<b>MS</b>	.039	ns
<b>Black</b>	.046	.046
<b>SWD</b>	.059	.049
<b>EL</b>	.053	.035

Table 1. Hedges' *g* of Treatment Effects

While there is no inherent substantive meaning to standard deviation units for policymakers, the most common practice is to rely on Cohen's suggestion that effect sizes of about .20, .50, and .80 standard deviation be considered small, medium, and large. As Bloom and colleagues point out (2008, p. 5-6), these guidelines were not relevant to intervention effects in education with Cohen (1988, p. 25) even stating that the suggestions should only be used when there is no better basis for estimating the magnitude of

impact. Using Bloom and colleagues (2008) as a guideline, this study creates benchmarks using local norms which can provide more meaningful interpretations of the impact of the program.

## Learning Rate Calculations

To create local norms, average student achievement gains were calculated for each grade level using all students in the district who were tested in both Fall and Spring from 1st to 10th grades. Table 2 outlines the average annual gains for reading and math in DMPS from Fall to Spring in 2017-18 school year. Weighted averages are displayed in the last row. Annual gains from the year prior to the treatment would have been optimal; however, not all grade levels were tested in the 2016-17 school year. Consequently, the learning rates calculated in this study may be underestimated because the calculations incorporate a large portion of treatment students.

To calculate the rate of learning in reading for year-two treatment students, an effect size of .063 divided by the average annual gain (.426) equates to a 15% learning rate within 162 school days. School days were calculated by taking the first administration of the pretest minus the last day of administration of the post-test and then counting the number of school days within those dates (no weekends). The number of school days gained was calculated by using the ratio of effect sizes compared to the proportion of days between the pretest and post-test.

Grade	Reading	Math
1	1.281	1.333
2	.938	.977
3	.611	.913
4	.482	.763
5	.408	.574
6	.397	.472
7	.243	.374
8	.231	.298
9	.179	.192
10	.112	.162
<b>Wt. Avg.</b>	<b>.426</b>	<b>.626</b>

Table 2. Average Fall to Spring Gains

### Subgroup Gap Calculations

Due to the large sample sizes available for Blacks, SWD and EL treatment subgroups, treatment effect sizes for the selected subgroups were calculated using the same procedures outlined in Quasi-Experimental Design Matching Procedures section. More specifically, each Black treatment student was matched to a Black control student in the same grade level and who had similar Fall scale scores using all other covariates in the model. To satisfy WWC baseline equivalence requirements, the pretest was included in all

models to adjust for any differences in groups at baseline. Table 3 shows the matching results with corresponding baseline Hedges' g for the analytic samples.

Out of 1,599 Black SFR students who took both the Fall and Spring reading assessments, 94% were matched to a similar Black control student. Out of 1,948 Black SFR students who took both the Fall and Spring math assessments, 97% were matched to a similar Black control student. Hedges' g at baseline indicated equivalence of the treatment and control groups on the Fall scale score in reading ( $g=.033$ ) and in math ( $g=.010$ ). Propensity score matching was not used for the EL analyses, as the analytic sample satisfies the baseline equivalence requirement without matching if the models incorporate a statistical adjustment, and they did. Treatment effect sizes for each subgroup were then calculated as noted in Estimating the Magnitude of Effects section.

Subgroup gap benchmarks were calculated by taking the mean difference in the Fall to Spring achievement for each subgroup/counterpart divided by the standard deviation for each grade level for all tested students (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 20). Table 4 shows the average Fall to Spring

	Reading			Math		
	Treatment Students with Pre/Post	Percent Matched or Included	Baseline Hedges' g	Treatment Students with Pre/Post	Percent Matched or Included	Baseline Hedges' g
<b>Black</b>	1,599	94%	.033	1,948	97%	.010
<b>SWD</b>	1,573	93%	.052	1,734	93%	.027
<b>EL</b>	2,199	100%	.013	2,800	100%	.065

Table 3. Results of Matching Procedures with Hedges' g

Subgroup Performance Gaps for the 2017-18 school year. To obtain how much black SFR students closed the achievement gap, an effect size of .046 for Black treatment students divided

by the average Black-white gap (-.701) equates to a 7% closure in the black-white reading gap within 162 school days. All other subgroup rates were calculated in the same manner.

Grade	Reading			Math		
	Black-White Gap	SWD:No-SWD Gap	EL:Non-EL Gap	Black-White Gap	SWD:No-SWD Gap	EL:Non-EL Gap
1	-.501	-.736	-.441	-.725	-.627	-.580
2	-.618	-.904	-.664	-.721	-.842	-.640
3	-.721	-.978	-.818	-.804	-.891	-.769
4	-.664	-1.083	-.849	-.717	-1.021	-.799
5	-.738	-1.036	-.985	-.728	-.958	-.884
6	-.739	-1.037	-.907	-.796	-1.082	-.863
7	-.622	-1.091	-.995	-.760	-1.133	-.947
8	-.669	-.949	-1.105	-.756	-1.019	-1.053
9	-.758	-.927	-1.261	-.834	-.963	-1.207
10	-.820	-.675	-1.321	-.890	-.754	-1.205
<b>Wt. Avg.</b>	<b>-.701</b>	<b>-.968</b>	<b>-.935</b>	<b>-.770</b>	<b>-.930</b>	<b>-.881</b>

Table 4. Average Fall to Spring Subgroup Performance Gaps

## References

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<sup>1</sup>The findings expressed in this publication are solely those of Learning Sciences International and not necessarily those of EIG.



175 Cornell Rd. Suite 118 | Blairsville, PA 15717  
1400 Centrepark Blvd. | West Palm Beach, FL 33401  
724.459.2100 | 877.979.3316

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