



SC EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Reporting facts. Measuring change. Promoting progress.

Beating the Odds Research Activities 2025-26

Jenny May, PhD

**Amina Asghar; Tenell Felder; Gabrielle Fulton; Crystal Garcia
Rainey Knight, PhD; Matthew Lavery, PhD; and Dana Yow***

**Listed alphabetically as they contributed to the research*

Introduction & Background

In 2023, a review of SC school report card data showed that South Carolina aligns with research conducted on a national scale finding that high rates of poverty covary with low academic achievement. After an Education Oversight Committee (EOC) member asked where in our state are students in poverty beating these odds, and what are these schools doing differently to achieve different academic outcomes, staff began a multiyear research study.

Several questions drove data collection for the Beating the Odds Investigative Study (BTOIS):

1. Of the schools in South Carolina serving high populations of students in poverty, which covaries with low student achievement, what schools are beating the odds?
2. What is happening in these schools to achieve academic outcomes different from other high poverty schools?
3. Are there patterns across schools beating the odds? If so, what are they?
4. Can these practices be scaled up so that all children in poverty who attend SC public schools become high academic achievers?

To answer these questions criteria were established to determine what characteristics are present when schools “beat the odds.” Fifteen elementary schools were identified that met *selection criteria, and a sample of seven were selected to be invited to participate in year 1 of the study. Researchers visited these schools and conducted focus group interviews with principals, instructional leaders, teachers, parents, and community members asking questions designed to elicit information about practices, procedures, and characteristics integral to the high achievement in these schools. A theoretical framework was developed from this data. In year 2, 10 schools met the criteria to be a partner in this study, and a sample of five schools were invited to participate. The confirmatory phase of analysis further informed the theoretical framework schools used to understand how schools beat the odds, increasing academic achievement while serving high percentages of students in poverty.

*School Selection Criteria

- ✓ > 100 students
- ✓ Excellent Overall Rating
- ✓ No Below Average or Unsatisfactory Indicator Ratings
- ✓ Open Enrollment policies
- ✓ Poverty Ratio 75% or higher

Exploratory Study, Year 1:

The Cleveland Academy of Leadership
Spartanburg District 7

Kelly Edwards Elementary School
Barnwell Country School District

Latta Elementary School
Dillon School District 3

Matthews Elementary School and
Merrywood Elementary School
Greenwood 50

Monaview Elementary School
Greenville School District

Waterloo Elementary School
Laurens County School District 55

Confirmatory Study, Year 2:

Flat Rock Elementary School
Anderson School District 3

Honea Path Elementary School
Anderson School District 2

Hopkins Elementary School
Richland School District 1

Kershaw Elementary School
Lancaster County School District

West Pelzer Elementary School
Anderson School District 1

Year 3 Research Activities:

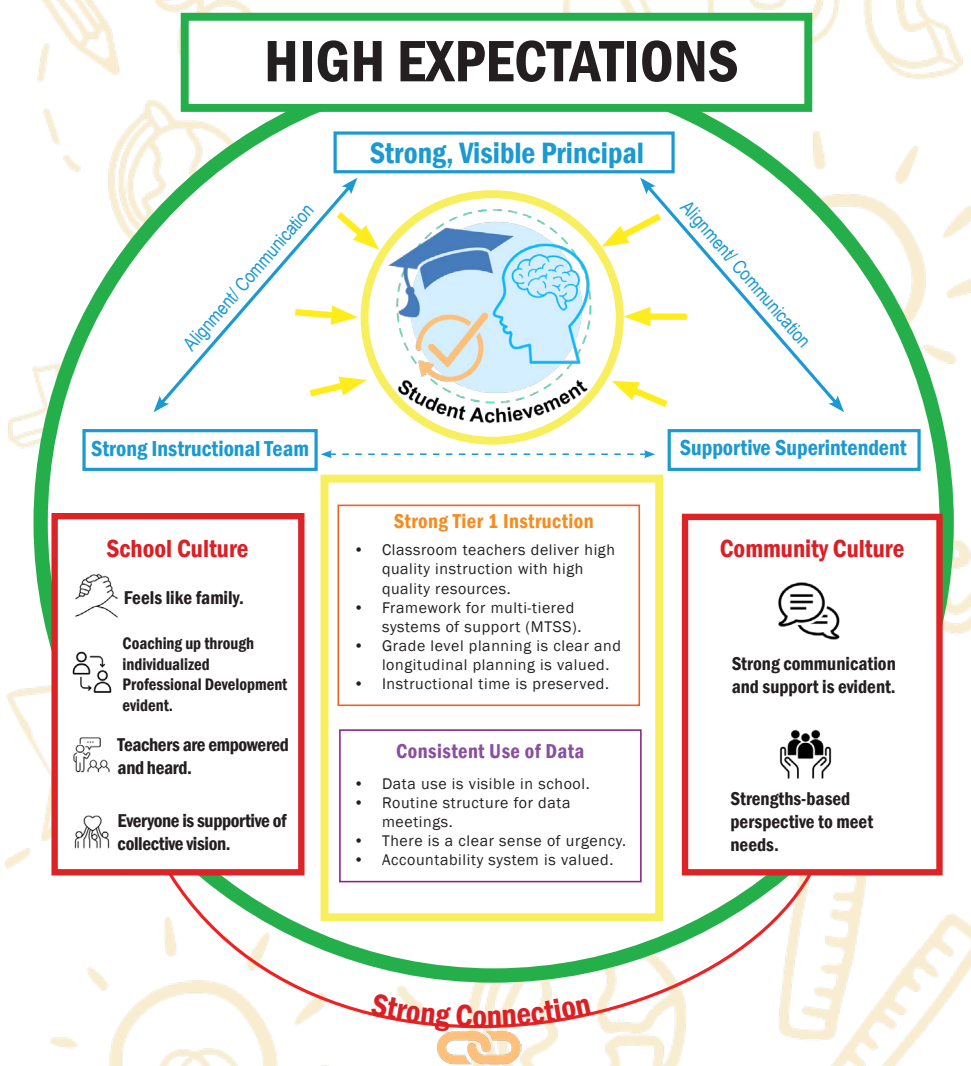
Year 3 of the Beating the Odds study took place during the 2025-26 school year, and of the nine eligible schools, EOC staff partnered with five to continue research efforts. For the first time, a middle school and a high school met the selection criteria to participate in this study. McCormick Middle School in McCormick County School district was designated as the state's first middle school in the study. Green Sea Floyds High School in Horry County, which serves students in grades 6 through 12 on one campus, is the state's first high school to qualify as a Beating the Odds partner. Data was collected in focus group interviews from Green Sea Floyds Middle School because it is noteworthy that with the same campus, administrative and instructional support staff only the high school met selection criteria.

The same data collection process used in the first two years of the study was used in year three. EOC staff completed visits to partner schools and collected data through focus group interviews of administrators, instructional coaches/leaders, teachers, parents, community members, and high school students. Focus group interviews were recorded and analyzed for salient features. Themes across high schools and middle schools were not possible because there was only one of each school to partner with; however, themes did emerge across when elementary, middle and high schools.

Preliminary Findings:

Overall, findings from the 2026 visits and interviews were consistent with those from 2024 and 2025 data collection in the exploration and confirmatory phases of the study. The framework developed remains relevant as an illustration of the required elements to "beat the odds." This study moves forward sensitive to the unique context and complexities of child development; to that end, elementary schools, middle schools and high schools are explored separately. Findings for middle and high schools remain preliminary as continued research of additional schools that are "beating the odds" must occur to confirm or edit the framework for these age groups.

(right) Beating the Odds
Theoretical Framework



Elementary Schools

Green Sea Floyds Elementary and Northside Elementary Schools were studied to determine if the existing theoretical framework developed was complete and accurate. Researchers determined that the framework remains consistent with the essential elements that impact the academic achievement of pupils in poverty. Particularly salient features were illustrated around the principal's central role in maintaining high expectations with high support to meet them and doing so by valuing relationships to meet the needs of the child.

"So, a lot of our teachers grew up in this area, and some of the kids we're teaching we went to high school with their parents and have been friends...you got that added pressure, like I know this kid and I know their whole family and I need to make sure he's doing what he needs to be successful." — Teacher

"I think some of these (high expectations) come from us being in small schools--- there was only 1 class per grade, so only one teacher of every grade level so when the kids didn't perform everyone knew what teacher it was!" — Teacher

Middle and High School Preliminary Findings

Researchers were somewhat surprised that many of the preliminary findings from both middle and high schools "beating the odds" were the same as those confirmed for elementary schools. While data from only one middle and high school are not enough in this research design to make conclusions about the most salient features of middle and high schools that support pupils in poverty to have high academic outcomes, analysis of the data shows that the elements of the framework in elementary schools are also important in middle and high schools.



High Expectations



Middle School Exemplar

"From an academic perspective, I would say moving kids forward. We want to, you know our rally cry last year was student growth. We had low achievement (the) previous year, and so it was unrealistic to believe that we were going to move from a low achieving school to a high achieving school overnight. And so one thing we knew we could do is grow our students. And so we talk a lot about growth, and is mentioned in our Professional Learning Tables (PLTs), it is mentioned in our faculty meetings, as mentioned in our day to day discussions, but from an academic perspective, I would say moving students forward, and from just a kid perspective, probably, you know, I think the big thing I see with our staff is how they truly love our students and care for our students." — Building Leader

High School Exemplar

"We've got a demographic that's got a lot of need rural, but it's got huge county resources. We talk about taking advantage of that you're in a great situation, get everything you need and a setting that you can manage and create fundamentals and expectations and all the things. That is why we are this is the because we're doing the things that you have to do to beat the odds, and we actually can manage it and do it so and we've seen it, we've established it." — Building Leader



Strong, Visible Principal

Middle School Exemplar

"Recently, within the last couple of years, we had a change in leadership here, and now there's more a cohesive unit there in middle school, teachers are excited to do the extra just to help a child who is struggling in many ways." — School Board Member

High School Exemplar

"I think (the principal and assistant principals support students by) being visible, they're always in the hall. They're always around and the kids will like... they'll go up to him, talk to him, and he's in the cafeteria, he's in the hallways. They're at the games. They're always participating in pep rallies and making fools of themselves and listening. Yes. When the kids have issues, they will ask to go see they will like, yeah, which I think is so great, yeah, for they, when they have enough, you know, a moment to think with them, think through the issue before it becomes an administrative issue, like they go for help." — Teacher



Strong Instructional Team

Middle School Exemplar

"...that was another big change... before my arrival, (there) was a lot of computer led instruction. I really felt like we moved to distance ourselves from that, and had the teachers provide the tier one instruction, because the research says the quickest way for our student achievement to increase is through the classroom teacher, and when they shut the door, if they can make a magic happen, that's what we wanted. So we wanted to give them that opportunity. It also allowed us to have content area planning, okay, which is important. You got to meet my ELA team, and you can see how they work together, and see the bonds that they created. And I'm not sure they would have that if we were operating on a grade level, common planning versus content area, common planning. So we felt it was more important for our ELA teachers to have planning together versus our sixth grade teachers all having planning together..." — Building Leadership

High School Exemplar

"We do a lot of like the PLCs. We do a lot of like professional development through the district. PLCs typically happen through here. Sometimes it's district provided, sometimes it's whatever the school feels our focus is for that year. So I mean, for me, I've done training with Savas. I've done training with Discovery Education. I've led several PDS, and our big focus this year is literacy. So I've led a session on literacy and science and the and stuff like that. So I mean, we kind of try and focus it to whatever our district focus is, but also, what are the resources that we have available to us, and how do we use them more effectively? So those were just a few that I've done."

— Instructional Coach



Supportive Superintendent

Middle School Exemplar

"...we want all of our kids to show growth every single year. We are we are reaching for that excellent rating in all three schools. But more than that, we want our kids to know what they're working on, to be able to speak to their own data, to speak to their strengths and weaknesses. And of course, we want all of our students to be able to score the meets or exceeds on the test. But we're, we're more than just numbers, more we're talking about kids. So we want kids to be able to onward and upward, and we want to prepare them for any career that they choose." — District Leadership

High School Exemplar

"But every child here understands their expectation from adults and from the community, and it just exudes high level of rigor, high level of engagement, but more importantly, a high level of responsibility for each student. I think that also transitions nicely to the expectations of the of the staff. There's no lowered expectations because of poverty here, that's not a thing. That's not even in the consciousness here we are. You know you're going to succeed, and success has a high level of engagement and responsibility for everyone. That's two, three. I think that, you know, the district support is one that I would say is commensurate with the needs. So it's not a, it's not a flat level of, hey, everybody's going to get X number of program specialists, and you're going to get X number of time. No, it's hey, you need extra support for the things that you're dealing with, and we're going to swarm your school and allow you a little bit of flexibility within that to get what you need to get done, is what I've seen." — Building Leadership



School Culture

Middle School Exemplar

"I will visit and say that teachers are having fun teaching...I haven't seen the teachers and instructional staff so excited to come to work. Since we had we've had that change, and all I can say is it starts at that top, with the principal and the assistant principal, members of the board...." — Community Member/ Parent

High School Exemplar

"They'll say... we are Trojans and we are tough. And they'll just say, and yes, some of them are being sarcastic, but they know, and they know, like, I can just go, you're not being a Trojan, and they're like, we're all smiling and laughing as they say it with enthusiasm, because they're like, you know, they're picking around, but they're having fun, but they're consistent with administration. And so it's correlated with us. It's a way that we can be successful as a team, but it's related with the students as well. They hold us accountable. They'll hold each other accountable, but I think it comes from the top down, how they're consistent with it, and it's every single day, and they know if they're not meeting that, then they're not set up for success... I think the other thing is, they're there to help, yes, instead of just looking for the gotchas very much. So even in their personal lives...some of our students, don't make the best choices outside of school and they... they receive consequences for those actions. But there's the administration and the faculty don't, like, turn their back on them." — Teacher



Strong Tier 1 Instruction

Middle School Exemplar

"The first thing I noticed when taking the job is I reviewed the master schedule and I didn't think there was enough instructional time, especially in our ELA and math content areas, and they had a club time here it was about a 45 minute block of the day that was devoted to clubs. And I just felt like with our scores the way they were, I'd rather have that time devoted to classroom instruction. So we made drastic changes to the schedule. We moved to a block schedule to give teachers more time...But still that was a major change--dropping the club and changing the schedule, master schedule, providing more time to get the instruction in. — Building Leadership

High School Exemplar

"Oh, okay, so the kids are like, I'm gonna try, because otherwise you're just going to assign me a whole bunch of remediation. So as I'm getting toward the end of the units, as we're building through each of the topics, I give them topic questions that aren't allowed to be graded, and then we'll just talk about the results. You guys, let's see. Let's look at the heat map. Half of you got it right. The other half chose this answer. That means I need to reteach this whole thing, because your answers weren't if they're all over the board, that's on them, that's not on me. I taught you that stuff. But what that does is it breaks it down with their progress check at the end of the unit, because they just took theirs yesterday. I'll go through all of the most missed questions, what we explained, the connections on how everything relates, and then they'll know exactly what topics they need to go into..." — Teacher



Consistent Use of Data



Middle School Exemplar

Dr. _____ and I partnered, and we came up with a great agenda to guide our Professional Learning Tables (PLTs), and we stick to that agenda. And we only have teachers in there for 45 minutes, and they're out, and so they're willing to give up that two to three times a month, and they're really good. Some of the conversations that took place during those PLTs, just brought them together just to hear them speak from the heart about what's going on in the classroom and where they were struggling. Another teacher may say, Well, hey, I found success using this practice for that topic, and so a lot of good sharing of ideas. They planned assessments together. They analyze student work together, and felt like it helped us personalize learning for the kids, because we're talking student data at every one of those PLT meetings. And not only are they aware of kids in their grade level, but they understand where the other kids are as well above and below. And so this really works out well for our eighth grade teachers, because they know where kids are academically two years prior to inheriting them, because we talked about and mention them by name, where they're struggling, and how we can help them with that. Mr. _____, will you come in to do an observation, check their work, sit with them and try to work through it." — Building Leadership

High School Exemplar

"So for biology, me and Ms. _____ will give very similar tests so that we can compare our data. Okay, where did your kids get really, like, high end and what did mine not? Could you come in and teach them that topic that day the way you taught it to your kids and see if there's any improvement, and then I'll flop over to her room and teach them the ones that my kids are really successful at. So that helps a lot, too...I can pull the data, I can see what questions they missed, what the standard is that they missed underneath, we do green dot challenges. We do remediation, because we can assign remediation that's specific to each individual student through progress learning." — Teacher



Community Culture



Middle School Exemplar

... there's four district goals that fall under that, which is world class instruction, world class culture, world class communication, and then a world class community, because we really wanted to bring in that community support from that those goals are aligned into our strategic plan goals we were on a continuous improvement plan years ago for needing to boost our test scores. So I will say we're all working on the same goals, the strategic plan goals are the same thing as the principal goals are aligned to the student learning objective goals that the teachers have. So that is one thing that I am extremely proud of. You don't need five different plans. All the plans have been streamlined and aligned so that everybody is working on the same thing, even for me as a superintendent, to the principals down to the teachers down to the students. — District Leadership

High School Exemplar

"Community support is a big thing. And the parents are active. And then the ones that aren't, they have, like a person that kind of steps into that student's role, like as their parent that can't be here all the time. They have a teacher that will step in for them and assist them. They come to us like, hey, I need help with my application. I need help with this. And they're willing to take the steps to speak to us, because we focused on building the relationship with them where they feel comfortable asking for help and they believe they can do these things." — Community Member

Discussion:

Given the unique composition of middle and high schools that data was collected from in year 3 of the study, some information about accountability raised potential questions. Because the same administrative team, instructional support, school and community culture are the same throughout a high school and middle school yet only one was rated Excellent on school Report Cards, alignment of rigor between middle and high school may require further investigation.

“...Yes, we have the exact same leadership and principal of both (middle and high school). Many of our teachers teach on both levels. We support them with the same support---actually we probably have more support for the middle school to be honest... the accountability system is just totally different in middle school.” — Instructional Coach

“(I think the reason for the different ratings for middle and high school) I think it’s a combination of both things... we’re getting students from the elementary over to the middle and then obviously building them up for the high school, and we’re in that—that transitional period, you know, in their life when they’re trying to figure things out as well... As far as our expectations, they don’t change from middle to high—we incorporate the same things...we have the same interventions that we put in place to help meet the needs of those kids we feel need support based off of data that we have and the things we discuss.” — Building Leader

Yet, a middle school did earn a score of Excellent on the school Report Card this year, so this high standard of excellence is possible to meet even if it can feel distinctly different. Additional consideration around developmental phases throughout adolescence seem potentially relevant as research continues.

“...We're a middle and high school, but it's not really fair to say, 'oh, that high school is excellent!' ... it's seamless, because, like, if our that involvement with our students, it starts there, and then they watch these kids grow up. So that is our foundation. That's what makes these things work... They know that they're a Trojan and they're tough, and just getting started in sixth grade. And, like, it's something that just stays with them, so it's, I think that's really how we get so successful on this side of the hallway, as opposed because we've, we want to think most of us have been on both sides (Middle School and High School). Yes, and like, you know... they're the same children, right? But I think that by the time we get them through that angst of middle school adolescence, like they believe, they believe, but they believe that we're children's (support) they believe that we care, because we're still here like and, you know, watching them.” - Instructional Coach

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Because this is the first year since 2023 when the Beating the Odds Investigative Study began that middle and high schools have met the criteria to participate in this study, EOC staff will continue to identify and partner with middle and high schools to develop or confirm the framework, and districts that consistently have schools meeting selection criteria will be studied further. Additionally, inquiries around how achievement is measured in middle and high school will be noted and considered in light of the cyclical review of the accountability system and forthcoming assessment review to be completed in 2027. Schools, leadership, students, and communities integral in beating the odds will be honored and celebrated with a commemorative banner and recognition at an Education Oversight Committee meeting.

