

Date: January 2, 2015

To: Sub-committee for Academic Distress
State Board of Education

From: Roxie Browning, Lead SIS for LRSD
ADE School Improvement Unit

Chante'le Williams, SIS
ADE School Improvement Unit

Kyron Jones, SIG Program Director/Specialist
ADE Learning Services

Richard W. Wilde, Program Manager
ADE School Improvement Unit

Through: Annette Barnes, Assistant Commissioner of Education,
ADE School Accountability

RE: Little Rock School District Progress Report Related to Schools in
Academic Distress

Introduction

In the spring of 2014 the State Board classified the following Little Rock Schools in Academic Distress: Hall High School, J. A. Fair High School, McClellan High School, Henderson Middle School, Cloverdale Middle School and Baseline Elementary. Academic Distress status was based on combined math and literacy three year trend data from school years 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13.

Each Academic Distress school had previously been identified through the ESEA No Child Left Behind Act as in "Corrective Action"; and then under the ESEA Flexibility Waiver as a "Needs Improvement: Priority School". The Flexibility Waiver initially required each priority school to have support through an external provider contract. The ADE School Improvement Unit was tasked with providing technical assistance to the provider and school. Based upon district evaluation and general lack of progress towards improvement, general support from an external provider was discontinued at the start of school year 2014-15. External support was replaced with internal support from locally hired School Improvement Specialists. External provider services were

maintained for more targeted professional development related to data utilization and leadership.

Given that the locally hired School Improvement Specialists were not specifically trained in the science of school improvement, this effort is more of a capacity development effort than an immediate support for school turnaround. Individuals selected for the locally hired SIS role were content specialists with experience in curriculum development. In actuality, given the number of schools in Needs Improvement status, there is probably not an adequate number of School Improvement Specialists available for hire within the state of Arkansas. Thus, development of local improvement specialists is probably the most economical and practical method available to the district. The LRSD Office of Accountability, in collaboration with the ADE School Improvement Unit, has sought to fast-track the professional development of the locally hired School Improvement Specialists.

In October of 2014, the Little Rock School District Board of Directors and key administrators from the district and school sites met with a subcommittee of the Arkansas State Board of Education. A plan of improvement for school year 2014-15 was presented to the State Board subcommittee by LRSD leadership, and comments were provided by individual LRSD Board Members. Through interactive discussion in the meeting, the LRSD Board of Directors was notified that the sub-committee for Academic Distress would make recommendations to the whole of the State Board of Education. The action(s) to be recommended by the sub-committee, and the date of the recommendations was to be determined following a January progress report. Further, it was clear to the casual observer that both substantial progress in the implementation of the plan presented by LRSD administrators (inclusive of ADE recommendations), as well as substantial improvement in “teammanship” within and between district administrators and the local school board was expected. Improvement of the common focus was to be evidenced by school board meetings, agenda items, and perceptual information from the community at-large.

In November of 2014 the validated state assessment from school year 2013-14 was used to calculate a new three year trend. District trend data identified an overall student advanced and proficient rate at approximately 67 percent in Literacy, and approximately 60 percent in Math. Using the new calculation, little to no improvement was reported in the overall trend data of the schools previously classified in Academic Distress and all three year trend data proficient and advanced averages remained below 49.5 percent. It is noteworthy to point out that the Office for Education Policy (OEP) at the University of Arkansas praised J.A. Fair and McClellan for outstanding educational performance,

highlighting them as high-performing schools in Arkansas based on the Benchmark and End-of-Course exams in poverty communities.

Summary of the ADE Review Team Findings September 2014

Initial findings by the ADE review teams assigned to the LRSD schools following their classification as Academic Distress can be distilled to six main issues. These were:

1. Despite multiple years of identification as “Corrective Action” and then as “Priority School”, school leadership and faculty had little understanding of targeted school improvement processes. This was compounded by lack of clarity in the purpose for External Providers, high turnover in school staff, lack of flexibility in district policy and practice to staff high need schools first, and minimal incentive to evaluate or retain highly effective teachers.
2. Despite leadership teams being provided training and support in the collection and utilization of formative assessment data to drive professional development, district initiatives or educational trends were the primary drivers of professional development. This was further compounded by limited principal authority to direct individual professional development plans, limited ability of the principal to direct staff work, and the disconnect between student outcomes and teacher self-evaluations.
3. Despite adequate funding available to the schools over time, improvement efforts were not focused, sustained, evaluated, or selected based on a meaningful analysis of student data. Indeed, having funds without depth of knowledge of turnaround processes may have contributed to the selection of multiple “supplemental” innovations that lacked targeted intent and clear evaluation procedures. The lack of focus was further compounded by turnover in staff and the desire by new faculty to recreate practices based on personal preferences and/or prior experiences rather than deep analyses of the current situation. Most improvement efforts focused on supplemental programs and efforts rather than seeking to systematically improve core classroom instruction and initial student learnings.
4. Despite knowledge of the ESEA Waiver and the Waiver’s intent for a district to make struggling schools THE PRIORITY for support, specific changes to district policy or practice to support priority schools were not evident. As a result, recruitment, retention, and school autonomy were basically the same regardless of school status, with a number of positions still vacant after the start of school.
5. Despite good intentions and high effort on the part of staff, a pervasive attitude of helplessness to improve student outcomes existed within the building leadership and staff. Staff reported feelings of unfair treatment and that students were permitted to transfer out of the service area to other schools. They had difficulty

accepting that students in schools classified in Restructuring, Priority and Academic Distress were permitted to easily transfer based on parent choice.

6. Despite knowledge of the importance of student-teacher relationships to motivate and influence students, no systemic or school efforts focused on improving the bond between students and teachers. Indeed, from the student perspective with each change in administration a new emphasis was placed on disciplining them (the students) for misbehavior. The culture appeared to be based in “make the students behave” rather than a culture of respect, relationship, and mutual support.

With only a few of the findings unique to a school, the ADE review teams produced recommendations that seem to reflect generic solutions rather than addressing issues specific to a school. However, the commonness of the findings only reflects the systemic nature of the challenges faced by the LRSD schools in Academic Distress.

Summary of ADE Review Team Recommendations September 2014

Given the systemic nature of the review teams’ findings, it would be expected that the recommendations would have common themes. Indeed, the recommendations can be consolidated into four primary themes and two secondary themes regardless of the school reviewed. The primary themes reflect the need of the schools to understand and utilize the research related to turnaround schools. In essence the primary recommendations were:

1. Refine and empower school leadership teams to address site specific issues and to expand the knowledge of the science of turnaround beyond school administration.
2. Refine and coordinate the work of instructional teams to improve initial delivery of instruction utilizing common units or pacing guides, common unit pre and post-tests, and teach the Arkansas State Standards across the curricula.
3. Use classroom level data related to short-term learning outcomes to drive professional development and supports to individual teachers.
4. Identify the specific innovations being implemented by a specific school to improve the outcomes with TAGG component populations and evaluate the fidelity of implementation and to evaluate the impact of the innovation.

Primary Recommendation 1 reflects the need for schools seeking to turnaround performance to embrace distributed responsibility and a distributed sense of urgency. To accomplish a distributed sense of urgency, faculty must have a structure for understanding the problem at the school level (beyond the classroom). To have shared

responsibility for addressing the problem, faculty must have “voice” in identifying changes needed and meaningful input in the solutions chosen.

Primary Recommendation 2 reflects the need for teachers to have a sense of the entire course being taught, to break that course into units of instruction, and for student progress to be monitored on a frequent and incremental basis. The joint planning, frequent progress monitoring, and subsequent differentiation based on assessment is key in the science of school improvement.

Primary Recommendation 3 reflects the need for staff in a low performing school to be provided support directly related to progress or lack of progress being made by their assigned students in real time. Instructional teams are responsible for monitoring their own level of effectiveness, identifying who is most effective within the team, and embedding professional development into the work being performed. Each instructional team is represented on the school leadership team to create systemic communication. Data on student progress is collected and analyzed on a frequent basis and this information is provided to the School Leadership Team for discussion related to targeting resources.

Primary Recommendation 4 reflects the concept of cost-benefit analysis. Each additional effort or innovation employed by a school to improve student outcomes has a cost in terms of a resource. Thus, when a school selects an improvement strategy there should be an anticipated amount of improvement, a clear identification of the population to be served by the innovation, and a known cost in terms of resources needed. Without this systemic planning, efforts and innovations are subject only to testimonial evaluation. In addition to knowing how the innovation will be measured the leadership must clearly know how they will monitor and support fidelity of the implementation.

The two secondary recommendations were:

1. Prioritize recruitment and stabilize/retain effective teachers and leaders in the priority school(s). District and school practices related to the staffing of priority schools need immediate improvement.
2. Increase student voice in the process of school improvement. Students in the secondary schools reported a “feeling tone” of punishment for non-compliance of expectations rather than a collaborative development of the overall culture. Interestingly, this same “feeling tone” was reported by teachers when discussing the district initiatives. In general, each level of the education community interviewed expressed feelings of things being done to, or decisions made for, rather than with them.

Secondary Recommendation 1 reflects on the need for the district to review their practice of one size fits all. In truth, Secondary Recommendation 1 is evident in the LRSD plan for improvement of schools in Academic Distress. The actions in the plan are required in all the schools regardless of status or situation. The concept of individualization and individualized support is not easily embraced by the district leaders. This may be due to a long history of equity being defined as “every school getting the same thing”.

Secondary Recommendation 2 reflects the need at both the school and district level to expand “voice” to other groups, but in particular to the group most directly impacted by the lack of effectiveness of the school. Indeed, if students are engaged in the decisions, parents will be better informed and more supportive of the school. More importantly, if a structure can be developed that facilitates all students feeling connected to the school and having “voice” in the management of the school, the culture should become more collaborative.

The Progress Report

The ADE School Improvement Unit is tasked with the progress monitoring of the recommendations made by the ADE review teams. While the Unit is not tasked with monitoring of the LRSD Improvement Plan, nor is it tasked with the monitoring of the development of a common focus on the part of leadership of the district, it is clear that these efforts are all linked together.

What has been accomplished to date?

1. LRSD district administration has directed the principals to include the recommendations in their ACSIP Needs Assessments. This is pending given that the ACSIP is under review by ADE and principals do not have edit access at this time.
2. LRSD district administration has directed the locally hired School Improvement Specialist to assist in the communication of the recommendations and support the school administration in implementation of the recommendations.
 - a. The Chief Academic Officer for LRSD in collaboration with the ADE assigned School Improvement Specialists have provided multiple sessions of professional development for the locally hired SISs specific to the research related to the recommendations.
3. The ADE assigned School Improvement Specialist has met with the principal and the locally hired SIS to review the recommendations and clarify any site specific questions.

4. The recommendations have been shared with school leadership teams.
 - a. It should be noted that the district is employing the Southern Region Education Board's High Schools/Middle Schools That Work Model. This process is a long standing, researched-based, national model for improving outcomes in schools with high numbers of low income and underachieving minority students. There is significant overlap between the Turnaround Model and HSTW model. Nonetheless, several of the schools reconstituted their leadership teams in November adding additional change and additional professional development needs.
5. ADE SIS and the locally hired SIS for each school have coordinated their schedules to maximize support for the school while minimizing distraction and or competition for the principal's time.
6. Initial technical assistance on the purpose of a Leadership Team has been provided to the principals through an external provider.
7. The schools are beginning to transform the work of the instructional teams from primarily lesson planning and professional development to the recommended work of developing standards aligned units of instruction with pre-post units.
 - a. It should be noted that instructional teams are key in the improvement of outcomes, but to implement the practice with fidelity requires deep understanding of the standards, the development of cross curricular pacing guides, and the refinement of the formative assessments to be actual measures of the standards. This is at least a three year process, and despite this being encouraged through the ESEA Waiver, very little progress has been made in Little Rock on this essential component to date.
 - b. It should also be noted that until the system is developed to collect classroom level student progress data on a frequent basis, and for that data to be analyzed and response systems and professional development linked to that level of data, then the School Leadership Team and the Instruction Teams have minimal real time instructional data to analyze. This results in the continuation of the Instructional Teams and the Leadership Teams performing more managerial or mechanical tasks.
8. There has been little progress in the schools identifying the two to three innovations that are key to their acceleration of student performance.
 - a. It should be noted that this is in part due to all the changes being asked of the school staff with no clear prioritization. To principals and staff, the number of changes being requested all seem to have the same level of demand, and thus, there is no clear plan of action. Indeed, it would appear that the focus for the principals is based on who is coming or what

report is due. The LRSD is attempting to address this through 45 day action plans, asking principals to define and target their efforts.

- b. The perception of the ADE School Improvement Specialists is that the LRSD School Board and Central Administration have acquired a sense of urgency. This sense of urgency has resulted in the rapid implementation of several innovations in an attempt to demonstrate that sense of urgency. The district plan is on top of the buildings efforts, not in place of. These new district required efforts result in lots of implementation prior to the building of capacity for the new innovations. Thus, we observe considerable activity without a clear understanding of the desired outcomes. When this is combined with the ADE recommendations, it becomes overwhelming and beyond the capacity of a school staff to meaningfully implement any innovation or recommendation with fidelity. The process is in contrast of the ADE Recommendation to focus on two to three research-based strategies. Without fidelity in implementation, the impact of the innovation cannot be evaluated.