

Executive Summary

Overview

Whole School Reform (WSR) is the response of the New Jersey Department of Education (NJ DOE) to the state Supreme Court's 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* 153 N.J. 480 decision. As a result of the Court's landmark ruling, districts and schools were required to implement WSR in accordance with N.J.A.C. 6:19A¹. This regulatory code was adopted into state law in July 1998.

This report presents the findings of an evaluation commissioned by NJ DOE and conducted by the Region III Comprehensive Center at The George Washington University. Its focus centers on the implementation progress of WSR in 18 of the 30 districts designated as Abbott districts in the state of New Jersey during the 2000 school year. The purpose of the study is to inform NJ DOE about:

- the progress of implementation of WSR model programs and strategies in three school cohorts, and
- the technical assistance needs of district and school level stakeholders.

The study's findings are optimally viewed through the lens of *organizational capacity*. A review of the literature on school accountability for improved student achievement identifies several core elements of organizational capacity: teacher knowledge and skills; effective leadership; technical and financial resources, and organizational autonomy.

At the district level, the importance of organizational capacity is critical and connected: it enables educators to raise achievement for all students, particularly in high poverty schools such as those found in the Abbott school districts. We also discuss how policies, even those crafted around the elements of organizational capacity, and clear goals for student learning, are not sufficient to transform schools into collective effective enterprises (see p.5). We argue further that technical assistance is a vital part of capacity building.

Methodology

Survey and telephone protocols were developed to collect data. Participants in the study were drawn from three key educator groups: (1) members of each School Management Team (SMT) from the 196 schools in three WSR cohorts²; (2) central office administrators from 18 districts with schools in cohorts 1, 2, and mid-year; and (3) staff

¹ Legislation was recodified and adopted into state law as N.J.A.C. 6:24A on 6/8/2000.

² Cohorts reflect the timetables for planning and implementation that were consistent with those ordered by the state Supreme Court at the recommendation of the NJ DOE. "Cohort 1" schools initiated the WSR process in 1998-99, "cohort 2" in the 1999-2000 school year, and "mid-year cohort" in the second term of the 1999-2000 school year.

members from the NJ DOE Headquarters and the Program Improvement Regional Centers (PIRCs)³ at the state level.

A survey focused on the primary components of WSR was administered to each of the three key educator groups. Components of the survey include:

- Planning,
- Governance,
- School-based budgeting,
- Personnel,
- Academic program,
- Training,
- Resource integration and alignment,
- School environment,
- Student and family services, and
- Family involvement.

Three surveys were developed for this study: (1) The NJ WSR School Staff Survey, (2) The NJ WSR District Staff Survey, and (3) a Process Evaluation of WSR administered to the NJ DOE. All three surveys, using Likert scales, address various aspects of WSR implementation. Results of the first survey measured the perceptions of SMTs in their implementation progress of WSR and also provided data on the level of support provided to them by the district and the state in the implementation of WSR. The second survey provided data on the perceptions of district administrators of their progress in implementing various aspects of WSR, and to what degree NJ DOE activities and products appropriately support WSR. The third survey provided data about the perceptions of NJ DOE staff regarding their support to schools in WSR, the extent to which NJ DOE activities and products were beneficial, and the extent of progress schools realized in WSR implementation.

A telephone interview of eight NJ DOE staff involved in managing the state’s “roll-out” process was conducted in order to provide an expanded perspective on WSR implementation. Interview questions focused on the various steps involved in implementing WSR, the goals and mission of the state DOE in this effort, and the perceived impact of the reform on districts and schools.

³ PIRCs are the state technical assistance centers that house the “School Review and Improvement” (SRI) teams. The purpose of the SRI teams is to assist school and district staff with their WSR initiatives.

High survey response rates at school, district and state levels were obtained as illustrated in Table 1, below:

Table 1

Whole School Reform Survey Response Rates in the State of New Jersey by School, District and State Levels

Survey Sectors	Total Population	Number of Respondents	Response Rate (Percent)
School	590	415	70
District	72	70	97
State	8	7	88
Total	670	492	73

Conclusions

Four questions guided the study. Representative findings for each question are summarized below:

***Question 1:** What perceptions do members of School Management Teams (SMTs) have of the progress of Whole School Reform implementation?*

Overall, SMT members stated that they had made “significant progress” in all components of WSR implementation (i.e., planning, governance, school-based budgeting, personnel, academic program, training and professional development, integration and alignment of resources and functions, school environment, student and family services, and family involvement). Yet analysis of individual items within each component revealed that “significant progress” was not made in the following aspects of WSR:

- A sufficient number of faculty/staff to implement fully and support the WSR program;
- Adoption of an academic program that meets the needs of LEP students;
- Training/professional development in the following areas: needs identification of programs and services; alignment of curriculum and instruction to state standards; personnel selection appropriate to the school; and use of zero-based budgeting processes;
- A school-based team that would train parents for volunteer roles (i.e., Student and Family Services); and
- An ongoing effort to involve parents as partners in school-based decision making (i.e., membership on SMT).

Question 2: *What perceptions do district staff have of the progress of Whole School Reform implementation?*

District staff assessing their own progress in implementing WSR observed that “some progress” was made in implementing all components of WSR. However, an analysis of individual items identified aspects of WSR implementation in which “less progress” was made. These aspects include:

- Training and technical support to SMTs;
- Budgeting issues;
- Professional development for school staff; and
- Provision of data to schools for purposes of planning and decision-making.

Question 3: *How do SMTs assess the quality of support provided by districts?*

SMT members rated district support highest in the area of curriculum alignment and weakest in the area of providing performance and demographic data for decision-making.

Question 4: *How do SMTs and district administrators assess the quality of support supplied by the state?*

District and school respondents agreed that there were three areas in which the state provided support for WSR implementation to “some extent” only. These areas were:

- SRI team support for schools,
- Start-up grants and incentives, and
- WSR model showcases.

Of these three areas, NJ DOE is urged to focus on the first only – SRI team support for schools. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: now that all Abbott schools have begun WSR implementation, the other two areas are pre-implementation strategies and are no longer needed.

Lessons Regarding Organizational Capacity for School Reform

As stated earlier, this study is predicated on the premise that ***schools cannot take responsibility for improving student achievement if the organizational capacity necessary to work effectively as a collaborative enterprise is not in place.*** In this report, we demonstrate how and in what ways WSR strategies are related to the elements of organizational capacity defined in the literature.

We also point out, however, that WSR policy, with its specific focus on building the organizational capacity of schools, has not addressed the needs of district administrators or NJ DOE staff in reinventing their roles so that they might provide the technical assistance that schools need to implement WSR successfully. We point out that it is equally important to realize that NJ DOE and district administrators need to develop their

own capacity at both the individual and institutional levels if they are to provide educational direction and leadership to advance WSR at the school level.

We discuss some new ways that district and DOE staff must change institutional structures and individual roles to maximize efficiency, effectiveness and job performance. Specifically, they must change from:

- Centralized bureaucracies to decentralized institutions that manage autonomous schools.
- Categorical programs and budgets to consolidated programs and budgets.
- A management perspective focused on monitoring program compliance to a technical assistance perspective focused on continuous improvement.
- Organizations rich in data that are largely inaccessible to organizations able to help district and school staff organize, analyze and manipulate data in order to permit educators to make meaning about student learning.

The areas where we postulate that district administrators and DOE staff need to build their own capacity are areas where respondents reported “less progress” for WSR implementation (training and technical support to SMTs, budgeting issues, professional development for school staff, and provision of data to schools for analysis). It is for this reason that our recommendations provide suggestions for technical assistance in these areas.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is recommended that NJ DOE target two areas for assistance and support of the implementation of WSR in Abbott districts and schools: (1) provide ongoing technical assistance to district and school level administrators and to community organizations that can support WSR, and (2) conduct additional research on the implementation of WSR. In terms of presentation, each recommendation is paired with the particular stakeholder group it is designed to serve: district, school and community members. Each recommendation also is presented by technical assistance and research categories.

In the area of technical assistance for district level administrators, it is recommended that NJ DOE:

- Work with districts to design training for SMT members on how to hire personnel appropriate for their schools.
- Work with district administrators to design training for curricula alignment to the state content standards.
- Work with district administrators to expand curricula alignment training to include instructional and classroom assessment alignment to the state content standards.
- Continue training on how to collect, organize and analyze comprehensive data at the district level to facilitate administrators’ assistance and support of

schools engaged in a continuous improvement process for managing student improvement.

- Create a partnership with Abbott districts to create a statewide warehouse for student achievement data. This centralized resource would enable educators at district and school levels to access and manipulate data in order to inform a continuous improvement process aimed at advancing and sustaining student achievement.
- Create a partnership with Abbott districts to develop an accountability system that is primarily based on a philosophy of capacity building (Fullan, 2000), enabling educators to become assessment literate.

It is recommended that NJ DOE provide the following training at the school level:

- Train SMT members on how to identify needs for additional programs and services.
- Advance training in the area of zero-based budget development and budget adjustment to facilitate annual assessment of school needs.

At the community level, it is recommended that NJ DOE form partnerships as follows:

- Collaborate with organizations that support parent involvement and assist them to implement the elements of WSR and train parents for volunteer roles and partnerships with the schools. Among suggested organizations are:
 - New Jersey PTA
 - ASPIRA of New Jersey, Inc.
 - NJ Association of Parent Coordinators
 - Parent Information Resource Centers

Due to the emphasis of WSR on school restructuring, the state has to this point focused on providing ongoing assistance to schools (via PIRCs). However, based on the study findings, we recommend that the NJ DOE expand its technical assistance to incorporate the district level. The rationale for this is that district administrators must build their own capacity to provide the technical assistance schools need to implement WSR successfully. Thus we strongly recommend that the state maintain its support for schools through its SRIs while increasing the level of support for districts.

We recommend further that NJ DOE consider developing a research plan in collaboration with NJ stakeholders. Among questions that merit consideration and additional research are:

- What is the relationship between successful implementation of WSR and improved student achievement?
- How and in what ways does the selection and fidelity of model implementation affect student achievement?

- How might “lessons learned” from each successive cohort advance understanding and improve implementation for cohorts engaging in WSR?
- Considering the large and growing number of limited English proficient (LEP) and language minority students, how and in what ways do existing WSR models address their needs?

In sum, the data provide useful information to NJ DOE on how to improve the implementation of WSR. An important lesson of the study is that the state needs to increase its technical assistance to districts. The recommended context of this technical assistance emphasizes the need of NJ DOE staff and district administrators to work together in order to build their individual and institutional capacity to support schools in the implementation of WSR. Finally, it is recommended that the state evaluate the WSR implementation process on an ongoing basis in order to ensure that educators have data on which to base future decisions.