Southwest Comprehensive Center

Evaluation of Arizona's System of School Support

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Executive Summary

Evaluation Background
Arizona's system of school support was developed in response to the creation of a state accountability system known as AZLEARNS in 2000. AZLEARNS assigns annual achievement labels for every school in the state based on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) scores. If a school is labeled Underperforming (one of five school labels assigned), and if it was Performing or better the previous year, then the school enters the state's system of school support.

The system of school support consists of three major components. The first component is an Arizona School Improvement Plan (ASIP), which Underperforming schools are required to complete and submit to the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). The ASIP is guided by four standards in *The Standards and Rubrics for School Improvement*: school and district leadership; curriculum, instruction, and professional development; classroom and school assessment; school culture, climate, and communication. The second component of the system of school support is a Solutions Teams visit. Solutions Teams consist of three or four experienced educators who visit Underperforming schools once for 2–3 days. During the visit, Solutions Teams members collect data through document reviews, interviews, focus groups, and observations and write a Statement of Findings (SOF), which is presented to staff. The SOF is based on the four standards for school improvement and provides recommendations within each standard for ways to improve. The third component of the system of school support is the assignment of an Arizona School Site Improvement Support Team (ASSIST) Coach. The ASSIST Coach is an ADE employee who provides guidance in the creation of the ASIP and then visits the school throughout the subsequent year to help the school continue to implement its ASIP as well as recommendations and changes suggested by the SOF.

The purpose of this evaluation was to review ADE's system of school support and analyze its components for effectiveness and impact from the perspectives of teachers, principals, district administrators, Solutions Team members, ASSIST Coaches, and ADE staff. To assess possible impacts of the system of school support on student achievement, we also conducted a student-level achievement analysis. In addition, through reported findings and recommendations, this evaluation sought to assist in the improvement of the current system of school support and the development of a system of *district* support. Thus, this study adds to and continues the research conducted previously on different aspects of the system of school support (e.g., Goode, 2003;[1] Kotterman, 2005;[2] Judson, 2006).[3]

Evaluation Design and Methodology
Through the evaluation, we address the following four evaluation questions:

1. Are there differences in student achievement over time between students who attended schools that received school support versus students who attended schools that did not receive school support?

2. What are the perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of the different aspects of the system of school support? Do different stakeholders have different perceptions of the system's effectiveness?

3. What are the perceived impacts at the different levels of the system? Do different stakeholders have different perceptions of the system's impact?

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[1] Goode, T. (2004). *Solutions Teams in Arizona: School Principals and Solutions Team Members' Perceptions of the Process.* Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Department of Education.
[2] Kotterman, P. (2005). *Solutions Team Professional Performance and Feedback Survey. Phoenix, AZ:* Arizona Department of Education.
[3] Judson, E. (2006). *The Value of External Assistance: An Examination of the Arizona Department of Education's ASSIST Coach and Solutions Team Model.* Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Department of Education.

4. How can ADE improve the system of school support? What can ADE replicate from the system of school support to develop a system of district support?

The study began with a stratified random sample of 12 schools that received Solutions Team visits in the past 3 years and four districts associated with four of the 12 schools. We interviewed a principal and a teacher from each of these schools and a district administrator from each of the four districts. In addition, we interviewed eight state-level staff: two ADE staff, two ASSIST Coaches, and four Solutions Team members who were selected to be as representative of their affiliated groups as possible. The goal of the interviews was to learn about participants' perceptions of the program, its implementation, effectiveness, and impact. We also asked participants about their recommendations for how to improve the system of school support and the development of a system of district support in Arizona. Finally, we conducted an analysis of student achievement to compare the academic performance of students in schools that received this intervention as compared to schools that did not to assess possible impacts on school academic performance.

Impact on Student Achievement
For the student achievement analysis, we used individual AIMS scores of students in Grades 3–8 (reading, writing, and mathematics) for school years 2003–04, 2004–05, and 2005–06. We conducted two sets of achievement analyses. The first was a cross-sectional analysis conducted at the school level, where treatment schools (i.e., schools that participated in the system of school support) were compared with non-treatment, matched schools as well as all schools over time. The second, longitudinal analysis was carried out at the student level, where students in treatment schools were compared with similar students in non-treatment schools over time.

The major question for both these analyses was whether treatment students and schools appeared to have performed academically different than like students and schools not participating in the program. These analyses showed small differences between the treatment and comparison groups that favored one set or another over the course of the years and AIMS test categories examined. However, the two groups showed sufficiently similar academic performance during this period to conclude no overall treatment effect from the system of school support, either positive or negative, with respect to the achievement data examined.

It is important to note that these achievement results represent only 2 years of implementation, as this intervention is fairly new. It might be that the implementation of the system of school support takes longer than 2 years to show an effect on student achievement. Thus, these analyses only provide a 2-year window into the effect of the process, whereas our qualitative data reflect perceptions of program impact over a 3-year period (2003–04 through 2005–06).

Implementation and Perceived Effectiveness of the System of School Support
The 36 interview respondents (12 teachers, 12 principals, four district administrators, four Solutions Team members, two ASSIST Coaches, and two ADE staff) were asked to describe and assess each component of the system of school support, including the ASIP, Solutions Teams, and ASSIST Coach processes. Respondents were generally positive about the different components, though their perceptions varied somewhat by component and respondent group.

ASIP: Overall, principals and teachers were positive about the usefulness and impact of the ASIP on their school improvement efforts. A majority of the principals and teachers indicated that the process of drafting the ASIP was useful for providing focus and encouraging systemic change. However, some principals recommended that ADE provide more up-front assistance and guidance in the creation of the plan, which, as of the 2006-2007 school year, ASSIST Coaches do. District- and state-level staff varied in their perceptions of the effectiveness of the ASIP process. Similar to school-level staff, several district- and state-level staff felt that the ASIP process had increased focus on school goals and accountability.

However, even though the ASSIST Coaches have become more involved in the creation of the ASIP, ADE staff and ASSIST Coaches noted that only a few schools have taken full advantage of the ASSIST Coaches' help. One ASSIST Coach said that at least half of the ASIPs that ADE receives are not satisfactory.

Solutions Teams: Generally, school-level respondents described the Solutions Team visits as positive. Half of the school-level staff felt that the Solutions Team provided an accurate and insightful assessment of the school. Several district and state staff noted that the process had increased school accountability and validated district feedback to schools. However, some respondents felt that the visits came too late in the school year (February or March) to implement change; expressed a need for more hands-on assistance and specific suggestions for improving schools; and indicated that the Solutions Teams spent too little time in the schools.

ASSIST Coaches: The ASSIST Coach process was perceived by a majority of the principals as helping their schools' improvement efforts. However, about half of the principals also mentioned interacting with more than one ASSIST Coach due to coach turnover or reassignment, and commented on the need for more frequent visits, more follow-up, and more in-depth work with the ASSIST Coach. ADE staff indicated that overall the process is working well with regard to the support the ASSIST Coaches provide to the schools. Nevertheless, they also acknowledged difficulties with the large caseload of schools (an average of 20) that each ASSIST Coach is responsible for and with ASSIST Coach recruitment and retention issues.

Perceived Impacts at the State, District, and School Levels
The system of school support was reported to have an impact at all levels of the school system. State staff felt that the system of school support has created a new role for ADE, whereby staff have become actively engaged in assisting schools in improvement efforts as opposed to only making sure that schools comply with accountability policies. State staff also indicated that the establishment of a cross-unit communication committee has improved school improvement and intervention efforts because of better coordination and communication. The system of school support has also created more awareness around school improvement processes and standards across the state according to three state-level staff.

State staff also observed impacts on nonparticipating districts and schools. Specifically, some districts have used the ASIPs for all schools, modeled school improvement efforts on ADE's Solutions Team process, and requested Solutions Team visits for schools with Performing labels. Most of the district administrators confirmed that their districts have used aspects of the system of school support for their own district improvement purposes. Respondents at all levels of the system (state, district, and school) indicated that the system of school support has provided more district accountability and increased district support to schools.

A majority of the respondents reported a sense that the system of school support had helped increase school performance by providing focus and direction. In addition, respondents reported impacts on all four standards for school improvement, in particular Standard 2 (curriculum, professional development, and instruction). About one-third of the respondents reported that schools had made curricular changes (such as implementing a new curriculum or engaging in curriculum mapping) and increased professional development for teachers. Similar to the impact at the district level, the system of school support was reported as providing more accountability for principals and teachers at the school level and improved leadership practices (Standard 1). It was also said that the process increased the use of data and data analysis, including the development and use of formative assessments and benchmarking (Standard 3). In addition, respondents felt that school culture and climate had changed (e.g., improved discipline and increased parent involvement) but fewer respondents reported an impact in this area (Standard 4).

State- and district-level respondents did not observe any differential impacts on different school types with respect to school performance levels (e.g., moving from Underperforming to Performing), grade

levels, type of schools (e.g., charter), location (e.g., rural), or size. School-level respondents were not asked about these impacts given their limited experience with the implementation of the system of support outside of their own school.

The system of school support was reported as impacting both teachers and students. Some principals said they had observed such changes in teachers as increased responsibility, ownership, motivation, and professionalism. It was also reported that the process had led to teacher turnover. While teachers generally perceived this as negative, some principals reported that it enabled them to let go of some poor performing teachers. A few respondents felt that the process has created positive feelings in students, such as higher self-esteem, because of improved achievement and because staff are showing more concern about students and their futures.

Overall Recommendations
Our overall recommendations are based on our knowledge of and experience with other state systems of school and district support, the literature on school and district improvement, as well as the interviews conducted in conjunction with this study. We first present recommendations for improving the state's current system of school support and then propose recommendations related to the development and implementation of a system of district support.

Improvement of the Current System of School Support
Several overall themes emerged regarding how to improve the current system of school support: timing of activities, hands-on assistance and specificity of activities, state capacity, involvement of stakeholders, and coordination of school improvement efforts. Based on these themes, we propose the following recommendations to the system of school support:

Timing of Activities:
- Create a sense of urgency for newly labeled schools by accelerating the timeline of activities:
    a. Provide school labels early in the summer.
    b. Over the summer, have the ASSIST Coach work with the principal and a district representative on a school needs assessment and preliminary goal setting.
    c. Early in the new school year, establish a school improvement team and send this team to ASIP training.
    d. By October, have the school improvement team write and submit the ASIP to ADE.
    e. Between November and February, conduct Solutions Team visits to allow time for changes within the same school year based on Solutions Team recommendations.

Hands-On Assistance and Specificity of Activities:
- Provide more hands-on assistance and guidance across all activities: ASIP, Solutions Team, and ASSIST Coach activities.
- Share lessons learned from schools that have been designated as Performing. The PRISM initiative,[4] or something similar, could help facilitate discussions between successful and less successful schools to share strategies and ideas for improvement.
- More closely match school needs to the knowledge and experience base of assigned Solutions Teams and ASSIST Coaches (e.g., in areas such as charter schools, Native American schools, rural schools, elementary/middle/high schools, English learner expertise).
- Consider developing a feedback system that will provide specific information from schools on the quality of the services provided by Solutions Team members and ASSIST Coaches. This will help facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of services provided to schools.

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[4] http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0315edbest0315.html

State Capacity:
- Consider utilizing economy of scale support strategies. For example, assign ASSIST Coaches to the district level where they would focus on building the capacity of district staff to assist the low-performing schools within their district.
- Consider employing regional support teams that would serve all schools and districts within a region to help build capacity and share expertise at regional levels.
- Develop a tiered system where support is provided based on school needs and identification status. For example, if a school is identified for improvement or underperformance based on subgroup targets they would need a different intensity of support than a school that missed its attendance or graduation rates. This would allow ADE to focus more resources on needier schools while providing tailored support to all schools in their specific AYP or state accountability area of need.

Stakeholder Involvement:
- Require participating schools to secure substantial faculty involvement in the creation of the ASIP to ensure their participation and buy-in to the school's improvement process.
- Make district participation in the ASIP process and the SOF presentation mandatory to increase district responsibility and accountability for school success.
- Have ASSIST Coaches participate in the SOF presentation to create more continuity in their assistance at the school level.

Coordination of School Improvement Efforts:
- At the local level, increase coordination of the different improvement efforts and accountability requirements (e.g., ASIP, NCLB Improvement Plans).
- Continue coordinating school improvement efforts through the cross-unit communication committee to ensure that schools that are served by multiple coaches are getting consistent messages.
- Consider assigning a single coach to each targeted school who could address both NCLB and state accountability issues.

Development and Implementation of a System of District Support
Coordination of efforts will become even more important with the implementation of a system of district support. Almost half of the respondents felt that the basic structure of the school support system could be replicated for districts. At the time of this report, ADE was implementing a system of support for districts in improvement. As of the 2007-2008 school year, ADE provides the following resources to LEA's in need of improvement:
- An LEA Coach to assist the district in addressing reasons for missing AYP and developing an LEA Plan of Improvement;
- Training with the Standards and Rubrics for LEA Improvement and State System of Support during Fall Process Workshops and throughout the remainder of the year by the assigned LEA Coach; and
- Site visits at the district and two schools within each visited district from an LEA Review Team to determine the level of implementation of the LEA Improvement Plan. The Review Team includes ADE staff from multiple divisions (e.g. Title III or special education) based on the reason the LEA missed AYP to encourage specialized support.

Integration of School and District Support Systems:
- To facilitate the coordination of improvement efforts and to save resources, ADE should integrate the school support system with the new system of district support. For example, ASIP plans should be coordinated and integrated with the new LEA plan; Solutions Team visits should be coordinated and integrated with LEA Review Team visits; and ASSIST Coaches and LEA Coaches should coordinate their efforts to build district capacity to support low-performing schools.

Summary of Findings

Through our evaluation of Arizona's system of school support we were able to better understand its implementation and impact. An important overall finding from this evaluation is that students in schools participating in the state's system of school support showed similar academic performance to students in comparison schools not participating in the program. However, it may be too early to assess the full impact of the state's system of school support on student achievement. Interviewed state, district, and school staff reported that the process helped to increase accountability, focus, and direction towards school improvement. To summarize our recommendations, we propose that ADE adjusts the timing of these school improvement activities to create more urgency, provide more tailored hands-on assistance, create a tiered system of support to prioritize the most needy schools, involve more stakeholders, and better integrate school support with its new approach to district support to create a more cohesive and coordinated overall statewide system.

Please <u>Note</u>:

If further information is needed, please make contact to the following personnel:
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