

Improving School Performance: Partnering for Success

March 11, 2002

**Dr. David Fetterman
Stanford University**



Executive Summary

IMPROVING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: Partnering for Success

The State and the respective districts have an opportunity to build a new educational community where teaching and learning flourish. Inconsistent student progress and low academic performance must be addressed through decisive action. It is time to stop making excuses. It is time to create new relationships - partnerships - which embrace the local community, Board, administration, teachers, students, and the State.

Each party has much to offer. The potential of these educational communities is real. The spirit of education can be rekindled in these school districts. It will take a concerted effort to accomplish this task. Many steps will not be popular at first. However, there is nothing less than the future of these children at stake. This transformation can only be accomplished with the vision, will, hard work, and determination of members of the school community, with increased substantive and ongoing support and technical assistance. This report is a call for each party to rise to the occasion. It is time for everyone to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

Background

State policy makers have developed policies governing various levels of state intervention in schools identified as chronically low performing in order to improve performance. The primary indicator has typically been student test scores. Approximately half of all states have "academic bankruptcy" regulations, allowing for state intervention. However, the track record of comprehensive or draconian state takeovers has not been impressive. In 1998, McRobbie pointed out that "academic takeover is largely a leap into the unknown. No body of research yet exists to provide guidance. Most state education officials admit being far from eager to step in and run an academically failed school or district. The record of attempts is scant; of success even more so". The record of state takeovers is not any more encouraging today. However, recently, states have shifted from the old paradigm of takeover to the new one in which they enter into a

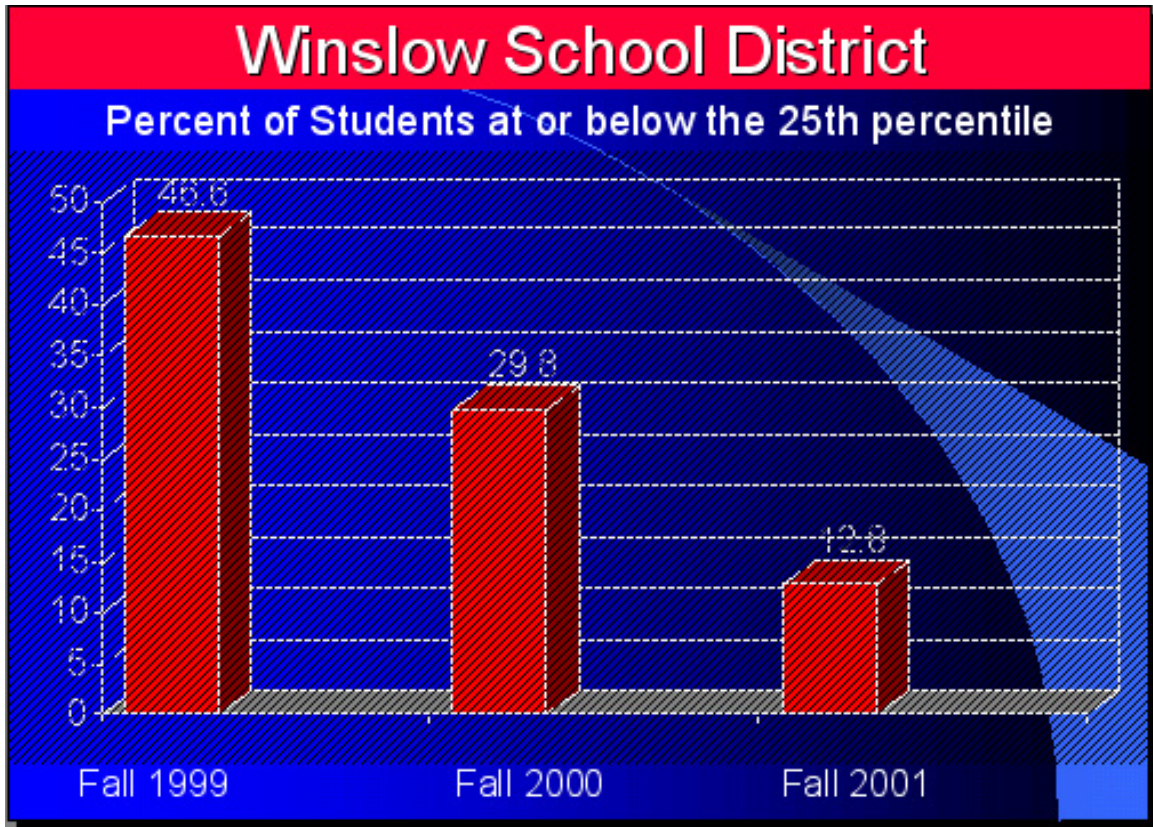
"partnership" with schools, districts, and the community in order to improve student performance (see Fuhrman and O'Day, 1996; Berliner, 1997; Harkavy, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; EdSource, 2002). Many districts welcome this new approach, including some level of direct state intervention, as a catalyst for change.

Arkansas

In Arkansas, Act 915 of 1995 was passed to improve the capacity of local school districts through targeted assistance from the Department of Education. The Department of Education developed rules and regulations to implement Act 915 in 1996. In brief, Districts in which 40 percent or more of their students in grades five, seven and ten score at or below the 25th percentile and have at least four of the five secondary indicators: less than the state average for completion rate, enrollment in core subjects, and/or attendance rate, and greater than the state's average in the percent of teachers not fully certified, and/or greater than the state's average achievement disparity shall be classified as Phase I. Phase I requires a school improvement plan. Unsatisfactory progress results in a re-classification of Phase II for the respective districts. The district prepares a school improvement plan in Phase II, along with extensive technical assistance from the state in the areas identified in the district's plan. The State is provided with the most latitude concerning intervention strategies in Phase III. However, it also provides for the highest level of collaboration; allowing for new and extended partnerships.

Since the 1996-97 school year, thirty-one districts have been identified in Academic Distress. Since that time, the majority of districts have improved performance enough to be removed from the ranks of academically distressed school districts. Most districts removed from Academic Distress have sustained the academic improvement and many have made even greater continuous gains.

During the 2000-2001 school year, thirteen districts were placed in various stages of academic distress and nine districts met or exceeded growth expectations. In addition, five of the nine made enough progress for the department to recommend removal from the distress list.

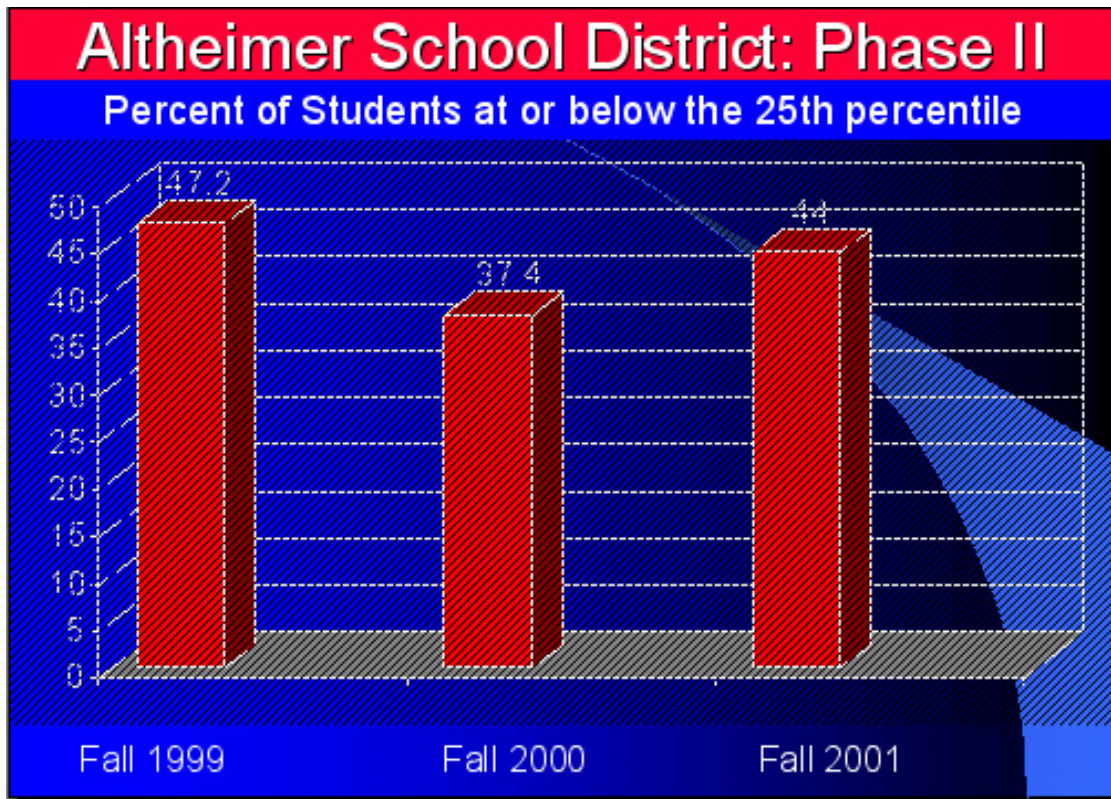


Winslow School District provides an excellent example of the results of a State-District partnership as the District emerges out of academic distress. The illustration highlights a steady decline from 46.6% to 12% at or below the 25th percentile.

However, some districts need special additional assistance. Two districts in Phase II, Elaine and Altheimer Unified School Districts, which are the focus of this report, have demonstrated some progress during specific years. However, their progress has not been consistent. In fact, they experienced a significant drop in achievement from the previous year.

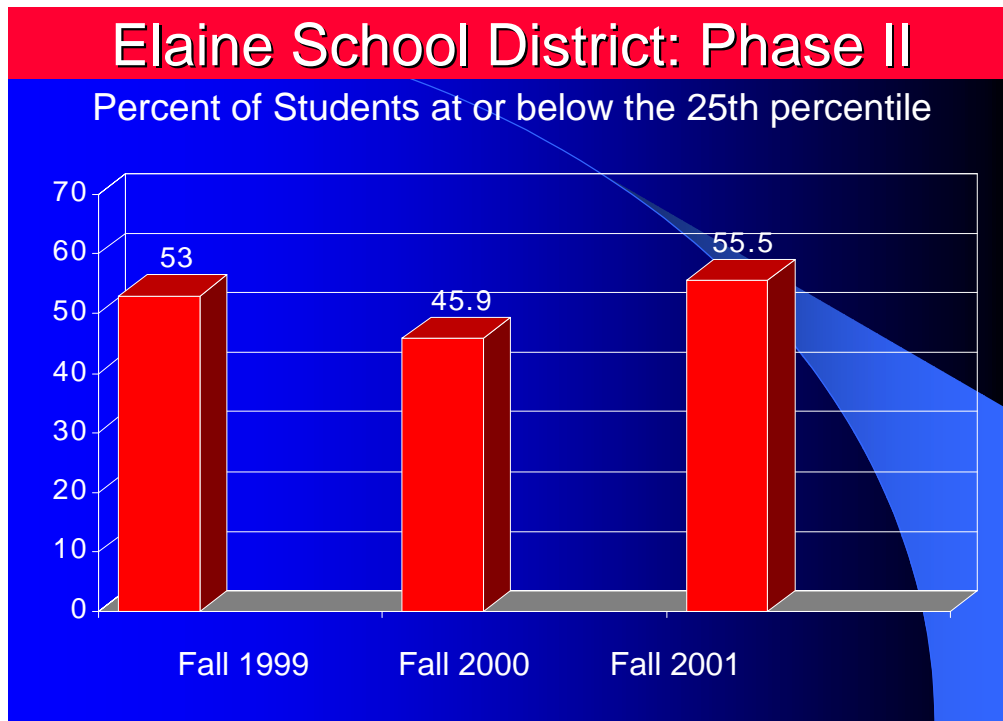
A needs assessment has been conducted to identify the most significant areas requiring attention in order to further focus targeted assistance in the immediate future. The findings and recommendations made in this report including a recommendation to move into Phase III, are the result of this needs assessment.

Phase III provides the state and the districts with an opportunity to build a new educational partnership where teaching and learning flourish.



This figure demonstrates Alzheimer School District's decrease in achievement. There was an increase from 37.4 to 44% of their students at or below the 25th percentile.

In Arkansas, state policy dictates placing Phase II schools that fail to satisfy the district's statement of reasonable progress into Phase III of Academic Distress.



This figure demonstrates Elaine School District's decrease in achievement. There was an increase from 45.9% to 55.5% of their students at or below the 25th percentile.

Next Steps

The State should enter into an extended partnership with both the Elaine and Altheimer Unified School Districts as they strive to improve student performance. The State should assume a managing partner role in this relationship.

General Recommendations

1. District-wide accountability systems need to be implemented. The districts need to list and prioritize existing recommendations and implement them.
2. The State should place the Altheimer and Elaine districts in Phase III of Academic Distress. This is the phase needed to make needed, substantive changes in both of these districts at this time.

3. This joint effort or partnership should build on strengths. The focus of the State's efforts should be on building capacity where possible. However, identified weaknesses need to be addressed immediately.
4. The State should not adopt a wholesale takeover. It should adopt a precise and surgical approach to its intervention. Intervention where specified, however, should be swift and decisive. The intervention should focus on very specific areas including leadership, governance, specifically the Altheimer Board, curriculum, instructional strategy or delivery, and discipline (in Altheimer).
5. Continuous professional development in the form of technical assistance should be given high priority. The most important areas requiring immediate attention include: leadership, governance, curricular alignment with the State standards, instructional strategies or delivery, and teacher content Knowledge.
6. In addition, an empowerment evaluation workshop should be conducted immediately to help build local capacity. It should be designed to help students, teachers, and administrators create a baseline of goals and strategies in order to measure performance over time.
7. The partnership should be inclusive, including all relevant stakeholders. Community resources should also be brought to bear wherever possible, including public officials, such as the mayor, ministers, and local business people, as well as local foundations.
8. The recruitment and assignment of a managing Chief Academic Officer, (CAO) should be considered the highest priority to improve educational quality.
9. Expand the role of the curriculum and assessment monitor. The monitor should be charged with the responsibility of collaboratively developing, monitoring, and implementing a targeted

comprehensive school improvement plan and accountability system. This will enable the districts to measure and evaluate day-to-day implementation of their plans.

10. Increase targeted assistance provided by the ADE in content areas. Specifically, math and literacy coaches should be assigned to each site to provide ongoing staff development as an integral part of the school day. Math and literacy coaches should serve as demonstration model teachers. One approach might include team teaching, pairing up school teachers with the math and literacy coaches.
11. Consider the employment of national staff development providers with experience in turning around low performing schools to help build instructional and leadership capacity and improve performance.

There are many intelligent and hard working teachers and administrators in both districts. In addition, there are many students who thirst for a quality education and are willing to work to get a good education. Every effort should be made to respect the dignity of the students, teachers, administrators, and Board members in the respective districts during this difficult transitional period. However, decisive steps are needed immediately to prevent any further reduction in the quality of education.

Immediate Action Steps

This Needs Assessment Team recognizes that building capacity is a process requiring time and resources. However, this moment presents a window of opportunity for the partnership to act now. In this spirit, the following recommendations are made for immediate consideration.

1. **Appoint a Chief Academic Officer (CAO) in both school districts.**
2. **Appoint an Educational Curriculum and Assessment Monitor.**
3. **Identify and fund a nationally recognized staff developer to increase instructional leadership capacity: School Turnaround.**

4. **Conduct an Empowerment Evaluation prior to the completion of the Phase III Plan. Dr. David Fetterman, Stanford University. (Fetterman, 2001).**
5. **Increase targeted assistance from the ADE by hiring a Math and Literacy Coaches to service both school districts exclusively.**

Immediate recommendations for each district

Alzheimer

1. Appoint an Interim Administrative Panel to operate the district. In addition, the State and the new panel should provide current Board members with training and mentoring.
2. Leadership training is needed on every level in the school district. In addition to the Board training discussed earlier, the superintendent needs additional technical assistance in the area of program evaluation and curriculum, the principals need technical assistance in the areas of instructional leadership and discipline, and the teachers need instructional leadership training skills as well as classroom management training. A comprehensive discipline management plan is needed.
3. A facilities study should be conducted to evaluate the viability of the current elementary school structure. Recommendations concerning that formal assessment should be made to the Interim Administrative Panel within 90 days.
4. Local college level faculty should be recruited to provide enrichment training for district teachers. They should also be recruited to provide students with additional instruction in math and reading. Recruitment of high quality teachers should remain a top priority.
5. Generate opportunities, resources, and systems to support the recruitment of high quality teachers.
6. Develop and implement diagnostic, customized and targeted academic improvement plans for each student performing below grade level.
7. Establish opportunities and resources to support academic development and acceleration in the district involving parents and community leaders through after-school and extended day activities.

Elaine

1. Leadership training should be provided for the administration, including the superintendent and principals, with an emphasis on teacher and program evaluation and follow-through.
2. Technical assistance and workshops are needed to help the district to function as a team with an educational vision. Technical assistance is also needed in the areas of instructional delivery and curriculum alignment. The focus should be on translating training into practice.
3. Additional staff development training is needed. The focus should be on content knowledge training in math and literacy. Local college instructors may be used to provide enrichment and accelerated learning opportunities for faculty in their content area. In addition, classroom management and discipline, and other staff development opportunities should be a priority for staff development for faculty.
4. Neighboring districts that have sustained success since removal from the academic distress list should be consulted.
5. Teachers and administrators should find ways of making a link to community life, e.g. civic, religious, sports, and so on.
6. Recruitment of high quality teachers should remain a priority.
7. Generate opportunities and resources to support academic development and acceleration. The involvement of parents and community leaders should be encouraged through after-school and extended day activities.

References:

Berliner, B. (1997). What it takes to work together: The promise of educational partnerships. <http://www.wested.org/cs/wew/view/rs/32>

Edsource (2002). Selected School Reform Models and Networks. http://www.edsource.org/edu_refmod_mod.cfm

Fetterman, D.M. (2001). Foundations of Empowerment Evaluation. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fuhrman, S. H. and J. A. O'Day (Eds.), (1996). *Rewards and Reform: Creating Educational Incentives That Work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Harkavy, I. (1998). ["School-Community-University Partnerships: Effectively Integrating Community Building and Education Reform."](#) Paper presented at the Connecting Community Building and Education Reform: Effective School, Community, University Partnerships Conference. University of Pennsylvania, May 12, 1998.

McRobbie, J. (1998). Can State Intervention Spur Academic Turnaround? San Francisco, CA: WestEd
(<http://www.wested.org/pub/docs/policy/intervention.htm#1>)

U.S. Department of Education (1998). Turning Around Low-Performing Schools, A Guide for State and Local Leaders.
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/turning/>

Overview

The Executive Summary provides an introduction to the full text of this report. A brief discussion of the methodology used in this Needs Assessment is presented next. The methodology section is followed by a brief report about each district. The district reports are presented separately, focusing on the most relevant components from this list: curriculum, instruction, assessment/student achievement, professional development, teacher quality, learning environment and student support, school's comparability, resources, time allocated for student/teachers, administration and school leadership, professional relations, governance: board policies and district support, and school community parent relations. The report only focuses on the most significant components identified and in need of attention, according to the Needs Assessment team.

Methodology

A team of 20 state officials was assembled to conduct a Needs Assessment of Elaine and Altheimer Unified School Districts. The Elaine High School Team included Dr. William Thomas (team leader), Susan Grier, Reginald Wilson, Chandra Martin, and Bob Maddox. The Elaine Elementary Team included Annette Barnes (team leader), Monica K. Norwood, Luverda Clay, Polly Davis, and Willie Morris. The Altheimer High School Team included Dr. Michael McIntosh (team leader), Dr. Karen DeJarnette, Dr. Charity Smith, John McKinnon, and Cassandra Green. The Altheimer Elementary Team consisted of Frank Wimer, Dr. Anne Noble (team leader), Dr. Glenn Holzman, Marsha Tolson, and Dr. Bill Nielsen.

The team was lead by Dr. David Fetterman from Stanford University. He provided the team with data collection and analysis training to ensure a useful review. The team was divided into two groups, with members at each site over a two-day period. They devoted one day to classroom observations and the second to interviews and document review. As discussed earlier, topics included leadership, instruction, curriculum, standards (alignment with curriculum), staff development, budget, morale, physical structure, and health and safety, as well as other issues. The teams debriefed at the end of each day to triangulate findings, identify patterns, and plan for next steps. Dr. Fetterman was primarily responsible for assembling the data, conducting the analysis, and drafting a final report

for review by the Needs Assessment Team, the site administrators, and the Arkansas Department of Education.

The next two sections of this report provide specific findings and recommendations concerning both the Elaine School District and the Altheimer Unified School District. Each section is followed by a conclusion, summarizing critical points.

Elaine School District

Background

Elaine is a rural, low income Delta community, approximately 2 1/2 hours from Little Rock. The families are predominately African American. There are only a handful of local stores in the town. Most have been closed down due to a recent downturn in the economy and dwindling employment opportunities. These economic factors have forced many families to move out of the area.

The school district is composed of an elementary and secondary school, serving 380 students. The attendance rate is 94%. Many children receive youth services, including counseling, medication, and monitoring. Class size is small. Approximately 93% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-cost meals. The school buildings are within walking distance of each other. They are in good physical condition. The district office, principal's residence, and the alternative school are located between the elementary and secondary school buildings.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Administration and School Leadership

FINDINGS

The primary finding of the Arkansas Department of Education Needs Assessment team is that the district is hindered by inaction. There appears to be a lack of follow-through and accountability in the school system, despite an abundance of data documenting their problems.

Some board members and the superintendent are aware of many of the problems, however, substantive changes are not evident. For example, the need to improve teacher recruitment and retention, teacher evaluations, and instructional strategies is not new. Although there is no serious discipline problem, the lack of follow-through also applies to classroom decorum or management issues as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A district-wide accountability system needs to be implemented. The district needs to list and prioritize existing recommendations and implement them.
2. In order to facilitate this recommendation, the district administration will need to develop a reporting system to document their efforts to follow-up on specific recommendations, particularly in the area of instructional delivery and personnel evaluations.
3. Reinforcements and sanctions should accompany evaluations. In addition, each party needs to be held accountable for their performance, e.g. student, teacher, administrator, and Board member.
4. In addition to external accountability, teachers, for example, need to understand that they share the responsibility for student performance. It appears that accountability for student achievement is not shared, and various groups blamed one another for the low performance. There is a need to help students and educators share the responsibility for academic performance, to develop high expectations that specify what students should know and be able to do, and to align curriculum, instruction, and expectations with the Arkansas Curriculum Frameworks.

Instruction

FINDINGS

Many problems were identified concerning instruction. They include, but are not limited to: an overemphasis on recall as compared with higher order reasoning activities, lack of instructions or explanations in the classroom, inadequate modeling or scaffolding, overemphasis on lecturing as a sole means of instruction, poor classroom management, and inadequate or no closure at the end of a lesson. Some instructional strategies that overemphasize guessing rather than problem solving may contribute to poor testing practices as well.

There are also numerous examples of teacher evaluations recommending specific teaching strategies to improve instructional delivery at the high school level; however, there is little evidence of actual implementation associated with those recommendations. Standards-based instructional strategies need to be developed and implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Technical assistance is needed in the areas of instructional delivery and content areas. The focus should be on translating training into practice.
2. In this regard, a system should be developed to monitor actual classroom instruction before and after technical assistance has been provided to measure change or improvement.

Assessment/Student Achievement

FINDINGS

Student test scores are low. The school district has had more than 45% of their students at or below the 25th percentile for the last three years. The standardized test scores point to a negative trend. The overall performance indicators of this school district have resulted in an Academic Distress Phase II classification, by the Arkansas Department of Education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The school district will need to enter into a partnership with the state, community, local college faculty, and various technical assistance providers in order to help improve student performance. This report presents numerous recommendations needed to make improvements in this area.
2. The schools in the district need to adopt a district-wide or at least a whole-school vision concerning what they are trying to accomplish and how they plan to implement their vision.
3. Assistance is needed to improve teacher capacity where appropriate (see Instruction and Professional Development).
4. Additional instruction is needed in core areas such as math and literacy. The district might consider recruiting local college faculty and Mathematics and Literacy Coaches to provide instruction in these areas (see Professional Development).
5. The curriculum taught in the classroom must be aligned with state standards (see Curriculum).
6. Students should be held to high academic standards in the classroom.

Teacher Quality and Professional Development

FINDINGS

Teacher capacity was a significant issue identified by the Needs Assessment team. Many teachers need to update their content knowledge. Continuing education is a requirement of most professionals, including attorneys and health care providers. Teachers, including teachers in this district, need to engage in continuing education and professional development in content areas.

The team recognized that teachers and administrators have had various professional development opportunities. In addition to ADE-provided professional development activities, the district has hired Standards Works as their professional development provider of choice, and there have been a number of professional development activities provided by the district's area educational cooperative. The implementation of the professional development into daily practice is where the process has broken down.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Additional staff development training is needed. The focus should be on content knowledge training in math and literacy. Local college instructors may be used to provide enrichment and accelerated learning opportunities for faculty in their content area. In addition, classroom management and other staff development opportunities should be made available to faculty.
2. A concerted effort should be made concerning implementing professional development into daily practice.
3. Responsibility and accountability for implementing the professional development into daily practice must be shared by teachers, the principals in both schools, and the superintendent.
4. Staff development in standards based instructional delivery is needed.

Curriculum

FINDINGS

Needs Assessment team members observed some teachers teaching two or three grades below grade level. The implemented curriculum observed was not in alignment with the students' grade level and thus not in line with the material students are being held accountable, e.g. standardized tests. This contributes to the student's low-test scores, in conjunction with many other factors. Other factors include teacher content knowledge and instructional strategies, as well as local economic conditions, which minimize opportunities to learn.

In addition, lesson plans, curriculum, and actual instruction are not always consistent with state standards.

The district has adopted Direct Instruction as a literacy tool. Students appear to be learning to read using this method, however, they are not learning to comprehend what they read using this approach, as implemented in the district according to some teachers. In addition, there is no reading program for the 7th and 8th grade.

Other instructional programs have been adopted in a piecemeal fashion, omitting critical parts of the kit.

Neighboring districts that emerged from academic distress have valuable lessons to share, however, they have not been consulted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The district needs to align their curriculum with the state standards, particularly as the curriculum is actually taught in the classroom.
2. Curriculum, lesson plans, assessments, Individual Improvement Plans (teacher plans), Academic Improvement Plans (student plans), teacher evaluations, materials, and professional development should all be clearly linked to the state frameworks.
3. The district needs to be more aggressive in its monitoring and enforcement role concerning consistency of lesson plans, curriculum, and actual instruction.
4. A literacy program designed to improve reading and writing comprehension is needed, particularly in the 7th and 8th grades.
5. Adopted instructional programs should be adapted to the local conditions; however, critical elements of the program should not be omitted in the process. Neighboring schools should be consulted concerning their implementation of similar programs and use of similar kits.

6. Neighboring districts that have sustained success since removal from the academic distress list should be consulted.

Resources (educational technology focus)

FINDINGS

The district appears to be adequately equipped concerning technology. The computers and software could be updated. However, the primary issue is access. Students complained about the lack of access to computers in the library or classroom during school hours. In addition, students appear to be limited to word-processing and some email. There appears to be limited use of the Internet. Administrators have made an additional server available to students including storage space but students reported being unaware of this resource. In addition, there is no effort to align computer use with the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Access to computer use should be expanded immediately.
2. Students should be made aware of additional resources in the district, including access to a server outside the school.
3. Students should make much greater use of the Internet, including conducting school-based research, making web pages, and participating in virtual classrooms.
4. Teachers need to capitalize on the potential of the Internet and use it to expand their curriculum lesson planning and classroom assignments. At minimum there should be an alignment of classroom exercises or assignments and computer use.

Learning Environment

Classroom Management and Student Behavior

FINDINGS

Overall, students are generally polite and well behaved. The school district is not characterized by a plethora of detentions or violent acts. There was a problem concerning school violence in the past. Specific steps were taken to address this problem at that time, including publicizing the number of violence free days and reinforcing that positive behavior. Recently, there has been a slight resurgence of referrals or detentions and reported school discipline issues. In addition, there was no observed educational activity associated with detention. Students typically sit in the cafeteria and talk to each other according to students.

Most of the referrals appeared to come from the same handful of teachers. Some reported that the referrals for detention are often gratuitous and capricious or for insignificant infractions. This practice is not conducive to promoting respect or school discipline.

Enforcement of discipline policies has not always been consistent according to staff members interviewed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Gratuitous referrals for detention should cease.
2. Staff development concerning classroom management and discipline is needed.
3. A consistent enforcement of school rules should be implemented.
4. Consideration should be given to providing educational opportunities during detention.

Morale and Attitude

FINDINGS

School district morale is reported to be low. The label of serving in the academically distressed school and the news coverage have been personally humiliating for the faculty and administration. The attitude towards students is mixed. As one student stated: "Some communicate and bond with us and others do not." There are some dedicated teachers and administrators. However, there are teachers who have adopted very low expectations of students. Students have internalized some of the teacher's criticisms of them.

Teacher salaries are below the state average. Recruiting teachers has been a difficult issue. However, the district has begun to participate in state-sponsored teacher recruitment activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Morale can be improved by administrative and faculty follow-through and consistency, as discussed earlier.
2. A system of rewards and recognition for teachers and students should be considered based on performance.
3. Higher standards and expectations need to be adopted by students, teachers, and administrators. Teachers need to share responsibility for their students' success.
4. Opportunities to involve parents and community members should be considered.
5. Recruitment of qualified teaching staff should remain a priority. Vacant positions should not result in the absence of an instructional program for students for any significant length of time.

Health and Safety Concerns

FINDINGS

The district facilities do not appear to present significant health and safety concerns. However, specific concerns were shared with the superintendent during the site visit including the safety of specific playground equipment, an electrical wire hanging from the ceiling, and burning material on the playground during school hours. The superintendent assured the team leader that these matters would be addressed promptly.

School and Community Relations

FINDINGS

One of the issues raised about teacher and administrative commitment to the district was their "tie to the community."

Teachers typically live outside the district in large part because there is not enough adequate housing in the district. In addition, district teachers and administrators interviewed generally did not enroll their children in their own public schools. Although this is a parent's right, it does send a negative message to the community about the quality of the school. Parents have more of a stake in the success of a school if their own child is enrolled in it.

In addition, few teachers reported being actively involved in community life, ranging from sports to religious affiliations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Teachers and administrators should find ways of making a link to the community and being visible in community life, e.g. civic, religious, sports, and so on.

Conclusion

The primary finding of the Arkansas Department of Education Needs Assessment team is the district is hindered by inaction or a lack of follow-through, despite an abundance of data documenting their problems. Leadership is a significant issue. The absence of any real system of accountability has implications for the entire district, ranging from instruction to detention.

There is a plethora of data concerning the need to improve instructional strategy and delivery. However, converting the results of the data into meaningful improvement practices has not always occurred. Similarly, the district has the data to inform them that the same handful of teachers is responsible for the majority of detentions but no effective intervention has been implemented. There is also no standards-based educational activity associated with the detentions or alternative educational experiences.

This report is a call for organized accountability on all fronts, with an emphasis on improving instructional delivery and teacher content knowledge.

The need for technical assistance concerning teacher content knowledge is clear and has been requested by a few teachers. Faculty should be recruited to provide ongoing training to both teachers and students in specific core areas, such as math and literacy.

The curriculum as currently implemented is not in alignment with the State standards with some exceptions. Technology is not used to complement classroom teaching in an effective and systematic manner and access to computers is very limited. There is also a very limited connection to the community. This current state-of-affairs has resulted in extremely low morale for both administrators and teachers in the district.

Alzheimer Unified School District

Background

Alzheimer is a rural, low-income Delta community, approximately 45 minutes from Little Rock. Families are primarily African American; however, there is a migrant or seasonal Latino population as well. The town of Alzheimer has experienced a downturn in economic conditions.

The school district is composed of an elementary and secondary school, serving 534 students. The attendance rate is 93%. Class size is small. Approximately 93% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-cost meals. The school buildings are not quite within walking distance of one another because of the physical layout. The elementary school is in poor physical condition while the secondary school is in reasonable physical condition, aside from the issues identified in this report.

Consistently low student achievement along with secondary factors have prompted this Needs Assessment. As with all Academically Distressed districts, Academic phases, consequences and remedies are statutory.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Governance: Board Policies and District Support

FINDINGS

During the needs assessment interviews, the Alzheimer Unified School Board was characterized as not operating in the best interests of students. Concern about the Board came from parents, community leaders, and staff members. They noted the length of the meetings, the lack of action on important education issues, and the lack of support in disciplinary matters. A few selected quotations are telling: "School board ties the superintendent and principal's hands," one individual noted. "They cannot enforce any strict measures because the Board will intervene or not support them" was another statement that echoed the concerns of a number of individuals interviewed. "The Board should be dissolved,"

reported another interviewee. “The Board tends to micromanage everything” was the comment of another person. “You can’t blame all our problems on the School Board. It was a combination of things that dragged us down,” said another respondent. “We may need an outside person who will monitor us every day and keep us straight” another interviewee commented. It appears that internal conflicts and divisiveness have a negative impact on the Board with regard to basic operational and educational matters. On many decisions individuals reported a predictable pattern of three votes for and three against. It seems that significant issues are tabled from one meeting to the next.

These factors may have contributed to an environment that is not always conducive to learning. The school needs to be more inviting for teachers and students. Janitorial services appear to be inadequate, doors are missing from the girls' bathroom stalls, ceiling tiles are missing, and there is no hot water in some of the school bathrooms. These problems appear to be linked to funding decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Appoint an Interim Administrative Panel to monitor district operations. In addition, the State Department of Education and Interim Administrative Panel should provide current Board members with additional training and mentoring

Administration and School Leadership

FINDINGS

Leadership on every level of the school district appears to be compromised by funding issues, Board inaction, and behavior that undermines authority. The need for educational leadership from the Board has been discussed. The superintendent needs the full support of the Board. Principals, in turn, need to feel supported by the superintendent, and teachers need to feel that the principal will support their authority concerning disciplinary and other educational matters.

There seems to be a need for training and professional development for district level leaders in a variety of educational leadership domains, including personnel evaluations, curriculum, standards, and strategic planning. Leadership training in dealing with the issues of student discipline, school violence, and classroom management should be a priority.

There is some evidence of superintendent review of principals, principal review of teachers, and teacher review of students. However, there appears to be little evidence of implementation of recommendations. A system of monitoring implementation of recommendations concerning personnel performance appraisals, lesson plans, and academic improvement plans is needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Leadership training is recommended on every level in the school district. In addition to the Board training discussed earlier, technical assistance for the superintendent should focus on the areas specified above. Instructional Leadership and discipline should be priorities in professional development and technical assistance for principals. Continuing professional development for the classroom educators should include developing leadership skills and improving classroom management skills.

2. Formal evaluations of personnel performance are required at every level. They should be based on Arkansas academic standards and curriculum frameworks, high expectations for students, and implementation of research-based instructional and leadership strategies. In addition, a mechanism is required to track and ensure follow-up on recommended action steps.

Learning Environment and Student Support

Discipline

FINDINGS

It appears that student discipline has negatively impacted student learning and classroom practices. Teachers lock their doors during classroom instruction to minimize disruptions. Teachers reported that some students loiter in the hallways, disrupt classes, and wander throughout the school without a monitoring system to keep track of them. Some school personnel were concerned about jeopardizing State funding if disciplinary policies were enforced. Others were concerned about adverse publicity. The concern includes possibly compromising personal relationships if students are expelled from school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Discipline needs to be a top priority.
2. Teachers and administrators need to enforce existing rules concerning student discipline consistently.
3. Decisions concerning discipline need to be supported throughout the chain of command. The practice of supporting each level of authority should be encouraged. However, discipline including retention should not be punitive or distributed without merit. In addition, each level of authority retains the right to correct errors.

4. Technical assistance concerning school disciplinary issues and classroom management is needed.
5. Just as administrators need to hold each other accountable, teachers need to hold each other accountable for student learning, including high expectations of students, learning objectives, lesson plans, alignment of classroom instruction with standards, and proper demeanor, such as attendance and promptness.
6. A standards-based curriculum for the Alternative Learning Environment should be developed and implemented immediately.

Facilities

FINDINGS

The elementary school facility is in need of repair. Ceiling tiles are missing or stained, janitorial services appear to be inadequate, there are leaks in the skylights, the walls need painting, doors are missing from bathroom stalls, among other signs of disrepair, decay, and delayed maintenance. In addition all the windows on one side of the building are boarded up.

The high school is in fair condition. However, the floors are not well maintained. New towel dispensers are broken or vandalized as quickly as they are installed according to staff. However, as discussed earlier, some students reported that they do not believe they will be held accountable for destructive behavior.

The library needs some reorganization. Books were observed in piles instead of shelved appropriately. In addition, access to the library appears to be limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A facilities study should be conducted to evaluate the viability of the current elementary school structure. Recommendations

- concerning that formal assessment should be made to the Interim Administrative Panel.
2. Discipline needs to be improved in the high school. In addition, graffiti should be removed as quickly as it is found.
 3. Vandalized property should be replaced immediately. Sanctions should be created and consistently enforced concerning any expression of disrespect for the facility.
 4. High school teachers and administrators need to instill a sense of respect for the facility. This involves teaching students to respect themselves and each other. It also involves creating an educational environment conducive to learning in order to earn student trust and respect. It also involves high expectations for personal behavior and demeanor.
 5. Students, teachers, maintenance staff members, and administrators should be held accountable for keeping their classrooms and offices clean.
 6. The library should be made more accessible. The library should be kept clean and the books should be properly shelved and readily accessible to students.

Morale

FINDINGS

Teacher and administrator morale is extremely low. They appear dedicated to the profession and to the students. There are many competent teachers. However, some teachers reported that they needed more technical assistance concerning individual training needs. Other teachers expressed concern about discipline. They are also weary of being labeled or stigmatized as a school in Academic Distress despite efforts to improve.

It should be noted that the team found that teachers and administrators were not clear about roles and responsibilities. There

was confusion concerning the role and activities of the State, the Arkansas Department of Education, and the Educational Cooperative.

One community member expressed his view of the district and community stating: "We are the trash can." He explained that students expelled from other schools end up in the district.

Teacher salaries are lower than the state average and teachers are aware of the discrepancy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Teacher and administrator morale can be improved by concrete results associated with an effective implementation of the School Improvement Plan. The first steps toward a strategic plan and actual improvement involve: improved discipline and order in the school, capacity building self-assessment activities, alignment of curriculum and instruction with the State standards, technical assistance, and community involvement.
2. Appropriate rewards and recognition should be considered for students, teachers, and administrators depending on performance.
3. Higher standards and expectations concerning student behavior need to be adopted in the schools.

Instruction, Teacher Capacity, and Professional Development

FINDINGS

There are competent teachers in the district, teaching in their content areas. However, there are others who could benefit from additional training in their content area. Some teachers specifically requested technical assistance or continuing educational opportunities in their content area and the use of educational technology. The majority of teachers could also improve their instructional delivery approach. Lecturing appears to be the dominant mode of instruction. In some cases, little was observed in the way of scaffolding or explaining lessons.

There is some admirable work being done in reading instruction on the elementary level. However, it could be enhanced and there is no reading teacher or program in the high school. Improved reading instruction is needed. Some limitations to the direct instructional approach as implemented were reported.

Class size and student ratios appear reasonable. The smaller class sizes should facilitate greater teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Local college level faculty should be recruited to provide enrichment training for district teachers.
2. Local college level faculty should be recruited to provide students with additional instruction in math and reading.
3. Teachers should receive additional technical assistance concerning both their content areas and instructional strategy or delivery.
4. Altheimer administrators and teachers should consider observing and consulting with other local school district personnel to assist them as they extricate themselves from academic distress.
5. Reading instruction should be provided on the high school level. Reading efforts could be enhanced on the elementary level.

Assessment/Student Achievement

FINDINGS

The school district has been classified as Academically Distressed, Phase II since 1996-97. The standardized test scores point to inconsistent progress and performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Altheimer Unified School District should enter into a partnership with the state, community, local college faculty, and various technical assistance providers in order to improve student performance. This report presents recommendations aimed at making improvements in this area.
2. Discipline in the high school needs to be improved. Conventional classroom learning cannot take place if students are not in the classroom or are disruptive while in the classroom.
3. The schools in the district need to adopt a district-wide or at least a whole-school vision concerning what they are trying to accomplish and how they plan to go about achieving their vision.
4. Assistance is needed to improve teacher capacity where appropriate.
5. Additional instruction is needed in core areas such as math and literacy. The district might consider recruiting mathematics and literacy coaches to provide instruction in these areas.
6. The taught curriculum must be aligned with state standards.
7. Students should be held to a higher standard of academic and disciplinary-related behavior in the classroom.

Resources

FINDINGS

Textbooks, desks, and computer equipment appear to be in good condition. However, limited use is made of the computers aside from word processing. According to teachers interviewed, paper is rationed, making it difficult to implement lesson plans. In addition, there appears to be a need to augment laboratory equipment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A concerted effort should be made to ensure that all students have appropriate classroom materials, including textbooks and supplementary materials.
2. A systematic effort should be made to make effective use of educational technology in the school by teachers and students.
3. Teachers should have ample access to conventional supplies, such as paper, art materials, and laboratory equipment and materials.

School Community Parent Relations

FINDINGS

Typically, many staff members do not live in the community or actively participate in community life. In addition, they do not enroll their own children in the district schools. This creates a disconnect between teachers and administrators, and school district students, as well as their parents in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers and administrators should work with community leaders to find creative ways of establishing links with community members.

Conclusion

The Needs Assessment team identified several significant findings. They included School Board operations and school discipline. The district also needs additional assistance with academic leadership.

The need for additional professional development concerning administrative and teaching expertise is clear and has been requested by both administrators and teachers. Mathematics and Literacy Coaches are needed and should be recruited to provide training in core content areas.

School-community networks or partnerships are also needed to support academic development. It is time to create new relationships and partnerships to improve student performance.