

Allocating Resources in an Education Reform Environment:  
Findings from 12 School Districts

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## Allocating Resources in an Education Reform Environment: Findings from 12 School Districts

### Introduction

With passage of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, and heightened public interest in student achievement, educators must better understand how schools can provide every child with opportunities to excel educationally and succeed throughout life using the resources available. This requires linking education priorities with local practices to allocate resources efficiently. Resource allocation must also be better understood as one component of comprehensive school and district reform efforts.

Previous research about successful resource allocation practices has revealed that schools and districts can and should implement a range of strategies to align fiscal, staff, and other resources to instructional goals. Needs-based budgeting, flexible account managing, and cost analysis support effective allocation of fiscal resources. Lowering class size and increasing instructional leadership are strategies for supporting goals through staffing patterns. Block scheduling and other time management strategies can make more effective use of teachers' time. A wide range of possible resource allocation strategies that schools and districts might implement exists. This paper briefly explores the findings from our examination of resource allocation practices in 12 school districts in the Southwest. We will describe with some detail the relationship between successful resource allocation strategies and the education improvement efforts in one of these school districts.

### Methods

This study examined 12 public school districts in four states in the Southwest region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas) that demonstrated consistent and sustained improvement in

student achievement over a five-year period, labeled improvement districts for the purposes of this study. In order to compare the effect of size and geography, the improvement districts represented varying levels of student membership and rural/urban/suburban status. The percentage of minority and/or poverty students in all were higher than the state average.

Researchers sought answers to three questions.

- 1) How do improvement school districts allocate their financial resources?
- 2) What allocation practices have improvement school districts implemented that they identify as effective?
- 3) What barriers and challenges have improvement school districts faced in resource allocation?

To gain an in-depth understanding of resource allocation practices, individual and focus group interviews were conducted with district and campus administrators at the 12 improvement districts. Researchers also distributed surveys to all teachers in the districts with the goal of gaining a broader, more complete picture of resource allocation practices at the school level. These data sources were triangulated with fiscal, staffing, and demographic data collected from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) for further elucidation and validity of results about their allocation of resources.

Analyses of qualitative and quantitative data were performed in order to answer the research questions. Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed first using open coding in order to identify relevant themes and then using thematic coding to organize and further refine the results of open coding. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and cross tabulations, were performed on survey data. Researchers also used fiscal, demographic, and student performance data for the 12 districts to perform a descriptive comparison of improvement districts and districts of comparable size.

## Results Among the 12 Districts

When compared to districts with similar demographics in their state, the 12 improvement districts were found to have spent more per pupil over a five-year period in direct student instruction. The 12 districts engaged in successful resource allocation practices such as needs-based budgeting, flexible fund management, innovative staffing patterns, and leveraging of outside resources. These spending priorities and allocation practices, however, were neither systematically applied nor were they part of an overall district plan regarding the effective and efficient use of resources. Teachers and administrators did, however, reveal that the 12 districts all explicitly engaged in overall reform practices, including:

- Focus on standards and benchmarks
- Data-driven decision making
- Increase use of technology
- Emphasis on instructional programs for math and literacy
- Investment in at-risk programs
- Priority towards professional development
- Attention to community and parent initiatives
- Development of school and district leadership
- Use of formal and informal evaluation

Qualitative analyses of the interviews with school and district administrators further revealed specific allocation resources and practices used toward reform goals. They included leadership, decision-making, monetary and budgeting, staffing, and other resources such as technology and facilities and parent and community. Interviews described a variety of ways in which these resources were applied to challenging circumstances.

*Findings from One Sample District.* In one medium-sized district with approximately 10,000 students, interviews with school and district administrators revealed innovative resource allocation practices used toward the implementation of elementary-level reading programs. The district was characterized by not only high minority enrollment and poverty, but also high student mobility and a high superintendent turnover rate. Exemplary practices in three resource areas were evident in the effort to adopt and implement a reading program: decision-making, monetary budgeting, and staffing.

Decision-making resources were deployed for the purposes of collaboration, data use, and assessment. Elementary school teachers collaborated on the assessment of and decision to adopt a specific reading program. They began by assessing their school's standardized test data, which revealed a group of students on the borderline of performing at grade level, the "bubble kids." Focusing effort on this group maximized the reform effort. The teachers were trained by consultants provided through the reading program and spent time outside of class to align the reading curriculum to state standards and benchmarks. The strategic plan included packaging the reading curriculum into nine-week units that were then evaluated by the teachers after implementation of each segment. If students were not on track at the end of the learning unit, teachers realigned the curriculum.

Monetary resources for the reading program presented a number of challenges, such as funding and staffing a computer lab to support the reading program. Administrators began by assessing needs and then searched for all funding options. Two funding entities were created in the district to assist funding decisions. One district budget committee was made up of business people, parents, and principals, and another was funded with legislative and staff development monies. District administrator used those entities as vehicles for granting special funding

requests from the district budget. The resulting reading program budget pooled a variety of fund sources. Title 1 money funded annual and registration fees, and site licenses for the computer lab that supported the reading program. Three educational assistants were also funded through Title 1, reallocated from other areas to assist with support duties and tutoring. Instructional materials for the computer lab were funded through Title 1 and activity money derived from fund-raisers. Grants written and awarded for technology training were used to train the teachers on software attached to the reading program. Building and maintaining a positive relationship with funding foundation staff was reported to facilitate special funding requests.

Administrators also had to consider staffing resources in order to provide the reading program with required specialized staff. A certified teacher with 18 years of reading experience was reallocated from another area to facilitate the reading program implementation. Another certified teacher was reallocated to provide the tutoring component. Teacher professional development for curriculum alignment was paid through a special request to the district budget entity. A full-time technology staff person was hired to staff the lab and train teachers. Two truancy officers, non-instructional staff, were hired to track children's whereabouts and free up teachers' time to focus on instructional activities.

While most of these resource allocation practices were not planned in advanced or systematically applied to challenges, the district administrators were successful in implementing a reform effort that improved reading. The average district reading scores increased from 24% reading at grade level to 60%, and specifically, performance improvement was seen in the majority of the district's low performing schools. Strong leadership proved to be a critical factor in the success of the reform effort, especially the ability to have and maintain a vision of the goal and draw upon all possible resources to achieve it.

## Conclusions

The lack of a purposeful and planned approach to resource allocation at the 12 improvement districts did not result in unsuccessful resource allocation practices. In fact spending at the 12 districts was generally better prioritized towards student instruction than comparison districts and each of the twelve districts implemented effective, innovative allocation strategies. Researchers conclude that effective resource allocation at the 12 districts were a result of a larger district reform effort and grew out of district improvement practices. A central issue that few districts could afford to address, as mentioned in the interviews, was the importance of starting a vision process at least the year before implementing a reform effort. While few administrators had the luxury of knowing well in advance what they would be facing, envisioning not only one year but also several years ahead may open up the possibility of successful implementation of broader school and district reform efforts. The process could become part of a larger strategic plan, one that would benefit from the systematic application of creative resource allocation practices.

## Educational Importance of the Study

This study explores an important perspective in school improvement through its view of successful strategies and practices of districts that have made continuous improvements in student achievement over time. This information is useful to local decision makers in helping to assess school and district allocation practices and whether larger reform efforts exist to support those practices. Study results also help state-level policymakers better understand the linkages between the effective allocation of resources and education reform.