

Characteristics of Succeeding and Struggling South Carolina School Districts

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Over the last thirty years, South Carolina has been working to build a successful economy characterized by high per capita income, family self-sufficiency and diverse revenue bases. State leaders have supported strengthening public education because of the positive relationship between achievement and economic success. Beginning with the 1977 Education Finance Act and extending through the most recent innovations in virtual schooling, South Carolina leaders progressively have refined and raised expectations for school results and increased the resources available to the districts to achieve those results. Legislative attention over the thirty-year period has focused on establishing an instructional foundation funding program and on providing additional resources to target special student populations, to develop and advance the teaching profession and to expand academic expectations from minimum competencies to the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the twenty-first century.

Three acts, fulfilling a commitment to educate all students to a defined standard, dominate the responsibilities of school districts in public education policy: (a) the Education Finance Act of 1977 allocates funds to school districts in accordance with student instructional needs and varying community economic capacity; (b) the Education Improvement Act of 1984 uses information from student and educator assessments to raise student achievement for students scoring below state minimum expectations and to provide specialized instruction for students capable of achieving at the highest levels; and (c) the Education Accountability Act imposes a results-based accountability system intended to “[focus] on improving teaching and learning so that students are equipped with a strong academic foundation.” The EAA uses academic content standards as the basis for the system and states clearly that “[t]he standards must be reflective of the highest level of academic skills with the rigor necessary to improve the curriculum and instruction in South Carolina’s schools so that students are encouraged to learn at unprecedented

levels and must be reflective of the highest level of academic skills at each grade level” (SC Code of Laws 1976, as amended, §59-18-300.)

District Responsibilities

South Carolina’s constitution (Article XI) establishes that the state is responsible for a system of free public schools (Constitution of the State of South Carolina.) Through a series of statutes and regulations, the General Assembly has delegated policy and administrative functions to eighty-five local school districts and three statewide districts. The eighty-five local districts, with enrollments ranging from less than 1,000 students to over 60,000 students, are governed by boards of trustees with authority to carry out the responsibilities assigned through state or federal statutes. These districts enroll roughly 700,000 students in slightly over 1,100 schools and are the systems most often associated with the term “public education.” The three statewide districts vary in purpose and student population. The Department of Juvenile Justice School District and the Palmetto Unified School District serve incarcerated populations on the agencies’ residential campuses. The South Carolina Charter School District, initiated in 2006 and funded beginning in Fiscal Year 2008, anticipates launching five schools in the 2008-2009 academic year.

Although most attention in education reform focuses on the individual schools, scholars remind us of the importance of the school district. McLaughlin and Talbert state that, “for better or worse, districts matter fundamentally to what goes on in schools and classrooms and that without effective district engagement school-by-school reform efforts are bound to disappoint” (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2003). Childress and others affirm this position in *Managing School Districts for High Performance* (2007), when they write:

The most important work in a district happens in classrooms, where teachers work with their students to master challenging academic content. However, the classroom does not stand alone. It is nested within a school where teachers must collaborate and coordinate their curriculum and teaching so that students experience a coherent academic program over time. Schools, in turn, are nested

within districts, which are uniquely positioned to ensure equity and to increase the capacity of all schools—not just some to succeed.

These authors and others cite the importance of systemic focus over time and collaboration as central to deep change. Yet analyses of performance in South Carolina and other states indicate that some districts succeed while comparable ones do not. Given that both succeeding and struggling districts have the same legal responsibilities, why do some achieve and others do not? A comprehensive study of improving school districts in Washington found four strong categories of action in the districts that improve: (1) quality teaching and learning; (2) effective leadership; (3) support for system wide improvement; and (4) clear and collaborative relationships (Shannon et al, 2004).

What then are the roles and responsibilities of South Carolina districts and which factors differentiate those designated as succeeding from those that are not?

Roles and responsibilities of the school district can be drawn from professional literature, accreditation standards and state law. In a meta-analysis of 27 studies conducted since 1970 of district influence on student achievement Waters and Marzano (2006) identified five responsibilities of school district leadership: collaborative goal-setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction and use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The authors also found a correlation between student achievement and “defined autonomy” for schools. Defined autonomy for schools occurs when superintendents set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction “yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals” (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Another meta-analysis (Anderson 2003) explores the role of the district administrative unit as a promoter of change and as the agent to focus schools on the community-held goals. District administrations were perceived as successful when they offered leadership stability, policy governance, consensus on shared visions, the capacity to respond to different learning needs and the alignment of resources to support accomplishment of priorities. Essentially the district serves as the origin of strategic action through focusing on the following: (a) district-wide sense of efficacy, (b) focus on student achievement and quality of instruction, (c) adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards, (d) district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction, (e) alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials and assessment to relevant standards, (f) multi-measure accountability systems; (g) targeted and phased foci of improvement, (h) investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels; (i) district-wide job-embedded professional development and supports for teachers; (j) district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community; (k) new approaches to board-district and district-school relations; and (l) strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources (Anderson 2003). McLaughlin and Talbert agree that the influence, coherence and coordination provided by the district organization “matter[s] fundamentally to what goes on in schools and classrooms and that without effective district engagement, school-by-school reform efforts are bound to disappoint” (2003).

In South Carolina schools and, more recently, districts are encouraged either by statute or by professional norm to earn voluntary regional accreditation. For example, South Carolina permits schools and districts to use the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) school planning process in lieu of the state-structured process. The SACS standards for school accreditation incorporate state assessment results. Currently only a handful of South Carolina school districts (e.g. Horry, Richland Two) have achieved system (or district) accreditation. System accreditation is earned through satisfaction of ten standards (SACS, 2006). These standards address the following components (descriptive statements are displayed in Figure 1): Standard 1-Beliefs and Mission; Standard 2-Governance and Leadership; Standard 3-Curriculum;

Standard 4-Instructional Design; Standard 5-Assessment, Measurement and Effectiveness Results' Standard 6-Resources; Standard 7-Student Services; Standard 8-Staff and Stakeholder Communications; Standard 9-Physical Facilities; Standard 10-Continuous Process of Educational Improvement.

Through statutes, South Carolina school districts are assigned roles and responsibilities for policy in four general categories: school facilities; personnel matters, contractual agreements for services, and the curricular and instructional program (South Carolina Code of Laws, 1976, as amended, Chapters 1, 17, 19 and 24). School districts are under the "management of boards of trustees," (§59-19-10, SC Code of Laws 1976, as amended). The four functions are exercised through a plethora of specific provisions. A simple search of Title 59 of the SC Code of Laws for the term "school district" yields 114 matches, 89 matches are found for "board of trustees"; and 85 matches are found for "superintendent." A search of State Board of Education regulations yields 581 references to "school districts;" 26 to "boards of trustees" and 114 to "superintendent." All public education units ranging from boards of trustees to a single school) must be accredited by the State Board of Education (SBE). The state accreditation process is linked to eligibility to receive state funds and to operate schools. Through this process the SBE enforces the statutes and regulations (Horne, 2007). A review of the accreditation reports for the years 2000-2007 indicate that no district has been denied accreditation. Districts may find themselves *advised* but there are no consistent patterns among the problems that have resulted in an *advised* status. Often an administrator or a teacher does not hold the appropriate certification for the assignment (South Carolina Department of Education, 2001 though 2007).

There are commonalities among the three sources of district roles and responsibilities presented above (i.e., professional literature, SACS standards and statutes). The common areas are goals, governance and leadership, measurement of results, core processes and ancillary or support processes. Core processes include the curriculum, instruction and professional development. The chart below demonstrates alignment as well as gaps in prescription of functions.

Figure 1

School District Roles and Responsibilities

District Function	Research Literature	SACS Standards	General Statutory Directives
Goals	<p>Collaborative goal-setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006).</p> <p>Focus on student achievement and quality of instruction (Anderson, 2003)</p>	<p>Beliefs and Mission- A quality system develops and communicates a vision, beliefs and mission that provide a focus for the quality of the work of the students and the quality of the work of the system and schools.</p>	<p>59-18-100-“improving teaching and learning so that students are equipped with a strong academic foundation”</p> <p>59-20-30-“guarantee each student . . . the availability of at least minimum education programs and services appropriate to his needs”</p>
Governance and Leadership	<p>Board alignment and support of district goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006)</p> <p>Investment in instructional leadership at the school and district levels (Waters & Marzano, 2006)</p> <p>Defined autonomy for schools (Waters & Marzano, 2006)</p> <p>Redesign the organization so that it supports the strategy (Childress et al, 2007)</p> <p>Allocate resources in alignment with the strategy (Childress et al, 2007)</p> <p>Effective leadership: focus on all students learning; dynamic and distributed leadership (Shannon, 2004)</p>	<p>Governance and Leadership- A quality system provides for and promotes stability in the leadership, governance and organizational structure which include a focus in developing and maintaining a vision; an emphasis on improving student learning; and support for innovative efforts that produced desired results;</p>	<p>59-19-90. General powers and duties of school trustees. (1) Provide schoolhouses. (2) Employ and discharge teachers. (3) Promulgate rules and regulations. Promulgate rules prescribing scholastic standards of achievement and standards of conduct and behavior that must be met by all pupils (4) Call meetings of electors for consultation. (5) Control school property. (6) Visit schools. (7) Control educational interest of district. (8) Charge matriculation and incidental fees. (9) Transfer and assign pupils. (10) Prescribe conditions and charges for attendance. (11) Provide school-age child care program or facilities therefore, Provide: (a) a school-age child care program for children aged five through fourteen years (12) Establish the annual calendar.</p>
Measurement of Results	<p>Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006)</p> <p>Using performance data for decision-making, organizational learning and accountability (Childress et al 2007)</p> <p>Support for systemic improvement: effective use of data; strategic allocation of resources; policy and program coherence (Shannon, 2004)</p>	<p>Assessment, Measurement and Effectiveness Results- A quality system uses effective and continuous performance management systems for assessing, aligning and improving student learning and operation performance, including organizational and instructional effectiveness, at all levels and areas of the system.</p> <p>Continuous Process of Educational Improvement A quality system establishes implements and monitors a continuous process of educational improvement clearly focused on</p>	<p>59-20-30 (2) To encourage school district initiative in seeking more effective and efficient means of achieving the goals of the various programs.</p> <p>59-18-100 (3) require all districts to establish local accountability systems to stimulate quality teaching and learning practices and target assistance to low performing schools</p>

District Function	Research Literature	SACS Standards	General Statutory Directives
<p>Core Processes: Curriculum, Instruction, professional development</p>	<p>Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006).</p> <p>District-wide job-embedded professional development and supports to all teachers</p> <p>Implementing the strategy effectively across schools with different characteristics and Developing and managing human capital to carry out the strategy (Childress et al 2007)</p> <p>Quality teaching and leaning: high expectations and accountability for adults, coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, coordinated and embedded professional development (Shannon, 2004)</p>	<p>student performance.</p> <p>Instructional Design- A quality system develops and employs instructional strategies and activities in support of student achievement of the expectations for learning defined by the curriculum</p>	<p>59-18-110 (3) require all districts to establish local accountability systems to stimulate quality teaching and learning practices and target assistance to low performing schools; (4) provide resources to strengthen the process of teaching and learning in the classroom to improve student performance and reduce gaps in performance; (5) support professional development as integral to improvement and to the actual work of teachers and school staff;</p>
<p>Ancillary or support processes</p>	<p>Clear and collaborative relationships: professional culture and collaborative relationships; clear understanding of school district rules and responsibilities; interpreting and managing the external environment(Shannon, 2004)</p>	<p>Staff and Stakeholder Communications and Relationships- quality system develops and supports organizational patterns or structures that promote effective communications and relationships between and among the schools, stakeholders and system.</p> <p>Resources- A quality system has qualified staff that is supported by the financial and physical resources necessary to fulfill the vision, mission and goals of the system.</p> <p>Student Services- A quality system identifies and has a network of services that support the development and well-being, including the health and safety of each student.</p> <p>Physical Facilities- A quality system has the necessary resources to provide the facilities, sites and equipment for the educational programs and services to be fully implemented throughout the system and individual schools.</p>	<p>SECTION 59-28-160. Local school board of trustees activities. Each local school board of trustees shall: (2) incorporate, where possible, proven parental involvement practices into existing policies and efforts; (3) adopt policies that emphasize the importance, strive to increase and clearly define expectations for effective parental involvement practices in the district schools; (5) provide incentives Section 59-28-170. School district superintendent activities. (A) Each school district superintendent shall consider: (4) encouraging principals to adjust class and school schedules to accommodate parent-teacher conferences at times more convenient to parents and, to the extent possible, accommodate parents in cases where transportation and normal school hours present a hardship.</p> <hr/> <p>59-19-90. General powers and duties of school trustees. (1)Provide schoolhouses. (5) Control school property</p>

Differences in District Performance

If districts impact performance through communicating a focus, allocating resources, providing support and collaborating internally or externally, then it is logical to assume that there would be differences in actions or resource allocations linked to academic achievement. To explore this, overall performance and organizational profile information were studied. Forty-two (42) of South Carolina's 85 districts have earned absolute performance ratings of Average, Good or Excellent across the seven years in which schools have been rated, including the years in which the rigor of the school ratings designation was intensified. For purposes of this article, these districts are defined as Succeeding Districts. The forty-three (43) districts with lower and/or variable ratings are referred to as Struggling Districts.

How do the 42 succeeding differ from the 43 struggling districts? For this purpose profile information on the annual district report card were sorted into categories aligned with the five functions or providing general descriptive information. The means by district grouping are displayed in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

2007 Profile Information by District Grouping

District Function	Report Card Data Element	District Median	Succeeding Districts N=42	Struggling Districts N=43
General Description	Average Daily Membership (ADM)	8,289	11,092	6,976
	Change in ADM 1992-93 to 2002-2003	-3.7	11.17	-7.74
	Poverty Index	72.7	61.9	78
	% Students with non-speech disabilities	10	9.5	10
	% Students eligible for state gifted & talented	12.	15.5	11
	Per Pupil Expenditure	\$8,454	\$7,935	\$8,812
	# schools	13	15.8	11
	# teachers	579	755.5	495
Goals	2007 Absolute Index	3.0	3.2	3.0
	2007 Improvement Index	0	-0.2	0
Governance and Leadership	# of Supts. Between 2001-2007	1.98	1.76	2.18
	Superintendent's years in the district	4.0	Not available	Not available
	Number of schools <i>not</i>	0	0	0

District Function	Report Card Data Element	District Median	Succeeding Districts N=42	Struggling Districts N=43
	<i>accredited</i>			
Measurement of Results			Defined by ratings designation	Defined by ratings designation
Core Processes	2006 % Spent on Teacher Salaries	53	55	52
	2006 % Spent on Instruction	56	58	55
	Average Teacher Salary	\$43,267	\$44,342	\$42,906
	% of teachers with advanced degrees	55	56.6	53
	% teachers on continuing contracts	75	78.7	75
	% teachers on emergency or provisional certificates	6	3.3	7
	% teachers returning	88	90.1	87
	Teacher attendance	94	95.2	95
	# professional development days/teacher	16	15.1	18
	Student-teacher ratio	20	21	20
	Prime Instructional Time	88	90	88
	Student attendance	96	96.3	96
	Student retention rate	4	3.6	5
	% students participating in AP/IB courses	12	14.9	11
Ancillary or support processes	Mean age of facilities	20	23.9	30
	% Portable classrooms	7	5.3	7
	Vacancies more than 9 weeks	1	0.4	2

Sources: South Carolina Department of Education, 2007. Annual District Report Cards and South Carolina Department of Education, 2004. *Rankings*.

Findings and Questions

Sixty-six (66) of South Carolina's students are enrolled in succeeding districts (465,811 or 704,500 students). Succeeding and struggling districts differ in structure and size within and across the two groupings. Across the groupings immediate differences emerge from an examination of the data. Enrollment in these districts ranges from 1,223 to 67,966. The struggling districts enroll fewer students, with district enrollments ranging from 843 to 42,488.

Succeeding districts enroll larger numbers of students and fewer of those students are living in poverty. Succeeding districts also have greater variation in student poverty indices, ranging from

22.7 percent to 76.6 percent. The average poverty index for succeeding districts is 61.9 percent compared with the 78 percent mean index in struggling districts.

The succeeding districts differ from their struggling peers in slightly lower percentages of students with disabilities but larger percentages of students in the gifted and talented program. Ten-year data are available for the period 1993-2003 (State Department of Education, 2006). These data indicate a pattern of enrollment declines. Succeeding districts experienced an average growth of 11.67 percent, while struggling districts experienced an average loss of 7.74 percent. Only ten (24 percent) of the succeeding districts lost enrollment over this period, compared to 35 (81 percent) of the struggling districts.

Fifty-five (55) percent of school districts have experienced declines in average daily [student] membership between 1993 and 2003. Between 2005 and 2006, 46 percent of South Carolina school districts experienced declines in enrollment (39 of 85). Only 24 percent of successful school districts experienced enrollment declines across the two years in contrast with 72 percent of the struggling school districts. Lorna Jimerson, writing for the Rural School and Community Trust, points out that “when the enrollment decline is chronic, it generates serious financial distress because of the lack of per-pupil state revenue. This financial hemorrhage usually results in deep cuts in programs, staff and resources (2006).

Struggling districts are experiencing difficulties meeting the state goals for school results despite the infusion of state technical assistance funds.

No public school district is in the status of having funds withheld for failing to carry out the roles and responsibilities defined in statute. In fact, of 90 district units (local school districts, special schools, and statewide school districts) 82 are in “all clear” status and six are “advised”. None have been dropped (Horne, 2007). Only in recent years has SACS offered accreditation at the district level; therefore, only a minority of South Carolina districts has achieved district

accreditation. The South Carolina Office for SACS reports that a dozen or more districts are in pursuing district wide accreditation. We should note that an overwhelming majority of South Carolina public schools nested within all South Carolina school districts are SACS-accredited.

Differences in leadership stability likely contribute to the performance difference. Of the 42 succeeding districts earning ratings of Average, Good or Excellent consistently between 2001 and 2007, 76 percent (31 of 42) have exhibited stable leadership in the superintendency.” Stable leadership is defined as employing the same individual as superintendent or having filled a vacant superintendency with an individual from within the district. In struggling districts only 26 percent (11 of the 43) have had stable superintendencies .In his study of urban school districts, Frederick M. Hess (1999) states that “the fact that superintendents cannot expect to be around when their policies comes to fruition discourages a focus on long-term improvement and encourages an emphasis on short-term crises and projecting a reassuring image of progress.”

The struggling districts spend more dollars, but a smaller proportion of those dollars on instruction. The struggling districts spend more per pupil, generally supplementing state and local per pupil revenues with federal funds related to their student population. (e.g., Title One, IDEA) and larger amounts of state technical assistance funding. Succeeding districts spend \$4602 per pupil on instruction (58 percent) while their lower performing peers spend \$4847 per pupil (55 percent), approximately 5 percent more per pupil. Struggling districts have fewer students eligible for the gifted and talented program, lower enrollment in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs. Lower program enrollments levels result in higher costs for low incidence offerings. The struggling districts spend almost 20 percent more per pupil for non-instructional functions.

As is often lamented, teachers with the least experience and lower qualifications are assigned to the most challenging situations. Analyses of the struggling districts indicate teachers with fewer years of experience and less likely to have an advanced degree. Vacancies are lengthier and

absenteeism is higher contributing to smaller proportions of instructional time than in succeeding districts. The number of teacher vacancies more than nine weeks likely increase personnel costs as substitutes must be found and employed and the teacher recruitment and retention process extends into the academic year.

Ancillary and support processes may be a source of increased cost to the struggling districts. The facilities in these school districts are markedly older (25 percent older) and, no doubt, require greater maintenance and not able to take advantage of more recent energy-efficient systems.

Conclusions and Residual Questions

The analyses yield two strong influences on district performance that separate the succeeding from the struggling districts. First, the level of student poverty is much higher in struggling districts. Educational and social research literature is full of studies documenting shifts in instructional focus, resource allocation and expectations that occur as the incidence of poverty increases. Economic deprivation results in health and social barriers to successful progression through school. Educators at classroom, school and district levels must respond to these challenges which divert resources from one priority to another. The second influence that differentiates between the succeeding and struggling school district emerges from examinations of the teacher data. The struggling districts report lower teacher retention, more extended vacancies, fewer advanced degrees and lower teacher salaries. Essentially struggling districts routinely address more complex instructional needs with less experienced teachers.

The struggling districts are spending more dollars generally but a lower proportion of those dollars on instruction. Since technical assistance funds are spent on instruction, we would expect these districts to spend a greater proportion of funds on instruction, but they are not. Complementary studies of resource allocation should be conducted. In order to determine how funds from other revenue sources have been diverted from instruction. Pan et. al. explored expenditure patterns in four states and found marked differences in resource allocated in high

and low performing districts (SEDL, 2003). Working in struggling settings requires interaction and coordination with health and human service providers so that the impact of poverty on teaching and learning is ameliorated. These students also require greater amounts of instructional time and services that may not be as costly in urban and suburban settings (e.g., transportation). Are costs such as these a contributor to the per pupil expenditures? Other studies have documented the high costs of teacher turnover, evident in both personnel functions and professional development costs. The struggling districts report more days in teacher professional development.

Few would argue that quality teaching is the key to student achievement. For quality teaching to be the rule, rather than the exception, then districts must allocate resources, provide consistent leadership and overcome those barriers which preclude or impinge upon success in the classroom.

The question of the impact of district organization remains. This study yields one level of information about differences; however, the study opens questions regarding resource allocation, stability of focus and leadership and variations in how organizations respond to opportunity and challenge.

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