

A Southern Strategy for Success

“The best intentioned movement in modern education—the drive for higher standards—has driven public education to the brink. Unintended consequences of the movement could change the face of American education,” said John Poteat of the North Carolina Public School Forum at the SERVE Southern States Seminar. One such consequence is the mounting opposition to the testing movement. This opposition, claims Poteat (his organization is a staunch supporter of the standards movement), is fueled by legitimate concerns:

- Flaws in testing programs
- Debates over passing standards
- Charges of teaching to the test
- Disappearance of non-tested curriculum
- Pressure on teachers and students

As a result, Poteat said, “The wealth of testing data now available to the public has spawned its own unintended consequences:

- Feeding a negative image of public schools;
- Causing a growing dissatisfaction in our minority community;
- Threatening to fracture the traditional pro-public school lobby.”

Further, because the persistence of the movement is leading to a massive refocusing of resources to at-risk young people and subsequent cuts in arts, music, science, and foreign language offerings, middle-class parents are asking, “What about my kids?”

At the SERVE Southern States Seminar in Destin, Florida, January 10-11, 2002, approximately fifty mostly state-level administrators from the six SERVE states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and North and South Carolina, interacted with researchers; discussed state efforts to improve schools; and identified patterns or issues. The goal was to create a regional response to school improvement efforts and state policy recommendations: a “Southern Strategy for Success.”

Kicking off the seminar with their research were Andrew and HATHIA Hayes (University of North Carolina-Wilmington) who studied Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration implementation efforts in 70 North Carolina schools. Along with startling insights into the workings of these schools, the Hayes’ research confirmed much of what Poteat discussed. They said structural barriers in state policy and in local policy and practices are slowing down reform in many cases; “there were so many different projects and issues operating in the schools...the teachers and leaders had difficulty viewing the comprehensive school reform initiative as an overarching plan for improvement.”

In sessions interspersed with interaction with the researchers, state representatives gathered in role-alike and state groups to build on the speakers’ ideas. They identified the following main patterns or issues as having a detrimental impact on the standards movement:

- A disconnect between state policy and teachers' perception of that policy
- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Local school Leadership
- A lack of resources for professional development

Following is a synopsis of the discussion.

A Disconnect Between Policymakers and Teachers

Teachers feel pressured to improve test scores rather than teach to content standards. Teachers indicated, in nearly every interview with the Hayes team, "...a concern for penalties they may incur due to low student test scores." The Hayes team says it clearly and succinctly: "State testing and high-stakes accountability programs contributed to low levels of reform." Comprehensive school reform was meant to assist schools in raising student achievement; it should be seen as a welcome support to schools meeting the requirements of the state accountability system. How can states alleviate this conflict between different parts of the same puzzle?

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Participants reported many academically challenged schools continue to fill positions with teachers working outside their content areas. Others are placing permanent substitutes in classrooms until qualified teachers become available. The Hayes team reported, "In several of these schools, staffing was mainly with initially-licensed teachers or lateral-entry teachers who revealed little evidence that they had the capability to make changes through their own efforts. Many of these teachers were merely trying to make it through each day and week."

To meet this challenge, many school systems are changing the "one-size fits all" pay schedule. According to Poteat, more schools are offering signing bonuses, providing higher pay for hard-to-fill jobs, and giving financial incentives to teachers willing to work in low-performing schools. How can we build on these ideas to craft a regional policy to bring up to high standards what all teachers in the Southeast know and are able to do?

Local School and District Leadership

State representatives noted that low-performing schools often demonstrate a lack of clarity in school vision and a failure to strategically address the needs of schools—especially where school leaders see improvement efforts as a matter of compliance rather than a need to change.

The Hayes report indicates that principal leadership is essential to the reform efforts in schools: "An important proportion of the CSR schools did not have leaders skilled in (or willing to engage in) planning, developing and communicating new and different visions of their school, nor were they expert in making decisions dependent on valid, goal-related data" Their study also revealed, "When efforts to change were authentic...there was a clear link between success and the expertise, experiences, and engagement of the principal, several factors in the history of the school, and the strength of the local education agency support." What can state and district leaders do to provide the

professional development school and district leaders need and support administrators in their efforts as reform leaders?

A Lack of Resources for Professional Development

Unfortunately, many school staffs are not receiving the continuous, focused, and meaningful professional development they need. One participant complained, "There is a failure to align money to the intense program assistance expected with individual schools." Furthermore, the Hayes team reported, "... much of the staff development was low in intensity or duration and some was low in quality, especially given the needs of the teachers for development and the amount of change that was being attempted. Among these low-intensity or short-duration forms were attending workshops that were mainly for orientation to models or practices, attending conferences, or 'team-building' retreats." How do we get private and federal resources provided to schools to work in tandem with state efforts to raise student achievement?

Southern States' Progress

Despite the attention given to these glitches in the standards movement, discussion also brought out the accomplishments of the several years of focus on low-performing schools. Although assistance is very specific to state requirements, there are common improvements:

- A clearer understanding of the needs of low-performing schools
- A greater awareness of how to use disaggregated test data to improve instruction
- Focused, individual school improvement plans
- Professional development centered on specific needs of schools and staff members as identified through assessments
- Teachers exposed to and sharing varied instructional procedures
- Resources used more effectively

Participants also discussed lessons learned:

- On-going professional development is essential.
- On-site assistance is most effective.
- Flexibility is essential. There is no one best strategy for all schools.
- Strong leadership must be developed at all levels, especially the district level.
- Schools must build capacity for continuous improvement.

Next Steps

In the last session, participants gathered into cross-state teams to address common concerns and suggest approaches to address these issues regionally. While good ideas were generated, little concrete was accomplished in the limited time. To continue the development of a regional vision, SERVE has established a website. In addition, the SERVE policy analysts housed in each state department of education are partnering with SERVE School Development and Reform staff to plan the agenda for the next meeting. The policy analysts will assure that participants of the January 2002 seminar contribute to the agenda in order to create a common, regional vision to be communicated, embraced, and acted upon.