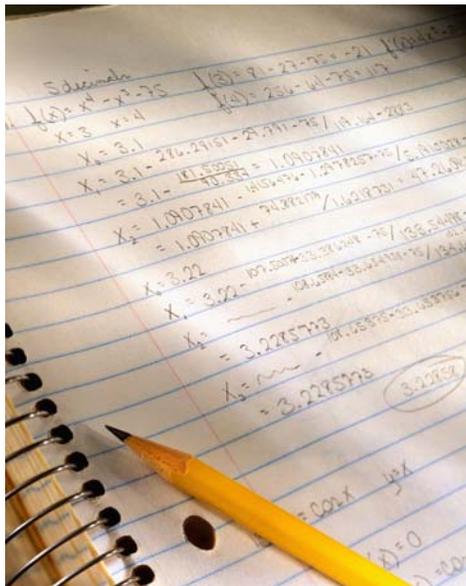


District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Fayette County Schools



December 2006



STATE OF TENNESSEE

COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY

John G. Morgan

Comptroller

STATE CAPITOL

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE 37243-0264

PHONE (615) 741-2501

December 20, 2006

The Honorable John S. Wilder
Speaker of the Senate
The Honorable Jimmy Naifeh
Speaker of the House of Representatives
and
Members of the House and Senate Education Committees

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Tennessee Code Annotated 49-1-602 requires the Office of Education Accountability and the Tennessee Department of Education to study schools and districts that have failed to meet state standards of adequate progress. Every year, the state Department of Education releases a list of high priority schools and districts that are at varying stages of meeting these standards. For the purposes of this report, OEA reviewed schools in the School Improvement 2 category of the state's high priority schools list during the 2004-05 school year, which included 24 schools in five districts. This system report for Fayette County Schools is one of five addressing the affected school systems. OEA also produced a statewide report summarizing trends noted throughout the five districts.

The scope for this study was limited to four education policy areas that impact the quality of instruction and student achievement: goals and governance; teaching quality; student discipline, attendance, and dropout; and instructional support. This report identifies areas for improvement and highlights exceptional and noteworthy practices in Fayette County Schools, and suggests recommendations for improvement.

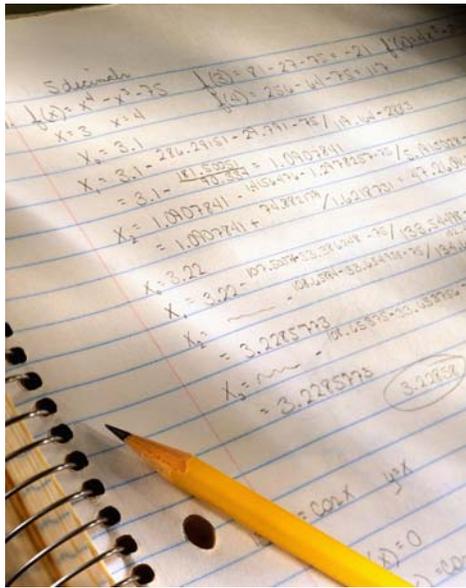
Sincerely,

John G. Morgan
Comptroller of the Treasury

cc: Commissioner Lana Seivers
Department of Education

District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Fayette County Schools



Russell Moore
Principal Legislative
Research Analyst

John G. Morgan
Comptroller of the Treasury
State of Tennessee

Ethel R. Detch, Director
Phillip E. Doss, Assistant Director
Douglas Wright, Assistant Director

Offices of Research and Education Accountability
505 Deaderick St., Suite 1700
Nashville, TN 37243-0268
Phone 615/401-7911
Fax 615/532-9237

www.comptroller.state.tn.us/orea/reports

The Office of Education Accountability was created in the Office of the Comptroller of the Treasury by *Tennessee Code Annotated* 4-3-308 to monitor the performance of school boards, superintendents, school districts, schools, and school personnel in accordance with the performance standards set out in the Education Improvement Act or by regulations of the State Board of Education. The office is to conduct such studies, analyses, or audits as it may determine necessary to evaluate education performance and progress, or as may be assigned to it by the Governor or General Assembly.

Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability.
Authorization Number 307341-01, 80 copies, December 2006. This public document was promulgated at a cost of \$1.74 per copy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fayette County Schools had two schools in the 2005-06 school year that had failed to make adequate yearly progress for three years in a row. As required by *Tennessee Code Annotated §49-1-602*, the Office of Education Accountability must study schools and districts placed on notice. This report is the Fayette County Schools portion of that study.

Student achievement scores have improved over the past several years in Fayette County but significant challenges remain, particularly in student achievement in math. The district has also made significant progress in implementing some of the recommendations made in OEA's 2001 study of the system. However, the system's low parental participation rate and high teacher turnover rate continue to pose significant challenges to district improvement. In addition, some of Fayette County's strategic planning documents lack specificity, and the district has not attempted to capture all the funding available to address its student dropout problems and boost its graduation rate.

Specifically, the report concludes:

Some of Fayette County's strategic planning documents lack specificity and do not reflect an evolving strategic planning process.

OEA found in its 2001 study that the system had not updated its district-level improvement plan every two years. Although the district appears to have complied with this regulation, two of Fayette County's strategic planning documents, the five-year plan and the strategic plan for teaching and learning, lack strategies for accomplishing goals and are either missing performance measures altogether or lack precision in existing performance measures. (See pages 6-7.)

Low parental participation at both of the schools on notice is a significant barrier to improving student achievement.

Policies designed to enhance parent and family involvement are evident in a variety of district documents, yet system and school officials characterized parental participation as low. Central Elementary's principal explained parent teacher organization meetings and parent teacher conferences are attended by the "usual suspects" (i.e., the same group of parents attends most meetings) and that those parents who would benefit the most from such meetings and conferences are the least likely to attend. The principal of Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School indicated the school's low level of parental participation has always been a major problem. (See pages 7-9.)

Frequent principal turnover at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School over the last five years has hindered the formation of stable leadership at the school.

Following the principal's promotion to Director of Schools in 2001, the school has had four principals over five years. The lack of stability in the principal position limits the school's ability to fully implement and realize school improvement efforts. With such frequent turnover, principals have little time to develop a vision for improvement and effect lasting change. School faculty must also continually readjust to differing leadership styles and a new school improvement vision with each successive director. (See pages 9-10.)

The system's teacher retention rate remains a major problem for the district and appears to have worsened since OEA's last review in 2001.

Interviews with district and school officials, an analysis of survey results, and a review of district and school documents all underscore that teacher retention is one of the district's most significant challenges. Average teacher salaries in Fayette County are lower than surrounding districts, and staff indicate they hire roughly 50 (approximately 20 percent) new teachers every year. In December 2005, the system was still short two high school math teachers for the 2005-2006

school year. Facing this shortage, the district filled one of the slots by persuading a former math teacher at the high school to come out of retirement and return to the classroom. The other math position remained unfilled. The district's high teacher turnover rates hurt teacher mentoring efforts. (See pages 10-12.)

Fayette County's graduation rate is very low. Although district officials have targeted the system's graduation rate for improvement, they have not attempted to capture all the funding available to address this problem.

Fayette County's graduation rate for the 2004-05 school year was 59.8 percent, below the Department of Education's reported statewide average of 77.9 percent and well below the state's graduation rate goal of 90 percent.

While district and school officials are targeting the graduation rate for improvement, they have not consistently applied for all available funding. Although applying for state model dropout prevention grant funding for the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years, the district did not submit an application for the 2005-06 school year. By not submitting an application, the district missed an opportunity to obtain guaranteed funding because the Department of Education only received six applications. With funding sufficient to award 10 school systems with such grants, Fayette County would have been assured of funding had it submitted an application. (See pages 13-14.)

Fayette County recently hired additional technology staff at the district level but still lacks enough employees to handle the district's technology needs.

Only one central office employee had been responsible for the technology needs of the system for several years until August 2006, when the district hired an Instructional Computers Coordinator. This new employee will train teachers in the use of computer hardware and software for the classroom and lab setting, in addition to his responsibilities for servicing and maintaining the district's Apple hardware and software.

However, the new employee does not service or maintain Fayette County's technological infrastructure (e.g., servers, email, Internet), and the district still lacks adequate technological support; district officials stated they need at least two additional computer technicians to meet the district's technology needs. (See page 14.)

No students accessed supplemental educational services under No Child Left Behind for the 2005-06 school year.

According to information compiled by Fayette County's Title I Director, 900 students in Fayette County schools were eligible for supplemental education services for the 2005-06 school year, but no students participated. Students were also eligible for such services during the 2003-04 school year. In that year, 30 students out of the 145 eligible participated.

Separate from supplemental educational services, the school system provides its own after-school tutoring through 21st Century Community Learning Center and School Improvement grant funding. Rather than availing themselves of the supplemental educational services, parents and students instead opted for the after-school tutoring programs provided by the district. One factor that may have contributed to the parental preference for after-school tutoring provided by the district is the provision of transportation; the district provides transportation for its after-school tutoring program but is not required to – and has chosen not to – for students who use supplemental educational services. (See page 15.)

The report recommends:

District officials should revise certain strategic planning documents to include specific strategies, more precise performance measures, and clear lines responsibility for accomplishing goals.

District officials should set a specific goal for improving parental participation rates over the next two years and implement research-based programs designed to enhance parental participation rates in collaboration with the principals of schools on notice.

District officials should create a monitoring system to ensure they seek out and attempt to secure all available external funding to reduce the system dropout rate and boost the graduation rate.

District officials should increase the amount of computer technical support available to the school system.

(See pages 16-18.)

Fayette County School officials chose not to formally respond to this report.

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INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Code Annotated §49-1-602 charges the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) to study schools and districts that have failed to meet state standards of adequate progress.¹ Every year, the state Department of Education releases a list of high priority schools and districts that are at varying stages of meeting these standards. For the purposes of this report, OEA reviewed schools in the School Improvement 2 category of the state's high priority schools list.

This report identifies areas for improvement and highlights exceptional and noteworthy practices in Fayette County Schools. In addition, OEA developed reports for the four other districts with Improvement 2 schools and a statewide policy report that looks at state actions affecting high priority schools.

SCOPE

The purpose of OEA's study is twofold. First, it informs the legislature of how well districts' existing policies and practices support the improvement of student achievement in Improvement 2 schools. Second, it includes recommendations that support improving student achievement. This report focuses on findings and recommendations for Fayette County Schools. The state-level report focuses on findings and recommendations at the state level.

There are 24 Improvement 2 schools in five school districts – the four large urban districts in the state and Fayette County. The study reviewed all 24 schools and the five districts.

The scope for the study was limited to four education policy areas that impact the quality of instruction and student achievement:

Goals and governance

- How clearly are districts and schools setting goals and assessing their progress?
- How well are districts and schools developing a positive and effective work environment?
- How effectively are districts and schools involving families and the community in improving achievement?
- Are resources allocated to schools in a way that allows them to be used for the most important student achievement improvement efforts?

Teaching quality

- How well are districts' professional development initiatives meeting the needs of teachers and administrators?
- How effective are teacher and administrator evaluations and how are teachers and administrators held accountable for improving student achievement?
- Are districts taking the necessary steps to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers?

Student discipline, attendance, and dropout

- What are districts and schools doing to establish safe and orderly environments in the schools?
- How effective are districts and schools at addressing drop out and attendance issues?

Instructional support

- How effective have supplemental education services, namely tutoring, been at targeting students' learning needs?
- How well are districts and schools using technology to improve student achievement?
- How effective is the district at ensuring that teachers have sufficient current textbooks and other instructional materials?

¹ T.C.A. §49-1-602 requires the OEA to study jointly with the Department of Education schools placed "on notice." The term "on notice" is no longer used by the Department; instead, the Department calls all the schools and districts on the list "high priority," and has renamed "on notice" schools and districts as those in the third year of failing to meet adequate yearly progress (also called School Improvement 2).

METHODOLOGY

The Office of Education Accountability used a variety of methods to collect information about schools' and districts' policies. Staff conducted a literature review to define the four areas of study and determine indicators of best practices. In addition, staff reviewed numerous school, district, and state documents pertaining to the four areas. OEA conducted surveys of district staff and school principals and also interviewed district superintendents, key district staff members, school principals, assistant principals, and other school staff.

SNAPSHOT OF THE DISTRICT

The Fayette County school system is dramatically different in many respects from the other four school systems of this study. Hamilton County, Knox County, Memphis, and Nashville are the state's largest and most urban systems, with tens of thousands of students and thousands of teachers. By contrast, the Fayette County school system, with 3,443 students and fewer than 300 teachers, is located in a largely rural county in southwest Tennessee with an estimated population of roughly 34,000; the other systems profiled in this study have a higher *student* population than Fayette County's *total* population.² Despite such differences in size and scale between Fayette County and the other systems, all five share a common set of challenges at their schools on notice: inadequate achievement levels in core academic subjects, high teacher turnover rates, high student poverty rates, and (for the high schools) low graduation rates.

Although one of the state's smaller counties in terms of population size, Fayette County has grown significantly over the past several years. Between April 2000 and July 2005, the county's rate of population growth (19.7 percent) eclipsed the state's (4.8 percent).³ The surge in population stems from the influx of former Memphis and Shelby County residents attracted by the rural character, comparatively lower tax rates, and quality of life in the county. The population growth spurt is driving the county's transition from a rural farming community to a more suburban satellite of Memphis. School-level documents recognize the county's transitional status. Central Elementary's School Improvement Plan states the county "seems to be transitioning from a rural farming and blue-collar community into a popular suburb of Memphis."⁴

Accompanying the broader county-level changes, the school system is undergoing its own transition. Student achievement scores have improved over the past five years but significant challenges remain, particularly in student achievement in math. Poor math performance placed two of the system's schools on the state's high priority list for the 2005-06 school year: Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School and Central Elementary. New principals take the helm at both of these schools for the 2006-07 school year. District officials reassigned the former principal of Central Elementary to another elementary school in the county, effective July 1, 2006. The former principal of Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, who came out of retirement in 2004 to lead the school for two years, returned to retirement in the summer of 2006, and the school will begin the 2006-07 school year with a new principal.

In addition, the funding needs of the school system and local tax pressures stand in conflict, with frequent budgetary wrangles between the school board and county commission. School budget shortfalls have risen over the last three years, from a deficit of \$200,000 for 2002-03, to just under \$750,000 for the 2005-06 school year.⁵ The district was forced to make cuts to instructional areas in 2005-2006, with \$70,000 cut from library books. In general, district officials have targeted other areas of school operations for notable cuts to minimize any direct impacts on student instruction, eliminating substitute teacher pay and altering the work schedules of support staff. In June 2006,

² Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts, Last Revised June 8, 2006, accessed October 18, 2006, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts, Last Revised June 8, 2006, accessed October 18, 2006, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>.

⁴ Central Elementary, 2005-06 School Improvement Plan, received from Principal Sandra Bryant, January 31, 2006, p. 17.

⁵ Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," Fax to the author, June 16, 2006.

the Director of Schools indicated that the proposed school budget for the 2006-07 school year was \$1.2 million to \$1.3 million more than the funding provided by the county commission.⁶

Also notable is the private school presence in the small county. Roughly one-fourth, or about 22 percent, of the county's school-age children attend private schools, according to district officials, who characterized the county as the "state capital" for private schools.⁷ Two of the county's private schools were established during the integration and busing era of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the school system remains under a three decades-old federal court desegregation order.

Exhibit 1: Background Facts for Fayette County Schools, 2004-2005 School Year

Schools and Staff	
Number of schools	10
Number of Improvement 2 schools ⁸	2
Number of teachers	257
Number of teacher waivers	0
Number of teacher permits	4
Average teacher salary	\$36,450
Student Population	
Number of students	3,443
African American	2,402 (63%)
Caucasian	1,322 (34.7%)
Hispanic	76 (2%)
Other	13 (.3%)
Limited English proficient	41 (1.5%)
Students with disabilities	649 (18.8%)
Economically disadvantaged	3,088 (77.5%)
Number of students in Improvement 2 schools	1,000 (29%)
Suspensions	661
Expulsions	0
Graduation rate	59.8%
Grades K-8 attendance	94.6%
Grades 9-12 attendance	90.0%
Fiscal Information	
Total expenditures	\$28,169,396
Expenditures per pupil (ADM)	\$8,238
Federal revenue	28.2%
State revenue	49.2%
Local revenue	22.6%

SOURCES: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2005; State of Tennessee Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 2005.

HIGH PRIORITY STATUS

Of the four schools on the state's high priority list in Fayette County for 2005-06, two were in the School Improvement 2 category. The other two schools were in the School Improvement 1 – Improving category.⁹

In 2001, the last time the Department published a list, Fayette County had five schools on notice. Of those five, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School was again on the list for the 2005-06 school year in the School Improvement 2 category. Southwest Elementary, listed as a School Improvement 2 school for the 2001-02 school year, is now in the School Improvement 1- Improving

⁶ Telephone Interview with Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Louise Holloway, Assistant Superintendent/Personnel Director, and James Teague, Title I Director, Fayette County Schools, June 28, 2006.

⁷ Interview with Myles Wilson, Superintendent, and various Fayette County Schools officials, December 6, 2006; Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," Fax to the author, June 16, 2006.

⁸ The Department of Education used performance data from 2004-05 when determining the 2005-06 high priority schools and districts.

⁹ Ibid.

category. The other three remaining schools improved enough to be removed from the high priority schools list. The other school listed as a School Improvement 2 for the 2005-06 school year, Central Elementary, was not on notice in 2001.

Exhibit 2: Schools in School Improvement 2, in Fayette County – 2005-06

School Name	Reason for High Priority Status
Central Elementary	% proficient/advanced in math for African American students and for economically disadvantaged students
Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students, African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities

SOURCE: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2005.

In August 2006, the Tennessee Department of Education released the 2006-07 High Priority Schools list. Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School and Central Elementary have seen improvement; both schools are now listed as School Improvement 2 – Improving.¹⁰ Another Fayette County school, East Junior High, did not make AYP for the third consecutive year and is now in the School Improvement 2 category.

CHANGES SINCE THE 2001 STUDY

The Office of Education Accountability (OEA) first reviewed schools on notice in 2001, per *Tennessee Code Annotated* §49-1-602. Both the 2001 study and this report look at goals and governance and instructional support issues. However, the 2001 study also looked at facilities and climate and class size. OEA broadened the study this year to include teaching quality and student behavior and management issues. In the 2001 study, OEA made 12 recommendations for Fayette County Schools. Fayette County has made significant progress in implementing several of these, which are listed below:

1. The Fayette County school system should continue to expand its pre-kindergarten services and facilitate school-level and community understanding regarding the selection process. There are currently 14 pre-K classrooms in Fayette County, an increase of four classrooms since the 2001-02 school year. The district’s pre-K classrooms are funded through lottery/voluntary pre-k, special education, Title I, and pre-K pilot monies. The district applied for three new lottery/voluntary pre-K classrooms for the 2006-07 school year. District officials indicate they will continue to apply for more state-funded pre-K classrooms as money is made available.
2. To meet 2002-03 ESEA requirements (No Child Left Behind) and to lower the number of system-wide teacher permits, the Fayette County school system should extend recruitment beyond west Tennessee. Contingent upon state policy and funding, Fayette County should also consider alternative preparation programs as they become more available to school systems. Six teachers had waivers and 27 were on permits for the 2000-01 school year in Fayette County, second only to Memphis City Schools for the highest percentage of waivers and permits among the schools on notice for that year. The number of system-wide teacher permits and waivers¹¹ has decreased significantly since that time. Four teachers were on permits and no teachers had waivers for the 2004-05 school year, and district officials report there were no teachers with waivers and only one teacher with a permit for the 2005-06 school year. When asked to explain the reasons behind this decline in waivers and permits, district officials cited their efforts to advise teachers of highly qualified requirements and the certification options of alternative

¹⁰ “2006-07 High Priority Schools List,” Tennessee Department of Education, as of September 25, 2005, accessed October 16, 2006, <http://www.tennessee.gov/education/nclb/ayp/index.shtml>

¹¹ “A *permit* is issued when a person the system or school wants to employ does not hold a Tennessee teaching license. A *waiver* of employment standards is required when both (a) a person qualified for the assignment is not available and (b) the applicant has a license, but does not have the endorsement to teach the anticipated assignment.” See Office of Education Accountability, Tennessee Schools on Notice, 2001-02, Comptroller of the Treasury, December 2002, p. 10.

licenses. They also noted that teachers on waivers and permits who did not comply with the state requirements for licensure were no longer employed by the system.

3. Contingent upon funding, Fayette County should budget for and recruit additional qualified elementary guidance counselors. OEA found the system employed two elementary guidance counselors to serve seven schools in the 2001 study, a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) deficiency. SACS standards require at least a half-time guidance counselor for schools with a student enrollment of less than 499 students and at least one and a half guidance counselors for schools with a student enrollment between 500 and 999 students.

Fayette County has increased the number of elementary school guidance counselors since the 2001 study, now employing four elementary guidance counselors to serve seven elementary schools. Three of those counselors serve two schools each on a half-time basis. All of these six elementary schools now meet SACS requirements because the student enrollment at each school is below 500. The system's other elementary school, Oakland Elementary, has a full-time guidance counselor serving 842 students. Since SACS standards require one and a half guidance counselors for schools with a student enrollment between 500 and 999 students, Oakland Elementary does not yet meet SACS staffing standards.

4. The Fayette County school system should continue to encourage the use of after-school tutorial programs and should consider providing transportation for the programs. Fayette County provided transportation for after-school tutoring for the 2005-06 school year through 21st Century Community Learning Center and School Improvement grant funding.
5. The Fayette County school system should hire additional technical support staff to assist the current technology coordinator. The district hired a new district-level technology employee on August 1, 2006. This new employee will train teachers in the use of computer hardware and software for the classroom and lab setting, in addition to his responsibilities for servicing and maintaining the district's Apple hardware and software. However, the new employee does not service or maintain Fayette County's technological infrastructure (e.g., servers, email, Internet), and district officials indicate they still lack adequate technological support.

CONCLUSIONS: GOALS AND GOVERNANCE

Some of Fayette County's strategic planning documents lack specificity and do not reflect an evolving strategic planning process.

State Board of Education rules and regulations require all local boards of education to develop and implement a long-range strategic plan addressing at least a five-year period of time. "The plan shall be updated every two years and include a mission statement, goals, objectives, and strategies, and address the State Board of Education's master plan."¹² OEA found in its 2001 study that the system had not updated its district-level improvement plan every two years. Although the

district appears to have complied with this regulation, two of Fayette County's strategic planning documents, the five-year plan and the strategic plan for teaching and learning, lack strategies for accomplishing goals and are either missing performance measures altogether or lack precision in existing performance measures.

Missing strategies - Imprecise or absent performance measures

For example, the district's five-year plan includes the following goal under the staff development heading: "Improve Mentorship programs."¹³ Absent from the plan, however, are the specific objectives and strategies pursued by the district to achieve this goal. The plan instead simply signals the district's progress toward achievement of the goal using very broad indicators of performance (i.e., the district indicates whether the implementation of its goals are complete, ongoing, partially implemented, initiated, or under study. If applicable, the district also notes whether a lack of funding prevented realization of the goal).¹⁴ Such broad performance indicators serve as rough measures of performance but, because they lack specificity, make precise quantification of improvement in mentorship programs difficult.

The board of education's strategic plan for teaching and learning exhibits similar tendencies. For example, the plan includes the following objective: the "school system will continue to support and improve the quality of instruction at the Alternative School."¹⁵ The inclusion of this objective illustrates that local policymakers recognize the importance of its alternative school for certain students, but the plan does not include specific strategies for improving instruction or performance measures that quantify the degree and kind of improvement desired within a given timeframe. Specific quantitative performance measures for the alternative school objective might resemble the following: doubling the number of guidance staff at the alternative school and achieving a 10 percent decrease in the annual rate of repeated remands to the alternative school by the 2008-09 school year.

Static goals

In addition, some of the objectives contained within district strategic planning documents appear to be static, either completely unchanged over the course of a decade or only marginally so. For example, the five-year plan includes the following district goal for the high school: "require keyboarding and typing or introduction to office technology."¹⁶ Although district officials indicated this particular objective was "complete" as of the 1996-97 school year, it is also present in the five-year plan covering the years 2002 to 2006. Once such objectives are completed, the development of new objectives, or the refinement of existing ones, should follow. The strategic planning process should be dynamic, with new goals continually being set and previous accomplishments improved upon in a continuous, ever-evolving process. The Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria for

¹² Tennessee State Board of Education Rule 0520-1-3-.03 (16)(a).

¹³ Fayette County Schools, Five Year Plan, July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2006, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Fayette County Board of Education, Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, Reviewed/Modified May 2005, p. 4.

¹⁶ Fayette County Schools, Five Year Plan, July 1, 1996 – June 30, 2001, p. 3; Fayette County Schools, Five Year Plan, July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2006, p. 2.

Performance Excellence encourage organizations to regularly examine their performance and feed the results into a continuous improvement process.¹⁷

In some cases, the strategic plan for teaching and learning does reflect change and transition over time. The 2005 update of the plan includes the following objective: “develop and support a plan for implementing comprehensive learning support programs including physical fitness/wellness and nutrition.”¹⁸ This new objective is likely a response to recently passed federal legislation and state requirements and shows that the district’s strategic planning documents do reflect the current policy environment to some extent.

Clearer lines of responsibility needed

In addition, both of these strategic planning documents do not assign clear responsibility to specific district personnel for achieving goals and accomplishing objectives. By establishing clear lines of responsibility, the school system could more easily recognize personnel responsible for the system’s performance, rewarding those responsible for success in achieving certain goals while holding others accountable for those areas where district performance has fallen short of expectations.

Other district documents are more specific and could serve as models

Other district planning documents show much more specificity and focus, however. The district has created detailed action plans to measure its performance in the areas of reading, math, and personnel as part of the Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process. In addition, the district’s current technology plan includes very specific goals, objectives, strategies, and performance measures that address both access to technology and its integration with curricula and teaching. One of the plan’s objectives establishes a specific performance measure for the incorporation of technology within the curriculum: “By the year 2008, at least 65 percent of all core-subject teachers will effectively incorporate technology within their curriculum as a way to enable students to reach performance levels set by the State.”¹⁹ The technology plan also establishes a timeline for completing specific objectives and strategies, sets performance measures for the goals and objectives, and assigns responsibility to specific individuals.

Low parental participation at both of the schools on notice is a significant barrier to improving student achievement.

Parental involvement is linked to numerous positive academic and nonacademic indicators, including better grades and test scores, improved school attendance, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates.²⁰ Improvements in student math scores are also associated with school programs that involve parents in their child’s education.²¹ Other research is more

blunt on this point, “simply put, students do better in school when their parents are involved in their education.”²² Almost all states, including Tennessee, have recognized the positive influence of parental involvement on student achievement and passed legislation aimed at increasing parental involvement in education.²³

¹⁷ Sandra Byrne and Christine Schaefer, “The Baldrige Program: Self-Assessment for Continuous Improvement,” *Principal*, March/April 2006; Community Action Partnership, “Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed June 19, 2006, <http://communityactionpartnership.com/>.

¹⁸ Fayette County Board of Education, Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, Reviewed/Modified May 2005, p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Family Involvement in Children’s Education: Successful Local Approaches*, October 1997, as cited in “Parental Involvement,” National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/PIinvolve.htm>, accessed June 19, 2006; “Parent/Family,” Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issuesK12.asp>, accessed June 19, 2006.

²¹ “Parent/Family,” Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issuesK12.asp>, accessed June 19, 2006.

²² “Improving Student Achievement: Linking State Policy to Effective Practice,” National Conference of State Legislatures, July 2001, p. 40.

²³ Kyle Zinth, “Parental Involvement in Education,” Education Commission of the States, March 2005, p. 1.

Participation opportunities are available for parents . . .

Policies designed to enhance parent and family involvement are evident in a variety of district documents. One of the school system's parental participation objectives is for each school to "establish an active parent advisory committee that will meet on a monthly basis with principals, staff, or the school improvement committee."²⁴ School documents also reflect the importance of parental involvement - the school improvement plan of Central Elementary recognizes that parents are a "vital part of a child's learning"²⁵ – and both Improvement 2 schools provide parents with multiple opportunities to become involved in their child's education. Such opportunities include:

- Parent-Teacher Conferences,
- Significant Male/Female Days at Central Elementary (allows students to invite a significant male or female role model to school for breakfast),
- "Second Cup of Coffee" at Central Elementary (parents may visit the school and mingle with staff and students alike),
- Parent Teacher Organizations,
- Parental education workshops, and
- Parental support groups.²⁶

Both schools also appear to emphasize flexibility in scheduling parent/school interactions to accommodate parents' busy schedules. Flexibility in scheduling opportunities for school/parent contact is important, as a 1998 National Center for Education Statistics Statistical Analysis report showed that 87 percent of schools perceived parents' lack of time as a great or moderate barrier to increased parental involvement in schools.²⁷

In addition, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School has explored some innovative opportunities to enhance parental and community participation. The school participated in "church week" for the 2005-06 school year. Teachers and school administrators volunteered to speak at various community churches, describing current school activities and asking for increased parental participation.²⁸

"We are currently working closely with our PTO in developing ways to increase parent involvement. We do realize that 'something' must happen at school that will cause a desire for parents to become involved."

Principal Charles Earle, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School

. . . but parental participation rates remain low

Despite a focus on improving parental involvement, system and school officials characterized parental participation as low. Central Elementary's principal explained parent teacher organization meetings and parent teacher conferences are attended by the "usual suspects" (i.e., the same group of parents attends most meetings) and that those parents who would benefit the most from such meetings and conferences are the least likely to attend.²⁹

The principal of Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School indicated the school's low level of parental participation "has always been a major problem."³⁰ School officials stated parent attendance at basketball games is well in excess of attendance at parent teacher organization meetings; Fayette-Ware's principal noted that if the school could get even half the number of parents who attend basketball games to attend parent teacher organization meetings the attendance rate would swell.³¹ Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, in particular, faces a special set of challenges in boosting parental involvement because education research indicates parents are generally more involved with their children's education at the elementary school level, with participation levels tapering off during the middle and high school years. And parents with

²⁴ Fayette County Board of Education, Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, Reviewed/Modified May 2005, p. 5.

²⁵ Central Elementary, 2005-06 School Improvement Plan, received from Principal Sandra Bryant, January 31, 2006, p. 13.

²⁶ Central Elementary, 2005-06 School Improvement Plan, received from Principal Sandra Bryant, January 31, 2006, p. 13; Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, 2004-05 School Improvement Plan, p. 10.

²⁷ "Parental Involvement," National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/PIinvolve.htm>, accessed June 19, 2006.

²⁸ Telephone Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, June 15, 2006.

²⁹ Interview with Sandra Bryant, Principal, Central Elementary, January 31, 2006.

³⁰ Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, "Survey Report 2006," E-mail to the author, June 12, 2006.

³¹ Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, January 31, 2006.

children in high poverty schools are generally less involved in their children's education than parents whose children attend lower poverty schools.³²

The situation is similar at Central Elementary where teachers cited the need for more parental and community support and involvement in a recent survey. Central Elementary's principal described a wide variation of parental involvement, regardless of socioeconomic status, with some parents quite involved in their child's education and others either consumed by work demands or absentee. The school's principal also noted the attendance rate for parent teacher organization meetings is generally lower now than it has been in the past, despite an occasional increase in attendance from time to time.³³

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

Frequent principal turnover at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School over the last five years has hindered the formation of stable leadership at the school.

Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School has undergone a series of leadership changes since 2001, when Mr. Myles Wilson was promoted from principal to Director of Schools. Following Mr. Wilson's promotion, Dr. Dan Shaw served as the school's principal for only one year (2001-2002). Mr. Lowell Winston then served for two years (2002-2004) before leaving to head a newly formed charter school in Memphis. Principal Charles Earle, the

school's most recent principal, resigned from the school system at the end of June 2006 after two years. Mr. Earle indicates he would have remained as principal if not for state retirement policy.³⁴ Mr. Earle's replacement, Mr. Osceola Hicks, a 28-year veteran of Memphis City Schools, served at another Fayette County school for two years prior to his recent promotion. With 30 years of experience, Mr. Hicks is eligible for retirement; thus, another change in the school's leadership is possible in the near future. National research shows principals in the public sector appear much less likely to remain on the job after the age of 55.³⁵

Exhibit 3: Principal Turnover at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School

Principal	Years in position	Reason for leaving
Dr. Dan Shaw	1	No reason given
Lowell Winston	2	Position with a charter school in Memphis
Charles Earle	2	Retirement policy
Osceola Hicks	Current Principal	N/A

SOURCE: Louise Holloway, Assistant Superintendent/Personnel Director, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," E-mail to the author, August 31, 2006.

The lack of stability in the principal position limits the school's ability to fully implement and realize school improvement efforts. With such frequent turnover, principals have little time to develop a vision for improvement and effect lasting change. School faculty must also continually readjust to differing leadership styles and a new school improvement vision with each successive director. Mr. Charles Earle, the school's most recent principal, stated he spent the first year of his two-year stint "learning the ropes" – assessing the current administrative condition of the school and becoming

³² "Parent/Family," Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issuesK12.asp>, accessed June 19, 2006.

³³ Interview with Sandra Bryant, Principal, Central Elementary, January 31, 2006.

³⁴ Telephone Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, June 15, 2006. Note: Principal Earle specifically referenced the statutory limitations on retirement benefits, leave, medical insurance, and salary set by *Tennessee Code Annotated* § 8-36-821.

³⁵ Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Chung, and Ross, "Who is Leading our Schools? An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers," *Rand Corporation*, 2003, p.xiv.

familiar with the school environment – before taking a more assertive leadership role in his second year as principal.

The Education Commission of the States notes that effective school leadership has been shown to be a critical element in improving student learning, closing the student achievement gap, and creating a school learning environment emphasizing continuous improvement.³⁶ The Education Partners Project, an initiative of the National Conference of State Legislatures, composed of state legislators, state legislative staff (including a representative from OEA), and private sector representatives recommends schools have a “strong and effective principal who is able to create the vision and the climate necessary to support high levels of student achievement.”³⁷

CONCLUSIONS: TEACHING QUALITY

The system’s teacher retention rate remains a major problem for the district and appears to have worsened since OEA’s last review in 2001.

Interviews with district and school officials, an analysis of survey results, and a review of district and school documents all underscore that teacher retention is one of the district’s most significant challenges.

According to an article from the *Journal of Rural Education* comments, teacher turnover is problematic for two reasons. Not only does it require enormous resources and energy to recruit new teachers to replace those leaving the classroom, but it also requires districts to expand additional resources and energy to develop new teachers’ knowledge and skills – new teachers “who are likely to leave after only a few years and be replaced by yet another recruit in need of special resources and support.”³⁸

System-level analyses reveal serious problems in this area. The Fayette County Minority Teacher Recruitment Plan sums it up: “Our recruitment efforts have been fairly successful, however, retention has been disastrous.”³⁹ Improving teacher retention rates is a prerequisite for any significant and sustained increase in academic achievement in Fayette County.

Multiple district documents emphasize the importance of retaining qualified teachers:

- “The school system will employ, train, and maintain highly qualified administrators, teachers, and support staff.”⁴⁰
- The school system will “provide staff compensation, benefits, and [a] working environment sufficient to attract and retain qualified employees.”⁴¹
- The school system will “aggressively seek better teacher salaries to attract and retain more minority teachers.”⁴²

Identified as an issue in OEA’s 2001 report, the district’s teacher turnover problems remain a chronic issue. Central office staff indicated that they hire roughly 50 (approximately 20 percent) new teachers every year.⁴³ In December 2005, the system was still short two high school math teachers for the 2005-2006 school year. Facing this shortage, the district filled one of the slots by

³⁶ “Leadership – Recruitment/Retention,” Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org>, accessed June 21, 2006.

³⁷ “Improving Student Achievement: Linking State Policy to Effective Practice,” National Conference of State Legislatures, July 2001, p. 26.

³⁸ *The numbers game: Ensuring quantity and quality in the teaching workforce*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 1998, as cited in Debra L. Holloway, “Using Research to Ensure Quality Teaching in Rural Schools,” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Winter, 2002, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 142.

³⁹ “Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention Plan,” Fayette County Schools, April 21, 2004, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Fayette County Board of Education, Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning, Reviewed/Modified May 2005, p. 3.

⁴¹ Fayette County Board of Education, “Goals and Objectives 5.100,” Issued March 2, 2000.

⁴² “Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention Plan,” Fayette County Schools, April 21, 2004, p. 5.

⁴³ Interview with Myles Wilson, Superintendent, and various Fayette County Schools officials, December 6, 2006.

persuading a former math teacher at the high school to come out of retirement and return to the classroom. The other math position remained unfilled.⁴⁴

Central Elementary's principal stated she has hired approximately 12 to 13 new teachers a year in past years, though noting that teacher retention has held steady as of late.⁴⁵ Turnover at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School is also a problem. The school hires an average of five teachers a year, according to the principal, with an average of three teachers leaving the school each year. The principal described this level of teacher turnover as "alarming."⁴⁶ Most of these teacher vacancies occur in the subjects of math and science, and school officials from Fayette-Ware characterized the teacher turnover rate in the math department as "extremely high."⁴⁷ Math teacher turnover is a significant problem for the school since school math performance is inadequate and responsible for the school's on-notice status. At the time of OEA's interview with school officials in January of 2006, only one teacher in the math department had been at the school for two or more years, the legacy of multiple years of teacher turnover in this department.⁴⁸

"Our [teacher] recruitment efforts have been fairly successful, however, retention has been disastrous."

Fayette County Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention Plan, 2004, p.5.

The National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools states that, while teaching experience does not guarantee effectiveness, teachers with limited experience are generally less effective than teachers who have at least several years of teaching experience.⁴⁹ Several recent studies "have confirmed that novice teachers are far less effective at raising student achievement over the course of a school year than their more experienced colleagues."⁵⁰

High teacher turnover rates also hurt mentoring efforts

High teacher turnover rates reverberate beyond the realm of instruction, complicating other important personnel-related functions. For example, the high teacher turnover rate in Fayette County has also affected the district's mentoring program. Because tenure is one criterion for serving as a mentor, a shortage of tenured teachers necessarily leads to shortage of mentors. A disproportionate burden then falls on those teachers qualified to mentor at schools with teacher shortages. During OEA's visit to Fayette County in January 2006, one math teacher at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School stated that she was the only tenured math teacher, making her the only math teacher who could serve as a mentor to new math teachers.⁵¹ When a new math teacher joined the school earlier that school year, the mentors for the new teacher were an English teacher and an art teacher. While those mentors could provide the new teacher with support and a sounding board for questions, comments, and concerns, a mentor in the math department would have been preferable, particularly for content-specific questions.

Average teacher salaries are lower than surrounding districts'

A review of 2004-05 salary data shows the district's classroom teacher salaries were lower than surrounding districts.

⁴⁴ Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," Fax to the author, June 16, 2006.

⁴⁵ Interview with Sandra Bryant, Principal, Central Elementary, January 31, 2006.

⁴⁶ Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, "Survey Report 2006," E-mail to the author, June 12, 2006.

⁴⁷ Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, and various school officials, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, January 31, 2006.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Qualified Teachers for At-Risk Schools: A National Imperative," National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Craig Jerald, "Planning That Matters: Helping Schools Engage in Collaborative, Strategic Problem Solving," The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, April 2005, p. 4.

⁵¹ Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, and various school officials, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, January 31, 2006.

Exhibit 4: Classroom Teacher Salary Comparison

School System	Average Salary	Salary Differential Compared to Fayette County
Fayette County	\$36,450	--
McNairy County	\$36,813	\$363
Crockett County	\$36,903	\$453
Chester County	\$37,063	\$613
Haywood County	\$38,274	\$1,824
Hardeman County	\$38,563	\$2,113
Lauderdale County	\$39,050	\$2,600
Dyer County	\$40,576	\$4,126
Tipton County	\$40,826	\$4,376
Madison County	\$42,531	\$6,081
Memphis City	\$48,740	\$12,290
Shelby County	\$48,877	\$12,427

SOURCE: Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 2005.

The Director of Schools described the system as a training ground for teachers who work in the system long enough to obtain some teaching experience and earn tenure before departing for a more lucrative teaching position elsewhere, often with Memphis City Schools.⁵² District data indicate that 95 percent of teachers leave the system for “opportunistic employment with a higher paying school system,” often after the teacher has earned tenure or completed certification requirements.⁵³

According to district officials, there are no incentives or enticements to recruit teachers to the district or retain them, though some federal monies (Title II, Part A) are being used to attract *administrative personnel*, such as principals and assistant principals. In addition, the district does use federal funding to reward teachers and administrative personnel for perfect attendance each school year. A teacher with one year of perfect attendance receives \$100, a teacher with two years receives \$200, and teachers with three or more years of perfect attendance receive \$300.⁵⁴ When asked to identify their ideal teacher retention plan, district officials described a plan that would award monetary incentives to teachers whose students “achieve well on state-mandated test(s).”⁵⁵ Absent such performance-based monetary incentives, district officials indicate they recognize teacher performance through non-monetary awards such as years-of-service pins and plaques for teachers whose students score the highest test scores.

(See the Office of Education Accountability’s state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee’s High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

⁵² Interview with Myles Wilson, Superintendent, and various Fayette County Schools officials, December 6, 2006.

⁵³ “Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention Plan,” Fayette County Schools, April 21, 2004, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Fayette County Schools, “Reply to follow-up questions,” Fax to the author, June 16, 2006.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS: STUDENT DISCIPLINE, ATTENDANCE, AND DROPOUT

Fayette County's graduation rate is very low. Although district officials have targeted the system's graduation rate for improvement, they have not attempted to capture all the funding available to address this problem.

Fayette County's graduation rate for the 2004-05 school year was 59.8 percent, below the Department of Education's reported statewide average of 77.9 percent and well below the state's graduation rate goal of 90 percent.⁵⁶ With a graduation rate so significantly below the state goal, it is likely the district will continue to fall short on this important indicator in future years absent a major improvement effort.

District and school officials are targeting the graduation rate for improvement . . .

The district reports taking specific steps to reduce the dropout rate and boost the graduation rate through:

- Better tracking of students from the feeder schools (junior high schools) transitioning to the high school;
- Increasing Credit Recovery and inviting more students to take advantage of tutorial classes after school; and
- Expanding counseling services.⁵⁷

And school officials are also targeting the low graduation rate for improvement, as evidenced by the following goal from Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School's school improvement plan: "Improve Graduation Rate In An Attempt To Make AYP of 90% According to NCLB."⁵⁸ Fayette-Ware's school improvement plan lists specific action steps the school is taking to meet this goal, including:

- Collaboration with Junior High guidance counselors to track 9th graders;
- Credit Recovery programs; and
- Tutoring for state mandated Gateway Tests needed for graduation.⁵⁹

The high school uses technology to identify and track those students at risk for dropping out in the 9th grade. The Star-Student management system, an Internet-based information system used by the entire district, allows the school to use more up-to-date information to track students from the feeder schools as opposed to waiting on paper documentation.⁶⁰ And as part of its designation as a Southern Regional Education Board High Schools that Work site, the school is again implementing its "advisor-advisee" program. The program assigns each student who enters high school with a counselor and a classroom teacher responsible for monitoring the student's progress and serving as an advocate.⁶¹

In its 2001 study, OEA recommended that the system and high school should continue to seek additional funding sources such as the state model dropout prevention grant. State law requires the commissioner of education to designate up to 10 locally-based, interdisciplinary initiatives within the state annually as model dropout prevention programs.⁶² At the time of OEA's previous review of the system in 2001, the district had received a model dropout prevention grant to target and serve

⁵⁶ Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2005.

⁵⁷ Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," Fax to the author, June 16, 2006.

⁵⁸ "Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, School Improvement Plan: Component 5, Goal 2," Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Charles Earle, Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, "Survey Report 2006," E-mail to the author, June 12, 2006.

⁶¹ Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, and various school officials, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, January 31, 2006.

⁶² *Tennessee Code Annotated* § 49-1-520.

6th through 8th graders most at risk of dropping out by pairing them with trained community mentors.

... but they have not consistently applied for all available funding

Since OEA's last review, Fayette County's model dropout prevention program applications have met with mixed success. The district applied for and received such funding from the Department of Education for the 2003-04 school year. The district also applied for the \$6,000 grant the following year; however, its application did not receive a high enough score from the Department of Education reviewers to be funded. The district did not apply for model dropout prevention funding for the 2005-06 school year, according to representatives from the Department of Education. By not submitting an application, the district missed an opportunity to obtain guaranteed funding because the Department of Education received only six applications. With funding sufficient to award 10 school systems with such grants, Fayette County would have been assured of funding had it submitted an application.⁶³

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

CONCLUSIONS: INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Fayette County recently hired additional technology staff at the district level but still lacks enough employees to handle the district's technology needs.

District officials indicated the lack of administrative support for technology use was a moderate barrier to the district's use of technology as an instructional tool in survey responses.⁶⁴ And in interviews at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, the principal and faculty members agreed that the shortage of district-level technology personnel is a system-wide problem, resulting in repeated requests for service by school personnel before computer problems are addressed.⁶⁵

The district's 2005-2008 technology plan includes an objective to employ a technician position to supplement the work of the Technology Coordinator. Only one central office employee had been responsible for the technology needs of the system for several years until August 2006, when the district hired an Instructional Computers Coordinator. This new employee will train teachers in the use of computer hardware and software for the classroom and lab setting, in addition to his responsibilities for servicing and maintaining the district's Apple hardware and software.

However, the new employee does not service or maintain Fayette County's technological infrastructure (e.g., servers, email, Internet), and the district still lacks adequate technological support; district officials stated they need at least two additional computer technicians to meet the district's technology needs.⁶⁶

⁶³ LaQuisha Oliver, Alternative Education Consultant, Tennessee Department of Education, "Re:Fwd: Model Dropout Prevention Question," E-mail to the author, May 4, 2006; Telephone Interview with LaQuisha Oliver, Alternative Education Consultant, Tennessee Department of Education, May 5, 2006.

⁶⁴ Office of Education Accountability, Fall 2005 survey of Fayette County Schools.

⁶⁵ Interview with Charles Earle, Principal, and various school officials, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, January 31, 2006.

⁶⁶ Louise Holloway, Assistant Superintendent/Personnel Director, Fayette County Schools, "Reply to follow-up questions," E-mail to the author, August 31, 2006.

No students accessed supplemental educational services under No Child Left Behind for the 2005-06 school year.

According to information compiled by Fayette County's Title I Director, 900 students in Fayette County schools were eligible for supplemental education services for the 2005-06 school year, but no students participated. Students were also eligible for such services during the 2003-04 school year. In that year, 30 students out of the 145 eligible participated.⁶⁷

The district informs students and parents of the availability of supplemental education services by sending letters home with students and mailing letters to those students most in need, but it appears parents and students prefer district-provided tutoring. Separate from supplemental educational services, the school system provides its own after-school tutoring through other grants.⁶⁸ Rather than availing themselves of the supplemental educational services, parents and students instead opted for the after-school tutoring programs provided by the district.

Another factor that may have contributed to the parental preference for after-school tutoring provided by the district is the provision of transportation; the district provides transportation for its after-school tutoring program but is not required to – and has chosen not to – for students that use supplemental educational services.⁶⁹ A Department of Education representative speculates that the provision of transportation may have a significant impact on student participation in supplemental educational services, particularly in a rural LEA. The Department of Education has not analyzed supplemental educational services data to support this theory, however.⁷⁰

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

⁶⁷ James Teague, Title I Director, Fayette County Schools, "Re: SES in Fayette County," E-mail to the author, October 4, 2006.

⁶⁸ Telephone Interview with Myles Wilson, Superintendent, Louise Holloway, Assistant Superintendent/Personnel Director, and James Teague, Title I Director, Fayette County Schools, June 28, 2006.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Carol Groppe, Consultant, Tennessee Department of Education, "Re: SES in Fayette County," E-mail to the author, August 30, 2006.

RECOMMENDATIONS

District officials should revise certain strategic planning documents to include specific strategies, more precise performance measures, and clear lines responsibility for accomplishing goals.

The district's most recently completed five-year plan covered the time period from July 2002 to June 2006. The development of the new five-year plan represents an excellent opportunity for the district to restructure its plan. Concurrent with revising the five-year plan, the district should revisit its strategic plan for teaching and learning to add strategies, performance measurements, and assignment of responsibility. In reformulating both of these documents, the district should retire accomplished goals, update existing goals to reflect progress made to date, add new goals, and include more specific and detailed strategies and performance measures. One way to do this would be to create action plans for both of the documents.

Action plans "detail the specific means by which strategies will be implemented and strategic objectives reached." The five most common elements of an action plan are:

- The specific steps or actions required [specific strategies]
- Who will be held accountable for seeing that each step or action is completed [assignment of responsibility]
- When these steps or actions are to be carried out [a timeline]
- What resources need to be allocated in order to carry them out
- What feedback mechanisms are needed to monitor progress within each action step [performance measurement].⁷¹

The district has some experience with creating district-level action plans, having created three of them to measure performance in the areas of reading, math, and personnel as part of the Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process.⁷² The format and structure of the district's technology plan could also serve as a model for district officials to use as they revise both documents. In addition, several school-system documents (e.g., school improvement plans) include specific and detailed strategies and performance measures system officials should consider as they formulate district-level measures. The district may also want to consider including specific goals, objectives, strategies, and performance measures for the schools on notice in its five-year plan.

The district should be careful not to create an overly detailed plan lacking focus and practicality when revising these documents, however. Douglas Reeves, a noted education researcher, notes that a cardinal principle of measurement is that measuring a few things frequently rather than many things once a year is more effective and accurate. Reeves also observes that the most effective strategic plans are those with more substance than weight (i.e., the size of the plan is not as important as its content).⁷³ In addition to avoiding the creation of a massive plan that could dilute the district's focus on those core areas that have the most impact on student achievement, district officials should explicitly acknowledge a planning document is the *means* by which the district can increase student achievement and not the *end* in and of itself, or simply an exercise required by State Board rules and regulations.

An example from Kentucky illustrates this point. In 2005, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence released a report highlighting practices in Kentucky's high-performing, high-poverty schools. One member of the Prichard audit committee recalled that schools in past audits may

⁷¹ Morrissey, Below, and Acomb, *The Executive Guide to Operational Planning*, 1987, as cited in John M. Bryson, "Strategic Planning and Action Planning for Nonprofit Organizations," *Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, p. 173.

⁷² Fayette County Schools, Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process, Components 1-5 Templates, November 2005, pp. 52-57.

⁷³ Douglas B. Reeves, *Accountability for Learning: How Teachers and School Leaders Can Take Charge*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria Virginia, 2004, pp. 25, 60-61.

have developed good plans and documentation processes and procedures but apparently were not seeing the real implementation of the plan in school classrooms.⁷⁴ Referencing this report from Kentucky, a policy brief from the Center for Comprehensive School reform states:

...too often the formal planning process required by state and federal policy is perceived as a bureaucratic exercise resulting in written plans that do not drive real change efforts for the day-to-day work of schools. And too often it is disconnected from the kind of planning that can lead to significant, measurable improvement.⁷⁵

The district should also pay close attention to the actual implementation of the activities necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the plan. A plan that is not effectively implemented and continually updated, no matter how detailed and comprehensive, may yield little district or school improvement. An August 2005 policy brief on this issue states:

In many of the guidebooks and tools meant to help with school improvement, school leaders can easily come away with the impression that if a team gets the plan right, successful implementation of that plan must surely follow . . . [Education leaders] also need help understanding that effective planning doesn't result in just a good written plan, but also in an ongoing process of *collaborative, strategic problem solving*.⁷⁶

By creating and using focused, detailed, and regularly updated strategic planning documents to guide and channel its efforts, the district will further its overarching goal of improving student achievement.

District officials should set a specific goal for improving parental participation rates over the next two years and implement research-based programs designed to enhance parental participation rates in collaboration with the principals of schools on notice.

Establishing a specific goal for parental participation would help focus the district and schools on a clearly defined target. In formulating this goal, system and school officials may also want to establish some interim objectives, or milestones, to periodically monitor their progress toward achievement of the ultimate goal. District officials and school principals should also explicitly outline their respective responsibilities necessary to achieve this goal.

In addition, the district should also study similarly situated school systems for insight into how other school systems in rural areas have improved parental participation rates. In its examination of high-achieving rural high schools, the Southern Regional Education Board notes that the small size of such schools can be an advantage in building relationships with students, parents, and the community.⁷⁷ Fayette County should continue to capitalize on its small size to enhance the relationship between parents and the school system.

The school system already offers parents a variety of opportunities through which they can become more involved in their child's education. System and school officials should together explore additional methods that build on existing efforts and acknowledge and build on the community and cultural context. For example, the principal of Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School indicated parental participation would increase dramatically if half the parents who attend school sporting events attended parent-teacher conferences. Given the high value placed on sporting events by the community, district and school officials should examine ways to capitalize on their popularity, possibly by scheduling parent-teacher conferences during halftime or even offering discounts on ticket prices for those parents who attend all parent-teacher conferences over a given time period. Fayette-Ware officials should continue exploring opportunities to link "church week" events with

⁷⁴ Patricia J. Kannapel and Stephen K. Clements, "Inside the Black Box of High-Performing High-Poverty Schools," A report from the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, February 2005, p. 23.

⁷⁵ Craig Jerald, "Planning That Matters: Helping Schools Engage in Collaborative, Strategic Problem Solving," The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, April 2005, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Craig Jerald, "The Implementation Trap: Helping Schools Overcome Barriers to Change," The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, August 2005, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Gene Bottoms, Alice Presson, and Lingling Han, "Rigor, Relevance and Relationships Improve Achievement in Rural High Schools," Southern Regional Education Board, 2005, p. 46.

parental participation, perhaps through obtaining a written commitment from parents at church services to attend the next PTO meeting or parent-teacher conference.

District officials should create a monitoring system to ensure they seek out and attempt to secure all available external funding to reduce the system dropout rate and boost the graduation rate.

The district has applied for model dropout prevention grants from the state in past years and has met with mixed success. The district did not receive funding for the 2004-05 school year, although the system did submit an application. Fayette County did not apply for model dropout funding for the 2005-06 school year. The district would have been assured of receiving the funding that year regardless of the quality of its application, however, as the Department of Education had enough funding to award 10 systems with funding but received only six applications.

District officials should take action to ensure they are applying for all grants, dropout/graduation rate-related and otherwise, for which they are eligible. In addition, district officials should study past grant applications that were successful and identify the strengths of these applications, using such insights to improve future grant applications. System officials should contact those organizations that do not fund the district's grant applications to ascertain the reasons why and use this information to make any necessary revisions so that future submissions meet with more success. By establishing a monitoring system or process to ensure they seek out and apply for all available external funding and assigning this responsibility to a specific person or persons, the district can avoid not submitting applications for future grants.

District officials should increase the amount of computer technical support available to the school system.

The Fayette County school system lacks adequate human resources in the area of technology. This lack of human resources was identified as a moderate barrier to the use of technology as an instructional tool in the district survey. And in interviews at Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, the principal and faculty members agreed that the shortage of district-level personnel is a system-wide problem, resulting in repeated requests for service by school personnel before computer problems can be addressed.

The system did hire a new district-level technology employee on August 1, 2006, doubling the number of technology staff, after relying for several years on one central office employee for all of its technology needs. This new employee will enhance the district's ability to train teachers in the use of computer applications for the classroom and lab settings. But even with the new district-level technology employee, district officials indicate they still need at least two additional computer technicians to meet the system's technology needs.

The district was able to rely on federal funding (Title 1) to pay the salary of the new technology employee but faces significant fiscal challenges to hiring additional technology personnel, as persistent school budget shortfalls at the local level have resulted in cuts over the past few years. Given the realities of school budget limitations, the district should consider all possibilities for increasing computer technical support, including seeking out all available technology grants from external sources, partnering with local/area corporate adopters to fund computer technician positions at the school, and asking local computer technicians at local and area business and organizations to donate their time, skills, and abilities to the school system.

APPENDIX A – PERSONS CONTACTED

Fayette County

Sandra Bryant
Principal, Central Elementary

Charles Earle
Principal, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School

Louise Holloway
Assistant Superintendent/Personnel Director, Fayette County Schools (FCS)

Nabil Loutfi
Technology Coordinator, FCS

Donna Signaigo
K-12 Instruction Supervisor, FCS

James Teague
Title I Director, FCS

Myles Wilson
Superintendent of Schools, FCS

State of Tennessee

Carol Groppe
Consultant, Tennessee Department of
Education

LaQuisha Oliver
Alternative Education Consultant
Tennessee Department of Education

Offices of Research and Education Accountability Staff

Director

◆ Ethel Detch

Assistant Director (Research)

Douglas Wright

Assistant Director (Education Accountability)

◆ Phil Doss

Principal Legislative Research Analysts

◆ Russell Moore

◆ Kim Potts

Senior Legislative Research Analysts

◆ Katie Cour

◆ Erin Do

◆ Jessica Gibson

◆ Kevin Krushenski

◆ Susan Mattson

Associate Legislative Research Analysts

Nneka Gordon

◆ Eric Harkness

◆ Patrick Hultman

◆ Mike Montgomery

Executive Secretary

◆ Sherrill Murrell

◆ indicates staff who assisted with this project

Note that former OREA staff members Corey Chatis and Jessica Lewis also assisted with this project.