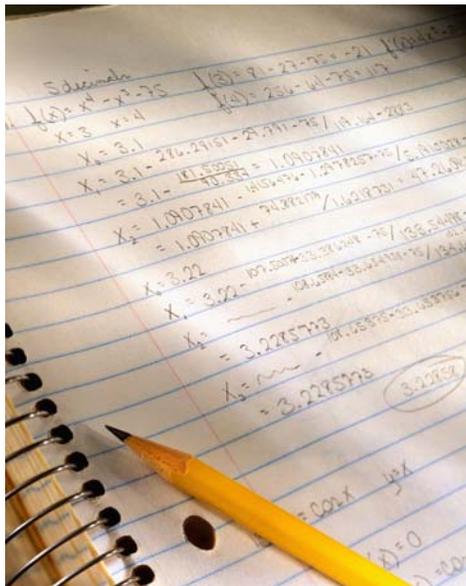


District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools



January 2007



STATE OF TENNESSEE

COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY

John G. Morgan

Comptroller

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January 10, 2007

The Honorable Ron Ramsey
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 Metropolitan Nashville Public 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 Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, and suggests recommendations for improvement.

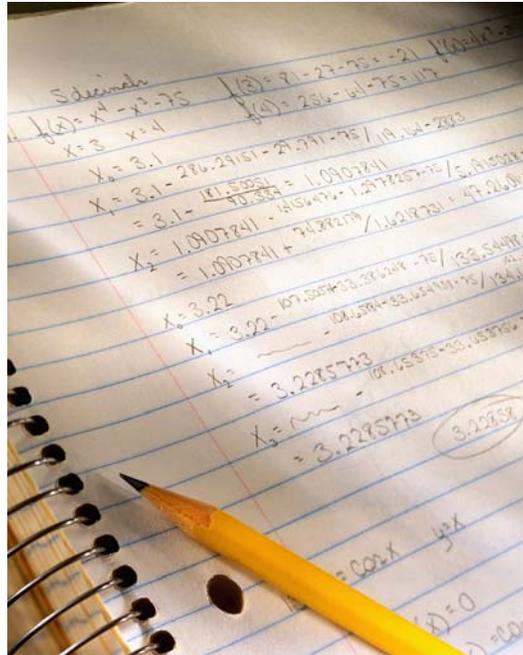
Sincerely,

John G. Morgan
Comptroller of the Treasury

cc: Commissioner Lana Seivers
Department of Education

District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools



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Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability.
Authorization Number 307341-05, 110 copies, December 2006. This public document was promulgated at a cost of \$1.91 per copy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) had nine 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 MNPS portion of that study.

MNPS has improved its focus on goals and governance in recent years, which has impacted administration and planning for on-notice schools. The district has also successfully linked professional development to district goals. The district faces some challenges, however, including high dropout rates, the variety of alternative schools, and insufficient resources for new teachers. Based on district interviews, MNPS personnel are well-aware of these challenges. Because of district policy decisions, the district has seen improvements in some of these areas, particularly in graduation rates.

Specifically, the report concludes:

Because of extensive data analysis and review, MNPS was able to identify state Department of Education data errors, resulting in the removal of six schools from the high priority schools list.

Upon reviewing the Department's assessment data for Metro schools for 2004-05, MNPS appealed 34 cases. Eighteen of the appeals resulted in changes in at least one category of AYP, and six of the appeals allowed the school to make AYP in all categories and come off the high priority schools list. (See pages 6-7.)

In part because MNPS has worked to build community involvement to improve schools, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the district a \$5.2 million grant to create smaller learning communities in high schools.

The U.S. Department of Education cited the district's collaboration with Alignment Nashville, a local nonprofit devoted to helping young people, as a major reason for awarding such a large sum to the district. The goal of the Smaller Learning Communities Program is to help high schools develop smaller communities for various students to improve student achievement and success in school. The district may receive up to \$11,750,000 to fund various programs in the high schools. (See pages 7-8.)

Because of a significant increase in the percentage of Hispanic students in MNPS, the district is working to improve Hispanic community and family relations.

In the past 10 years, the proportion of Hispanic students in the district has grown from 1.3 percent to 10.5 percent of total students in MNPS. To develop rapport with Hispanic families, MNPS hired a full-time Hispanic community liaison, called the Language Translation Specialist, in early 2006. The liaison's primary responsibility is to reach out to Hispanic families by organizing and publicizing community meetings in Spanish. (See pages 8-9.)

The district has successfully linked its professional development initiatives to district goals and uses proven best practices in its many professional development offerings. The district does not, however, clearly articulate a professional development plan to educators or the public.

MNPS follows best practices in its professional development offerings. However, MNPS does not have a stand-alone professional development plan and accessing information about a clear plan for professional development in the district is challenging. (See pages 9-12.)

While MNPS offers some support resources to new teachers, the district does not have a clear, structured new teacher induction plan.

The district has no written new teacher induction plan, nor does it require new teachers to attend orientation. Also, because of financial constraints, new teachers do not receive extra planning time. However, MNPS offers teachers new to the district, whether first-time teachers or transfers, a voluntary paid three-day orientation the summer before the new school year, for which they are financially compensated. (See pages 12-13.)

Additional assistance is available for teachers receiving poor evaluations, though MNPS neither requires nor monitors teacher participation.

Additional guidance in content and instruction is available for teachers who receive very poor evaluations, though mandatory assistance is not required. Principals generally approve of the Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth – the state teacher evaluation tool. A major complaint, however, is the absence of a component that would allow evaluators to make specific detailed comments regarding what is actually going on in the classroom, particularly with regard to student/teacher relations. (See pages 13-14.)

Because of MNPS's high dropout rate, the district has focused on improving attendance and graduation; the focus has begun to pay off, with the district graduation rate jumping over 6 percentage points between 2004-05 and 2005-06.

District officials claim that policy changes and targeted academic assistance have increased the graduation rate in MNPS. The district has also focused on nonacademic assistance to students through increasing the number of attendance officers to help with truancy, among other initiatives. In addition, the district has also recently created the Office of Redesign and Innovation, whose goal is to develop programs that will help improve the graduation rate. (See pages 15-17.)

Despite the district's lack of adequate or high-quality alternative schools for struggling and disruptive students, the Metro School Board voted to close an innovative alternative school last year.

In January 2005 the district started the New Beginnings school for students with chronic behavior problems. New Beginnings provided an alternative atmosphere for learning with teachers and guidance counselors specifically trained to deal with challenging students. The district's use of the New Beginnings program marked an innovative step towards reducing disruptive student discipline problems. However, in less than a year, the School Board voted to close the school. (See page 18.)

MNPS is not allowed to provide supplemental education services to its students based on NCLB requirements. It must contract out for these services.

Under *No Child Left Behind*, districts with Title I schools identified in need of improvement for two or more years must provide supplemental education services, namely tutoring, to low-income students. Because MNPS has been identified by the Tennessee Department of Education as in need of improvement, it is not allowed to provide the tutoring services itself. Instead, it contracts out the services to private tutoring companies. (See page 19.)

The report recommends:

MNPS should continue expanding its community partnerships and relations.

The district should develop a comprehensive professional development plan that clearly articulates the district's professional development goals, processes, and activities; the plan needs to be accessible to educators and the public.

MNPS should create and fund a rigorous, outcomes-based orientation and induction program for new teachers that includes a strong teacher mentoring program.

MNPS should encourage schools to develop individual education plans (IEPs) for all students.

The Metro School Board should consider revisiting the New Beginnings concept.

MNPS should look into filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education to allow the district to provide supplemental education services.

(See pages 20-21.)

See page 23 for Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools' response to the 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 the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. In addition, OEA developed reports for the four other districts with Improvement 2 schools and a state-wide 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 in key areas 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 Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). 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

Since the Office of Education Accountability first studied Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in 2001, the district has made good progress in goals and governance areas, such as the development of district standards, assessments, and curriculum aligned to state requirements. In addition, the district has been effective at working with data to impact reform efforts. MNPS has shown gains in some academic areas as well, particularly in reading, in part according to district officials, because the district began a reading initiative in 2001. The initiative includes a reading specialist at every school, and \$15,000 allocations per school to be used for a bookroom that has reading materials for all levels of readers. For students who began kindergarten the same year that the district instituted the reading initiative, 90.2 percent scored proficient or advanced on their 3rd grade reading assessment, compared to 77 percent in 2002-03.² In addition, several initiatives aimed at dropout have improved the graduation rate, which has been a real struggle for the district, in recent years.

For nearly three decades, Metro Nashville Public Schools was under a federal court desegregation order. In 1998, all parties to the desegregation law suit agreed to resolve the court order, and the court declared the school system unitary (meaning no longer segregated). Because of this decision, Metro Schools discontinued busing students to schools far from students' neighborhoods, greatly impacting the demographics and student achievement levels of some schools. Other changes in student demographics, particularly large increases in the numbers of Hispanic and Kurdish students, have affected the school system in terms of needs, staff development and family-community dynamics.

In 2001, Pedro Garcia became the superintendent of Metro Nashville Public Schools. Dr. Garcia and his central office staff have been instituting system-wide reforms with the goal of raising student achievement in all schools. Though some areas of student achievement have improved, Metro's Board of Education voted in January of 2006 not to extend Garcia's contract, which expired in June 2007. School board elections in fall 2006 introduced five new members to the school board. The new school board voted to extend Garcia's contract, which now runs through June 2010.

² Comments from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, hand-delivered November 13, 2006.

Exhibit 1: Background Facts for Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2004-2005 School Year

Schools and Staff	
Number of schools	126
Number of School Improvement 2 schools ³	9
Number of teachers	4,816
Number of teacher waivers	108
Number of teacher permits	181
Average teacher salary	\$45,613
Student Population	
Number of students	70,089
African American	35,743 (46%)
Caucasian	30,788 (40%)
Hispanic	8,144 (11%)
Other	2,819 (4%)
Limited English proficient	5,800 (10%)
Students with disabilities	9,874 (14%)
Economically disadvantaged	41,590 (64%)
Number of students in Improvement 2 schools	11,424 (16%)
Suspensions	12,335
Expulsions	169
Graduation rate	60%
Grades K-8 attendance	96%
Grades 9-12 attendance	91%
Fiscal Information	
Total expenditures	\$586,447,972
Expenditures per pupil (ADM)	\$8,540
Federal revenue	11%
State revenue	28%
Local revenue	61%

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.

³ The Department of Education used performance data from 2004-05 when determining the 2005-06 high priority schools and districts.

HIGH PRIORITY STATUS

Of the 32 schools on the 2005-06 high priority list in MNPS, nine are in the School Improvement 2 category. Twenty schools are in School Improvement 1, three in Restructuring, and no schools are under Reconstitution.

Exhibit 2: Schools in School Improvement 2 in MNPS – 2005-06

School Name	Reason for High Priority Status
Alex Green Elementary	% proficient/advanced in math for all students and for African American students
Glenclyff Comprehensive High School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students; % proficient/advanced in reading/language arts/writing for all students, African American students, and students with disabilities; graduation rate ⁴
Hillwood Comprehensive High School	% proficient/advanced in math and reading/language arts/writing for African American students and for economically disadvantaged students; graduation rate
Hunters Lane Comprehensive High School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students, African American students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students; % proficient/advanced in reading/language arts/writing for African American students and for students with disabilities
Jere Baxter Middle School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students, African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities
Joelton Middle School	% proficient/advanced in math for African American students
McGavock Comprehensive High School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students, Hispanic students; graduation rate
Neely's Bend Middle School	% proficient/advanced in math for all students, Hispanic students, African American students, and economically disadvantaged students; % proficient/advanced in reading/language arts/writing for Hispanic students
Paragon Mills Elementary	% proficient/advanced in math for economically disadvantaged students; % proficient/advanced in reading/language arts/writing for all students

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. Joelton Middle School, McGavock High School, Hunters Lane High School, and Paragon Mills Elementary have seen improvement; the schools made AYP in the 2005-06 school year and are now listed as School Improvement 2 – Improving. Five of the nine High Priority Metro Nashville schools from 2005-06 have not improved and are now under corrective action. The district itself is under School Improvement 2 status as well, having dropped from School Improvement 1 – improving in 2005-06.

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 discipline, attendance and dropout issues.

The Department of Education has not released a list of high priority schools since 2001 because of changes in federal and state accountability laws. In the 2001 release of high priority schools, MNPS had nine schools in School Improvement 2 status. Of those nine from the 2001 list, four have moved off the 2006-07 high priority list and are in good standing (East Middle School,⁵ Kirkpatrick Elementary School, Warner Elementary School, and West End Middle School. One school, Maplewood Comprehensive High School, is

⁴ In 2005-06, Tennessee used the event dropout rate – a measure of the proportion of students who dropped out of school in a single year – for its graduation data. The state now uses the graduation rate definition – the percentage of students graduating on time.

⁵ East Middle School is now East Literature Magnet and serves grades 5-12.

now under reconstitution. Three are in School Improvement 1 (Shwab Elementary School, Stratford Comprehensive High School, and Whites Creek Comprehensive High School) and one is School Improvement 2 (Pearl-Cohn Comprehensive High School). In the 2001 study, OEA made three recommendations for MNPS:

1. To increase the preparedness of middle and high school students, Metro schools should provide more early childhood, enrichment, and remedial programs.
MNPS is continually looking to expand its pre-K programs. The district began offering pre-K in 1998, has added classes almost every year, and now has 92 pre-K classes. Currently the district has nine four-year-old pre-K programs in the city, all of which are based on a sliding scale fee structure. In addition, MNPS has 11 blended programs that serve both “typical children and children with disabilities.”⁶ These programs are fee-based on a sliding scale for non-disabled children. In addition, the state provides funds for five schools to offer pre-K classes for four-year-olds. In August 2005, the district received funds from the state’s voluntary pre-k program to open 11 new pre-K programs.⁷

As required by NCLB, the district has begun offering supplemental education services through private providers for students in chronically failing schools, and individual schools have a variety of tutoring and assistance available for struggling students.

2. Metro schools should expand the enhanced option and cluster design school programs to more schools and to all high-risk clusters.
In 2002, MNPS developed a district strategic plan that included Action Step 1.1.21, “Evaluate, develop, strengthen, and promote Enhanced Option Schools and Cluster Design Centers to ensure each complies with the spirit and intent of the SIP.”⁸ The process is currently ongoing. The district has increased its number of programs since 2001; MNPS now has nine enhanced option schools, nine cluster design school programs, and three optional enrollment schools, as compared to five enhanced option schools, three design centers, and no optional enrollment schools in 2001.⁹
3. The state and the Metro school system should increase social services in schools serving at-risk populations.
Since 2001, MNPS hired more school counselors so that all elementary schools have at least one and larger elementary schools have an additional part-time counselor. MNPS has continued to hire additional counselors. In the 2005-06 school year the district created 22 new positions, most to work specifically with 9th graders and middle schools. MNPS tried to offer additional psychology services, but never increased funding for this. There has not been a significant increase in the number of psychologists serving at-risk students.¹⁰ MNPS has hired 11 attendance workers in recent years, removing attendance duties from social workers, which will help social workers remain focused on student behavior.

⁶ “Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools System Pre-K Programs,” Metro Nashville Public Schools website, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.mnps.org/MNPS/Page3550.aspx>.

⁷ Metro Nashville Public Schools Press Release, “Metro Schools to open 11 new Pre-K classrooms,” July 21, 2006.

⁸ “MNPS Strategic Plan,” Metro Nashville Public Schools, Action Step 1.1.21, p. 5, accessed September 20, 2006, <http://www.mnps.org/Asset1660.aspx?method=1>.

⁹ Kaye Schneider, Director of Magnet/Optional Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools, “RE: Question,” E-mail to the author, May 18, 2006.

¹⁰ Pat Cole, Former Director of Guidance Programs, Metro Nashville Public Schools, “RE: Social services question,” E-mail to the author, May 16, 2006.

CONCLUSIONS: GOALS AND GOVERNANCE

Because of extensive data analysis and review, MNPS was able to identify state Department of Education data errors, resulting in the removal of six schools from the high priority schools list.

Upon reviewing the Department’s assessment data for Metro schools for 2004-05, MNPS appealed 34 cases. Eighteen of the appeals resulted in changes in at least one category of AYP, and six of the appeals allowed the school to make AYP in all categories and come off the high priority schools list. Most of the appeals were based on the Department reporting inaccurate data or basing their reports on missing data. Two of the appeals were based on miscoding of students – that is, a student was inappropriately placed in an ethnic or other (economically

disadvantaged, students with disabilities, etc.) subgroup.

Exhibit 3 explains the appeals filed for the six schools – all of which were first labeled School Improvement 1 – Improving schools:

Exhibit 3: Details of Upheld Appeals Filed for Six Schools in MNPS, 2005

School	Appeal Category	Details of Appeal
Antioch High School	1 appeal: Dropout rate for students with disabilities	MNPS showed a dropout rate of 4.76% for students with disabilities at Antioch High School (state requires 5.4% or below to make AYP through Safe Harbor provision)
W.A. Bass Middle School	2 appeals: (1) Attendance rate for African Americans and (2) attendance rate for economically disadvantaged students	MNPS showed an attendance rate of 93.64% for both subgroups, above the requirement for Safe Harbor. The Department’s report had missing data before the appeal.
Bellevue Middle School	1 appeal: Attendance for African Americans	MNPS showed an attendance rate of 92.81%. The Department had reported that the attendance rate was below the required 92.5%.
Brick Church Middle School	3 appeals: (1) Percent of all students scoring below proficient in math, (2) percent of Hispanic students scoring below proficient in reading and math, and (3) percent economically disadvantaged students scoring below proficient in math	MNPS based the appeal on miscoding of membership (Hispanic, African American, etc.) for 18 students. With the correct coding, Brick Church meets Safe Harbor provisions for three categories. In addition, the changes bring the number of Hispanic students to below 45, which is the state cut off for reporting purposes.
Cameron Middle School	1 appeal: Percent of African American students scoring below proficient in reading	MNPS based the appeal on miscoding of ethnicity and membership for eight students.
Napier Elementary Enhancement Option	2 appeals: (1) Attendance rate for African American students and (2) attendance rate for economically disadvantaged students	MNPS reported attendance rates for African American students at 94.98% and for economically disadvantaged students at 94.91%. The Department based its reports on incomplete data.

SOURCE: Paul Changas, Director of Assessment and Evaluation, Metro Nashville Public Schools, “RE: Appeals Process,” E-mail to the author, April 20, 2006.

To accurately analyze the data reported by the Department of Education and meet appeals deadlines, MNPS staff had to work overtime. Paul Changas, Director of Assessment and Evaluation at MNPS, explained that smaller districts would not have the resources to do this kind of data analysis and must depend on the accuracy of the Department’s reporting.

Most states do not audit their school data on a regular basis, and fewer than half the states audit graduation rate data – a key component of making AYP for high schools. A recent GAO report found that, while the U.S. Department of Education has partially addressed graduation rate data inaccuracies, it has not effectively assessed the states’ various data tracking devices. In response, the Department stated that the systems needed to be in place for several years before accurate assessments could take place. However, as GAO

illustrates, this lack of accountability for the data could lead to serious inaccuracies.¹¹ In addition, the report found that the Department is not relaying effective intervention strategies to reduce dropouts to the states.

The same can be said for state education departments. More than half of states – including Tennessee – do not audit their districts' graduation rate data.¹² Without data verification, districts may be reporting inaccurate rates, affecting their AYP status. Most Tennessee School Improvement 2 high schools are on the high priority list at least in part because of their graduation rates. Absent state auditing and data verification, the districts are vulnerable to failing to meet AYP for false reasons.

In part because MNPS has worked to build community involvement to improve schools, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the district a \$5.2 million grant to create smaller learning communities in high schools.

The district submitted a Smaller Learning Communities grant application for eight comprehensive high schools to the U.S. Department of Education, and was notified that it was awarded \$5.2 million in October 2006. The goal of the Smaller Learning Communities Program is “to assist high schools to create smaller learning communities that can prepare all students to achieve to challenging standards and succeed in college and careers.”¹³ The grant can be used to fund various programs in high schools, such as “(1) establishing ‘houses,’ career academies, magnet programs, and other ‘schools within a school’; (2) instituting block scheduling; (3) developing personal adult advocates, teacher-advisory systems,

and other mentoring strategies; (4) reducing teaching loads; or (5) using other innovations to create a more personal experience for students.”¹⁴ In Tennessee, Memphis City Schools received a Smaller Learning Communities grant totaling \$3.9 million in 2004 and Hamilton County received one totaling \$1.5 million in 2002. McMinn County Schools, Anderson County Schools, Jefferson County Schools, Kingsport City Schools, and Sevier County Schools have all received Smaller Learning Communities grants as well since 2000.¹⁵

Much research exists showing the benefits of smaller learning communities because “smaller high schools are more engaging environments and produce greater gains in student achievement.”¹⁶ The student achievement gains are perhaps the most significant outcome of small learning communities, and one report even shows that not only do small schools help student achievement gains, but they also help reduce the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their counterparts.¹⁷ Another significant outcome of small learning communities is the fact that students are known by their peers and school administrators. Not only does a student who feels connected and significant perform better on tests, but he or she is also less likely to be involved in negative behavior or have discipline problems.¹⁸ In addition, some reports have found that small schools yield better cost benefits than large schools, in part because it takes more personnel to deal with alienation effects in large schools and in part because fewer students drop out in

¹¹ United States Government Accountability Office, *No Child Left Behind Act: Education Could Do More to Help States Better Define Graduation Rates and Improve Knowledge about Intervention Strategies*, GAO-05-879, September 2005.

¹² Ibid; Email to Katie Cour from Corey Chatis, Director of Data Quality, Tennessee Department of Education, “graduation rate data collection/verification,” July 12, 2006.

¹³ United States Department of Education, *FY 2006 Program Performance Plan, ESEA: Smaller Learning Communities*, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/2006plan/edlite-q2eseasmaller.html>.

¹⁴ United States Department of Education, *Guide to U.S. Department of Education Programs*, last edited on April 13, 2006, accessed on August 21, 2006,

<http://web99.ed.gov/GTEP/Program2.nsf/02cbabc638062ed2852563b6006ffae/34db2aafaf042aaa85256a0100618c65?OpenDocument>.

¹⁵ “Smaller Learning Communities Program, Awards,” United States Department of Education, last modified August 22, 2005, accessed September 20, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/awards.html>.

¹⁶ Joe Nathan and Karen Febey, *Smaller, Safer, Saner Successful Schools*, National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, Center for School Change, Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota, 2001, p. 10.

¹⁷ “Small Schools Reduce Poverty’s Power Over Student Achievement, New Four-State Study Points to Benefits of Smaller Schools for Poorer Communities,” The Rural School and Community Trust, February 9, 2000.

¹⁸ Learning First Alliance, *Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools*, November 2001, p. 6.

small schools.¹⁹ Dropouts result in large societal costs, and efforts to decrease dropouts may be one of the most effective ways states and districts can impact communities.

The U.S. Department of Education explains MNPS's goals for the grant: "Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) will implement Smaller Learning Communities in eight of the largest, most needy high schools in Nashville. To achieve MNPS's vision of connecting all students and their families to present and future opportunities through a rigorous, relevant, and personalized education, these eight high schools will implement Smaller Learning Communities in the form of Freshman Academies (9th grade) and Career/Thematic Academies (10th through 12th grade). A structured Advisory Program will provide personalized social and academic support, and sustained, ongoing professional development will equip teachers to improve teaching and learning to meet the needs of their students."²⁰ The 9th grade academies will be designed so that 9th grade classrooms are close to each other in a building, and teachers in the academies would have common planning periods to discuss issues around instruction.²¹

To garner community support for the Smaller Learning Communities grant and 9th grade academy initiative, MNPS worked with area nonprofits, businesses, colleges, the local government, Metro Nashville's Education Agency, and others. This group of advisors – which will serve as an oversight body for decisions around the 9th grade learning academies – is made up of members of Alignment Nashville, a local nonprofit whose mission is "to create a system to bring community organizations and resources into alignment so that their coordinated support of Nashville's youth has a positive impact on public school success and the success of our community as a whole."²² The U.S. Department of Education cited the district's work with Alignment Nashville as a major reason for awarding such a large sum to the district.²³

Because of a significant increase in the percentage of Hispanic students in MNPS, the district is working to improve Hispanic community and family relations.

In the past 10 years, the proportion of Hispanic students in the district has grown from 1.3 percent to 10.5 percent of total students in MNPS. Hispanic students also have the lowest graduation rate of any subgroup in the district – only 51.6 percent of Hispanic students receive a diploma.²⁴ Additionally, several school principals interviewed for this report stated that family and community involvement is a significant problem in their schools, and one principal mentioned that cultural and language differences

present the biggest challenge. To assist with the increase of Hispanic students and to develop rapport with families, MNPS hired a full-time Hispanic community liaison, called the Language Translation Specialist, in early 2006. In *Increasing the School Involvement of Hispanic Parents*, the author highlights the need to hire additional staff to help overcome cultural barriers that hinder Hispanic family involvement, such as family and school attitudes in Hispanics' countries of origin.²⁵

The Language Translation Specialist's primary responsibility is to reach out to Hispanic families by organizing and publicizing community meetings in Spanish. The district recently presented "Opportunities and Challenges of the Hispanic Student in Public School," the first-ever district-wide Spanish language Hispanic outreach event. Over 300 people attended the event, which featured a discussion in Spanish by Superintendent of Metro Schools, Pedro Garcia, on opportunities for Hispanic students and of the newly

¹⁹ Barbara Kent Lawrence, Ed.D, et al., *Dollars & Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools*, KnowledgeWorks Foundation and The Rural School and Community Trust, 2002, p. 12.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Cohort 6 Abstracts for New Awards, Smaller Learning Communities Program, accessed at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/slccohort6.doc> on November 15, 2006

²¹ James R. Overstreet, Director of 9-12, Metro Nashville Public Schools, "RE: Smaller Learning Communities Grant," E-mail to the author, April 25, 2006.

²² Alignment Nashville website; accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.alignmentnashville.org>.

²³ U.S. Department of Education, "Selection Criteria – Foundation for Implementation," Received by email from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, "Selection Criteria for Metro's Federal Grant," November 21, 2006.

²⁴ Comments from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, hand-delivered November 13, 2006.

²⁵ Morton Inger, "Increasing the School Involvement of Hispanic Parents," *ERIC/CUE Digest*, No. 80, 1992.

formed Committee of Latino Parents. Other speakers discussed various programs available to Hispanic students in Metro and the importance of community involvement.

In addition, MNPS has re-launched *Minuto Escolar*, a Spanish television program that informs students' families of happenings in the schools and provides details for programs and options within MNPS. Ruben De Pena, Metro's Language Translation Specialist, explains: "These are one-minute pre-recorded information pieces that are aired several times a day through local Channel 42, TELEFUTURA, which is an affiliate of [the] popular TV network UNIVISION." Topics on the program include parent involvement, transitioning to different schools, attendance issues, after-school tutoring programs, parent-teacher meetings, bullying and peer pressure, and English language learner information.²⁶

Of the nine Improvement 2 schools in MNPS, three have Hispanic populations of over 10 percent – Glenciff Comprehensive High School (22 percent of students are Hispanic), Neely's Bend Middle School (15 percent) and Paragon Mills Elementary (37 percent). The principal at Paragon Mills reiterated the need to reach out to Hispanic families, explaining that one of the biggest issues for the school is meeting AYP in math and reading among its English language learners. In addition, the principal said that the language barrier causes low parental involvement (20 different languages are spoken by students at the school). The school is hoping to hire a family involvement coordinator – much like the district's Language Translation Specialist – using Title I funds in the upcoming school year. This action, coupled with assistance by the MNPS Language Specialist, could result in improved communications with Hispanic families in this school.

The district has also hired a Somali community liaison whose "primary function is to coordinate and facilitate discussion between [the district and the Somali community] and to design, in conjunction with the Somali Community, meaningful and productive events and programs that will serve to inform Somali parents and students of the cultural norms and expectations of the U.S. schooling system."²⁷ Arabic and Kurdish students have also increased in number in MNPS, but there are no current plans to hire liaisons specifically for those communities.

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

CONCLUSIONS: TEACHING QUALITY

The district has successfully linked its professional development initiatives to district goals and uses proven best practices in its many professional development offerings. The district does not, however, clearly articulate a professional development plan to educators or the public.

Research shows that professional development must be intrinsically tied to strategic goals to be successful. MNPS has adhered to this by directly linking its professional development action steps to the district's Strategic Plan. The eight directives that comprise the Strategic Plan each have a professional development component attached to them; for example, Strategic Directive 1 – "Maximize each and every student's learning and eliminate achievement disparities that exist among different subgroups" – includes, as one of its action steps, "Provide staff development for principals and teachers on instructional strategies for high

achieving students."²⁸ District officials explain that this linkage directly ties the district's professional development goals to its student achievement goals, a key factor in developing meaningful professional development.

²⁶ Ruben De Pena, Language Translation Specialist, Metro Nashville Public Schools, "RE: Hispanic liaison questions," E-mail to the author, April 10, 2006.

²⁷ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, "Status of Somali Liaison Staff Member for Metro Schools,," November 20, 2006.

²⁸ Ibid.

Strong professional development is not based on one-day workshops but rather is embedded in a teacher's workday and seeks teacher buy-in. In reviewing effective professional development strategies, the Learning First Alliance explains that:

districts [with strong professional development] were no longer simply offering workshops and sending teachers to conferences...furthermore, as a way to offer additional opportunities for job-embedded professional development, the districts shifted a majority of their release days back to schools. In most districts, schools were asked to use the time to extend the discussion on district-level training, but to do it in a school-based context. Teachers and principals highly praised the shift.²⁹

In addition, strong professional development must focus on involving teachers in the learning process, as opposed to merely relaying information.³⁰ Teacher buy-in to reform and improvement efforts can significantly increase when teachers are involved in the process. For example, strong professional development courses may ask participants to model good teacher skills, break out into small group discussions, or role-play classroom scenarios – a far cry from the lecture format that is prevalent in many courses.

MNPS follows these best practices in its professional development offerings. For example, the district offers a 4 or 5 day training for the district K-8 reading initiative with a 1-2 day follow-up on specialized reading topics. In addition, the district has worked to embed its professional development in the daily functions of the teacher by providing every elementary school with a full-time reading specialist. These specialists have no administrative duties; their responsibilities only include teaching reading and working with other reading teachers.³¹

Another example of the district's professional development that incorporates best practice while embedding the professional development in the school day is through the use of its mentor specialists. The district has nine math mentor specialists, three science mentor specialists, and two Language Arts mentor specialists, all of whom are available to teachers to work on specific strategies and initiatives. According to district officials, "recently, for example, the math specialists created CDs with all the math materials and support lessons they have created to help with district initiatives such as math problem solving and delivered them to each teacher."³² Access to strong subject-specific mentors is a proven best practice in developing a continuum of teacher learning.

A good example of follow-up in the district's professional development is through the use of two full-time COMP specialists. COMP, short for Classroom Organization and Management Program, is a nationally-recognized program that focuses on classroom management with the goal of improved student behavior.³³ Several principals interviewed for this report commented on the benefits of COMP. The program consists of a 4-day workshop with a follow-up day on a later date; in addition, the district's COMP specialists are available to teachers and principals on a needs basis and can provide direct support to teachers who are having classroom management problems.³⁴

MNPS teachers are allotted five professional development days for activities that their principal must approve. In addition, the district has "Code 10" days that can be used for professional development, either because the district or school is beginning a new initiative that requires professional development or because a principal thinks a specific teacher could benefit from additional professional development. With the addition of Code 10 professional development days, an individual teacher could theoretically participate in 10 or more professional development days a year.³⁵

²⁹ Wendy Togneri and Stephen E. Anderson, *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools – A Leadership Brief*, Learning First Alliance, 2003, pp. 28-29.

³⁰ Ravay Snow-Renner and Patricia A. Lauer, "Professional Development Analysis," *McRel Insights*, 2005, p.6.

³¹ Comments from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, hand-delivered November 13, 2006.

³² Ibid.

³³ Classroom Organization and Management Program website; Accessed at <http://www.comp.org/aboutus.htm> on December 4, 2006.

³⁴ Comments from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, hand-delivered November 13, 2006.

³⁵ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, "Professional Development with note re: Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process," November 21, 2006.

The district offers a plethora of courses – over 350 options are included in the 2006 MNPS Professional Development Course Catalog. The majority of courses concentrate on subject-specific content, with additional courses available in managing students, creating strong leadership, working with different types of learners, and using the district’s online student information management system. District officials say that the most popular courses offered to teachers are reading courses such as “No More Letter of the Week,” science and math courses like “Hands On Science” and “Marilyn Burns Math Solutions,” and the Covey Training, “7 Habits of Effective People.” When asked what courses are on the “cutting edge” of professional development, a district representative listed the new vocabulary initiative based on education specialist Robert Marzano’s work and “A Framework for Understanding Poverty” by education specialist Ruby K. Payne, among others.³⁶ Several principals interviewed for this report commented on the benefits of the Ruby Payne course in particular.

Despite progress in professional development options, MNPS does not have a stand-alone professional development plan and accessing information about a clear plan for professional development in the district is challenging. The professional development section of the district’s website explains that the professional development goals are to “work to develop exceptional instructional leadership in all of our schools [and] attract, train, and retain highly qualified staff, empower all staff, reward excellence, and increase job satisfaction.”³⁷ However, in response to a question about the district’s professional development goal, district officials replied: “The MNPS goal is to provide professional development that promotes the learning of all students through high expectations for their academic achievement. The district seeks to prepare educators to understand and appreciate all students, and to help all staff members create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments. To accomplish this, professional development offered by MNPS is results-oriented, standards-based, and job-embedded.”³⁸ Though both of these statements are admirable, it appears that the professional development division is unclear as to its purpose: help attract and retain teachers, provide assistance to teachers to improve instruction, help teachers create safe environments? Without a focused goal and agenda, the district’s professional development division will face challenges in continuing to provide up-to-date, needs-based best practices.

In addition, the district could benefit from a stand-alone professional development plan that includes, among other things, the goals of professional development, including a long-term vision, a thorough description of how professional development works in the district (including information on the new electronic course registering system – ERO), a toolbox of courses that all teachers should take, funding for professional development initiatives, accountability plans for courses and their impacts, a description of the district’s PALS mentoring program, evaluation procedures for professional development, and a section devoted to professional development for new teachers. The district has some of these elements available on its website, but there is no systematic way for a teacher – in particular a new teacher – to quickly access information about professional development and about district expectations for teacher professional development. The district could easily tie in the Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth, the state’s teacher evaluation tool, to a professional development plan, making it easier for teachers to understand how their future growth plans work in coordination with professional development offered by the district.

The North Carolina Regional Educational Laboratory developed a toolkit called *Professional Development: Learning from the Best*, that includes information on developing a clear professional development plan. The author writes: “Make a clear plan that includes:

- a. How professional development supports the...district’s long-term plan;
- b. A professional development needs assessment process;
- c. Professional development goals;
- d. Professional development content, process, and activities;
- e. Research that supports the chosen content/process for professional development;

³⁶ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, “Professional Development,” November 17, 2006.

³⁷ MNPS website; accessed at <http://mnps.org/Page2073.aspx> on November 20, 2006.

³⁸ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, “Professional Development,” November 17, 2006.

- f. Resources available to support professional development; and
- g. Professional development evaluation steps.³⁹

MNPS may already have many of these pieces in place; however, the district could benefit from pulling them together and forming a concrete plan, allowing educators and the public to easily access information on professional development.

While MNPS offers some support resources to new teachers, the district does not have a clear, structured new teacher induction plan.

MNPS offers teachers new to the district, whether first-time teachers or transfers, a voluntary paid three-day orientation the summer before the new school year, for which they are financially compensated. According to district personnel, the summer orientation program reaches 75 percent of all new teachers;⁴⁰ the other 25

percent of new teachers receives a one-day training in the fall focused primarily on standards, curriculum, and district goals. The district has no written concrete new teacher induction plan,⁴¹ nor does it require new teachers to attend orientation. According to district officials, a new teacher induction plan would have to be negotiated with the local teacher’s union. Officials noted that the teacher’s union has resisted additional requirements for teachers. Also, because of financial constraints, new teachers do not receive extra planning time.

New teacher induction programs combine orientation, support, and guidance programs to increase new teacher confidence and effectiveness.⁴² Successful induction programs are comprehensive and system-wide, lasting several years and then transitioning into a lifelong district professional development program aligned with a school district’s mission and structure.⁴³ Induction can positively impact teacher attrition rates, which are on average 40-50 percent nationwide in the first five years, and which contribute to teacher shortages. Mentoring is an important component of the induction process, but is shown to be effective only in combination with other components, as Exhibit 4 illustrates:

Exhibit 4: Differences between Mentoring and Induction

Mentoring	Comprehensive Induction
Focuses on survival and support	Promotes career learning and professional development
Relies on a single mentor or shares a mentor with other teachers	Provides multiple support people and administrators—district and state assistance
Treats mentoring as an isolated phase	Treats induction as part of a lifelong professional development design
Limited resources spent	Investment in an extensive, comprehensive, and sustained induction program
Reacts to whatever arises	Acculturates a vision and aligns content to academic standards

Source: Harry K. Wong. “Induction Programs that Keep New Teachers Teaching and Improving,” *NASSP Bulletin*, 88 (638), March 2004, pp. 41-58.

In addition to the orientation program, the Peer Assistance, Leadership and Support Program, or PALS, is a mentorship program available for new teachers in MNPS.⁴⁴ A joint project of the Metro School Board and the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association (MNEA), PALS provides new teachers support from an

³⁹ Hassel, Emily, *Professional Development: Learning from the Best*, North Carolina Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999.

⁴⁰ Interview with Metro Nashville Public Schools Director and Staff, December 13, 2005.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Richard Ingersoll and Jeffrey M. Kralik, “The Impact of Mentoring on Teacher Retention: What the Research Says,” Education Commission of the States, February 2004, accessed September 13, 2006, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/50/36/5036.htm>.

⁴³ Harry K. Wong. “Induction Programs that Keep New Teachers Teaching and Improving,” *NASSP Bulletin*, 88 (638), March 2004, pp. 41-58.

⁴⁴ “PALS Program Overview,” Metro Nashville Public Schools website, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.mnps.org/Page2075.aspx>.

experienced teacher mentor in the form of demonstration teaching, feedback on instruction style, information on policies and procedures, and assistance in lesson planning, self-assessment, and classroom management. The mentors (referred to as “PALS”) are veteran classroom teachers who work full-time with new teachers, offer in-school and after-school sessions throughout the new teacher’s first year. PALS usually serve for a period of three years. In the 2005-2006 school year, eight PALS were available to serve roughly 500 new teachers; each mentor is thus responsible for around 60 new teachers (an improvement over years past when each mentor was responsible for up to 100 new teachers, but still a heavy load for the mentor).⁴⁵ Though administrators at both the district and school levels report that new teachers participating in the PALS program have provided some positive feedback, principals often cited the ratio of PALS to new teachers as a significant shortcoming of the program.

Teachers who want to mentor with the PALS program must meet certain criteria, including 10 years of teaching experience in MNPS and positive, confidential recommendations from administrators and colleagues. Finalists are selected by a “PALS Panel” comprised of seven members, including MNEA and School Board appointees, who oversee the program and monitor the progress of participants. Once chosen, PALS receive three days of training from MNPS staff.

Many schools in the School Improvement 2 Category in MNPS have additional informal teacher orientation and mentoring practices, including:

- Team structures that are instructed to include and welcome new teachers
- Self-initiated in-house mentoring
- New teacher meetings and information sessions
- Reducing class sizes for new teachers
- School mentoring committees
- Peer observations
- Common planning times

States vary in their approaches to induction programs for new teachers. Only 15 states – Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia – required and funded mentoring for new teachers in 2005-06.⁴⁶ Since 1978, North Carolina has emphasized providing assistance to new teachers by strengthening professional certification, teacher preparation, staff development, and induction programs. Currently, new teachers in North Carolina receive a three-year license during which they develop a comprehensive portfolio and an annually updated Individual Growth Plan with the principal and teacher mentor. Each year, they are observed four times and participate in an end-of-year conference. This Performance-Based Licensure Process requires that teachers have a reduced workload and are placed in their field of licensure. After the three-year induction period, teachers may receive a continuing license if they have successfully completed the program.

Memphis follows the Santa Cruz model of New Teacher Induction, providing intensive and thorough induction and support that has shown promise in improving teacher retention.

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

Additional assistance is available for teachers receiving poor evaluations, though MNPS neither requires nor monitors teacher participation.

Principals and assistant principals evaluate classroom teachers using the Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth, the state-mandated evaluation and professional development process. A non-tenured teacher is evaluated three times annually for each of the three years on probation, while a teacher with a Professional License is evaluated twice during

⁴⁵ Interview with Metro Nashville Public Schools Director and Staff, December 13, 2005.

⁴⁶ “Quality Counts 2005, Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality,” *Education Week*, accessed September 20, 2006, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2005/tables/17quality-t1f.html> (requires free registration).

the 10-year period of the license. As part of the evaluation, teachers and evaluators create a Future Growth Plan, which lays out professional development goals and determines measurable objectives and action plans for meeting those goals. These Future Growth Plans require self-reflection and teachers and principals are responsible for ensuring that they follow through with them.

If a teacher receives a poor evaluation, a principal may request that the district assist in developing a Growth Plan – distinct from the Future Growth Plan – which defines the areas the teacher needs to strengthen, creates goals with measurable outcomes, and designs an appropriate action plan.⁴⁷ The district Growth Plan resembles the state’s Future Growth Plan in that neither requires oversight or assurance that the teacher is actually following it.

Additional guidance in content and instruction is available for teachers who receive very poor evaluations, though mandatory assistance is not required.⁴⁸ The principal may request that the district help develop a Plan of Assistance for a teacher who has received a poor evaluation. The Plan of Assistance is similar to the Growth Plan in that it targets areas of weakness and lays out goals for improving. However, the Plan of Assistance is more specific, and only occurs when a teacher’s job is on the line. According to district officials, “Failure to make improvement results in non-renewal of the teacher for the following year,” though non-renewal would only occur when a teacher is not tenured, or within the first three years of teaching.⁴⁹ Unlike with the Growth Plan, the principal is required to report back to the district on a teacher’s Plan of Assistance. With both the Growth Plan and the Plan of Assistance, the onus is on the principal to follow through with actions.

The district tries to emphasize to new teachers and principals to focus on the probationary period for non-tenured teachers—three years—for reprimands and other actions. According to district officials, three actions may occur when a non-tenured teacher receives a poor evaluation: remediation, improvement or termination. Dismissing a tenured teacher is a rare occurrence, as a required hearing demands a tremendous amount of time and effort from the principal. Therefore the district attempts a dismissal only in the most serious cases, and only when a principal has done the necessary legwork to document problems.

While principals like the Framework in general, a major complaint is the absence of a component that would allow evaluators to make specific detailed comments regarding what is actually going on in the classroom, namely student/teacher relations.⁵⁰ Therefore, many principals are using additional evaluation resources, namely “drop-ins” or “walk-throughs,” to observe teachers’ instruction and interaction with students.

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

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Dr. June Keel, Director of Human Resources, Metro Nashville Public Schools, May 23, 2006.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, “Re: Assistance to Teachers,” November 27, 2006.

⁵⁰ Interviews with Mary Nollner, Principal, Joelton Middle School, February 2, 2006 and Michael Tribue, Principal, McGavock Comprehensive High School, January 30, 2006.

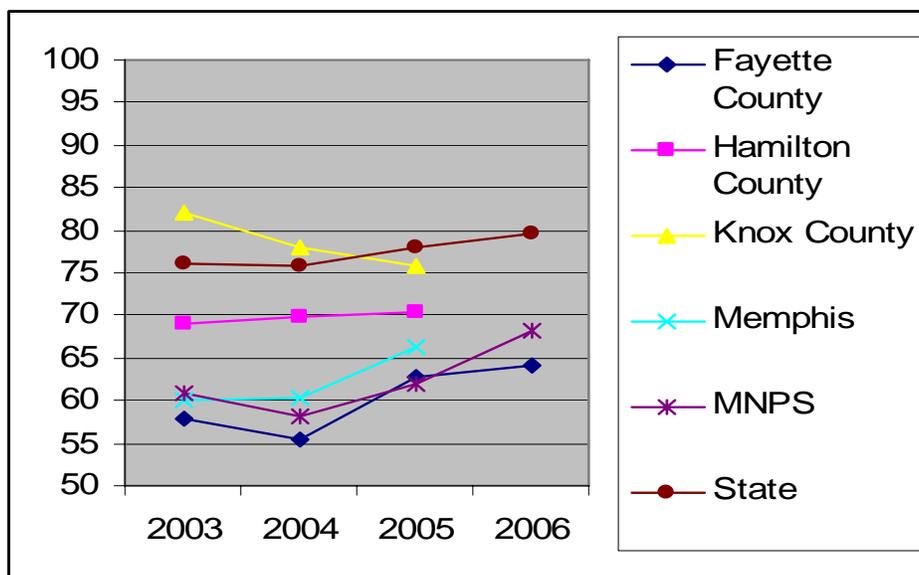
CONCLUSIONS: STUDENT DISCIPLINE, ATTENDANCE, AND DROPOUT

Because of MNPS's high dropout rate, the district has focused on improving attendance and graduation; the focus has begun to pay off, with the district graduation rate jumping over 6 percentage points between 2004-05 and 2005-06.

According to the Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process for MNPS, the biggest challenge for the district is to increase high school achievement and the graduation rate.⁵¹ As the plan illustrates, almost one-third of all high school students in the district do not graduate on time. In 2004-05, the district's graduation rate was 61.9 percent. In 2005-06, the rate had risen to 68.3 percent – an increase of 6.4 percent. Most of the other districts with Improvement 2 schools have seen increases in their graduation rates as well,

and the state has also increased its graduation rate. Exhibit 5 compares graduation rates for the five districts with Improvement 2 schools and the state. Graduation rate data for 2006 is under review for Knox County, Memphis City Schools, and Hamilton County.

Exhibit 5: Comparison of Graduation Rates for the State and Five Districts with Improvement 2 Schools



SOURCE: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Cards 2003-06.

District officials claim that policy changes and targeted academic assistance have increased the graduation rate in MNPS. In 2002, district officials asked the School Board to change the 93 percent attendance rule, which mandated that high school students attend 93 percent of days to receive credit for graduation regardless of their grades. District staff had found that more than 6,500 students had failed to receive credit for courses in high school because of this rule in a three year period. The Board eliminated the requirement in April 2003.⁵²

⁵¹ The State Department of Education requires each district to complete a Tennessee Comprehensive Systemwide Planning Process (TCSP) in order to receive federal funding. The plan highlights the districts' strengths and includes planned action steps to address areas of weakness.

⁵² MNPS School Board Meeting Minutes, April 22, 2003.

In addition, upon reviewing research on retention and dropout, district officials changed the retention policy so that a student could be retained no more than two times in grades K-8.⁵³ Research has shown that a student retained even once in elementary school is more likely to dropout than one who is not.

To assist students with graduation requirements, the district added Credit Recovery, a way for students who have failed classes because of excessive absences to recover course credit. According to the district, 193 students graduated in 2005-06 because of Credit Recovery. In addition, the district began a transition summer school for over-age 7th graders to concentrate on reading, writing, and math. The program helps prepare these students for the impending transition to high school.

In an effort to better prepare students early on to prevent potential dropouts, MNPS has been offering pre-K classes since 1998, and continues to add new classes almost every year. Currently the district has 92 preschool classrooms. The district also preceded the state in developing pre-K standards in reading and math, and has recently incorporated social and emotional pre-K skills into the standards.⁵⁴ The district offers professional development to all pre-K teachers on the standards, and it also provides parents with a standards-based report card for pre-K students that includes progress on content areas as well as teacher comments, parent comments, and ways that parents can better help their children succeed in Pre-K.

In 2002, MNPS began a new reading program for students in grades 4-12 called Language! Specifically, the program targets students who score in the bottom third on state tests. Research has shown a strong correlation between poor reading skills and dropout potential. Programs that focus on reading have seen some of the best returns in terms of decreasing dropouts. In addition, MNPS offers Project S.H.A.R.E. (Supporting Healthy Attitudes Regarding Education), a program that helps at-risk students become engaged in school and has focused efforts on reading achievement in the early grades.

All schools develop individualized instruction plans for special education students, as required by federal law. These plans, called Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), serve as guiding tools for students with disabilities, including learning disabilities. By federal law, all IEPs must include several components, including:

- A summary of current performance based on student assessments and observations
- Annual goals with short-term objectives
- A list of services to be provided to the student, and the dates and times of those services
- A summary of transition courses or services necessary for the student to reach his or her post-school goals
- A review of how the student's progress will be measured and how parents will be informed of that progress.⁵⁵

Ideal dropout prevention programs would include IEPs for all at-risk students, not just for those with disabilities. Several schools and districts across the country have experimented with IEPs for low-performing students, and some have seen excellent results.⁵⁶ MNPS does not have a formal plan for developing IEPs for all students, though some schools are experimenting with this idea. Staff at Dalewood Middle School, for example, produce reports on students' strengths and weaknesses that are shared with the student and his/her family. An MNPS official explains: "Virtually every student in the school can tell a visitor what skills they need to improve."

Though initiatives that target academic success are essential to any dropout prevention program, nonacademic assistance to students is also integral. MNPS has focused on the nonacademic areas as well in an effort to decrease the dropout rate.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Email to Katie Cour from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, "Re: Pre-K Standards – Update," November 29, 2006.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Education website; accessed at

<http://www.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html#The%20Basic%20Special%20Education%20Process%20Under%20IDEA> on September 27, 2006.

⁵⁶ See the Miller Education Center in Hillsboro, Oregon.

Perhaps most importantly, the district has several programs that foster safe learning environments, including Respect and Protect, Building Bridges, Second Step, Safe At Last, and a Safe Schools Summit.⁵⁷ The Learning First Alliance explains the link between school safety and success in school:

Why is a safe and supportive learning community so powerful? Because it fulfills students' basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, influence competence, and physical security. As those basic needs are met, *because they are being met*, students tend to become increasingly committed to the school community's norms, rules, and values. As students subscribe more deeply to these constructive norms, their behavior changes accordingly, which in turn creates an upward spiral that benefits everyone.⁵⁸

In addition, MNPS hired 11 new attendance workers in 2005-06 to assist with chronic truants. These attendance workers have a range of duties, including monitoring general attendance, contacting and working with parents of students who are chronically late, and working to promote school involvement for truants. In addition, the district is streamlining its withdrawal procedures to better track dropouts and transfers, as evidence from schools indicated that policies were inconsistent from one school to the next.⁵⁹

The district has also recently created the Office of Redesign and Innovation, whose goal is to develop "strategies and new programs that will result in improved graduation rates, improved attendance and discipline, increased academic achievement, and reductions in the achievement gap between subgroups of students."⁶⁰ Specific initiatives for the office include:

- Managing the \$5.2 million federal Smaller Learning Communities grant (see page 7 for more information on this grant and its connection to dropout)
- Establishing "career academies" and other small learning opportunities in high school
- Reaching out to the nonprofit community in Nashville to align dropout prevention strategies and other innovative school programs
- Engaging the business community in an effort to garner support for innovation in schools.⁶¹

The district focus on business and community involvement through the Office of Redesign and Innovation is significant. The National Dropout Prevention Center sites community involvement and engagement as an effective and significant strategy to help prevent dropout.⁶² In addition, the National Dropout Prevention Center lists mentoring as a highly effective dropout prevention strategy. MNPS has not begun a formal mentoring program in its schools, but the district does work with the PENCIL Foundation to provide mentoring and tutoring to students. An MNPS official explains: "As one of the district's strongest community partners, PENCIL recruits volunteers, screens each with a background check and pairs them with the schools/students of greatest need." A study of a similar program in Cincinnati – the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) Mentoring Program – found that "ninety percent of the mentees studied over the two-year period stayed in school, compared to drop out rates of 40% to 70% throughout the school district. Mentored students had higher rates of school attendance compared with their peers who didn't have a mentor."⁶³

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

⁵⁷ MNPS website; accessed at <http://mnps.org/Page2410.aspx> on September 27, 2006.

⁵⁸ Learning First Alliance, *Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools*, November 2001.

⁵⁹ Comments from Diane Long, Public Information Coordinator, MNPS, hand-delivered November 13, 2006.

⁶⁰ "Schools Director Pedro Garcia Creates Office of Reform and Innovation," MNPS Press Release, October 12, 2006.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² National Dropout Prevention Center website; Accessed at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/> on November 29, 2006.

⁶³ Cincinnati Youth Collaborative website, accessed at <http://www.cycyouth.org/main.php?pgID=10> on September 27, 2006.

Despite the district's lack of adequate or high-quality alternative schools for struggling and disruptive students, the Metro School Board voted to close an innovative alternative school last year.

Nearly every school principal interviewed for this report complained about the inadequacy of alternative schools in the district. The district has scaled its alternative schools back to three – Baxter Alternative Learning Center (ALC), Cohn ALC, and McCann ALC. In a study of alternative schools in 2005, OEA recommended that local school districts improve their alternative schools by:

- Improving integration between regular schools and alternative schools;
- Improving transition and long-term services for alternative school students returning to the regular school setting; and
- Considering alternative options to provide alternative school education.⁶⁴

In January 2005 the district started the New Beginnings school for students with chronic behavior problems. New Beginnings provided an alternative atmosphere for learning with teachers and guidance counselors specifically trained to deal with challenging students. Several principals interviewed in this study reported difficulties in dealing with students with chronic behavior problems. Often these students did not meet the criteria to be sent to an alternative learning school but were too disruptive to remain in regular classrooms. According to principals in Improvement 2 schools, New Beginnings offered a better learning environment for these students. New Beginnings teachers were provided with classroom management training, violence and bullying prevention, and other student behavior trainings.⁶⁵ The district's use of the New Beginnings program marked an innovative step towards reducing disruptive student discipline problems.

In less than a year, the School Board voted to close the school. From its inception, community and board members had complained about the cost of New Beginnings although the board had endorsed the program. In addition, community members living near the facility – located at Highland Heights in East Nashville – complained that they were not told by MNPS that a school for children with chronic behavior problems would be opening in their neighborhood.⁶⁶ Board Member Lisa Hunt argued that the Board never received an evaluation of the program, and suggested that funds would be better used in school-based intervention strategies such as in-school suspension and more guidance counselors.⁶⁷ Board Chair Pam Garrett, who supported the school, explained that, despite ample evidence that programs like these are very beneficial and show strong results when done correctly, the community revolted against it.⁶⁸

Principals interviewed in this study thought favorably of the program and were disappointed to see the end of it. In fact, principals came up with the original idea to begin a program like New Beginnings. The program had also garnered support from the Citizens Panel of the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce.⁶⁹

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

⁶⁴ Comptroller of the Treasury, "Tennessee's Alternative Schools," Office of Education Accountability, John G. Morgan, Office of the Comptroller, State of Tennessee, April 2005.

⁶⁵ "Board Letter – December 17, 2004," Metro Nashville Public Schools memorandum to School Board Members, Dec. 17, 2004, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.mnps.org/Page1873.aspx>.

⁶⁶ Bill Harless, "Residents unhappy with new school," *The City Paper*, January 13, 2005, accessed September 13, 2006, http://66.45.13.138/index.cfm?section=9&screen=news&news_id=38500.

⁶⁷ Metro Nashville Public Schools Board of Education, Conversation with the Director, March 15, 2005, accessed September 20, 2006, <http://mnps.org/AssetFactory.aspx?did=10727>.

⁶⁸ Phone conversation with Pam Garrett, Chair of the MNPS Board, November 29, 2006.

⁶⁹ "2004 Citizens Panel for a Community Report Card," Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce website, p. 35, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.nashvillechamber.com/education/0304report.pdf>.

CONCLUSIONS: INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

MNPS is not allowed to provide supplemental education services to its students based on NCLB requirements. It must contract out for these services.

Under *No Child Left Behind*, districts with Title I schools identified in need of improvement for two or more years must provide supplemental education services, namely tutoring, to low-income students. The U.S. Department of Education lists several entities that may provide supplemental education services, including non-profits, for-profits, school districts, public schools, public charter schools, private schools, public or private institutions of higher education, and faith-based organizations.⁷⁰

Organizations that cannot provide supplemental education services include “(1) public schools identified as in need of improvement, restructuring or corrective action; and (2) LEAs⁷¹ identified as in need of improvement (although schools within such an LEA that are making adequate yearly progress could be providers).”⁷² Because MNPS has been identified by the Tennessee Department of Education as in need of improvement, it is not allowed to provide the tutoring services itself. Instead, it contracts out the services to private tutoring companies.

In discussions with MNPS, many members of the staff mentioned the U.S. Department of Education’s double standard of who can provide supplemental education services. On the U.S. Department of Education’s website, it clearly states that districts in need of improvement are forbidden to provide these services.⁷³ However, the U.S. Department granted a waiver to the Chicago school district, a district labeled in need of improvement, to allow it to provide its own supplemental services. In September 2005, the U.S. Department of Education authorized Chicago to continue providing tutoring under NCLB in exchange for agreeing to certain provisions despite the fact that the district fell short of state targets.⁷⁴ The U.S. Department of Education is looking at nine other large districts’ requests to provide services and is expected to form similar deals.⁷⁵ MNPS officials stated that they are in a better position to provide appropriate services to students because they know the students, and because they do not have a profit motive driving their results.⁷⁶

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

⁷⁰ “Supplemental Services, Title I, section 1116(e),” United States Department of Education website, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/admins/comm/suppsvcs/supplementalservices.doc>.

⁷¹ LEA stands for Local Education Agency and is a synonym for school district.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Supplemental Educational Services, *Non-Regulatory Guidance*,” United States Department of Education website, June 13, 2005, p. 12, accessed August 21, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/suppsvcsguid.doc>.

⁷⁴ Catherine Gewertz, “Ed. Dept. Allows Chicago to Provide NCLB Tutoring,” *Education Week*, September 7, 2005, accessed September 13, 2006, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/09/07/02tutor> (requires free registration).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview with Metro Nashville Public Schools Director and Staff, December 13, 2005.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MNPS should continue expanding its community partnerships and relations.

The district's collaboration with Alignment Nashville, a local nonprofit whose goal is to bring agencies and resources together to help Nashville's youth, provided the basis for a federal grant award of over \$5 million to the district. Continuing this relationship, and developing more like it, can only benefit the district. In addition, the district should consider hiring community liaisons for Arabic and Kurdish families modeled after the district's liaisons for Hispanics and Somalis.

The district should develop a comprehensive professional development plan that clearly articulates the district's professional development goals, processes, and activities; the plan needs to be accessible to educators and the public.

Most of the components of a strong professional development plan are already in place in Metro Schools. However, a concise and accessible plan with action steps is not. Teachers and the public would greatly benefit from a plan that includes current professional development requirements, courses, and actions as well as long term goals and accountability measures.

MNPS should create and fund a rigorous, outcomes-based orientation and induction program for new teachers that includes a strong teacher mentoring program.

While MNPS does have a teacher mentoring program (PALS) and a new teacher orientation program, neither is required, both are short term, and neither tracks the impact of the respective programs on teacher development. The district currently does not have a written new teacher induction program, though the Strategic Plan includes a goal to develop one. Also included in the MNPS Strategic Plan is the goal to decrease the number of new teachers leaving the system;⁷⁷ research suggests that strong induction programs have positive effects on attrition rates. The development of a new teacher induction plan would benefit MNPS teaching quality, may help reduce teacher attrition rates, and would help the district meet its Strategic Planning goals. The district could also benefit from expanding its PALS program, the district's teacher mentoring program, or developing a new mentoring program. Principals applauded the PALS program, but commented on the high mentor-to-teacher ratio (roughly 1:60).

MNPS should encourage schools to develop individual education plans (IEPs) for all students.

IEPs provide a clear vision for students and teachers as to what each student needs to focus on. When students and teachers share a common vision of goals and areas of weakness, students are more likely to make achievement gains and are less likely to drop out of school. Though all schools could benefit from developing IEPs, MNPS should initially work to train and educate staff at high priority schools on how to develop and effectively use these plans.

The Metro School Board should consider revisiting the New Beginnings concept.

According to MNPS principals, the now defunct New Beginnings program offered a positive learning environment to students with behavior problems who were not required to attend alternative schools. The district should revisit the positives and negatives of the New Beginnings alternative learning environment and involve community members in the discussion. New Beginnings failed in part because the district did not adequately notify the community about its plans for the school.

MNPS should look into filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education to allow the district to provide supplemental education services.

All elementary and middle school principals interviewed for this report expressed frustration with the current marketing methods and disorganization of supplemental education services. By providing the supplemental tutoring services directly, the district could have the potential to serve more students. In addition, the district

⁷⁷ MNPS Strategic Plan, Strategic Directive 28, 2007 Target 8.3.

should be more capable of targeting its resources – namely its own teachers – to the needs of its students than is an outside organization. District interviews verified that most of the providers hired existing teachers to provide their services. The district would also be more invested in the program if they were allowed to provide the services directly.

The U.S. Department of Education has begun an SES pilot program that allows districts in need of improvement to provide supplemental education services directly.⁷⁸ At least ten districts in the country have formally requested to provide supplemental education services from the U.S. Department, and most are expected to be granted.

⁷⁸ “Supplemental Educational Services, Request for a flexibility agreement to provide supplemental educational services,” United States Department of Education website, November 3, 2005, accessed June 14, 2006, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/stateletters/chicago.html>.

APPENDIX A – PERSONS CONTACTED

James Herman
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Education

Lenna Allen
Director of Professional Development, Metropolitan
Nashville Public Schools (MNPS)

Joe Anderson
Director, Security, MNPS

Dr. Terri Breeden
Former Executive Director – Grades 5-12, MNPS

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Pat Cole
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Mary Lou Del Rio
Principal, Paragon Mills Elementary School

Dr. Pedro Garcia
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Pam Garrett
Metro Schools Board Chair

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Former Assistant Principal, McGavock Comprehensive
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Dr. June Keel
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Mary Nollner
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Director 9-12, MNPS

Kaye Schneider
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APPENDIX B – MNPS RESPONSE LETTER



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Pedro E. Garcia, Ed.D.
Director of Schools

January 8, 2007

Ms. Ethel R. Detch, Director
Office of Research and Education Accountability
Comptroller of the Treasury
505 Deaderick Street, Suite 1700
Nashville, TN 37243-0268

Dear Ms. Detch:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the report on district approaches to improving Tennessee's high priority schools. In particular, the staff of Metro Nashville Public Schools has appreciated the opportunity to work with your conscientious staff as information was submitted and clarified throughout the process.

After our careful review of the report, we believe the findings constitute an accurate representation of the goals, policies and efforts of the district. We also find merit in the report's recommendations for future action and offer this reaction to each:

- “The district should develop a comprehensive professional development plan ...” As noted in your recommendation, MNPS has most components of strong professional development already in place. The district will work to make the plan more transparent and easily accessible.
- “MNPS should create and fund a rigorous, outcomes-based orientation and induction program for new teachers ...” Our staff has already begun to review best practices in delineating a plan for new-teacher induction and professional development. A definitive, written guide will be an asset to our new teachers.
- “MNPS should encourage schools to develop individual education plans (IEPs) for all students.” Many of our schools already develop “individual learning plans” for each of their students. While a formal IEP process would be a massive undertaking for a district as large as MNPS, expansion of the use of learning plans for at-risk students at each school will be considered for implementation.
- “The Metro School Board should consider revisiting the New Beginnings concept.” MNPS developed the New Beginnings program at the suggestion of our educators, who see the value of a positive learning environment for

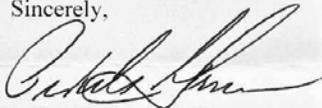
WWW.MNPS.ORG

students with behavior problems. Our staff is currently considering other optional school opportunities for students.

- “MNPS should look into filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education ...” MNPS continues to believe the dedicated educators in our district are best suited to deliver supplemental education services to our students. We will pursue a waiver request to the U.S. Education Department.

We appreciate these thoughtful recommendations to improve the education of Nashville’s children and your department’s continuing attention to the educational needs of all children.

Sincerely,



Pedro E. Garcia, Ed.D.

PEG:jw

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