RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Evaluation of Strategic Staffing Initiative in a Large Urban School District

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As educational leaders focus on strategies for improving student learning, new initiatives are being implemented that reorganize the structure of schools. This study evaluated a school district-wide Strategic Staffing Initiative (SSI) that paid school personnel to transfer to low-performing schools. Three different stakeholder groups, including principals who transferred to low-performing schools ($N = 9$), staff who received bonuses for working in the low-performing schools ($N = 32$), and other staff members in the school who did not receive additional pay ($N = 91$) responded to a survey about the effectiveness of the SSI. The findings suggest that the SSI had inconsistent outcomes. SSI had a positive impact on student achievement and increased the number of effective teachers in the schools, but principals reported that more high quality staff was needed to make a long-term impact on student achievement. Implications and reform policies for educational leaders are discussed.

Keywords: strategic staffing, effective school movement, turnaround schools

Across the United States, educational leaders and policy makers are examining not only their curriculum and standards, but also strategies for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR; Lezotte, 2009). The need for systemic reform emerged as educational leaders realized that the previous approaches to improving schools, especially low-performing ones, were not working. According to Smith and O'Day (1991), systemic reform combined two previous waves of educational reforms. The first wave from the 1970s to early 1980s focused on expanding and improving educational inputs and ensuring basic skill competency. The second wave spanned the mid-1980s through the end of the decade, and stressed decentralization, teacher professionalism, and bottom up changes. Neither of the approaches produced the desired results. Consequently, reformers shifted their efforts to three areas: (a) challenging standards for students, (b) the alignment of the policy components of educational governance, and (c) school flexibility to

develop the strategies to best suit the needs of their students (Supovitz, & Taylor, 2005). The expansion and implementation of systemic change became synonymous with standards-based reforms and standards-based accountability. At the school level, these systemic reforms were labeled CSR.

While research (Johnston, 2002; Rowan & Miller, 2007) suggests that school districts and individual schools that undergo CSR programs are highly motivated to improve the quality of the school, district leaders and principals face a number of problems as they attempt to implement reforms (Duke, 2006; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010: Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). One of the biggest obstacles is that school districts and schools fail to realize the influence of external policies and internal practices on schools. For example, according to Johnston (2002):

> "What we find in school-level efforts to implement comprehensive reform is the relative absence of explicit consideration of the influence of external policy on school practices and relative absence of application of system perspectives during reform efforts. The consequence is that almost without exception, and contrary to principles of comprehensive reform design, initial school improvement efforts remained a relatively disjointed assemblage of programs and practices" (p. 206).

Previous researchers have documented the importance of a strong principal for schools attempting systemic reforms (Duke, 2006; Graczweski et al., 2007; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Rowan & Miller, 2007; Wetherall & Applefield, 2004). As the leader of the school and agent of change, the principal must skillfully navigate all stakeholders through the reform process. As leaders, principals must be both flexible to change and resistant to critics who refuse to support the reforms. Principals must guide the staff in professional development that is critical to improving student achievement. In an evaluation of his school's CSR reforms, a principal noted the challenges of getting the support of teachers by saying that teachers believe "they can outlast any principal" and make it difficult to get them to change their practices (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2010; Wetherall & Applefield, 2004).

Another approach to improving chronically low-performing schools is known as the "turnaround schools" model. Turnaround schools are defined as schools that have a high proportion of students failing to meet state standards of proficiency in mathematics or reading as defined under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for two or more consecutive years (Herman et al., 2008). Turnaround models differ from CSR in that the turnaround model attempts to make quick, dramatic improvements within three years, while CSR makes change in a more incremental manner and has longer, three to five year implementation plans (Herman et al., 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). The two approaches can be very similar in their strategies but differ in the implementation. For example, in CSR, school leaders may focus more on professional development to existing staff to build the capacity of teachers over a longer period of time, while in a turnaround school, a principal may have to hire and train a small group to implement and lead change immediately.

The national clearinghouse "What Works," supported by the U.S. Department of Education, reviewed previous studies on turnaround schools and made four broad recommendations. The guide is clear that each of the recommendations has shown only modest results and that the research on turnaround schools is limited in scope and validity. The authors

narrowed their findings down to four recommendations: (a) signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership, (b) maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction, (c) make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process, and (d) build a committed staff (Herman et al., 2008). The authors conclude that there is no one approach for implementing these strategies, but that each school needs to consider the specific characteristics and needs of its school and adjust accordingly.

The findings of the research presented on turnaround schools stress that there is no single answer or strategy that has shown absolute success. It is imperative that district officials and school leaders work together to develop a model that works, not for every school, but that has the flexibility to address the differences in each school. The need for school districts and individual schools to effectively implement lasting comprehensive schools reforms is becoming increasingly important as the Federal Government continues to support such initiatives as Race to the Top that provide school leaders with flexibility to do so.

Strategic Staffing Initiative

In 2008, ABC school district (fictitious name) implemented a district-level turnaround, restructuring effort, referred to as the *strategic staffing initiative* (SSI), that moved school personnel to low-performing schools. Principals were selected for transfer based on their previous history of demonstrating over a year's worth of student growth in a year's worth of instruction. The selected principals would also have to commit to staying at the school for at least three years. Realizing that change and academic gains do not always come quickly, the team also made it a priority for principals to know that they would be given the freedom, flexibility, and time to establish a new culture and environment that would foster high academic standards and achievement (Travers & Christiansen, 2010).

Next, principals selected their own teams, including an assistant principal, a literacy facilitator, a behavior management technician, and up to five teachers with proven success. Teachers with proven success were defined as those who demonstrated high growth in student achievement. Teachers would also have to make a three year commitment to the school. Principals were also given the authority to choose as many as five teachers to leave the school for reassignment elsewhere in the district. Between 2008 to 2010, 26 principals were transferred to low-performing schools.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate selected aspects of the SSI including its influence on improving student achievement. Specifically, we documented the perceived impact that the strategically staffed (SS) faculty/staffs have had on the student achievement levels in their schools. Three groups of stakeholders from SS schools were included in the study: (a) principals, (b) SS staff, and (c) non-SS staff who have been at the school throughout the SSI, but did not receive the SS bonus. Members of each group were administered a survey that asked them to evaluate the impact the SSI has had on improving student achievement with their students and the school as a whole. The survey also asked each group the strengths and weaknesses of the SSI. In addition to the survey, school value-added measures (VAM) were compared before and after the SSI.

METHOD

We used a survey and quasi-experimental comparison to document the effects of SSI in low-performing schools. The following sections describe the school district and participants characteristics, sampling procedures, measures, and research design.

School District and Participant's Characteristics

The studied school district will be identified as the ABC School District. The ABC School district is located in the southeastern region of the United States and is one of the nation's 25 largest school districts and serves nearly 135,000 students with 178 schools. Similar to other urban school districts around the country, ABC has struggled to meet the needs of all students, especially minority and impoverished students.

Participants. In this study, three different surveys were administered to three groups: (a) principals, (b) recruited staff (referred to as SS staff), and (c) staff members who were employed at the school before and during the SSI (referred to as non-SS staff). These groups provided a diverse and comprehensive view of the impact that the SSI has had on improving student achievement.

For the principals, nine of the 17 principals who were still employed in the district responded to the survey. A majority of the principals (67%) had eight years or more of experience as principals, with the remaining principals having five to seven years of experience. All of the respondents had served as principals in other schools in the district before taking a Strategic Staffing position.

Thirty-two (86%) of the 37 recruited educators eligible to participate responded to the survey. Seventy-two percent of the respondents had 11 years or more of experience as educators, with the remaining 18% reporting between 3-10 years of experience. Half of the 32 SS staff who responded were in their second year at the school. Of the remaining participants, 12 were in their third year, one respondent was in an SS school beyond the three year commitment, one person completed the SS commitment and has moved to another school, and two did not complete the SS commitment. All 34 of the SS staff worked in the same or another ABC school before accepting their SS positions. A majority of the SS staff served in three roles: Academic Facilitator (38%), teacher of EOG/EOC courses (i.e. state mandated standardized testing; 31%), or Assistant Principal (21%).

Of the 285 eligible non-SS participants, 91 (32%) completed the survey. The majority of the respondents (60%) have over 11 years of experience as educators. The remaining participants have 3-5 years (15%) or 6-10 years (26%) of experience. A majority of the non-SS staff served in two roles: (a) teacher of a non-EOG/EOC course (56%), and (b) teacher of an EOG/EOC class (46%). When asked if, given an opportunity to transfer to another position in the district, they would choose to stay at their current schools since SS began, the answers were almost evenly divided, with 53% responding yes and 47% responding no.

Procedure

All eligible participants received an email from the Chief Academic Officer of the district asking them to participate in an online survey, along with a copy of the invitation letter and a link to the surveys. The invitation letter included a statement of informed consent. Each participant was asked to complete the survey, which was designed to take less than 20 minutes. A reminder email was sent to all participants a week later to increase the rate of return.

Surveys.   Three online surveys, one for each stakeholder group, were developed for this study. Surveys included items addressing basic demographic information such as years of teaching experience, years in current school, and educational background. Some of the items were Likert-type response and others items open-ended. Principals were asked to explain the impact that the SS staff had on student achievement. The SS staff and non-SS staff were asked about the challenges they face in regards to student achievement and their role in decision making, and designing lesson plans. All three groups were asked about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the SSI and the internal and external barriers they face in regards to improving student achievement.

School effectiveness scores.   In addition to survey results, school effectiveness scores were examined before and after the intervention. The ABC Value-Added Measure (VAM) was developed in 2010 and is a calculation of effectiveness based on student achievement as measured by the state end of year standardized tests results, referred to as End of Grade (EOG) or End of Course (EOC) tests. The VAM combines student factors that may affect student achievement and a calculated predicted test score for each student based on previous test scores. The difference between the actual score and the predicted score combined with student factors indicates the impact of a school, team, or teacher on student achievement. There are three levels of variables in the VAM, including student level, class level, and school level. More information about the school effectiveness scores can be found in *Talent and Teacher Effectiveness* (2011). In this study, school-level VAM math and reading scores were used.

Research Design

The study used a survey and causal-comparative analysis to document changes resulting from the SSI. We used the survey to identify stakeholders' perceptions of (a) impact on student achievement, (b) impact on school-wide decision making, (c) benefits of SSI, (d) weaknesses of SSI, (e) barriers to making greater gains in student achievement, and (f) instructional decisions that made the biggest impact on student achievement. We also compared changes in math and reading school effectiveness scores before and after the implementation of SSI.

RESULTS

Perceptions of SSI

Impact on student achievement.   All principals reported that the SSI was *effective* or *somewhat effective* at improving student achievement. Most of the principals (67%) believe that the five allotted SS positions were not enough to have a significant impact on student achievement. As one principal stated, "This school was and continues to be in academic crisis, especially in the area of reading. I need, and needed then, an effective teacher in EVERY class, not just an average teacher." Two principals commented that they believe the gains their schools had seen were more a result of their focus on hiring and retaining the right teachers rather than the impact of SSI.

Principals listed several ways that the SS staff impacted student achievement. Three principals described the impact that the SS staff had on increasing collaboration with other teachers, and stated these SS staff provided curriculum and instructional support to other staff members. One principal responded to the survey explaining the mixed impact of the SSI staff:

"Three of the teachers had a major impact as they not only grew the students in their classroom, but they also played a major role in changing the way in which teachers planned and collaborated in a number of areas. They changed they way the staff talked about kids and families, and how to analyze data."

The survey included questions common for all stakeholders, which asked participants to rate the effectiveness of their schools in several areas, including increasing student achievement, collaborative efforts of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), flexibility in designing lesson plans, and input on curriculum and instructional decisions. The percentages of principals, SS staff, and non-SS staff who rated the item effective or somewhat effective are reported in Table 1. Most participates (> 60%) rated SSI as effective or somewhat effective of making positive changes at the schools. Generally, non-SS staff had lower ratings than principals or SS staff for all items.

TABLE 1
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Ratings of Selected Areas of SSI Effectiveness

Item	Principals (*N* = 9)	SS (*N* = 32)	Non-SS (*N* = 91)
Ability of staff to improve student achievement (first year of SSI)	70%	84%	65%
Ability of staff to improve student achievement currently	100%	88%	81%
Effectiveness of school's PLC	100%	82%	61%
Input from teachers in decision making processes	100%	91%	61%
Flexibility in designing lessons	89%	87%	80%
Ability to improve student achievement- Self Rated		100%	89%

Instructional decisions that impact student achievement.   Respondents were asked to list instructional decisions that had the biggest impact on student achievement. Table 2 shows the most frequent answers among the three groups. All three groups rated the increased focus on reading as the number one decision that impacted student achievement. Respondents attributed growth to a variety of strategies, including Accelerated Reader, Reader's Workshop, guided reading, use of non-fiction text, Achieve 3000, and balanced literacy. The increased use of data to guide and adjust instruction, and providing staff with quality professional development were ranked high by two of the groups. One non-SS staff member noted the value of "…increased professional development conducted by our teachers, our experts. This boosts credibility for the participants of the training and allows them to see that they can also become skilled on this particular strategy."

TABLE 2
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Ratings of Effectiveness for Instructional Decisions

Decision	Principal	SSI staff	Non-SSI
Increased/ new focus on reading	33%	47%	21%
Increased use of data	33%	25%	8%
Adjusting master schedule	44%	28%	5%
Quality PD	33%	31%	7%
Improving PLC's	22%	25%	9%
Increase in tutoring options	0%	19%	5%
Increase in technology	0%	16%	5%
Freedom to design lesson plans	0%	13%	4%
Use of facilitators/coaches	0%	19%	1%
Increase in inquiry model	0%	19%	2%

The impact of the schools' PLCs was frequently cited. One respondent stated that the positive change was due to the "focused, consistent work within PLCs. This work was led by the Academic Facilitator and administrators and helped us better understand the status of our teachers as well as what was needed to improve their practice."

Scheduling was noted as having a dual impact. First, respondents described the impact of adjusting the master schedule to be more flexible and better meet the needs of students. They also wrote about the importance of moving teachers to different positions. One principal wrote about the importance of "putting the right people in the right places – not just placing all strategic people in upper grades where scores might have big leaps more quickly." Other top responses included increased tutoring opportunities for students, increases in technology, freedom in designing their own lesson plans, and increasing the use of the inquiry model.

Benefits of SSI.   The three stakeholder groups consistently reported the benefits of the SSI (see Table 3). Each group reported that the quality of teachers in the schools has improved. The groups also agreed that the schools are more focused and have a clearer vision. The SS staff

and non-SS staff also noted that the quality of leadership of the SS principals has had a positive impact on their school. One SS staff member said:

> "The biggest benefit is that a proven, high performance principal is in place in these buildings along with several staff members to support their growth efforts. This provides us with a leader who is instructionally focused and can maintain sight of what is necessary to improve teaching and learning at the school."

Other benefits mentioned are presented in Table 3 and include increased resources, bonuses for SS staff, a new sense of urgency to improve instruction, increased collaboration among staff, and the ability to remove weak or ineffective teachers.

TABLE 3
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Perceptions for Benefits of SSI

Benefit	Principal	SS Staff	Non-SS
Increase in effective teachers	33%	47%	21%
Strong leadership principal	33%	25%	8%
More focused vision/goals	44%	28%	5%
Additional staff	33%	31%	7%
Bonus money	22%	25%	9%
Being able to remove weak teachers	0%	19%	5%
Increased resources	0%	16%	5%
Increased sense of urgency	0%	13%	4%
Freedom and flexibility	0%	19%	1%
No benefits	0%	19%	2%

Weakness of SSI.   The participants were asked to describe the weaknesses of the SSI. The answers are highlighted in Table 4. A total of 118 individuals responded to the question. The most frequent response from the three groups was that the program does not recognize and reward all good teachers. The SS and non-SS staff also noted that there was some favoritism among the SS staff, which impacted school morale. One respondent noted:

> "I would say the one weakness that I have encountered was that there were some tensions in the beginning between the teachers that were already there and then when the Strategic Staff came in. Understandably the other teachers were upset that the Strategically Staffed teachers were coming in and receiving monetary bonus, while they have worked there for a number of years and not receiving anything."

One principal also noted the tension and said:

> "I talked extensively with my SSI teachers before our arrival in our school in terms of coming to the school in a 'stealth fashion'- not coming in like they were going to be the saviors of student achievement. They needed (we all needed) to begin by building relationships with those that were already here at the school."

The groups identified staff turnover as another major weakness. The large number of new teachers each year and the inability to retain the SS staff beyond their three year commitment was cited by many principals. One non-SS staff member wrote "It keeps the school a revolving door. There is not dedication or commitment to the students. The teachers and administration get their money, and then they leave." Other noted weaknesses from the SS and non-SS staff perceptive included poor leadership, lack of freedom, and the negative reputation that comes with being labeled a SSI school.

TABLE 4
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Perceptions of Weaknesses of SSI

Weaknesses	Principal	SSI Staff	Non-SSI
Not all good teachers recognized with bonuses	22%	22%	9%
Too much staff turnover	22%	9%	9%
Staff leaving after SS commitment is over	33%	13%	4%
Staff not understanding school setting	0%	6%	2%
Low morale of staff	0%	13%	3%
Favoritism of some staff	0%	0%	4%
Finding effective teachers	22%	0%	2%
Poor leadership	0%	0%	5%
Reputation of being designated SSI school	0%	0%	3%
Lack of support from district	22%	3%	1%

Recommended Changes to SSI.   The next open-ended question asked the participants what changes they would make to SSI. A total of 123 individuals responded. Table 5 shows the most frequent responses. Overwhelmingly, the recommended changes have to do with bonuses that the SS staff received. Non-SS staffed respondents wrote about how teachers are selected to receive the bonuses. One participant wrote:

> "The bonuses should be offered to teachers who have been effective at those schools. I have been doing the same job of the teachers that were strategically staffed and have not been rewarded for my efforts. As an exceptional children teacher I am limited on the

bonuses I can receive for student achievement. Both of my inclusion teachers from the last year were offered bonuses from the state to stay at my school for the next two years. This has not been offered to me."

The non-SS staff and the SS staff would like the following changes to be made: increase the number of teachers who receive bonuses, give bonuses to all teachers who show growth, give bonuses to teachers who are already in the school, and expand the program to include non-EOG teachers. The principal responses were focused more on increasing both the number of SS positions and the flexibility of when and how the SS staff is hired.

TABLE 5
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Perceptions of Changes to SSI

Change	Principal	SSI Staff	Non-SSI
Offer bonuses to staff already in schools	0%	3%	10%
Bonuses for all teachers who show growth	22%	3%	7%
Change who is eligible for SS positions	22%	28%	18%
Increase number of SS positions	33%	31%	20%
Increase flexibility in SS hiring process	22%	0%	0%
Make process more transparent	0%	6%	5%
No changes needed	11%	16%	8%

Internal and External barriers.   The last two survey questions addressed the perceived internal and external barriers to making greater gains in student achievement in schools. The responses to internal barriers were extensive with limited overlap among the three groups. As shown in Table 6, the most frequent concern common to all three groups was student behavior.

Getting all staff members to support the vision and mission of the leadership team was also noted numerous times. One principal described the challenge of teachers having a "…*this too shall pass* attitude among some of the entrenched staff. Possible expectation that I'll be somewhere else after three years and another philosophy will change things." A SS staff member agreed, and noted that "in order to improve student achievement, there needs to be a team of teachers who have a laser like focus on student achievement. Distractions of any kind are deadly and draining."

Time was another consistent barrier among the groups. Some respondents spoke about the lack of time during the school day to plan and complete paperwork. Principals spoke about time in regards to the three year commitment not being long enough and facing new challenges. As one principal stated, "This year we had to start all over again. Becoming a PreK-8 school has put us back where we started over 3 years ago. We have added so many new staff that we have had to rebuild our culture."   SS and non-SS staff noted that disruptive students were not

addressed effectively, and negatively impacted the classroom environment. Having too many weak teachers and new staff were also noted frequently among the groups.

One theme that emerged in both the internal and external barrier questions was parental involvement. One non-SS staff member expressed frustration, referring to "the attitude the parents pass on to the students. You can give the students all the resources in the world to help them learn, but you can't make them learn." Another SS member wrote a similar response citing the difficulty in making needed improvements because of "parents, communities, and poor role models. A culture of failure and ignorance persist despite the improvements made in school."

Community support, living in poverty, language barriers, and high levels of transient students are concerns for the staff (see Table 7). Three responses were connected to the school or district: too much testing, changes to student assignment (e.g., changing to PreK-8), school/class size, lack of support for teachers, and the struggle to attract top teachers.

The responses from the survey showed some consistencies among the three groups on impact and the benefits and weaknesses of the SSI. The three groups agreed that the increased focus on reading strategies has had the biggest impact on student achievement levels. All three groups rated themselves relatively high on their ability to improve student achievement, and noted the input that teachers had on curriculum and instructional decisions.

TABLE 6
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Perceptions of Internal Barriers to Improving Student Achievement

Barrier	Principal	SSI Staff	Non-SSI
Too many weak teachers	22%	19%	7%
Too many new staff members	22%	16%	3%
Lack of staff buy-in	22%	6%	3%
Student behavior problems	22%	22%	10%
Not enough time	33%	6%	5%
Class/school size	22%	6%	4%
Parental involvement	11%	3%	9%
Stress/low morale	22%	6%	10%
ESL/EC support	0%	6%	5%

TABLE 7
Principal, SS Staff, and Non-SS Staff Perceptions of External Barriers to Student
Achievement

Barrier	Principal	SSI Staff	Non-SSI
Parental involvement	22%	16%	20%
Community involvement	22%	13%	5%
Students living in poverty	22%	13%	8%
School/class size	33%	0%	2%
Transient student population	11%	6%	2%
Language barriers	0%	3%	3%
Too much testing	22%	6%	5%
Failure to attract top teachers	11%	6%	3%
Lack of support for teachers	11%	3%	3%

Impact of SSI

In math and reading, the VAM means increased, but none of the changes were statistically significant. In math, the average increase for VAM was from the 46th percentile ($SD = 26.3$) to the 52nd percentile ($SD = 30.9$) but the improvement was not statistically significant ($t = 1.20$, $df = 18$, $p = .23$). Similarly, in reading, the increase for VAM from the 40 percentile ($SD = 28.3$) to the 44 percentile ($SD = 27.1$) was not statistically significant ($t = 0.50$, $df = 18$, $p = .62$).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the survey results from the three groups indicate that the SSI had a positive impact on student achievement and that the ability of the staff to improve student achievement increased after the first year of the SSI. All of the principals ranked their current staff's ability to increase student achievement as "very effective" or "somewhat effective." The SS staff and non-SS staff gave similar rankings of 88% and 81% respectively. When asked to rate their own ability to increase student achievement, nearly 100% of the SS staff and non-SS staff rated themselves as "very effective" or "somewhat effective."

When asked about whether principals would rehire the same SS staff, the results were mixed with a majority stating that they would rehire some of the same individuals but not all. Four of the nine principals attributed the positive increases in student growth to the SS staff. The principals stated that the SS staff impacted student achievement by increasing the collaboration among teachers and leading and providing professional development and instructional support for the staff. The results of the survey indicate that none of the groups felt that the five allotted positions were enough to make the impact on student achievement that was needed.

The survey results suggest that overall most of the respondents felt that they had input in the decision making process. The principals gave the highest ranks with 100% of them indicating that the staff had "a great deal" or "some input." The non-Staff had the lowest rating with 12% answering that they had "no input" into decision making.

All participants noted the perceived benefit of SS was the "increase in effective teachers." Some of the noted weaknesses of SS were staff leaving after SS commitment is over, not all good teachers recognized with bonus money, and too much staff turnover. Low morale was another one weakness that mentioned frequently by SS staff and non-SS staff.

The groups did not show agreement in their responses to what they perceive as internal barriers to increasing student achievement. The principals cited a variety of responses including; not enough time, too many weak teachers, too many new staff members, lack of staff buy-in, student behavior problems, class/school size, and stress/ low morale. The most frequent responses for the SS staff were: student behavior problems, too many weak teachers, and too many staff members. The non-SS staff top answers were: student behavior problems, parental involvement, and stress/low morale.

In regards to external barriers, there was consistency among the three groups. All three groups believe that parental involvement, community involvement, and students living in poverty were major barriers. Other frequent responses included too much testing and class size.

Overwhelmingly the majority of the responses to what changes they would make to the SSI addressed who and how individuals received the SS bonuses. Specific changes that were frequently mentioned included: offer bonuses to staff already in the SS schools, offer more bonuses, and change who is eligible for the bonuses. The SS staff was asked to answer an open-ended question on the factors they considered before accepting the SS position. The two most frequent responses were they wanted to work for the principal of the school and the bonus money.

Each of the three groups was asked to rank the effectiveness of the PLC's in helping teachers collaborate to improve student achievement. The principals gave the highest ratings with 100% answering "very effective" or "somewhat effective." The SS staff had 81% give the same rankings. The non-SS staff gave the lowest ranking with only 61% answering "very effective" or "somewhat effective" and 12% responding "not effective at all." It is worth noting that improving PLC's was one of the more frequent responses by SS staff and non-SS staff on open-ended questions about positive instructional changes made by the leadership team.

The quantitative findings from the VAM data suggested that the SSI has not had a significant impact on the effectiveness of teachers in math or reading from immediately before to after the implementation of the SSI. It should be noted that these results were based on only one year of implementing SSI, and future research should examine three to five years of implementation.

Many of the findings from this study supported earlier research. Similar to the theories of Weber (Weber, 2004), Johnson H. (2008) and Johnson O. (2008), the demographics of the neighborhood impact the learning of students. Participants in this study agreed that parental involvement, students living in poverty, and lack of community support were the three largest external barriers they faced. Previous research by Duke et al., (2007), Mac Iver (2004), Mac Iver and Balfanz (2000) and Weatherfield and Applefield (2004) found that many schools undergoing CSR reforms failed due to the lack of resources, lack of technical knowledge about effective curriculum and instruction, getting the staff to support the vision and mission of the school, and unstable operating environments (teacher and principal mobility). Based on the

responses to the survey, it appears that most SS schools do not see lack of resources or technical knowledge as an issue. In fact, participants gave high ranks to quality of professional development, support from Academic Facilitators, and the increase in technology and other resources. While some respondents voiced concerns that too many people that received bonuses while serving in non-teaching positions, the findings suggests that the Academic Facilitators have helped to provide the SS schools with curriculum and instructional support that they need. Having adequate instructional support in struggling schools is a positive difference between the findings in this study and previous research (Duke et al., 2007).

The findings of this study are aligned with the other two concerns: getting the staff to support the vision and mission of the school, and unstable operating environments (teacher and principal mobility). Respondents from all three groups stressed the difficulty of getting all staff members to support the changes that the principals attempted to implement. As already discussed, one of the most frequent noted problem in low-performing schools is the high numbers of vacancies and teacher turnover.

The findings from this study suggest that the SSI has been successful in addressing many of the recommendations made by previous research. First, the surveys show that the staffs at SS schools believe that they have strong principals leading the schools, that decisions are made based on data, and that they are building effective PLCs to increase collaboration among the staff. This is important, because previous research (Duke, 2006, Graczweseki et al., 2007, Rowan & Miller, 2007, and Wetherall & Applefield, 2004) suggests that not having a strong leader or effective PLCs are major reasons for the failure of school reform.

Implications for the Improvement of Practice

Based on the results of this study, there are several recommendations for future studies and for the policy makers of the ABC school district. First, based on the responses of the survey, district officials should consider developing a longitudinal plan for retaining effective teachers at the schools during and beyond the three year commitment. It is clear from the results of this study that implementing and sustaining the reform efforts cannot be accomplished with just a three year plan. The longitudinal plan could also incorporate strategies to provide extra support to teachers in these schools, especially new teachers. One idea would be to provide paid professional development opportunities to all teachers in SSI schools. This would be an incentive to remain at the school and provide them with additional strategies and support to be successful during the school year.

Another recommendation is to take a closer look at the reading programs that the SS schools have implemented to see if there is one program that is most effective for the challenges these schools face. Given the large number of strategies and programs that are used, an investigation of their relative effectiveness would be worthwhile.

The last recommendation is to look in depth at the individuals who chose to leave and their reasons for doing so. The results from this study indicate that about half of the non-SS staff would transfer out of their SS schools if given the opportunity, and that the schools face high levels of teacher mobility. Understanding the reasons why some teachers stay while others choose to leave could lead to policy or school level initiatives to increase the stability of the staff.

Limitations

The findings of this study have the potential to guide reform efforts in the ABC school district and beyond, as educational leaders weigh the financial costs of the SSI against student outcomes and perceived benefits. The design of this study expanded the knowledge on the SSI regarding what does and does not work from the viewpoint of different stakeholders in each school. This study included the perspectives of stakeholders that had not been included in any previous research. By using both quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers were able to provide a more thorough explanation of the impact of the SSI. The study is limited in scope to only one school district and a small percentage of people within the district, but it does include the individuals who were most directly affected by the SSI. Another limitation to this study is that only non-SS staff that remained at the school for the duration of the initiative were included. The decision to exclude those staff members who left was made to ensure that the responses reflected changes over the years, but it is important to realize that excluding those who left may bias the results.

This study provides a description of the SSI schools, but any changes at the SSI schools could be due to factors not considered in this study. It is worth noting that the ABC district has faced great budget woes over the past three years. The SSI schools were impacted by budget cuts, staff layoffs, and increases in the number of high poverty students.

CONCLUSION

The results from this study exemplify the complexities that school leaders face in executing meaningful reform. Despite, the careful planning and focused alignment to previous research, ABC district is still struggling to implement the SSI in a way that results in high levels of change in student achievement and teacher effectiveness. School leaders, however, should not dismiss the efforts of the ABC district. The survey results from this study suggest that stakeholders can clearly describe positive changes that the SS schools have seen as a result of the SSI and very few respondents believe that the initiative should end.

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