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ABSTRACT

As expectations rise for students to perform at higher levels, the question of how best to support student performance through resources becomes paramount. In determining new ways to better allocate resources, administrators must consider teacher input on what has/has not been effective in supporting increased student performance. Teachers (N=1,701) responded to a survey on effective resource-allocation practices and barriers to support student success in their schools and districts. Survey results imply that teachers are aware of how resources are allocated at both the school site and district level to improve student performance and appreciate opportunities to share their knowledge. Results also indicate that schools and districts implement innovative practices, such as increased technology, special instructional programs, and staff development, but not necessarily increased staffing allocations. Although reported innovations have been somewhat effective for all students, a number of barriers continue to limit how much improvement is achieved. The results help further the dialogue on how spending relates to student success and validate the use of a systemic approach to resource allocation. The study's focus on district and school resource-allocation practices within a state context provides a regional perspective pursued in relatively few studies on resource allocation. (Contains 6 tables.) (RT)

Resource Allocation and Improved Student Performance: Teachers' Perspectives on School Finance Administration.

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October 19, 2002

Resource Allocation and Improved Student Performance:
Teachers' Perspectives on School Finance Administration

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Abstract

As expectations rise for students to perform at higher levels, the question of how best to support this through resources becomes paramount. In determining new ways to better allocate resources, administrators must consider teacher input on what has/has not been effective in supporting increased student performance. Teachers (N=1,701) responded to a survey on effective resource allocation practices and barriers to support student success in their school and district. Results indicate schools and districts implement innovative practices such as increased technology, special instructional programs, and staff development, but not necessarily increased staffing allocations. Although the reported innovations have been somewhat effective for all students, a number of barriers continue to impact how much improvement is achieved. The results help further the dialogue on how spending relates to student success and validates the use of a systemic approach to resource allocation.

Problem Statement

This year, America's public school districts will spend more than $350 billion to educate the nation's children. Policymakers, educators, researchers, and the general public want to know how these resources can be allocated effectively and efficiently to guarantee the success of all students. As expectations rise for students and teachers to perform at higher levels, the question of how best to support this reform through fiscal measures becomes even more critical.

New federal goals for all students to reach proficient or higher levels of performance will require better approaches to allocating resources for teaching and learning. In determining new ways to better allocate resources, administrators must consider teacher input on what has or has not been effective in supporting higher levels of student performance.

The complexity of resource allocation issues require researchers to search for ways to validate findings and ground them in local experience in order for results to be useful in guiding education spending. Researchers face the additional challenge of translating research findings to generalizable conclusions that 1) are relevant to and supportive of state and local education policymaking, 2) consider a systemic approach to improving student performance, and 3) incorporate an understanding of the challenges and innovations that currently exist in local practice.

This paper describes SEDL's recent study that examined resource allocation in relation to student performance in public school districts in which mixed methodologies were used to analyze state, district, and campus level data. Details of the findings from teachers describing effective resource allocation practices, as well as barriers and challenges, to improve student performance are provided. Implications of the study are briefly described to support state and local education policy decisions.

Methodology

Researchers examined resource allocation and student performance from 1995-2000 in public school districts in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas. Twelve school districts, representative of the region, that exhibited consistent improvement in performance over time were selected for more in-depth study. Three improvement districts in each state, demographically representative of their state, with enrollments of 800-1,999 (small); 2,000-10,000 (medium); and more than 10,000 (large) students were selected. Researchers distributed surveys to instructional staff in the 12 improvement districts (N=7,840) with the goal of gaining a broader, more complete picture of resource allocation practices at the school level. The perspective of teachers provided researchers with (1) a classroom view of effective practices and barriers/challenges regarding district resource allocation, (2) teacher opinions regarding the ways their schools and districts allocate resources to support student achievement improvement, and (3) additional data to triangulate findings from interviews and focus groups with campus and district administrators and from analysis of existing data sets (district level fiscal data from NCES Common Core of Data, performance data from state departments of education).

Researchers developed a survey form to solicit both quantitative and qualitative information, including open-ended, forced choice, and Likert scale questions. Individuals with classroom teaching experience who were not part of the study piloted the survey, as did teachers in a pilot district. Surveys were disseminated with assistance from district staff in each improvement district. Attached to each survey was a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope respondents used to return their surveys. Quantitative analysis of the close-ended survey responses, using SPSS software, included descriptive statistics, i.e., frequencies, percentages and cross-district comparisons by demographic variables. A qualitative analysis of open-ended responses resulted in common themes found among the survey respondents within and across districts.

Results

Researchers eliminated responses from those who did not identify themselves as teachers in order to focus the analysis on the perspectives of individuals with direct teaching experience. Analysis of results from all respondents indicated that there was little difference in response means from the teachers (92%) and the "other instructional staff" (8%), suggesting that omitting other instructional staff would not significantly skew the results. A breakdown of the teacher respondents (n = 1,701) from each improvement district appears in Table 1.

Most teachers (74.6%) had five or more years of teaching experience, while only 7.3% were first-year teachers. More than half of the teachers reported that all students in their schools had made at least some progress in student performance over the previous five years, whereas 36.8% reported only some students had made progress (see Table 2).

Table 1. Teacher respondents by improvement district

State	District size	Number of teachers	Percent of teachers	State	District size	Number of teachers	Percent of teachers
AR	Small	45	2.6	NM	Small	31	1.9
	Medium	62	3.6		Medium	171	10.1
	Large	273	16.0		Large	264	15.5
LA	Small	51	3.0	TX	Small	66	3.9
	Medium	89	5.2		Medium	100	5.9
	Large	328	19.3		Large	219	12.9

Table 2. Teacher perception of overall student improvement in previous five years

	Arkansas teachers	Louisiana teachers	New Mexico teachers	Texas teachers	All teachers
Responses	Percent of teachers reporting				
Much improvement for all students	9.9	18.8	17.4	37.6	20.9
Some improvement for all students	37.4	34.3	32.0	22.9	31.6
Much improvement for some students	18	14.7	17.4	16.3	16.6
Some improvement for some students	27.2	22.2	19.7	12.1	20.3
No improvement	0.3	1.5	1.3	0.3	0.9
Unsure	7.3	8.6	12.2	10.8	9.7

General Allocation and Influencing Factors

Teachers were asked about the ways that resources are allocated and the factors that influence allocation in their districts and schools. Eighty-five percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that their district often engages in or attempts innovative practices to improve student performance. Fewer (63.5%) agree district resources are aligned with school needs, while slightly more (66.9%) believe that the district finds new ways to allocate existing resources to improve student performance. Over half of respondents (53.8%) report that the school district evaluates spending practices to make better decisions about resources (see Table 3). Teachers were in greater agreement about school allocation practices than district allocation practices. As Table 3 also shows, overwhelmingly teachers agree (95.2%) that instructional staff often engages in or attempts innovative practices to improve student performance. They also feel that new funds have been available to the school (77.5%), that the school finds new ways to allocate existing resources (83.7%), and that the school staff make use of data (test scores) to determine resource needs (86.1%).

The survey also asked respondents to rate how eight different factors influence resource allocation decisions at the district level. Responses ranged from influences "a great extent" to influences "not at all". Among the choices, laws and regulations influence resource allocation

decisions the most (see Table 4), although Texas and suburban teachers feel that this influences resource allocation to a lesser extent. District goals and priorities is also identified by teachers as having an important influence on resource allocation decisions; teachers in Arkansas and Texas are more likely to feel this factor is important. Fairness and equity factors and staffing needs exert the least influence, especially for New Mexico teachers.

Table 3. District and school resource allocation

	Agree strongly	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Disagree strongly
District allocation	Percent of teachers reporting			
District often engages/attempts innovative practices to improve student performance	31.1	54.6	10.6	3.6
District resource allocation decisions are aligned with school needs	10.6	53.9	24.5	11.1
District finds new ways to allocate existing resources to improve student performance	16.8	50.1	26.2	6.9
District evaluates spending practices to make better spending decisions	13.2	40.6	27.5	18.7
School allocation				
Instructional staff often engages/attempts innovative practices to improve student performance	53.1	42.1	4.0	.7
New funds for resources have been available in the past five years	33.3	44.2	15.8	6.6
School finds new ways to allocate existing resources to support student performance	33.9	49.8	13.5	2.8
School staff use data to determine resource needs to improve student performance	44.8	41.3	10.7	3.3

Table 4. Factors that influence the allocation of resources

Factors	Great Extent	Some Extent	Very Little	Not at All
	Percent of teachers reporting			
School characteristics (a)	40.4	44.8	10.6	4.2
School type (b)	29.7	53.8	13.4	3.2
Student needs	22.3	51.4	22.0	4.3
Staffing needs	13.3	46.4	31.7	8.7
Laws and regulations	48.3	40.5	9.2	2.0
District goals and priorities	43.0	45.8	9.4	1.8
Fairness and equity	13.4	44.3	30.0	12.3
Availability or lack of funds	32.2	47.0	16.1	4.6

(a) location, population, enrollment

(b) grades served and specialty services such as magnet schools or alternative programs

Allocation Practices to Support Improved Student Performance

Teachers were asked to identify resource allocation practices that their school and district implemented that were effective (i.e. practices resulted in improved student achievement). The vast majority agreed that instructional staff at their schools and their districts often engage in or attempt innovative practices to improve student performance. Resource allocation at the school level is focused primarily on increased access to computer technology (78.4%), increased special instructional programs (65.8%), more professional development for teachers (57.7%), improved programs and services for at-risk students (54.3%), and provision of needed materials or equipment (52.7%). Teachers were less often able to identify district-wide resource strategies that resulted in student improvement; however, they acknowledged increased access to computer technology (68.0%) and more professional development for teachers (52.9%) as the two most common district-wide strategies implemented (see Table 5).

Table 5. Effective resource strategies in improving student improvement

Resource Strategy	Scope of implementation	
	School level	District-wide
	Percent of teachers reporting	
Increased access to computer technology	78.4	68.0
Increased special instructional programs (a)	65.8	42.3
Provided more professional development for teachers	57.7	52.9
Improved programs and services for at-risk students (b)	54.3	45.3
Provided needed school materials or equipment	52.7	27.6
Reduced class sizes	39.3	30.2
Improved building facilities or maintenance	37.0	29.0
Increased planning time for teachers	24.9	15.7
Increased use of classroom aides	18.0	7.8
Reduced class loads	13.1	9.6
Increased teachers with more experience or higher degrees	10.7	10.1
Unsure	3.6	3.9

(a) reading, mentoring/tutoring, English language, etc.
(b) special education, English language learners, drop-out, etc.

Descriptive analysis of state groups of respondents reveals that overall, teachers in Louisiana indicated that their school has implemented more strategies to support student performance improvement. Louisiana teachers were more likely to indicate implementations of improved programs and services to at-risk students, provision of materials and equipment, and more professional development at the school and district level. New Mexico teachers indicated that schools implemented the least number of strategies. Schools in New Mexico were least likely to provide needed materials and equipment, and professional development; districts were less likely to provide programs/services for at risk students, special instructional programs, and professional development.

Further analysis reveals that suburban teachers feel their schools have implemented more strategies than those in urban and rural districts, especially improved programs and services for

at-risk students and more professional development. In general suburban and urban teachers were more likely to say that their school has implemented more professional development, while rural teachers were more likely to indicate that the district has provided more professional development. Teachers from small district, compared to those in medium and large districts, responded that their schools have implemented more strategies, including reduced class size, provision of materials and equipment, and more professional development.

Allocation Barriers and Challenges

Nearly one-half or more respondents noted these barriers and challenges: large class sizes, lack of competitive salaries, and limited planning time for teachers. About one-third of teachers identified limited school materials or equipment, ineffective state policies and mandates, and large class loads as barriers or challenges. Least likely to be identified as a barrier or challenge was limited access to student data, insufficient professional development, lack of experienced teachers, lack of leadership at the school level, and lack of special instructional programs (see Table 6). The majority of teachers in Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico responded that large class size was a barrier to improving student performance. More than sixty percent of teachers in Louisiana and New Mexico indicated that lack of competitive salaries was a barrier, while less than 40 percent of teachers in the other two states identified this barrier. More than 50% of Arkansas and New Mexico teachers also indicated that limited planning time for teachers was a challenge to improving student performance. New Mexico teachers were also more likely to identify more barriers, including: limited school materials or equipment, ineffective state policies (along with Arkansas teachers), large class loads (along with Louisiana teachers), ineffective district policies and mandates, limited access to computer technology, and insufficient professional development.

Table 6. Barriers and challenges to improving student performance

Barrier/Challenge	Percent of Teachers
Large class sizes	53.6
Lack of competitive salaries	49.9
Limited planning time for teachers	49.6
Limited school materials or equipment	36.1
Ineffective state policies and mandates	32.8
Large class loads	32.5
Ineffective district policies and mandates	29.6
Limited access to computer technology	29.0
Insufficient programs and services for at-risk	26.1
Poor building facilities or maintenance	23.1
Lack of community resources	22.0
Lack of special instructional programs	18.4
Lack of leadership at the school level	18.3
Lack of experienced teachers	17.9
Insufficient professional development	14.2
Limited access to student data	7.1
Unsure	10.8

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, improvement district teachers see their district and individual schools making positive reforms in resource allocation. More experienced teachers with a longitudinal perspective of allocation practices see less school and district allocation practices implemented to improve student performance than first year teachers. At the same time they perceive more barriers and challenges that they must face than their less experienced colleagues. The predominant practices that most agree have supported student performance improvement are increased technology, special instructional programs, and staff development. Most do not see as much reform in staffing allocations, such as increased use of classroom aides and teachers with more experience or higher degrees. Large class sizes, a lack of competitive salaries, and limited planning time are their greatest barriers. In a time of increased equity lawsuits, the majority of the teachers do not perceive that fairness and equity exert as much influence on allocation decisions as laws and regulations and district goals and priorities.

The study results imply that teachers are aware of how resources are being allocated at both the school site and district level to improve student performance and appreciate an opportunity to share their knowledge. Many teachers view that there have been a variety of effective allocation practices implemented; however, no one specific approach seems to increase student success for all. Although innovations have been somewhat effective for all students, a number of barriers and challenges continue to impact how much student performance improvement is achieved.

This study benefits education administrators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in addressing the link between resource allocation and student performance. The results help further the dialogue on how spending impacts student success and validates the understanding that using a systemic approach to resource allocation will best serve the success of students. More specifically, incorporating teacher perspectives in resource allocation decisions could be an important factor in achieving student performance improvements. Further, the study's focus on district and school resource allocation practices within a state context provides a regional perspective pursued in relatively few studies on resource allocation.

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