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Strategic School Funding for Results (SSFR)

Perspectives of Key Central Office Staff and School Principals Regarding Resource Allocation Policies and Procedures- TECHNICAL APPENDIX

A Report Prepared for Twin Rivers Unified School District
SSFR Research Report #02 (TRUSD)

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About the Authors

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Interview and Focus Group Administration

Strategic School Funding for Results (SSFR) interviews in Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD) took place in October 2009. Three key district officials were interviewed, and five principals (representing elementary, middle, and high schools) participated in a focus group. District officials were chosen for interviews because of their key role in implementing the SSFR Initiative in TRUSD. The AIR/PLP team asked district leaders to select principals that they felt had a good understanding of the current system and who could provide us with some thoughtful perspectives on how to evaluate its advantages and disadvantages. The principals in this report are by no means a random sample of individuals, and may not be representative of all principals in the district. Each interviewee was asked a standard set of questions appropriate for their respective positions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted by Ray Tolleson, consultant, Pivot Learning Partners.

Interviews and focus groups were guided by the protocols presented on the next pages.



**PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
DRAFT**

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. Before we start, I'd like to provide a little background on our work and answer any questions you might have for me.

Pivot Learning Partners (PLP) and The American Institutes for Research (AIR) have partnered on a study to learn about how school districts distribute funds to schools, and how schools make decisions about how to use these funds now, and how such distributions and decisions might change if a new system of funding were implemented. This study is currently funded by the Hewlett Foundation. This is not an evaluation of you, your staff, or your school. The purpose of this focus group discussion, which will last about an hour and a half, is to learn more about your experiences as a principal with school budgeting.

All of the information you provide will be completely confidential, meaning that we will not associate your name with what you said when we present findings, and we won't report directly back to district staff anything that you say. Data will be used both to provide technical assistance to your district in improving policies for distributing funds to schools and as baseline data to evaluate any changes that might result from a new formula that might be put in place.

This focus group is voluntary, so you may withdraw from the group without penalty or decline to answer any question at any time.

If you don't mind, I would like to record this focus group discussion simply for note-taking purposes. No one will hear the tape, outside of our research team; it will just be for my own reference. We will destroy recordings after the project is over. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Will that be ok with everyone? (require affirmative answer from everyone)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant you may contact the AIR IRB chair at IRB@air.org or 1-800-634-0797. I'll also email you that contact information.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Notes to interviewer:

1. Before the interview, ask principals to bring a copy of their school budget with them.
2. Throughout the interview, possible probes are set aside following each general question. Asking these questions may help to move the interview pace or may prompt a less talkative respondent. However, do not feel you need to ask each of these probes; it is likely that the respondent will cover many of the issues when responding to your initial inquiry. For focus groups involving multiple principals in particular, it will be difficult to receive detailed responses for each question within a limited timeframe. It will likely be necessary to sacrifice the depth of many responses to cover the multiple areas of this protocol.

**** Indicates higher priority questions.**

1. Can you walk me through the general process in your school for how your school budget is developed each year?

Probe, if necessary:

- Do you involve the School Site Council? If so, how?
 - Do you get feedback from teachers? If so, how?
 - How are members of the local community at your school site involved in the budgeting process?
 - Is any particular data used in the planning process? If so, what?
 - How are the decisions made about how to spend the funds?
 - Are you satisfied with the budgeting/planning process? What might you change?
2. ******Can you tell me the extent to which the current budgeting process...
 - Encourages innovation in schools?
 - Is clearly understood by principals, teachers, and parents?
 - Achieves equitable distribution of resources?
 - Encourages accountability?
 3. What do you see as specifically your roles and responsibilities regarding the budgeting and planning process at your school?
 4. ******What is your total school budget? Please consider all of your expenditure accounts: the 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, 5000, and 6000 accounts. What portion is under your discretion and what portion is controlled by the district? That is to say, what portion of the total school budget do you feel you have control over spending according to your site's needs?

Important Probes:

- Can you spend the money any way you choose or are there constraints with regard to positions, curriculum, assessments, etc.?

- What services do you receive from the district that aren't part of your school budget?
5. How much discretion do you currently have over your...
 - Curriculum offered at the school?
 - Class schedules?
 - Length of your school day/week?
 - Recruitment and retention of staff?
 6. **If you had more discretion over your school budget, how would you use it? Specifically, what kinds of discretion would you like to have? (see the list in item 5 above).
 7. What kind of accountability do you have for student learning in your school? How is this reflected in your interactions with district leadership? What does it mean for you to be accountable for student learning?
 8. Do you have an academic plan for the school? How well are your current budgets and academic plans aligned? To what degree does this document really guide the activities of the school and budget allocations?

If they have an academic plan:

- When do you prepare the academic plan, and who participates in the process of developing them? Are teachers and other faculty involved in developing your academic plans? How many of your teachers/faculty are engaged? Do parents or students play a role in developing these plans? Should faculty or parents play a role? If so, what kind of role would you like to see them play?

Probe, if necessary:

- In your opinion, do you feel that the budgeting/planning policy has increased community involvement?
 - Has your school taken additional steps to ensure your parent/community's involvement in the budgeting/planning process?
9. How would you describe your district's vision, mission, core values, and goals? What are the district's goals for your school?
 10. What would improve your ability to meet district goals for student learning in your schools?
 11. Do you feel you have the tools you need to do budgeting and reporting effectively?
 - [If yes:] What are they?
 - [If no:] What functions do you need to perform effectively?

12. What types of budget training are offered by the district? To whom is this offered? Do you feel that those involved in budget planning at the school site have received adequate training and assistance from the district to make decisions about resource allocation?

Important probes:

- Does the central district office organize technical assistance and/or professional development activities?
- Do you feel the professional development and/or technical assistance they provide is adequate? Why or why not?
- Has the role of the district in assisting schools around budgeting/planning changed at all over the past several years?

13. What kinds of technology do you use in the development of school academic plans or budgets? Are either of these structured through processes established by the district?

14. Do you feel there are district or state-level policies that create barriers to more effective implementation of the budgeting/planning policy for your school? If so, what are they?

Important probes:

- Do you feel an impact from the state categorical program funds? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact at small schools vs. comprehensive schools? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact from the district's hiring policies? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact for the district's collective bargaining agreements? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact based on the open enrollment policy? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact that is felt differently for small and larger schools? If so, what do you feel is the impact on these different schools?
- Do you there is an impact from the state and/or federal accountability policies? If so what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact from the state's curriculum and standards policies? If so, what do you feel is the impact?

- Are there other state policies, district policies, or other major factors that impact the implementation that we haven't mentioned? If so, what are they and what impact do they have?

15. Are you aware of whether your district uses average staff salaries or actual salaries when charging a teacher's cost against your school's budget? What is your opinion on using average salaries or actual salaries in the budgeting process?

Probe, if necessary:

- If you feel that using actual salaries would be useful, what barriers exist to implementing this change in your district?
- If you feel that using average salaries would be better, what barriers exist to implementing this policy in your district?



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DISTRICT STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL DRAFT

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. Before we start, I'd like to provide a little background on our work and answer any questions you might have for me.

Pivot Learning Partners (PLP) and The American Institutes for Research (AIR) have partnered on a study to learn about how school districts distribute funds to schools, and how schools make decisions about how to use these funds now, and how such distributions and decisions might change if a new system of funding were implemented. This study is currently funded by the Hewlett Foundation. This is not an evaluation of you, your department, or of the district. The purpose of this interview, which will last about an hour, is to learn about services your department provides to schools and your perspectives on the current fund distribution policies and procedures.

All of the information you provide will be completely confidential, meaning that we will not associate your name with what you said when we present findings. Data will be used both to provide technical assistance to your district in improving policies for distributing funds to schools and as baseline data to evaluate any changes that might result from a new formula that might be put in place.

This interview is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the interview without penalty or decline to answer any question at any time.

If you don't mind, I would like to record this interview simply for note-taking purposes. No one will hear the tape, outside of our research team; it will just be for my own reference. We will destroy all recordings at the end of the project. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Will that be ok?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant you may contact the AIR IRB chair at IRB@air.org or 1-800-634-0797. I'll also email you that contact information.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you agree to participate in this interview?

1. Can you tell me a bit about your background and your current role in the district?
2. What services does your department provide to schools? Which of these services are schools required to use and which are optional?
3. How much budgetary discretion do you feel that schools actually have in your district? That is, what proportion of the total school budget is reflected in the budget the school presents to the district each year? Has this changed over time?
4. What money is withheld from schools by the district? Where does that money go?
5. How do you feel about the current balance between district and school control? Would you like to see the district or schools have more control over school-level expenditures?
6. One of our goals on this project is to make district funding to schools a more transparent process. How would you define transparency? To what degree do you believe your current process is transparent to board members? To principals? To teachers or other school faculty? To parents?
7. How would you describe your district's vision, mission, core values, and goals?
8. To what extent do your district's vision, mission, core values, and goals drive funding allocation decisions? Are there any guiding district-wide strategies for funding allocations?
9. Is the community involved in the budgeting and program planning process at the school level? How would you describe their role and involvement?

Probe, if necessary:

- What steps has the district taken to ensure the community's involvement in the budgeting process at the school level?
- What value do you feel is added (or could be added) with the community's involvement in the processes of budget allocation and/or program planning?

10. Can you explain how schools develop their site-based academic plans? How would you describe the district's involvement in this process?

Important probes:

- Does your central office plan and organize technical assistance and/or professional development activities for this process?
- How does the district ensure that the site-based plans are aligned with the overall academic plan for the district?

11. To what extent do you feel that schools' academic plans and resource allocation are aligned? How would you describe the role of the district central office in supporting the alignment of the academic plan and resource allocation?

12. How would you describe the role of the district central office with regard to assisting schools with the upcoming implementation of a new student-need-based funding allocation formula for schools?

Important probes:

- How important is it for the central office to plan and organize technical assistance and/or professional development activities support such a new school level funding formula?
 - Is anyone in the central office currently actively engaged in providing professional development to school sites around budgeting?
 - Do you feel that teachers, principals, and school site council members have adequate preparation and the technical capacity to make effective decisions about resource allocation?
 - If not, what kinds of capacity building activities do you envision as being important?
 - Does the central office have a “customer service focus” when it comes to providing support to schools?
13. Are school principals held accountable for student learning in your district? How is this reflected in your interactions with school principals? What does it mean for school principals to be held accountable for student learning?

 14. Do you feel there are district or state-level policies that create barriers to more effective implementation of a needs-based funding formula and increased school autonomy policy? If so, what are they?

Important probes:

- Do you feel an impact from the state categorical program funds? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact at small schools vs. comprehensive schools? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact from the district's hiring policies? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
- Do you feel there is an impact for the district's collective bargaining agreements? If so, what do you feel is the impact?

- Do you feel there is an impact based on the open enrollment policy? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
 - Do you there is an impact from the state and/or federal accountability policies? If so what do you feel is the impact?
 - Do you feel there is an impact from the state's curriculum and standards policies? If so, what do you feel is the impact?
 - Are there other state or district policies that impact the implementation that we haven't mentioned? If so, what are they and what impact do they have?
15. Do you feel that the current budgeting/planning process has contributed to changes in student performance?

Important probe:

- What, if anything, did the budgeting/planning process allow you to do that you would not have been able to do otherwise?
 - Is this opinion based on your own observations or is it based on data (e.g. school surveys, etc.)? If so, what data have you used to observe any changes over time?
16. What do you see as the intended goals for the budgeting/planning process in your district? Have those goals been achieved?