A Strategic Spending Review of Syracuse City School District

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ERS
Education Resource Strategies

Contents

About this Report

During the 2009–10 school year, Education Resource Strategies[1] (ERS) was hired by Say Yes to Education (Say Yes) to collaborate with the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) to map the district's current resource use patterns in order to understand how SCSD aligns people, time, and money to its priority goals and challenges. The goals of this study were to help SCSD and the Syracuse community find ways to continue to implement the transformative reform agenda of the Say Yes and SCSD partnership by comparing current spending patterns against other districts and against emerging evidence with regard to resource-use practices that appear most likely to improve student performance. The ERS findings were used as the primary data source of a participative community "work-out" process that yielded recommendations for the FY12 budget. In this final ERS report, we summarize the findings and recommendations of the ERS study as well as the community recommendations that emerged from this participative work-out process. We present both the findings and these FY12 recommendations in the context of the following long-term strategic transformation imperatives for SCSD.

The ERS team of Stephen Frank, Jura Chung, Lin Yang, and Alex Livingston wish to thank Mary Anne Schmidt Carey and Eugene Chasin of Say Yes to Education who funded and facilitated this work as well as everyone in the Syracuse School District not only for their help with this report but also for their tireless work on behalf of Syracuse students.

FY12 Recommendations

1. Restructure the teaching job to attract and retain the highest contributors and support effective teams.

2. Focus more on the quality of instruction than on the number of instructors.

3. Move away from one-size-fits-all class sizes to target individual attention based on student and subject needs.

4. Extend and strategically organize student time.

5. Redesign special education to shift resources to early and ongoing intervention in general education settings.

6. Unbundle the provision of instructional and other services to take advantage of high-quality, lower-cost options.

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[1] See www.ERStrategies.org for more information about ERS.

Introduction

Transformation in Tough Economic Times
Like most school districts in the United States, the Syracuse City School District faces deep budget cuts now and over the next several years. This is an unprecedented situation for the U.S. To this point, nationwide, real per-pupil spending has increased steadily since 1920, declining in only two years. The combination of flat or decreasing state and local revenue and the impending loss of federal stimulus dollars will result in a significant drop of revenue for the FY12 school year. This includes New York state's failure to fund $15 million of court-ordered Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) funds.

Compounding the challenge, SCSD is committed to investing in its continuing strategic partnership with Say Yes to provide additional and better academic, health, financial, and social services to students in SCSD. The loss of expected revenue, combined with structural cost increases due to contractual and legal obligations and the commitment to fund the strategic SYTE initiatives, have resulted in a projected gap between revenues and expected expenses[2] of nearly $47 million (or 14 percent of the FY11 operating budget).

Say Yes hired ERS to help identify key areas where SCSD might be able to reallocate resources strategically to fund their priority goals during these tough economic times. The initial results of the ERS analysis were reported to the broader Syracuse community and used to support a participative 60-day work-out process that culminated in a concrete set of recommendations and short-term action steps. The work-out teams were divided into three groups, each charged with finding opportunities to redirect resources or to increase district revenues to accomplish priority goals.

While this report is not designed to be the official report of the working groups, it is worth summarizing here that the three working groups identified initial revenue opportunities and cost cutting of more than $42 million. These included two schools being converted to swing space, as well as deep reductions in the number of custodians and security officers, both of which were staffed higher in Syracuse than in benchmark districts.

The majority of cost cutting took place within team three, which was responsible for school personnel, many of whom were related to the direct provision of instruction and pupil services. We list here the positions cut by team three and the percent of overall staff cut within each category. Positions cut by more than 14 percent represent reductions that were deeper than the overall system budget gap, while positions cut by less than 14 percent could be seen as protected.

- 6% General education support teachers (art, music and physical education)
- 7% General education teachers (classroom teachers)
- 8% Counselors and psychologists
- 9% Special education teachers (includes reductions in speech pathologists/therapists)
- 10% Administrators/supervisors
- 20% Special education program teaching assistants
- 28% Instructional coaches
- 35% General education teaching assistants

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[2] Assuming no additional cuts to staff and services.

Although the recommendations of the workgroup are subject to change during the rest of the budgeting process, overall, ERS found the cost-cutting efforts of the working group to be in line with the strategic directions outlined in its strategic audit.[3] The report that follows describes some of the necessary next steps to making these reductions strategic.

The SCSD/Say Yes Partnership

Establishing a Vision and Theory of Action

To help improve student performance, SCSD has forged a strategic partnership with Say Yes to Education. This partnership has helped establish a theory of action that success will occur as we eliminate the key obstacles to Syracuse students graduating and succeeding in college. Overcoming these obstacles requires new ways to provide academic, health, financial, and social services. Path-breaking initiatives include scholarships for all high school graduates, more time in school, tutoring for struggling students, and a greatly expanded and integrated set of social and health services. The key strategies of the Say Yes to Education model are summarized below.

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[3] ERS does not normally encourage cuts to professional development during budget cutting except when the expenditure does not align with a coherent human capital strategy or when the effectiveness of the coaching is questionable.

The Need for Fundamental Transformation

ERS supports the core direction of the SCSD/Say Yes partnership and believes that it can lead to transformational success for Syracuse students. As we follow this strategic theory of action, however, it is imperative to remember that the core problems in school systems today cannot be solved simply by layering new programs over old practices. Existing systems and practices evolved in a time when educational institutions were more concerned about teaching a curriculum than ensuring student mastery. Successful transformation requires school systems to adopt and implement systems and practices that focus relentlessly on how much students learn. One of the first steps of the transformation process is to describe the current use of school system resources with a keen focus on how the system is investing to ensure highly effective teaching, targeted individual attention, and strategic use of in-school time.

To support SCSD in identifying how it might realign spending and reorganize staff and time to better fulfill its transformational agenda, ERS performed an in-depth analysis that integrates budget, staffing, student performance, and other data in a way that allows us to compare spending to other urban districts engaged in reform. Appendix A describes the work we undertake to ensure that the comparisons are "apples to apples" and reflect differences in student population and reporting standards. The figure below summarizes what we

consider the largest resource opportunities and the non-Say Yes-related top strategic priorities for additional or significantly different investment.

What are the Top Priorities for Investment in SCSD and Where Might the Funding Come From?

Largest Resource Opportunities
Top Transformational Priority

Longevity pay

Non-instructional time

Unstrategic class size

Special education overlap

School-based non-teaching staff

Teaching assistants

Areas of Underinvestment

Teacher evaluation

Teacher professional development and collaborative planning time

Formative assessment

District and school leadership development

SCSD must determine how to use these resource opportunities to implement the Say Yes reform agenda and cover the budget gap for FY12 while addressing the areas that have been underinvested in previous years. We believe that this requires them to:

1. Restructure the teaching job to attract and retain the highest contributors and support effective teams
2. Focus more on the quality of instruction than on the number of instructors
3. Move away from one-size-fits-all class sizes to target individual attention based on student and subject needs
4. Extend and strategically organize student time
5. Redesign special education to shift resources to early and ongoing intervention in general education settings
6. Unbundle the provision of instructional and other services to take advantage of high-quality, lower-cost options

1. Restructure the Teacher Job to Attract and Retain the Highest Contributors and Support Effective Teams

The Facts

SCSD teachers receive competitive salaries at the start and over the course of their career. At $82 thousand, average compensation (salary and benefits) in SCSD was 16 percent higher than the comparison districts in the ERS study, $3 thousand more than in Rochester, and $11 thousand more than the New York state average, according to the National Education Association (NEA) statistics.

As an urban school district with enormous challenges and sometimes difficult working conditions, SCSD must ensure competitive salary levels to attract and retain the highest-quality teaching staff. Furthermore, the evidence is clear that teaching effectiveness trumps all other in-school factors in improving student achievement. Given the large proportion of dollars consumed by compensation, a teacher compensation system and career structure that provides incentives and rewards to attract and retain the highest-quality teaching staff is one of the most leveraged strategies that SCSD can undertake to improve instruction. In the current system, more than 80 percent of the raises a teacher receives over the course of his or her career come from experience (steps), while most of the remaining pay increase comes from educational attainment (lanes.) Neither education nor experience is closely tied to improvements in student performance. They do not predict how well a teacher performs. Rather than keep compensation tied up in the traditional system of steps and lanes, SCSD should redistribute teacher compensation dollars to encourage and reward leadership and individual, team, and school contribution. Baltimore City, for example, recently renegotiated the union contract to emphasize teacher performance rather than longevity and education credentials. Baltimore simplified its steps and lanes structure, setting more stringent qualifications for promotion to the next level, and freeing resources to better develop, support, and compensate high-performers. Changing the compensation structure would, of course, require a significant renegotiation of the current SCSD contract, widening the door for improved teaching and learning.

As we head into this budget-cutting period, the state of New York is intimating that it might impose a wage freeze. Such a freeze applied to all district employees could save between $6-9 million and reduce the short-term need for layoffs. The current challenge with teacher layoffs in Syracuse is that at present the layoffs would almost exclusively affect junior teachers, whether they are high or low performing. There are no processes in place to protect significant numbers of young teachers who may be high performing or to remove ineffective, experienced teachers from the system. In the short term, SCSD must work with the union, perhaps leveraging the peer assistance and review program, to find ways to protect its higher-performing young teachers. In the long term, the district needs to make additional efforts to identify and reward the high-performing teachers and to ease out those teachers who are consistently ineffective.

Another opportunity available to the district is to leverage the "sixth-period," one of five non-instructional time slots of high-performing high school teachers who wish to earn more money by teaching an extra class. Currently, any teacher can apply for these additional teaching slots. Awarding these opportunities only to those teachers who consistently perform more effectively than their peers, could become a way of shifting students away from under-performers and into the classrooms of the strongest teachers.

2. Focus more on the Quality of Instruction than on the Number of Instructors

The Facts

Improving teaching effectiveness is the most impactful in-school strategy in improving student achievement.[4] Three primary means to improve the effectiveness of the teaching force are to:

1. Improve the recruiting, selecting, and hiring process
2. Remove ineffective teachers

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[4] See Miles & Frank (2008, p. 23-24) for a summary of this research.

3. Support and develop current staff through providing expert support, useful data and time for teacher teams to adjust instruction in response to student need.

District transformation demands continuous improvement in all three areas. Too often we find that districts focus more on the number of instructors than on the quality of instruction. Particularly in tough economic times, districts strive to preserve the jobs of teachers and teaching assistants while cutting expert teacher leaders, coaches, and information systems with little attention to the performance of those employees losing their jobs. As Syracuse leaders consider ways to reduce overall spending, they can heed the call to shift their focus from quantity to quality with respect to both teaching assistants and teachers. We start with teaching assistants because of the size of the monetary opportunity.

Teaching Assistants
SCSD employed nearly twice as many teaching assistants as comparison districts. This resulted in 300 to 400 more teaching assistants than comparable districts even after last year's reduction. This represents a reallocation opportunity of more than $16 million. While some of these teaching assistants are employed in special education, many are in general education. Research on teaching assistants suggests that their use does not often improve student performance and can, in fact, drain money away from more effective initiatives for improving the quality of instruction. ERS recommends that SCSD craft and act on a long-range plan to curtail the use of general education teaching assistants and dramatically reduce the reliance on teaching assistants in special education.[5]

Teachers
Protect high-potential junior teachers: While recruiting, selecting, and hiring are crucial strategies that SCSD must continue to improve, these strategies will affect only a small portion of the workforce over the next several years. Because the number of teachers in the district is likely to decline for several years, the immediate focus needs to be on the removal of ineffective teachers and the support and development of a stronger teaching force. Unfortunately, state and union requirements including tenure can make it difficult to remove even poorly performing teachers if they have longevity. However, it is possible to preserve some of the effective junior teachers in the district by creatively rewriting job descriptions and more actively attempting to counsel out the lowest performers. For instance, job descriptions that highlight the important and unique skills of high-performing novices in a school or district can increase a district's ability to keep the best teachers in the classroom and eliminate those who fall short. Preserving the highest potential junior teachers is a critical component of an effective long-term strategy for SCSD.

Right-size classes: When we looked at the number of teachers in Syracuse, we saw that it was similar to those of surrounding districts, with a student/teacher ratio of 12. This is only slightly lower than the urban districts comparison and slightly higher than Rochester.

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[5] Flexible grouping strategies supported by teaching assistants should, in the future, be supported by teachers through the differentiated instruction model described in the section on special education.

Ratio of Pupil/FTE (by District)
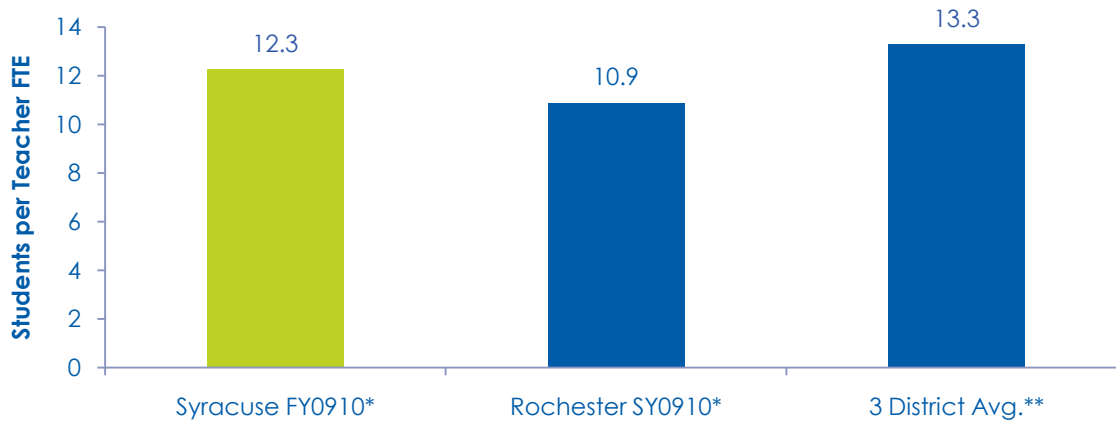
*Includes Pre-K; **Includes Atlanta, DC, and St. Paul
Source: SCSD SY0910 Budget; ERS District Database; ERS Analysis

In determining whether or not SCSD had the right number of teachers, we also observed that their class sizes were on average five to six students lower than currently mandated class size or teacher load maximums. Although SCSD would not necessarily want to increase all class sizes to the maximum, the difference between actual and mandatory class sizes represents a potential investment of up to $24 million . There is an opportunity to reallocate a portion of this by strategically targeting class size increases, rethinking either the number of teachers in the system, or the way in which they are deployed.

Class Sizes vs. Max Class Sizes
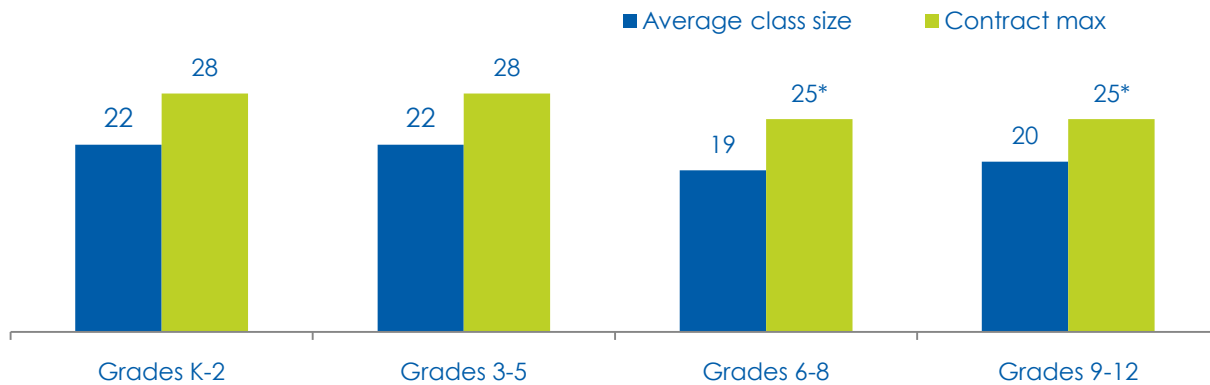
Source: ERS analysis; *Max determined by max number of student contacts per day

Because research suggests that small changes to class size have little effect on student performance, whereas improving quality instruction can have tremendous impact on student achievement, ERS often recommends that districts consider strategically raising certain class sizes to free up resources for more cost-efficient activities. These could include freeing teachers to work in smaller groups with struggling students in priority subjects as well as job-embedded professional development initiatives.

When money is cut from the budget, there is often resistance to class size increases. This resistance can be natural, productive, and reasonable. But it can also be challenging. It is often difficult to remember that the

quality of instruction outweighs small changes in class sizes and that the goal of schools is to improve educational outcomes for students, not to protect jobs for teachers.

Develop teachers effectively: Case studies of high-performing schools and successful urban reform initiatives show that the most effective professional development and team collaboration include five key components:

1. *Collaborative Planning Time.* Collaborative planning time is a key part of effective, job-embedded professional development, as it creates an opportunity for teachers to jointly discuss student progress, identify needs, and adjust instruction. But despite significant investment to provide teachers with non-instructional time during the school day, most SCSD teachers do not appear to have regular time scheduled with their teaching teams for adequate collaborative planning. SCSD has made a strategic investment in organizing schedules that allow teachers significant time without student contacts. This includes five hours in elementary schools each week and five out of ten periods of non-teaching time at the secondary level. This investment in additional (non-mandatory) planning time represents a significant district investment of $17.8 million in secondary schools and $3.1 million in elementary schools. However, at present, standards and support do not exist for teachers to effectively collaborate during this time. Teaching schedules must be coordinated so that teachers of the same grades and/or subjects can work together during this non-instructional time. But just meeting regularly is not enough. Teams of teachers in SCSD must be trained in effective goal-setting and meeting processes and supported by coaches and expert teachers. Finally, SCSD must make available accurate and timely student assessment and performance data so that teaching teams can adapt to student needs and continuously improve their teaching practice.

2. *Deliberate assignment of teachers to teams to ensure a balance of expertise and experience levels.* A high-performing teaching team might have a strong leader who can facilitate team collaboration and provide expertise in both practice and content areas, along with team members who have complementary skill sets and share a common belief in the vision and mission of the school. SCSD principals, however, have limited ability to assemble such teams. Externally, contract-related barriers and the lack of a functioning teacher evaluation system to eliminate low performers can create a "dance of the lemons," as poor teachers are passed around the district rather than dismissed. Internally, the district needs to leverage the data it has to support principals in establishing high-functioning teams at all grade levels. This will be especially important as the district adopts inclusion models in all schools in all grade-level teams. With the current hurdles that limit the removal of ineffective teachers and control over teacher assignment, many principals —especially those in hard-to-staff schools—may find it quite challenging to assemble competent teaching teams with balanced skills and experience.

3. *Student performance data from formative assessments.* SCSD is investing to improve formative assessments, which in turn will inform teaching practice. With better assessments that encompass all grades and subjects, teaching teams can focus on the highest-need areas for their students. In addition, principals can identify gaps in learning relative to instructional goals and hire or redeploy strong teachers to address these gaps. Additional investment in ongoing assessment of academic progress will tie nicely to the significant investment in tracking surround services and will be key to transformational improvement in instructional practices and to leveraging SCSD's investment in additional time and attention.

4. *School-based instructional expertise.* SCSD devotes resources for school-based expertise (e.g., instructional coaches or formal teacher-leader positions) at every school to help teachers improve their instruction, but in the past year, SCSD has reduced the number of expert support personnel. Going forward, it is

essential that the need to reduce overall spending not result in an insufficient investment in expert support in Syracuse schools. It is also essential to determine whether or not the people staffed in these positions are capable of meeting the needs of the faculty in each school and have effective support models and job descriptions to work with teams of teachers on continuous improvement of instructional practices.

5. *Teacher performance and practice information.*[6] While teacher evaluations are often considered a potential dismissal tool, the evaluation process plays a crucial role in understanding the components of teaching effectiveness, both on an individual teacher level as well as collectively at school and district levels. This information is critical to designing professional development that effectively and accurately supports teacher needs. SCSD is in the process of piloting a new evaluation system for teachers. Rather than typical teacher evaluation processes that do not differentiate teachers or allow for effective comparison among teachers, SCSD's evolving evaluation system will include student test scores. By combining a variety of nuanced measures, including classroom observations, team support and other responsibilities in addition to student test scores, the new evaluation system can become a significant tool for teacher teaming, guiding professional development. Atlanta Public Schools has been developing a similar Teaching Effectiveness Dashboard (TED) that may serve as a good resource as SCSD builds its evaluation system. Throughout this process, it is essential to remember that improving conversations around teacher effectiveness data as well as other processes for effectively using data will have a far larger impact on district success than the quality of any given evaluation metric.

Areas in Which to Increase Spending

Implementing a more effective teacher evaluation system is a priority area for SCSD. While detailing and estimating evaluation-related costs goes beyond the scope of this report, the district should consider both up-front, one-time infrastructure investments and ongoing investments as part of integrating the evaluation system into its entire human capital picture. Up-front implementation costs can include process development and information systems that provide principals with timely and accurate information on teacher performance. As part of the new Race to the Top federal funding in New York, Syracuse will be participating in a pilot to include student performance data in teacher evaluations. It is essential that the district not only improve the metrics of teacher effectiveness, but also the use of teacher effectiveness data, including changing the way that principals use and interact with the data to determine teacher teams, promotion opportunities, support needs, and teachers who need remediation or removal. Other investments could include professional development to ensure norming of evaluations across the system and the support and additional time that principals will need to implement improved processes in a way that is comprehensive and integrated into a teacher effectiveness initiative.

A second priority area for SCSD is to engage in a human capital strategy review, or an analysis of how the district currently manages and supports its teaching staff, specifically around professional development and other efforts to improve the teaching effectiveness over time. In the districts that ERS has studied, professional development efforts are typically fragmented with little cohesion, consistency, or effectiveness across teachers, schools, or programs. Other problems include an overinvestment in low priority areas and an underinvestment in other areas. An audit of professional development practices throughout the district could help surface specific issues with the quality of AIS or coaching resources as well as whether or not the range of existing practices meets the highest priority needs of the district in coherent ways.

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[6] Shields, R.A. and Miles, K.H. (2008)

3. Move Away from One-Size-Fits-All Class Sizes to Target Individual Attention Based on Student and Subject Needs

The Facts

Although there is no one right way to organize school resources (people, time, and money), ERS has found that high-performing schools employ three sets of common strategies.[7] They:

1. Invest to continuously improve **teaching effectiveness** through hiring, professional development, job structure, and collaborative planning time.

2. Organize and use **student time** strategically, linking learning to student learning needs.

3. Create targeted **individual attention** and personal learning environments.

We discuss teaching effectiveness and student time in other sections. In this section, we discuss targeted individual attention.

Targeted Individual Attention

High-performing schools use individual attention to maximize instruction from highly effective teachers in the most important subjects and to meet individual student needs across the spectrum of student performance. Two metrics that are often used to measure individual attention are class size and teaching load (the total number of students for which a teacher has instructional responsibility). Teacher load is an important measure of a teacher's capacity to devote individual attention to students. High-performing schools often reduce teaching load, in particular in English language arts (ELA) and math, either by doubling or tripling the amount of time students spend in the subject (which can result in teachers teaching only two to three classes of students per year) or by strategically reducing class sizes in one or more core subjects. More to the point, high-performing schools are more likely to rely on formative assessments of student progress toward mastery to determine the group sizes that students experience. Through technology, flexible grouping, and tutoring, they target attention *when* it is needed to precisely those students who need it most and to cover the highest-priority topics.

Average Student Contacts by Subject—General Education
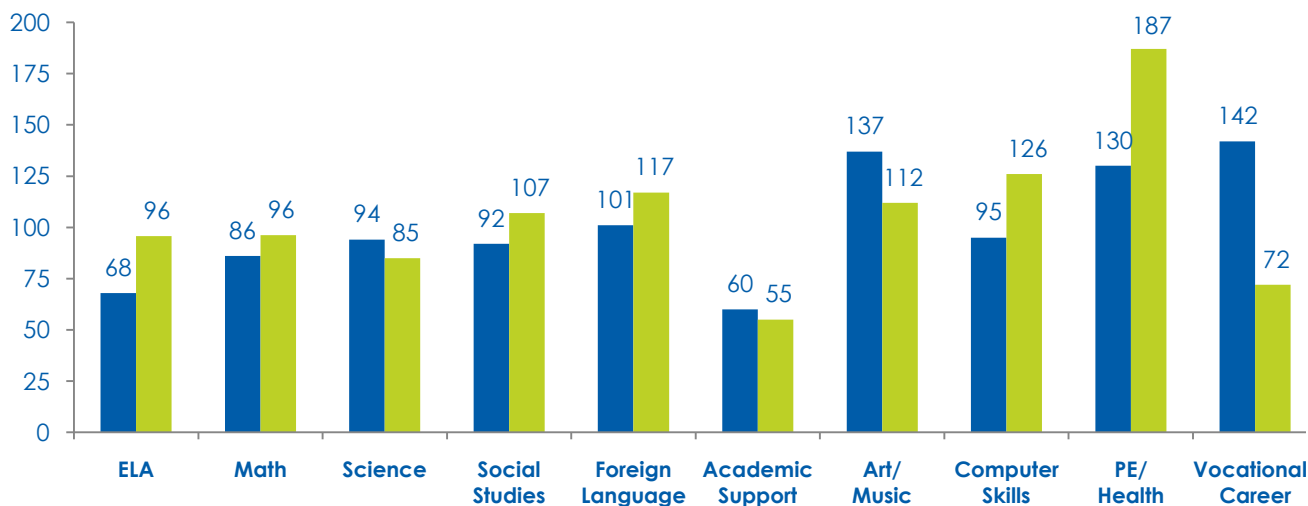
[7] See www.ERStrategies.org for more information.

As shown in the figure above, SCSD has done well to keep low the "teacher load" or total number of students per teacher (more than any other district that ERS has seen), especially in ELA for middle school students where the number of student contacts is less than 70.

Low teacher loads can, however, be misleading, as the current use of duty periods puts teachers and students together in ways that are not measured in teacher load. When we include study hall and other activities that pair students with teachers in classroom settings, the number of student contacts per teacher increases dramatically.

A second common measure of individual attention is class size. In an earlier section, we pointed out that average class sizes in SCSD are lower than required by mandates. This difference provides a pool of opportunity: flexibility to reconsider how teachers are staffed with students moving toward larger-than-average class sizes with room for smaller, flexible groups supported by highly qualified, certified teachers for targeted subjects and students. Currently, when SCSD does organize for small groups, these groups are supported by teaching assistants. It will be especially important to have a strategy for targeted individual attention as the district moves to systematically reduce the number of teaching assistants.

In general, average class sizes in SCSD vary systematically only with respect to categorical programs. Specifically, students in special education or English language learners (ELL) programs have reduced class sizes. Upon examination, general education class sizes did not vary significantly by grade, by subject, or by whether or not students passed or failed state subject tests.

In considering where to cut and where to invest in teaching staff, SCSD leaders would do well to target individual attention more strategically based upon demonstrated student need. For instance, the district might preserve small class sizes in ELA for the neediest students or even reduce them while raising class sizes for other students. While small changes in class size have little effect on student performance, significant changes in group sizes can be quite important. During this period of budget cutting and potential teacher layoffs, it is important to think strategically about the size and nature of class size changes that are desired by grade and subject.

4. Extend and Organize Student Time Strategically

The Facts

Time on task is consistently found to be a primary factor in student learning. According to ERS research, this was one of the first reforms enacted by leading-edge schools when they were given flexibility from union and other regulatory constraints. SCSD has already organized and extended its school day to the point that it has as much time on the regular school calendar as any district and leading-edge school in the country

School Hours per Year Across Districts

District	School Hours per Year
Boston Charters	~1,480
Leading-edge Schools	~1,280
Syracuse	~1,270
Atlanta	~1,260
Philadelphia	~1,250
Pittsburgh	~1,250
Baltimore	~1,210
Denver	~1,200
Rochester	~1,190
Washington DC	~1,180
Milwaukee	~1,170
St. Paul	~1,150
Seattle	~1,130
Boston	~1,120
LA	~1,110
Prince George County	~1,080
Chicago	~960

School Hours per Year
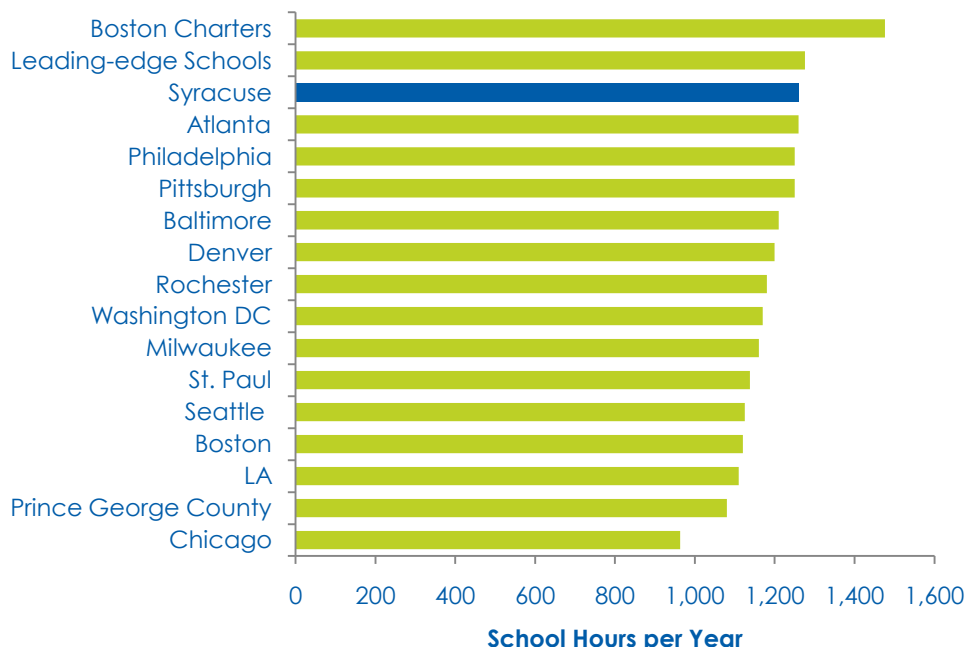
Source: District figures are from Frank, S. (2010) and from ERS analyses for the Aspen CFO network. Leading-edge school figures are from Shields, R. A., and Miles, K. H. (2008). Charter school figures are from The Boston Foundation (May 2010).

Furthermore, ongoing initiatives from the Say Yes partnership will continue to increase student time through extended day and summer opportunities that will eventually add about 13 percent more time to the regular school calendar. ERS believes that these initiatives have created sufficient time in school in Syracuse. The next step is to ensure its effective use.

Moving forward, it is imperative that the district focus on making the most of this investment in student and teacher time. Several issues seem particularly salient. First, at the secondary level, there is opportunity to leverage more than one hour per day of student study hall and other non- instructional time that does not include lunch. SCSD should explore technology and other innovative solutions to maximize the effectiveness of this valuable time resource. Second, the district invests heavily in teacher time when they are not in contact with students. The district must reconsider its assignment of duty periods to allow teachers the opportunity to organize into collaborative teams at times when they are not teaching students. Third, it will be vital for the district to allocate time strategically, spending more time on core subjects for those students who need it. SCSD has already made significant progress in targeting time in ELA based on student need. But in math, high school students who struggle the most (level one scores on eighth grade math tests) spend virtually the same amount of time in math as those who already meet standards (level three and four).

In elementary schools, too, it will be important to organize the inclusive grade-level teacher teams and student families so that regular assessment results can determine the grouping and the amount of time that students spend in priority subjects.

5. Redesign Special Education to Shift Resources to Early and Ongoing Intervention in General Education Settings

The Facts

SCSD currently refers 21 percent of its students for special education services, which is significantly higher than other New York districts, including other urban districts, and the national average identification of 13.4 percent.[8] With so many students classified as requiring special education and an increasing number of students needing ELL services, SCSD is caught in a cycle of specialization that drains resources from teaching core content in a general education setting and makes it hard to find resources for early intervention (see figure below).

Cycle of Isolation and Specialization Pulls Students with Additional Needs out of General Education Classrooms
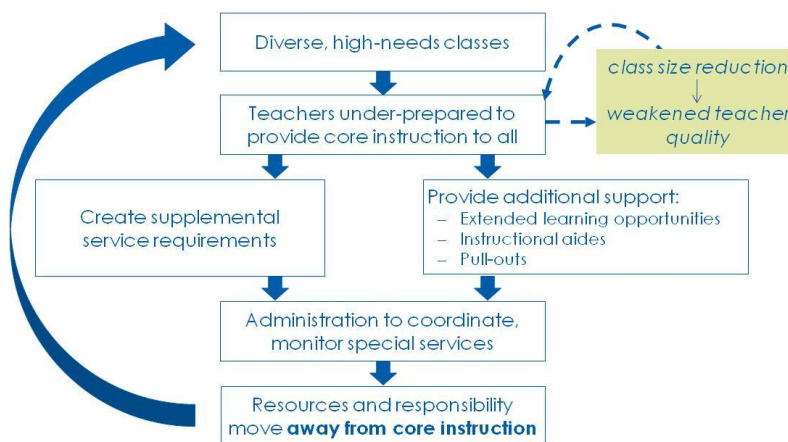
ERS recommends that SCSD work to reduce the number of students referred to special education over time to get closer to the national average. The district's plans to change the referral process and the ongoing training in early intervention and supports and Response to Intervention methods should aid tremendously in helping more students remain in general education, as will the continued investment in the Say Yes partnership, which will provide additional options for students who struggle but who do not belong in special education.

Service Delivery Models: While most elementary schools have an inclusion teacher and classroom at every grade level, a few SCSD schools do not have inclusion teams. This requires students to be bused from their home campuses. ERS recommends that for the few remaining elementary schools, SCSD establish an inclusion classroom in at every grade level and that more special education students be served in these inclusive (rather than in separate) settings. ERS further recommends that, as part of this model, the district systematically and steadily adopt the "schools of promise" model and dual certify both general education and special education teachers. Teachers with cross-skills will enable flexible grouping and regrouping across classrooms throughout the day to maximize the ability to work with every student, not just special education students, in teacher-supported small groups.

Additionally, ERS recommends that the district rely less on aides within special education and replace most of the aides with certified teachers, spending the same amount of money but reducing the number of personnel. While this may reduce the number of staff in special education, the reality is that teachers can perform tasks that aides cannot perform—and much more capably. Thus, this change should lead to a better

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[8] Special education placement rates in our district comparison database range from 10% in Los Angeles and Atlanta to 17% in St. Paul.

provision of services in special education. The district's cuts of special education aides this year are a good step in this direction and should be continued over time.

6. Unbundle the Provision of Instructional and Other Services to Take Advantage of High-Quality, Lower-Cost Options

The Facts

School systems are not always the lowest-cost or highest-quality providers of administrative, instructional, or other services. Central offices evolved in a time when ensuring access to a curriculum was one of the primary goals. The change in goal to ensuring that all students learn and attain high standards requires a radical overhaul of many different functions. Thoughtful outsourcing and/or devolving services to schools can yield cost savings while improving service delivery. At the time of this study, SCSD invested much more than most school districts in providing security, custodial services, and many pupil services. The current budget cuts are closing the gap. In the long run, the district should consider whether or not outsourcing is a viable option to improve the delivery of food or pupil services as well as staff development, recruiting, and other processes. There is a wealth of organizations that provide such services.

Concluding Thoughts

In January of 2011, as we write this report, Governor Cuomo has recently announced the possibility of challenge grants to help New York districts that are trying to cut costs strategically. Regardless of whether or not additional money is forthcoming, the SCSD has outlined plans to implement team collaboration in all schools and to participate in a pilot for teacher evaluation. It has announced its intention to reduce special education percentages from its current rate of 21 percent of students down to 17 percent or fewer. SCSD has also honored its commitment to the Say Yes theory of action and to the additional services it requires.

With the promise of free college scholarships for high school graduates, this path-breaking partnership has the potential to transform not only the school system but the city of Syracuse as well, providing a much needed successful case example of urban revitalization.

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Appendices

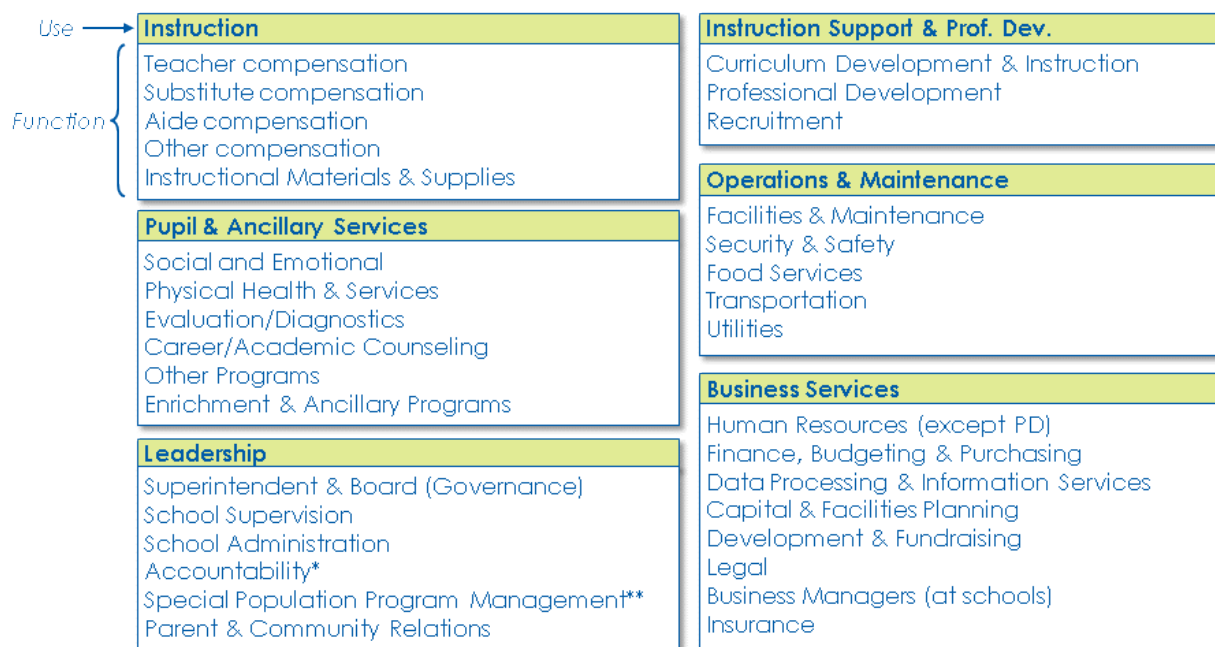## Appendix A: ERS Methodology Overview

Inflation-adjusted dollars: In order to compare real dollars across districts, data from the ERS Benchmark Database were adjusted using two methods:

- Inflation: Each district dataset is adjusted using the CPI-U to convert datasets from prior years into 2009–10 equivalents.
- Regional cost differences: To adjust for cost differences in various parts of the country, each district dataset is converted to Boston-equivalent dollars, using the Comparable Wage Index calculated and maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

K-12 operating expenses: Our analysis focuses on K-12 operating expenses.

- "Operating expenses" are defined as the district's total expenses for ongoing operations, excluding debt and capital.
- "K-12 operating expenses" are defined as the operating expenses excluding non-K-12 expenses such as adult education and child development.

ERS recodes the "use" and "function" of all budget lines in each district

Use → **Instruction**
Function {
Teacher compensation
Substitute compensation
Aide compensation
Other compensation
Instructional Materials & Supplies

Instruction Support & Prof. Dev.
Curriculum Development & Instruction
Professional Development
Recruitment

Pupil & Ancillary Services
Social and Emotional
Physical Health & Services
Evaluation/Diagnostics
Career/Academic Counseling
Other Programs
Enrichment & Ancillary Programs

Operations & Maintenance
Facilities & Maintenance
Security & Safety
Food Services
Transportation
Utilities

Leadership
Superintendent & Board (Governance)
School Supervision
School Administration
Accountability*
Special Population Program Management**
Parent & Community Relations

Business Services
Human Resources (except PD)
Finance, Budgeting & Purchasing
Data Processing & Information Services
Capital & Facilities Planning
Development & Fundraising
Legal
Business Managers (at schools)
Insurance

*Includes research, evaluation, and assessment, student registration/assignment and attendance tracking.
**Includes school and non-school based management and support for programs serving special populations (e.g., SWD, EL, Voc Ed., Alternative)
Source: ERS knowledge management

Adjusting for student type: We adjust student enrollment by weighting the student population based on district spending patterns, in essence converting all students to general education.

If District X is spending:
$10,000 - Regular Education
$15,000 - Special Education

The "weights" are then:
Regular Education = 1.0
Special Education   = 1.5
[Each Sped student = 1.5 Reg Ed]

Example: School A and School B both have 100 students, but School A has a budget of $1.25m and School B has a budget of $1.05m. Equitable?

School A

Enrollment Adjustment:

Regular Ed: 50 x 1.0 = 50

Special Ed: 50 x 1.5 = 75

    Adjusted Enroll: 125

Cost Per Pupil equals:

$1,250,000/125 = **$10,000**

School B

Enrollment Adjustment:

Regular Ed: 90 x 1.0 = 90

Special Ed: 10 X 1.5 = 15

    Adjusted Enroll: 105

Cost Per Pupil equals:

$1,050,000/105 = **$10,000**

Conclusion: Adjusting enrollment reveals that School A is not being overfunded and School B is not being underfunded