Factors that Facilitated an Alabama School Assistance Team's Success in a Low-Performing School[*]

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived factors that enabled an Alabama School Assistance Team (ASAT) to be effective in helping improve a low performing school. A case study was conducted with the ASATs and the Local Education Agency (LEA) site they served. Data were collected from interviews, documents and observations. The perceptions explored in this study were those of the ASAT Leaders, Team Members, LEA personnel, and community members. Findings indicate that the most prominent factor in enabling the ASAT to be successful was consistent, effective leadership. Other important perceived facilitating factors included the relational skills/personalities of ASAT personnel and their commitment and dedication.

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Sumario en espanol

Este estudio investigó los factores percibidos que permitieron un Equipo de Ayuda de Escuela de Alabama (ASAT) ser efectivos en ayudar a mejorar un punto más bajo que realiza la escuela. Un caso fue realizado con el ASATs y la Agencia Local de la Educación (LEA) sitúa sirvieron. Los datos fueron reunidos de entrevistas, los documentos y las observaciones. Las percepciones exploradas en este estudio fueron ésos de los Líderes de ASAT, de los miembros del equipo, del personal de LEA, y de miembros de comunidad. Las conclusiones indican que el factor más prominente en permitir el ASAT para tener éxito fue liderazgo consecuente y efectivo. Otro facilitar percibido importante que los factores incluyeron las habilidades/personalidades relacionales del personal de ASAT y su compromiso y de la dedicación.

1 Introduction

Interest in school accountability and student achievement in the United States is at an all time high (Ylimaki, 2007). The U.S. Congress has committed itself legislatively to building a rigorous public education system that fosters success for all children. This commitment was reflected over a decade ago, in the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2001) – commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. This legislation contains two components that directly affect student achievement and low-performing schools. The first component specifies that states must adopt a single statewide system to document that all students are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) over a twelve month period. The second specifies that school districts must ensure that research-based technical assistance is provided to schools that fail to meet their AYP goals for two consecutive years (Craciun & Snow-Renner, 2002). One of the outcomes of this law has been a shift from a focus on low-achieving students to a focus upon low-achieving schools. Timar and Chyu (2010) suggest that this refocusing represents a sea change in education policy because it redefines roles, responsibilities, and professional relationships in education.

Although NCLB legislation mandates that each state must provide state assistance to low-performing schools, there is flexibility in the intervention strategies that states may implement (NASBE, 2002). States have taken a variety of approaches in responding to providing assistance and support to failing schools. Among the most common are: (a) school improvement planning and self-studies (b) providing expert assistance (c) provisions for school choice (d) implementation of supplemental services, (e) adoption of a reform model, and (f) reconstitution (Murphy & Meyers, 2008).

2 The Need for Intervention Strategies in Low-Performing Schools

Many low-performing schools may have difficulty knowing how to increase student achievement (McFadden, 2009; National Education Association, 2002; Reeves, 2003) and need outside help to succeed. Research regarding low-performing schools found that significant numbers of teachers in high-poverty schools adopt a low energy/low expectations attitude toward students (Wilson and Corbett, 2001). This attitude is often manifested by a failure to set high expectations for these students and an attitude of despair over the situation they and their students are in. Even teachers and principals who are "heroes" in high poverty schools and give their all can become discouraged by things such as the poor condition of buildings, the attitudes of those within and outside the community, and the general lack of belief in their possibilities for success (Kozol, 2005).

Many educational leaders and organizations believe challenges to student success can be overcome and low-performing schools can provide a quality education for all students (A+ Education Foundation, 2003;

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[1] http://www.ncpeapublications.org

Achieve, Inc., 2001; Moore & Kochan, 2010). However, it is feasible that low-performing schools are not going to make improvements by continuing on the course they have always followed. Instead, these schools need to confront the challenges they face head-on; build on the strengths they have; and dedicate themselves to a multiyear program of continuous school improvement (Mandel, 2000). Taking such steps is difficult for any school and may be particularly so for schools that are already failing (Duke, 2006). The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and others have found that "not only is local leadership essential to embarking on the kind of comprehensive and far reaching restructuring initiatives that failing schools need, but that external assistance is crucial" (Southern Regional Education Board, Educational Benchmarks 2000 Series, 2000, p. 1).

Balfanz, Ruby and MacIver (2002) state that to overcome a school climate struggling with low socio-economic issues, it is essential to nurture positive and mutually supportive interpersonal relations at the student-to-student, student-to-teacher, student-to-administrator, teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-administrator, and parent-to-school levels. Achieve, Inc. (2001) supports that notion that such empowering, interpersonal relations are crucial to student and school improvement; however, they add that struggling schools cannot achieve this on their own and that outside assistance is needed.

Often, external assistance helps low-performing schools to: set priorities and establish ambitious, but realistic goals; raise awareness of what other schools in similar circumstances have found to be positive and constructive approaches; gain access to experienced and skilled educators who have a record of success in school improvement; and support on-going staff development efforts designed to implement specific curricular and instructional changes. One way to create these supportive, interpersonal relationships is by implementing a school assistance team model as an intervention strategy (Ginsberg, Johnson, & Moffett, 1997).

Most states require low-performing schools and districts to develop and implement a school improvement plan and to provide special professional development and technical assistance opportunities to teachers and administrators at low-performing schools (NASBE, 2002). In 2002, the Education Commission of the States interviewed practitioners in 11 states (California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Texas and West Virginia) to examine methods of technical assistance given to low-performing schools (Education Commission of the States, 2002). At the time, all 11 states were providing technical assistance to these schools and/or school districts, although only some of them had enacted policies requiring them to do so. Each of the states examined also emphasized the goal of building schools' and districts' abilities to identify and solve school and district specific problems and they tracked school and district progress toward achievement goals.

Technical assistance implementation, delivery and duration strategies vary throughout the country. For example, in New York, teams of administrators, curriculum specialists, experienced educators, school board members and parents conduct four-day observation visits to assess a troubled school's condition. They then develop a long-term plan for the school. In Connecticut, a "critical friend," designated by the state, partners with principals in low-performing schools to assist in the implementation of improvement plans over the course of one school year. North Carolina requires an assistance team to spend one full year at its assigned school to provide technical assistance on a daily basis. In Texas, monitoring teams conduct several one-day site visits to determine how to help a low-performing school.

California employ a capacity building accountability model with outside expert support (Timar & Chyu, 2010). This is quite a comprehensive approach involving multiple groups. The California Department of Education, the Regional System of District and School Support, and the Comprehensive Assistance Center have joined together to assure that all students will meet California's academic content and achievement standards. This involves the implementation of a system of School Support Teams. These School Support Teams are still in the developmental phase so there are no data available as to their effectiveness (California Department of Education Web site: www.cde.ca.gov[2] , 2011).

New Mexico has an extensive and varied program entitled *The Response to Intervention (RtI) Framework in New Mexico: The Three-tier Model of Student Intervention*. The Model seeks to ensure success for all students. It provides early assistance to students who are experiencing academic and/or behavioral

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[2] http://www.cde.ca.gov

challenges or need opportunities for advanced learning. A Student Assistance Team (SAT) is a component of this framework. The SAT is a school-based team whose purpose is to provide targeted, supplemental, and individualized support for students who are performing either above or below expectations.

Alabama, the state in which this research was conducted, established school assistance teams as part of a its approach to improving schools in 1999, prior to the NCLB legislation and continues to use this strategy as a means of meeting the requirements of this law. A review of the development and implementation of this program is presented to provide the context of the study.

3 School Assistance Teams in Alabama

Alabama had been addressing the issue of assisting low-performing schools prior to the NCLB legislation. Initial approaches to the issue had been primarily punitive and expected schools and systems to solve their own academic problems. In the mid-1990s, the Alabama State Department of Education realized that ever-increasing achievement goals being placed on the State Department of Education (SDE) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) by the state legislature could not be met by a hierarchical bureaucracy (Alabama State Department of Education, 1997). The Alabama State Superintendent of Education sought to change this department from an environment of "control and regulations" to an environment of "service and support." He envisioned having the State Department of Education become a service organization, facilitating the LEAs' abilities to overcome educational obstacles and achieve higher student achievement.

As a part of this vision of service, the Alabama State Department 21st Century Project Team was developed. A major component of the Team was the creation of the Alabama School Assistance Team (ASAT) Model. The purpose of the ASAT was to facilitate and empower the LEA schools/systems that were not meeting state t achievement goals to overcome educational obstacles to student and school success.

Each year, Alabama reviews student and school data and places schools into one of three performance categories: *Clear*, *Caution*, and *Alert*. This identification system is in accordance with legislation enacted in 1995 mandating the use of nationally norm-referenced tests for student assessment purposes and the implementation of a school and school system classification system (McCloskey, 2001).

Both a school's placement and the change in its placement over time determine its eligibility for special assistance from the ASAT. Schools with more than half of their students in stanines 5 to 9 on standardized tests are classified as *Clear*. Schools with more than half of their students performing at stanines 1to 3 are classified as being on *Alert*. Schools that fall between these two points are considered to be in *Caution* status.

Alert 1 status schools are schools in the first year of *Alert* status or schools that performed at the *Caution* level in the prior year and have failed to adequately improve. Schools earn an *Alert 2* designation if they were classified as *Alert 1* during the prior year and failed to move out of *Alert* status. Schools that fail to move out of *Caution* status for a second year are also classified as *Alert 2*. Schools are classified as *Alert 3* if after one or two years at the *Alert 2* level they are not demonstrating satisfactory growth (Mandel, 2000).

Alabama School Assistance Teams have worked with schools classified as *Alert 2* and *Alert3* status since the program began. (Alabama State Department of Education, 1997). Since this study, the State Department of Education has been restructured and the School Assistance Team Model has been reformatted. However, the purposes of the team and the criteria for providing assistance remain similar.

The ASATs were charged with the mission of providing timely quality service and technical assistance to LEAs. The mission statement includes serving schools by: providing leadership, expertise, and resources to help them solve their problems; recognizing and capitalizing on the diversity of schools; delivering on SDE promises to the LEAs; encouraging innovation by using imagination and creativity to deliver quality services; communicating between and within the SDE and LEAs; providing guidance and assistance to meet compliance issues and Public Education System accountability; encouraging partnerships with businesses, the community, and parents; aiding schools and communities to increase achievement levels of students attending these schools; and encouraging high expectations of LEAs and students to develop and maintain safe and positive learning environments.

At the time of this study, the ASATs were under the direction of the Director of Classroom Improvement/

School Assistance Team Coordination at the Alabama State Department of Education. Each ASAT was comprised of a team leader, team members and special service teachers (SSTs). These team members were diverse in their abilities, ranging from expertise in instructional and administrative functions, child nutrition, teaching practices, assessment, finance, special education, technology, and other areas of need. Each assistance team was guided by the team leader who was carefully chosen because of her/his skill, knowledge and commitment to school improvement for all children. Team leaders had a fair amount of autonomy in allocating and using the various resources at their disposal, including the special service teachers, to best assist the LEAs they served in their region (Mandel, 2000). These team members visited the *Alert 2* and *Alert 3* schools on a weekly basis, offering hands-on guidance, support and involvement to the principal and faculty, and provided assistance to the special service teachers, as needed.

Alabama special service teachers (SSTs) were exemplary classroom teachers who were nominated by their employing superintendents to serve in this capacity. The SSTs worked closely with classroom teachers on a daily basis in an effort to increase academic achievement. Their responsibilities included such tasks as providing workshops on needed content areas; modeling various teaching strategies through demonstration lessons; and providing technical assistance in all areas related to best practices of teaching and learning.

Although the assistance teams provided the primary support to these schools, some *Alert 3* schools required an additional "intervention" team of two or more educators appointed by the Alabama State Superintendent of Education. In these situations, the on-site state team assumed control of the school and the state superintendent could choose to unilaterally remove a principal. All teachers in *Alert 3* schools were assessed using the state's Professional Employees Personnel Evaluation (PEPE) or similar instrument (Mandel, 2000). Negative evaluations could result in the removal of teachers from *Alert 3* schools.

4 Purpose and Importance of the Study

Despite the national recognition and sense of urgency about providing assistance to improving low-performing schools, little professional literature has been written on strategies to accomplish this goal. The North Carolina assistance teams were highly successful, not only in helping schools reach their improvement goals, but also in moving them to exemplary status (NASBE, 2002). Research about their use in Kentucky indicates similar results. However, some are skeptical about an approach that uses outside expertise to help improve schools. In his book, *Victory in Our Schools: We Can Give Our Children Excellent Public Education*, John Stanford (1999), Superintendent of Seattle City Schools, states that support and help must come from within the school system culture because school assistance teams developed by the state department are "too far removed . . . are not accepted or trusted in the individual school cultures" (p. 79).

There appear to be three primary reasons for the current shortage of definitive research on school assistance team interventions. The first reason is the relative infancy and/or status of most state interventions. Many state accountability systems that contain state interventions are only a few years old or they have been restructured, revised, or eliminated since their inception. The second reason for the lack of a body of research is that many interventions are implemented in combination with other interventions, and therefore the research seldom examines the impact of a these teams as a single intervention (Education Commission of the States, 2002, p. 19). Finally, most State Departments of Education do not engage in conducting research on such initiatives and thus their success or failure often depend on anecdotal information or they simply change or expand based upon legislative or administrative concerns rather than on research data about their value.

Research suggests that that it would make sense to identify the characteristics that are part of a good school and then endeavor to assist all schools so that they can have these same characteristics (Goodlad, 2002). In the same way, the increase in states using school assistance teams, the drive to provide aid to low performing schools, and the increase in public scrutiny related to student achievement make it reasonable to identify positive characteristics of an effective assistance team so that those who are attempting to assist schools to improve can use this information to achieve their goals. This study sought to conduct such an examination.

This manuscript presents part of a three-part examination of characteristics of the ASAT Model to

determine its value and how it might be improved (Roy, 2006). This part of the study examined the factors that facilitated the success of this approach.

5 Methodology

Qualitative research seeks to provide an in-depth perspective of the environment being studied (Creswell, 2007). Thus, qualitative inquiry and case study methodology were implemented because the foundation of this study was "to elicit people's perceptions, to enter their interpretive frames of reference and to understand how they see the world" (Kochan, 2002, p. 248). The participants in this study included personnel from the ten ASATs (ASAT) and school personnel and community members of an LEA being served by one of these teams.

5.1 Data Collection

Four data sources were used in this study: documents of the Alabama State Department of Education; interviews with the ten ASAT Leaders (ASAT); interviews and focus groups with a single LEA Assistant Team and members of the LEA being served; documents, observations and field notes. Eighteen individual and 2 focus group interviews were conducted. Each of these sessions ranged from 45 to 70 minutes in length. A list of structured questions were used along with open-ended questions.

5.2 Data Analysis

Interviews and field notes were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. In accordance with the qualitative data analysis process developed by Bogdan andBiklen (2007), data were then organized, broken down into manageable units, synthesized, organized into themes and placed into code categories. The documents were hand-coded for key phrases, descriptors, and explanations, according to the code categories. In addition to the hand-coding process, all interviews and field notes (Microsoft Word documents) were imported into the *Atlas.ti* qualitative analytical computer software.

6 Factors that Facilitated School Assistance Team Success

Participants perceived three primary factors that facilitated the success of the ASAT. They were: consistent, effective and supportive leadership; strong interpersonal skills; and demonstrated dedication and commitment. Although they are presented as separate and distinct, it is important to note that they appear to be interactive in nature. They are described in the following sections.

6.1 Consistent, Effective and Supportive Leadership

The most often mentioned factor that enabled the ASAT Model to be effective in school improvement efforts was consistent, effective and supportive leadership. This leadership was present at the school, school district and state levels. A representative comment about this factor was "The one main factor that facilitates success on the school, system and state level is consistent, good leadership."

In addition to strong administrative capabilities, "consistent, good leadership" was defined as continually placing student achievement and school improvement as a top priority by implementing/supporting any programs or initiatives that would foster this goal. Although effective leadership was considered as crucial to school improvement on all three levels — school, system, and state — participants most frequently cited the school level (LEA principal leadership), with the system level (central office leadership) as the second most important type of leadership and leadership at the state level Alabama State Department of Education as the third.

6.2 School Level Leadership

Consistent, effective and supportive leadership at the school (LEA principal) level was perceived as crucial to school improvement. According to one ASAT Leader, LEA principals take one of two views regarding the support offered by the ASATs. She noted that some principals view this support as a "life-line" – providing needed assistance, materials, expertise and guidance in developing a school improvement plan and making wise data-driven decisions crucial to school improvement. However, such stated that other principals are wary of the school assistance team and show outward resistance and defensiveness towards it.

Data indicate that strong LEA leadership supports the ASAT school improvement efforts in numerous ways. First, these leaders accept the team as a valuable part of the improvement effort. An ASAT leader commented, "The principal of the LEA makes a big difference. If they support the School Assistance Team and the Special Service Teachers, it is easier for the rest of the school to accept the support and help. LEA teachers indicated that if the principal was "in favor of the school assistance team, I'll try to be, too."

Second, the principal must visibly endorse the ASAT and communicate to school/personnel that all school improvement efforts will be supported. A typical comment to explain the role of a principal in endorsing the Team was, "The principal's trust and endorsement of the School Assistance Team must always be gained FIRST . . . his or her endorsement of the School Assistance Team is critical to gain the trust of the school personnel." Finally, the LEA principal must form a working team relationship with the ASAT. This teamwork partnership can then be extended to include teachers and other LEA personnel. A central office participant stated it this way, "It's absolutely crucial that the principal and the School Assistance Team/Special Service Teachers work together as a team." Said another,

I think it would be good if the principal would arrange a 'welcoming party' to help the School Assistance Team/Special Service Teachers gain acceptance into the school culture. But these gestures have to be sincere, not just 'going through the motions.' It needs to be a 'Welcome to Our Home and Family/Staff'. . . a personal level. All of the staff/faculty MUST be involved: counselors, coaches, everyone. The SSTs must be introduced to the PTA . . . the main road to the community."

6.3 System-Level Leadership

Consistent, effective and supportive leadership at the school system level (central office) is also perceived as critical to the success of the ASAT in the school improvement effort. This leadership appears to center around giving priority to, or endorsing, the school improvement efforts. Much like the LEA principal/ LEA personnel relationship, the central office personnel's verbal endorsement of the ASAT can be a deciding factor in the acceptance of the team by the LEA principal/LEA site. Comments offered by the ASAT leaders, members, and SSTs supported this view. One team member commented, "If we can go into an LEA site with the backing of the central office, there is a strong chance the principal will be supportive of us as well." A central office personnel member stated,

I've always tried to encourage the principals that (by sharing) 'O.K., the State Department is in here . . . but that's really O.K.. . . We now have access to the SSTs — we need to use them! These SSTs are extra EYES, extra BRAINS . . . they can help us improve! The SSTs have resources, knowledge and research-based techniques to improve instruction!"

6.4 State-Level Leadership

It appears that consistent, effective and supportive leadership at the state level is also an important factor in the ASAT's success. The team leaders, team members, and SSTs look to the State Department of Education for knowledge, guidance, advice and mentoring support. One leader commented, "An Alabama State Department of Education personnel member often comes by my office, just to see how things are going . . . asking if there is anything he or she can do to help." Another team leader commented, "Sometimes our role in the School Assistance Team gets very discouraging . . . we often hit many brick walls. We need all the leadership, support, and advice we can get!"

If the ASAT personnel — team leaders, team members, and SSTs — receive strong leadership, knowledge and mentoring support from the state department of education, they are better equipped to facilitate school improvement in low-performing schools. As school assistance team members and SSTs voiced, "We (the School Assistance Team) can help make a difference in the schools because of the guidance, encouragement, and leadership of our team leader."

7 Excellent Relational Skills of ASAT Personnel

The second most important perceived factor that enhanced the ASAT success was the strong interpersonal skills of the team members. These relational/interpersonal skills allowed ASAT personnel to "build the foundation of school improvement" with the LEA personnel in two critical arenas. These skills enabled the team to diffuse initial feelings of failure by LEA staff and students and lessen their defensiveness toward the team. Additionally, the ability of ASAT members to interact positively with LEA personnel helped to initiate a "bonding process," which established a partnership relationship between ASAT personnel and LEA personnel.

7.1 Overcome Initial Defensiveness and Diffuse Initial Feelings of Failure

It appears that the success of school improvement efforts was facilitated by the interpersonal skills of the ASAT members who continually worked to "get everyone on board." The ASAT personnel were successfully able "win over" most people in the LEA site: central office personnel, the LEA principal, LEA faculty and staff and community members. Explaining this, an ASAT leader commented

"Members of a School Assistance Team must be hired very carefully. Potential assistance team members must be excellent practitioners, but most importantly, they must have excellent personal skills. People skills cannot always be taught. I'd rather hire someone with excellent people skills and teach them classroom/practitioner skills than hire someone who is an excellent practitioner, but has no people skills."

ASAT leaders, members, and SSTs recognized and understood the initial defensive stance from some of the LEA members and the need for effective communication and people skills to overcome it. As one ASAT member explained, "that first tough hurdle of breaking through the defensive stance and being accepted by the LEA (central office personnel, LEA principal, faculty, staff, and community members) must be successfully jumped before any progress in school improvement can be made." Another member of the ASAT team said that such a stance can be a "brick wall" hindering school improvement efforts. ASAT team members indicated that their success in breaking through this wall demanded a lot of understanding and time. Strategies to disarm this defensive stance included assuring the LEA personnel that they (the ASAT) were there to HELP and that success for the students would be success for all. Other strategies included providing expertise, moral support and recognition of the efforts and strengths of the staff and students.

In addition to an initial defensive stance of some LEA personnel, ASAT personnel also found that they had to use their interpersonal skills to help LEA members overcome a feeling of failure. Team leaders, members and SSTs described the importance of overcoming this feeling by carefully listening, conveying concern and understanding and looking for ways to empower LEA personnel. The ASAT personnel stated that they tried to become a "catalyst to making the students (and teachers) realize their strengths and gifts" (ASAT members and SSTs). An ASAT leader stated,

"School assistance team personnel must make sure that any constructive suggestions are given with a lot of praise — the teachers being assisted are very vulnerable. The teachers must be assured that they are doing a lot of things correctly. We use our '80/20 Rule.' We give 80% praise and 20% constructive suggestions."

LEA personnel commented about this vulnerability and "feeling of failure." An LEA respondent said, "The personality of the school assistance team is important ... in reaching out to the school which is already defensive and 'cowed'." One central office personal stated,

"This ASAT representative has a great personality ... this is the most important thing, because the school being assisted has a strong feeling of failure. As wonderful as it may be to be receiving assistance, there is a stigma attached ... we're not making it on our own ... what's wrong with us?"

LEA teachers admitted to the difficulty of "accepting help." One teacher commented, "I DO appreciate the help . . . it's just that it makes me feel kind of like a failure. Aren't I a good teacher?" However, despite l feelings of uncertainty and failure, many teachers expressed appreciation for the support and encouragement offered by the ASAT personnel. One teacher stated,

"It really, really helped when the SST made the effort to let me know that she cares for me . . . and my students. She listened — really listened — to me when I talked. I know that she has a job to do, but she makes me and my students feel like 'important people,' not just a 'job to complete.' "

These relational/personality/people skills enabled ASAT members to overcome initial resistant stances and feelings of failure by the LEA personnel so that they could begin developing a working partnership. A letter written to an ASAT member from an LEA site supported by the ASAT included the following words.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and Team _ _ _ for all of the wonderful ideas, teacher training support, and small group instruction that you did this school year for _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ . When we first learned that 'THE STATE PEOPLE' would be coming in, I know that you realized that we would be uncomfortable and unsure of what this meant. However, we were pleasantly surprised. We sincerely appreciate the extra help Team _ _ _ was able to give us, and although our SAT scores are not in, and who knows what they will reveal, I personally know that our children have made educational gains. Please convey our special thanks to _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (SST) and _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (SST) for their help. Both ladies worked diligently with our staff and students. We looked forward to their visits each week. They truly exemplify the word 'professional.' "

7.2 The Bonding Process

A second outcome of the ASAT's strong interpersonal skills is that they were able to initiate a bonding process with the LEA group that led to a partnership relationship between them. An ASAT leader stated, "The personalities of the ASAT personnel are very, very important — the potential for a bond with the LEA depends on the people skills, the personality of that ASAT person." An ASAT member (SST) acknowledged, "It makes such a difference when the teacher and I work as a 'team' . . . that is when real progress is made."

An LEA central office personnel respondent commented, "The most crucial facilitating factor is the PERSONALITY of the School Assistance Team assisting the school. If the SST (or other team member) and the school personnel don't "bond," then there will not be much meaningful progress made." LEA teachers commented on "personalities of the SSTs" as being a vital element in a working relationship. One LEA teacher remarked, "If the SST is 'all-knowing' and uppity . . . I'm just not going to work with her. I'll be good and listen to what she says, but I won't do it." Other LEA teachers commented on the "wonderful personalities" of the SSTs: the open and accepting attitude of the SSTs; the eagerness to help the teachers and students; their willingness to listen patiently to concerns and fears, and laughter. Their viewed these actions as creating a bond between and among them.

8 Commitment and Dedication of the ASAT Personnel

The third most often cited perceived factor leading to the success of the ASAT was their commitment and dedication to school improvement efforts. Excerpts from state department documents (team letter memos) included the following statements:

"This year two of our Alert 2 schools have provided a tremendous challenge to Team _ _ _ , both due to the general resistance of their faculties, and some particularly offensive behavior by certain faculty members. Through it all, the Alabama School Assistance Team members who have been assigned to these schools remained patient and service-oriented, and returned each day with a smile and renewed enthusiasm."

Another state department document (letter written by a team leader) stated, "They (school assistance team personnel) have enhanced the image of the department, thus improving the way we are received by the LEAs. The high caliber and strong work ethic of these employees is difficult to replicate."

This ASAT commitment to student and school improvement efforts was recognized by LEA personnel as well. Representative comments by LEA teachers included, "They (ASAT personnel, SSTs) don't give up,

even when things aren't easy. They really want our students to achieve." An LEA central office personnel participant commented on the day-to-day commitment to school improvement as demonstrated by ASAT personnel: "They have worked their hearts out. There are so many challenges facing our schools, but the empowerment and encouragement that the ASAT provides can make all the difference"

9 Discussion

This study identified three perceived factors that enabled an ASAT to be effective in school improvement efforts. These factors were: consistent, effective, and supportive leadership; strong interpersonal skills; and demonstrated dedication and commitment. As previously noted, although these factors were presented as separate and distinct, they are all part of a whole. Although they were all present in this setting, it is not known whether it was necessary to have all elements in place to garner success, nor are the interactions between them well understood. What IS known is that in combination, they helped create acceptance by those in the school and thus opened the possibility for success in working with the schools. Thus, the findings of this study serve as a basis for the following statements. In order for ASAT members to be successful there must be:

- consistent, effective, and supportive leadership on all levels of educational administration: school, system, and state. Although effective leadership is imperative on all education system levels, supportive leadership by the LEA principal (school level) appears to be a major key in the success of school improvement efforts;
- *personnel on a school assistance team who have excellent relational/people/ communication skills which will enable them to gain the trust and support of the LEA members and the community it serves;*
- *a high level of commitment and dedication to school improvement displayed by members of the ASAT despite challenges they may face.*

9.1 Implications for Practice

The most commonly noted facilitating factor found in this study was strong leadership. This finding is consistent with research findings about successful change in schools (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Numerous researchers agree that a significant, positive relationship exists between effective school leadership and positive student achievement (Waters, et al., 2003). As Lessinger and Salowe (2001) note, "If there is one ingredient essential to the success of any organization, it is leadership" (p. 161). Although strong leadership was essential at the school, system and state levels, the LEA principal's leadership appeared to have the most direct impact upon the dynamics of the LEA personnel and ASAT personnel. The role of the principal in creating school success is also consistent with general research findings (Kochan, 2010; Sparks, 2000). It appears that it will be important for all those involved to work diligently to garner the support of the principal in any situation in which outside expertise is being appointed to assist a school. Previous research findings on the role of the principal and the findings of this study suggest that the degree to which this support is garnered may have a significant impact upon the success of such an endeavor.

The importance of leadership from school system personnel is something that was not found in the literature. These findings have important implications for practice. For example, it might be valuable for State Department personnel to engage in meaningful and open conversations about this issues and work to develop strategies for gaining school system leaders' support prior to going into the schools. Perhaps they could also work with school system leaders to create opportunities for them to transmit the message to school personnel that they view the state team in a positive manner. Of course, it would be essential that this be done in such a way that it does not appear to be punitive or overbearing, which could, in fact, harm the ASAT and school relationship.

The finding regarding the value of the State Department in supporting team members was also something not located in the literature. The role of an outside expert in the schools, sent from the State Department of Education, is a tenuous and difficult one. The need for those who supervise these individuals to provide words

of encouragement and to demonstrate interest in their work is something that may tend to be overlooked. States may want to consider giving some type of recognition to outstanding teams or members who have been successful in working with school teams. Other options may be visiting these schools and offering words of praise and encouragement; holding quarterly meetings with team members,-just to listen and provide support; and engaging in one-on- one conversations with these team members to transmit a sense of concern and appreciation for the work they are doing.

Excellent relational/personality/peopleskills demonstrated by ASAT personnel were a second facilitating factor that enabled the team to be effective in school improvement efforts. Excellent relational skills have been identified as vital in overcoming problems in low socio-economic, low performing schools (Achieve, Inc., 2001; Balfanz, Ruby, & MacIver, 2002). It has also been identified as a top priority for team members in assistance teams in the educational arena (Ginsberg et al., 1997) as well as in the business arena (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Donaldson (2001) states that strong working relationships develop and grow when "leaders themselves demonstrate trustworthiness, openness, and affirmation" (p. 59). The findings of this study verified the importance of ASAT personnel having such skills and competencies, adding to the literature on this issue.

When assigning individuals from the state department or other external agencies to work with underperforming schools, it seems apparent that those selected should have strong communication and interpersonal skills and should also display an understanding and sensitivity for those who are working in these schools. State Department of Education administrators and others should be aware of the importance of these skills when assigning individuals to work in these schools. Professional development activities might be considered to build and enhance these skills. Likewise, discussions and conversations about the importance of listening, empathizing, and forming close bonds with those in the schools should be held on a continuous basis. Perhaps part of the personnel assessment of these individuals should include the degree to which they are successful in these areas when working in schools. Similarly, it might be wise to assess the degree to which there are close interactions between school personnel and the team, using surveys and interviews. It is essential, however, to remember that the ability of team members to work effectively in these schools is also related to the degree to which the leaders in them and in their systems are supportive and this factor should be considered in any evaluative process.

The commitment and dedication of ASAT personnel to school improvement efforts was the third important perceived factor that enabled the ASAT Model to be effective. School improvement efforts require change and resistance to change is inevitable. However although change involves resistant attitudes and behaviors, these should be viewed as natural responses to transition and steps need to be taken to overcome them (Fullan, 2007). During the needed transitions from a familiar situation (struggling, low-performing school, internal decision-making) to a new state of affairs (successful school, external assistance), individuals must normally confront the loss of the old and commit themselves to the new; unlearn old beliefs and behaviors and learn new ones; and move from anxiousness and uncertainty to stabilization and coherence. Lasting change demands time, patience, understanding, and support. To provide the time, patience, understanding, and support that true change and school improvement demands (Fullan, 2001), school assistance team members need to demonstrate genuine commitment and dedication to school improvement efforts. These skills are closely related to the interpersonal skills previously discussed and the suggestions for state department personnel to consider seem appropriate in terms of this facilitative factor.

10 Further Research

This study has extended the knowledge base on factors that facilitated the success of school assistance teams in Alabama. The findings appear to have implications for external agencies attempting to provide guidance and support to low-performing schools. However, further research should be conducted to verify and extend the findings. Examining the factors that facilitated the process uncovered some potential barriers such as negative attitudes on the part of school personnel toward having "outsiders" come to the school. Additional research on barriers to success should be conducted. Replication studies of assistance teams and other types of support systems should also be conducted in Alabama and in other states. Likewise, it might be

valuable to develop a survey from these findings to determine the degree to which the positive elements found are present in schools in which external assistance is being provided so that interventions might be conducted to foster the presence of more facilitative factors in these environments. Such surveys might also be able to address the degree to which the three factors identified are interactive and whether one can be present without the other. For example, a study might address the ability of a team to demonstrate strong interpersonal skills and commitment if there is not support from the school leadership. Another study might examine whether the effort is perceived as successful if the principal provides strong support to the team, but the school system leadership does not. Finally, research should be conducted to address the relationship between the perceived success of these teams and the short and long term success of these schools to enhance student learning.

11 Concluding Remarks

This study is an important step in raising issues about improving low-achieving schools through the implementation of school assistance teams. It should be valuable in providing information and ideas to leaders in Alabama, throughout the nation, and in other nations of the world seeking to provide effective support to low-performing schools. Low-performing schools are often schools with limited resources and great student needs (NEA, 2001). Education holds the key for children to reach their potential intellectually, physically and emotionally" (Cole,1995, p. 1). Thus, it is the responsibility of each state to assure that schools which are not succeeding receive the assistance they need so that all children can reach their full potential (Craciun & Snow-Renner, 2002). School assistance teams appear to be one avenue for helping to foster student and school success. This study has provided insights into how these teams can gain the support of the schools and individuals they work with. It is hoped that it will foster additional study on this important topic.

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