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Corrective Action and School Choice in NYC: An Analysis of District Funding Applications

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Abstract

Districts play a critical role in reforming schools. In January 2000, NYC community school districts applied for Title I, IASA, funding to carry out corrective actions against historically low-performing schools. Our purpose was to examine (a) how districts planned to take corrective action to address problems that cause low performance; and (b) the

extent to which school choice could be implemented in those districts which were applying for corrective action funding. Districts most commonly identified teacher turnover, poor-quality instruction, and student needs as causes of low performance. In response, districts proposed providing professional development related to instructional strategies, but often ignored other important issues. Moreover, most districts described plans to take corrective actions that would decrease schools' decision-making authority, but then failed to identify steps to increase the districts' own capacity to execute greater responsibility once control had been taken from the schools. Districts overall seemed unable to implement school choice plans in an effective manner.

As part of the FY 2000 funding for the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (ESEA), Congress appropriated \$134 million for local educational agencies to bolster their capability for carrying out school improvement and corrective action responsibilities under section 1116 (c) of Title I, IASA, and to provide students enrolled in low-performing schools the opportunity to transfer within the district to another school not identified as low-performing. This appropriation was aimed at strengthening accountability for student performance results, and was seen as "a key reform strategy capable of delivering a high-quality education for all students" (U. S. Department of Education, 2000, p. 2). Given the recent passage of the reauthorization of the ESEA in late 2001, including its provisions for districts to take corrective actions against low-performing schools, it seems appropriate to examine the manner in which some districts in New York City (NYC) have proposed to leverage change in historically low-performing schools.

Districts Play an Important Role

One clear intention of the 2000 appropriation was to have districts play an important role in turning around their low-performing schools. Districts were obligated to help low-performing schools develop and implement school improvement plans, and to provide additional professional development and technical assistance. Districts were also authorized to take one or more corrective actions which could include withholding funds from identified schools, decreasing decision-making authority of school leaders in identified schools, or reconstituting school staff (see Appendix A for the complete list of corrective actions). An important provision of this appropriation was that, when necessary, district leaders could use improvement funding to build up their own capability for turning around low-performing schools.

In addition to improvement and corrective action responsibilities, districts accepting these funds in FY 2000 were also required to implement school choice plans. School choice was intended to offer students in a chronically low-performing school the opportunity to attend a better school the following year. If districts were unable to offer school choice to every student desiring this option, provisions had to be made to transfer as many students as possible, and to allocate existing opportunities on an equitable basis. School choice was viewed as a means to provide students with better educational opportunities and to increase involvement of parents in children's education (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

Corrective action and school choice are both federal strategies intended to turn around low-performing schools. Corrective action provides districts with the authority to intervene directly in schools. With this legislation, districts were under special obligation to take corrective action against schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward student achievement goals in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics for two out of three years after being identified for improvement. Section 1116 (c) of Title I, IASA, gives districts a pivotal role in helping turn around low-performing schools. To do so, however, districts must have personnel with the knowledge and skill to help schools adopt and implement effective strategies for improvement.

Likewise, school choice is an accountability strategy intended to bring market forces to bear on low-performing schools. The public notification of poor performance, and the dissatisfaction accompanying parents' transfer of their children to higher performing schools creates public demand for better education. Like corrective action, districts must have a level of capacity for this strategy to be effective. In this case, districts must have space in schools that are making adequate progress in order to allow the exercise of the choice option.

District leadership for building school capacity and improving student learning. The path to improving chronically low-performing schools represents virtually uncharted territory for many school leaders. District leaders appear to lack the expertise and resources to respond to school-level calls for assistance, according to a recent report on district school improvement efforts (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). Given this, schools against which districts are planning corrective actions may be in a particularly troubling situation where they have been unable to improve over an extended period of time, and their district is ill-equipped to help halt their decline or provide the necessary external support to assist and guide improvement.

It is unclear exactly how districts will carry out corrective actions against schools, or the effect such actions are likely to have on student performance. Only a limited amount of empirical evidence exists to guide district-led reforms. What seems clearer, though, is that if districts have not been able to assist schools in need of improvement, there is little chance they will be able to turn around low-performing schools by taking corrective actions *unless* some action is taken to boost the capacity for reform at the district level.

One strategy districts might use to help low-performing schools is to use professional development funding in ways that directly affect teaching and learning. Youngs (2001) suggests that districts can use professional development to enhance the capacity of schools to improve student achievement. A school's capacity is enhanced when professional development includes features that improve teacher knowledge and skill, builds professional community within a school, and fosters coherence of instructional programs while providing some autonomy. These features provide knowledge and support for improvement, and ultimately make it more likely that teachers will change their instructional practice in ways that will improve students' academic achievement. Applying Youngs' criteria for effective professional development provides a guide with which districts can judge professional development, and provides a means to tie professional development directly to student learning.

A related strategy that may hold some promise for helping low-performing schools is for superintendents to become instructional leaders. Petersen (1999) described the actions of

eight California superintendents who are credited with turning around many low-performing schools in their district. These superintendents all embraced the role of instructional leader at the district level, and reorganized district priorities and structure to focus on teaching and curriculum in schools. Petersen described superintendents who articulated a vision of good teaching for their districts, held principals accountable for carrying this vision into the classrooms of their schools, and evaluated principals on their ability to act as instructional leaders.

These district-level strategies are consistent with what Elmore (2000) described as distributed leadership. According to Elmore, school leaders can improve low-performing schools by tightly coupling policy, administration, and teaching with standards for student learning and performance. This tighter coupling allows leadership for student learning to be distributed across the multiple levels and roles in districts, schools, and classrooms.

According to Elmore (2000), the task of improving student learning needs to be shared, or distributed, among every person in education organizations, and individuals must contribute their expertise and be accountable in a manner appropriate to their level. For example, superintendents are accountable for system organization, allocation strategies focused on instruction, and principal evaluation. Principals are accountable for school improvement strategies, professional development, and teacher evaluation. The specific role for superintendents, supported by policy, would be to arrange conditions and assure training and support for principals that would allow them to be instructional leaders in their school. With this support, principals, in turn, would arrange conditions, and provide training that would allow teachers to provide high-quality instruction; and teachers would provide conditions and training to support student learning.

District leaders focused on the core technology of education (instruction and curriculum) and a tighter collaboration between superintendent and principals are two themes that appear to be gaining support in the most current literature on school leadership (e.g., Hatch, 2001; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). These strategies seem to be a promising area in which districts might build their own capacity for turning around low-performing schools.

Parents' role in improving low-performing schools. School choice is a reform strategy that, over the years, has taken many forms (e.g., charter schools, magnet schools, vouchers for private schools, inter-district school choice, and intra-district school choice). In all its manifestations, the strategy is intended to directly involve parents in holding schools accountable for improving. By providing parents with a choice about the schools their child attends, advocates believe competition and market forces will force low-performing schools to improve. To date, however, there is little conclusive evidence to support or deny this claim (e.g., Goldhaber, 1999; Myers, et al., 2000).

Almost 10 years ago, New York City parents were given the option to transfer their children to any other school in any other district within the City (i.e., inter-district transfer option). Parents could exercise choice provided space was available in the receiving school and transportation could be arranged. Relatively few students, however, actually had the opportunity to attend schools outside of their home districts due to high demand for schools with good reputations, and because of the daunting procedures for obtaining permission to transfer to another district (Teske, et al., 2000). Teske et al. believed that because students were rarely able to exercise the choice option,

inter-district choice in New York City has had a very limited effect on low-performing schools.

In another New York City choice experiment, vouchers to attend private schools were given to a random sample of 1,300 children of low-income families. Meyers et al (2000) reported that parents believed the environments for their children's education had improved (i.e., less racial conflict, less fighting, more homework). In the two-year report of progress, however, there appeared to be few differences in performance on standardized tests between voucher and control students.

On the positive side, Teske et al's (2000) analysis of two New York City districts' intra-district choice plan provides compelling evidence that school choice within a district may provide parents and students with meaningful education alternatives, and also help improve low-performing schools (Teske, et al., 2000). Teske et al traced the reading and math achievement of students in two New York City districts (Districts 4 and District 2) that adopted school choice plans decades earlier than required by federal law. The authors demonstrate that the introduction and increase in the percentage of available schools for choice was positively related to gains in student performance in the district.

School choice, as a strategy for improving low-performing schools, continues to receive popular and critical support (e.g., Hart & Teeter, 2001). The effectiveness of school choice options seems to hinge, however, on the extent to which parents and students can actually exercise choice. In cities or districts where only a few schools have been identified for improvement or where enrollment is below 100% capacity, school choice may be a powerful reform strategy. In districts where few choice options exist, the school choice strategy may be ineffective.

Purpose of the Analysis

The purpose of this analysis was to describe the actions proposed by NYC districts to improve schools against which corrective actions must be taken, and to describe the extent to which districts would be able to honor school choice requests. This information may be helpful in evaluating current strategies for turning around low-performing schools, and in helping to direct other districts' action in the future as more and more schools are identified for corrective action.

Methods and Procedure

This report is a descriptive analysis of written applications submitted by New York City Community School Districts to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) in January, 2000. Districts were applying for a portion of \$12.8 million that was set aside for districts in New York State. In New York City, these funds were designated to support district efforts to improve low-performing schools and to take corrective action.

Twenty-five districts in New York City applied to NYSED for funding to carryout corrective actions against 122 schools (Elementary = 64; Middle = 54; K-8 = 4) that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward student performance goals on the NY state assessment in English Language Arts (ELA) (52%), Math (9%), or both ELA and Math (39%). To apply for funding, districts attached an amendment to their yearly

District Comprehensive Education Plan. The content of the amendment included a list of schools against which corrective actions were to be taken; an analysis of the needs and priorities in the schools and the district; a description of the district level intervention for assisting identified schools and for building district capacity for assisting schools; and a detailed description of the districts school choice plan (see Appendix B for questions on the applications).

Categories for analyzing district applications were developed directly from district responses, and from constructs in current leadership literature. These categories were used to summarize districts' analysis of schools' needs, and their proposed actions for improving achievement in English language arts (ELA) and Mathematics. We also examined how districts operationalized the corrective actions they proposed to take, and examined the school choice plan in terms of the likely number of students who could exercise their school-choice options.

Results

The results from our analysis will be presented in sections that correspond to the sequential order of questions found in the district application (see Appendix B): school needs identified by the district, proposed district action, and proposed corrective action. Finally, results from an analysis of districts' school choice plan will be presented.

Needs that Districts Identified

For descriptive purposes, we grouped districts' identification of school need into five broad categories, and then identified specific needs within each category (see Table 1). The school need most commonly identified by districts was the need for *teacher stability* in low-performing schools. The need for teacher stability refers to a high rate of teachers transferring in and out of the low-performing schools. Eighteen out of twenty-five districts (72%) identified this as a need that impedes progress toward improving student performance. The second most frequently identified areas were *student need* (68%) and *improved instructional* strategies (68%). Student need represents challenges to the instructional organization of schools presented by students who, for example, have special learning needs, are English language learners, or who frequently transfer between schools, etc. The district-identified need to improve instructional strategies was primarily described as a need for teachers to provide differentiated instruction that would accommodate student differences. This need, as described by the districts, typically did not address more stable student factors, such as poverty or mobility. Curriculum alignment (64%), parent involvement (60%), qualified and certified teachers (56%) and principal leadership (56%) all were identified as school needs by a majority of districts. Although these needs do undoubtedly create barriers to school improvement, districts rarely identified other needs that also may have a negative impact on students' achievement.

Table 1

School Needs Identified by the Districts

School needs	Number of districts identifying the need	Percentage of districts identifying the need
School-level needs		
Student needs	17	68%
Parent involvement	15	60%
Leadership needs		
Principal leadership	14	56%
District leadership	10	40%
Instructional needs		
Instructional strategies	17	68%
Curriculum alignment	16	64%
Training needs		
Access to professional development	11	44%
Personnel needs		
Teacher stability	18	72%
Qualified teachers	14	56%
Principal stability	10	40%

For example, fewer than half of the districts identified principal stability (40%) as a need in schools requiring corrective action. Moreover, as few as one-quarter of districts identified needs related to high-quality professional development (24%). Even fewer districts said there was a need for teachers to be able to collaborate with one another (8%); increased teacher leadership (4%); improved social services for students (4%); or the need to develop a reliable, qualified pool of substitute teachers (4%). Many of these needs correspond to factors that help create a positive, supportive school climate, and that contribute to a school culture focused on teaching and learning. It is unclear from the analysis of these applications whether these needs did not exist in the designated schools, or whether the majority of application authors were simply not aware of these needs.

Proposed District Action in Response to the Needs Schools

Districts' responses to the most common school needs were also grouped into five overarching categories and then specific examples identified in each category (see Table 2). Overall, the grouping of these proposed actions revealed an interesting pattern of responses from the districts that seemed to ignore many of the most significant problems they had previously identified (e.g., teacher stability), and also any opportunities for

increasing the capacity of district personnel.

District improvement action. One purpose to which corrective action funding could be put was to build the capacity of local districts to take action that would help turn around low-performing schools. Districts most often proposed two types of district-level improvement actions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Actions and Tally of Districts Proposing Responses to School Needs		
Proposed action	Number of districts proposing	Percentage of districts proposing
District improvement action		
Resource decisions	18	72%
Monitoring	9	36%
Instructional strategies	7	28%
Use of data	5	20%
Curriculum alignment	4	16%
Team leadership	4	16%
Instructional improvement actions		
Implement/revise academic program	15	60%
Implement/revise instructional time	10	40%
Teacher improvement actions		
Instructional strategies	21	84%
Curriculum alignment	13	52%
Principal improvement		
Instructional strategies	6	24%
Team leadership	6	24%
School organizational improvement		
Enhancing parent/community involvement	15	60%

Assist with school planning	12	48%
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First, districts proposed taking the important step of reallocating resources (72%). Typically, reallocation of resources meant reassigning existing staff-development personnel, or hiring consultants to do training. In some districts, resource allocation meant hiring specific individuals for the district to address specific needs, such as data analysis, principal training, or teacher professional development. One district, for example, proposed to improve teacher recruitment by hiring a former principal to act as a liaison between the district and area universities with teacher-training programs. Second, districts proposed increasing the amount of time and frequency of district monitoring in corrective action schools (36%). Monitoring was described, for example, as having the superintendent stop into schools more often or district-level staff attending staff meetings in the schools.

Some districts did propose actions that would increase the capability of district personnel to respond to the needs of low-performing schools, but these plans were present in less than a third of the applications. For example, a few districts proposed obtaining professional development for staff developers and curriculum directors in instructional strategies (28%), and the use of data (20%). Fewer proposed training district personnel in curriculum alignment (16%) team leadership (16%), instructional planning (0%) or assessment alternatives (0%). These actions, in particular, seem to be critical for district personnel if they are to lead school efforts to improve student achievement.

Instructional programs/practices improvement. Districts commonly proposed two actions aimed at improving the instructional programs in schools (see Table 2). Districts most often proposed implementing new academic programs (e.g., Reading Recovery, Saturday Math Academy) and revising existing programs (60%). Fewer districts proposed revising curriculum in ELA and Math (24%), or implementing a test-taking curriculum (28%). Forty percent of the districts proposed reallocating the amount of time spent on particular areas of instruction (e.g., 90 min literacy blocks). None of the districts proposed providing common time for teachers to plan or revise instruction as a strategy for improving instruction.

Teacher improvement. Districts' teacher-improvement actions were centered on providing professional development in several important areas (see Table 2). The two most commonly proposed actions were providing professional development for use of specific instructional strategies (e.g., balanced literacy instruction, constructivist math instruction) (84%), and alignment of curriculum to state standards (52%). Relatively few districts proposed to provide professional development aimed at helping teachers use assessment data (28%), or to boost team leadership (12%). Mentoring (12%) and school/district supports for obtaining certification (8%) are two strategies often used to improve teacher quality and stability in a school, but these two approaches were proposed by only a few districts. This is especially striking given the number of districts identifying teacher stability as a need in low-performing schools.

Principal improvement. Taking actions intended to improve principal leadership appeared in about one-quarter of all the district applications (see Table 2). Those districts that did include it most frequently recommended training principals in instructional strategies (24%) and team leadership (24%). Training principals to use data

to inform decisions (16%) and to align curriculum (16%) was mentioned less frequently. These results are somewhat surprising given the heavy emphasis on improving teachers' instructional practice, and it may indicate that districts are overlooking important strategies for turning around their low-performing schools.

Student need-based improvement. As few as 24% of districts proposed implementing or revising some type of program to respond to student needs. The actions districts proposed included establishing/strengthening ties to community-based organizations in order to provide after-school recreational opportunities for students; providing teachers with professional development aimed at reducing suspensions; and requiring the district director of student support services to meet with school guidance counselors. Although district responsiveness to student need appears modest, they were often addressed with additional academic programs, such as extended day, and linking remediation services to the regular education program (see Table 2). Still, the modest number of districts planning to address student-need issues is striking given that so many districts (68%) identified specific student characteristics as barriers to improving student performance. This figure may indicate that district leaders felt they were unable to respond directly to these needs.

School organization improvement. Finally, districts' plans for improving low-performing schools tended to focus primarily on teacher and instructional improvement (see Table 2). At the school-level, however, districts did propose taking some steps to improve parent and community involvement in schools (60%), and several districts recommended helping schools prepare improvement plans (48%). Districts did not frequently propose larger structural changes, such as reorganizing grade configurations (0%), changing from an age-based to an ability-based grouping (28%), or creating smaller class-sizes (16%).

Proposed Corrective Actions to be Taken Against Low-Performing Schools

The Improving America's Schools Act (1994) suggests eight corrective actions that may be taken by districts against schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress for two out of three years following their initial identification for improvement. In the current applications, districts on average proposed taking slightly less than 2 actions against low-performing schools ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.27$). Four districts (16%) did not specify any corrective action to be taken. This may indicate that districts leaders knew of a variety of possible improvement strategies, but were unclear how these strategies "mapped onto" the corrective action options. This limited response may also indicate that district leaders did not perceive "corrective action" to be distinct from previous school improvement strategies.

District descriptions of their corrective actions. The corrective action that districts most frequently proposed was to decrease the decision-making authority of the school leaders (see Table 3). Districts operationally defined "decreased decision-making authority" in a variety of ways, but most tended to revolve around districts requiring the adoption of instructional schedules (e.g., literacy block), the adoption of a academic programs (e.g., Saturday Math) and curriculum, or mandating teacher participation in professional development activities chosen by the district. Districts also decreased decision-making authority by specifying how budgets would be structured, and by increasing oversight of a principal's decisions related to literacy and math instruction, or oversight of

comprehensive improvement planning. It seemed unclear, however, whether these corrective actions represented a unique approach to improving low-performing schools.

Table 3

Corrective Actions Proposed in District Applications		
Proposed corrective action	Number of districts proposing action	Percentage of districts proposing action
Decreasing decision-making authority	18	72
Authorizing student transfer	6	24
Reconstituting school staff	5	20
Creating interagency agreements	5	20
Withholding funds	4	16
Revoking schoolwide program authority	2	8
Making alternative governance arrangements	2	8
Implementing opportunity-to-learn standards and strategies	1	4

To a lesser extent, districts also proposed authorizing students to transfer out of low-performing schools, reconstituting school staff, and creating interagency agreements. The number of districts intending to allow students to transfer as a corrective action (24%) is approximately equal to the number of districts that created transfer policies in response to this funding opportunity (see next section on School Choice). This may indicate that these districts were beginning to implement School Choice in response to the current legislation.

The action of reconstituting staff typically included monitoring personnel in low-performing schools, and hiring new principals and teachers—as one district application stated—“if possible and necessary.” Under the reconstitution action, districts proposed making changes to personnel roles (i.e., changing an administrative position to a teaching position), and proposed hiring new staff (e.g., an assistant principal with expertise in literacy, a new librarian). Creating interagency agreements was not typically about creating new agreements, but rather about reviewing, improving, or strengthening existing collaborations.

The four districts that proposed withholding funds (16%) tended to operationalize their actions in terms very similar to those used to described decreased decision-making (e.g., withholding funds to meet district professional development goals; taking over the budget-making process if schools were found to be fiscally irresponsible). The one district that proposed implementing opportunity-to-learn standards or strategies did not

describe what proposed strategies corresponded to this corrective action, or other ways they intended to carry out the action against the school.

Overall, corrective actions proposed by districts did not seem to address the pressing issues in the schools. That is, corrective actions were primarily concerned with decision-making around professional development, program selection, and budgets despite the fact that districts most frequently expressed the need for greater stability in the teaching staff – a need that directly impacts the effectiveness of professional development, and indirectly affects the quality of instruction. Similarly, professional development undoubtedly would be concerned with specific content areas, but it is noteworthy that only one district (4%) identified “opportunity-to-learn standards” as an action to be taken against a school – an action that explicitly addresses student achievement.

School Choice Plans

The final portion of the state application required districts to describe how they would implement a school choice plan for students in low-performing schools. Fifteen districts (60%) stated that they already had pre-existing choice plans that would satisfy the requirement specified in the law. Five districts (20%) articulated plans that were in response to the legislation guidelines, and five districts (20%) reported that there was no plan for school choice, or that conditions existed which made it impossible to create and implement a school choice plan. Conditions that prevented districts from implementing a choice plan included potential receiving schools that were already overcrowded, and a lack of schools within the district that were not already identified as in need of improvement.

Sixteen districts (64%) said they could implement a school choice plan. Within those districts, there are an average of 4.88 ($SD = 2.43$) schools into which students could transfer. No district, however, specified exactly how many students could transfer into each school under the school choice plan. Nine districts (36%) reported that they could not transfer any students. Five districts (20%) had the capability to allow students to choose to attend one receiver school – hardly enough to accommodate all students who might wish to exercise school choice in even one low-performing school. Ten districts (40%) seemed to have the capability of allowing students to choose to attend between two and ten schools, but again the number of choice students each school could accommodate was not specified. Only one district, which had a small number of low-performing schools, appeared to have the capacity to allow all students in a low-performing school to exercise a choice option.

Discussion

The special appropriation of \$134 million in FY 2000 was intended to strengthen school and district accountability for student performance results. One hundred percent of the funding was directed to local education agencies for the purpose of school improvement, including taking corrective action against historically low-performing schools and implementing intra-district school choice programs. An important provision of this appropriation was that these funds could be used to enhance the capacity of local education agencies to carry out its obligations to improve low-performing schools (USED, 2000).

This analysis is particularly timely given the current reauthorization of ESEA. The reauthorized bill continues to require districts to take corrective action, and to provide for intra-district choice once a school has been identified for improvement, but it also places even greater responsibility on districts for improving the lowest performing schools. The greater expectations for effective district action are seen in at least two ways. First, the reauthorized bill reduces the amount of time that elapses between a district identifying a school for improvement and taking corrective action. Second, one year after a district has taken corrective action, the school must make its adequate yearly progress goal, or be subject to an alternative governance agreement (e.g., reopening as a charter school, replacing school staff, contract with a private management company). Both of these represent changes that require district leaders to intervene sooner and to act with greater effectiveness than ever before. This descriptive analysis of NYC districts' proposed corrective actions offers some indication of the challenges and pitfalls school leaders will likely face as they attempt to improve their schools.

School Need and District Response

The needs most often identified by districts were the lack of teacher stability or staffing difficulties in the low-performing schools, teachers' use of ineffective instructional strategies, and student need (e.g., poverty, mobility, limited literacy experiences, limited English proficiency, and special education). In response to school needs, districts most often proposed more professional development for teachers in instruction and curriculum, and proposed to reallocate existing district resources to provide professional development and monitor schools. Although these strategies may be effective, several other important improvement strategies were ignored by a large proportion of districts, including improving principal leadership and improving district capacity to assist low-performing schools.

In addition, there appears to be a significant misalignment among school needs, district actions, and effective reform strategies. For example, instructional leadership of principals may be an essential component of improving low-performing schools (e.g., Berends, et al., 2001; Petersen, 1999; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Elmore, 2000), yet principal improvements were proposed in only one-quarter of the districts' applications.

It is also disconcerting that districts perceive the causes of low-performance (e.g., poor instructional strategies) and the strategies for addressing it (e.g., professional development for teachers) to lay squarely within the control of teachers, while at the same time, teacher leadership and time for teachers to collaborate is not perceived to be a need in many districts. It is ironic that districts expect teachers to improve their instructional practice, receive training and adopt new practices, but then provide no new instructional leadership at the district and building level, or time for teacher collaboration. Given the high rate of teacher turnover reported by the districts and by the entire city (Brumberg, 2000), it seems doubtful that expenditures for more teacher professional development and for consultants will have the desired effect on instruction or stem the flow of personnel.

More important from a district perspective, the corrective actions that were proposed also seemed to ignore some important consequences that would follow such actions. The

corrective action districts most often proposed taking against low-performing schools was to decrease the decision-making authority of the school leader. Decreasing decision-making at the school level may be an appropriate response given the poor performance of many of the schools. Yet districts do not seem to be aware of the need to improve their own capability. The applications indicated that districts were proposing to take over greater decision-making related to the implementation of instructional programs, adoption of curriculum, teachers' professional development, and to increase oversight of principals. These actions, although potentially effective, seem to be less likely to succeed due to the fact that districts were taking on greater responsibility for school-level orchestration while at the same time not addressing the capacity-needs of district personnel.

If districts are to have a chance at turning around the corrective action schools, it is important for district-level personnel to be well-trained in the important areas of instruction, instructional leadership, assessment and use of data, parent involvement, and communication. Apparently, district leaders felt confident in their ability to shoulder these responsibilities. A recent report on the district-role in school improvement, however, suggests otherwise (U. S. Education Department, 2001).

School Choice Plans

The effectiveness of the school choice strategy for improving low-performing schools rests upon the ability of parents and students to exercise their option to escape low-performing schools. Based upon the summary of district applications, it seems this strategy is likely to be ineffective in many of the applying districts. Eighty percent of the districts applying for the grant had or were implementing an intra-district choice plan. Unfortunately, factors such as overcrowding and too many low-performing schools left far fewer districts actually able to implement the choice plan. Of those implementing, only one district reported having the capability to allow large numbers of students to choose another, better-performing school. As was the case with inter-district choice in New York City and Milwaukee, this strategy seems unlikely to bring competition to bear on low-performing schools because very few parents and students could actually exercise choice (Teske, et al., 2000).

Conclusion

Overall, the patterns identified by this analysis suggest that districts are on the right track for improving low-performing schools by focusing on instructional quality. This analysis also suggests that this improvement strategy is likely to be ineffective in many districts where superintendents do not arrange conditions to focus on the core technology of schools (e.g., distributing learning leadership, principal training, teacher time to learn new strategies).

This analysis also suggests that intra-district transfer choice has little chance to improve schools in districts with a high incidence of low-performing schools. The requirement to exclude low-performing schools from choice options could be lifted to increase the likelihood that competitive forces be brought to bear on schools as was the case in District 4 and District 2. It is unclear, though, what effect this move would have on improving schools absent any other efforts that focus on instruction and learning.

Finally, it seems there is relatively little that is unique to the corrective actions described in these applications. Many of the actions districts proposed (e.g., professional development, program initiatives) were very similar to those already enacted by districts attempting to improve low-performing schools. The one feature that seems to distinguish corrective action from others is the control, authority, and responsibility placed upon the district. The districts making these applications, however, seemed to make few plans that reflected this new, more intense leadership role.

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Appendix A

Section 1116 of Title 1 in the Improving America's Schools Act (1994)

Sec. 1116. ASSESSMENT AND LOCAL EDUCATIONAL AGENCY AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

- **CORRECTIVE ACTION.** – (A) ... local education agency may take corrective action at any time against a school that has been identified under paragraph (1) but, during the third year following identification under paragraph (1), shall take such action against any school that still fails to make adequate progress.
- (i) Corrective actions are those, consistent with State & local law, determined and made public and disseminated by the local education agency, which may include –
- withholding funds;
- interagency collaborative agreements between the school and other public agencies to provide health, counseling, and other social services needed to remove barriers to learning;
- revoking authority for a school to operate a schoolwide program;
- decreasing decision-making authority at the school level;
- making alternative governance arrangements such as the creation of a public charter school;
- reconstituting the school staff
- authorizing students to transfer, including transportation costs, to other public schools served by the local educational agency; and
- implementing opportunity-to-learn standards or strategies developed by such State under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

Appendix B

Items Analyzed from New York City Application for 2000-2001 Title 1 Improvement and Choice Funds

Needs Identification

- Research has shown that there are often organizational or systemic factors that negatively impact progress in low performing schools. Describe the factors affecting student achievement in Title 1 Corrective Action Schools. Such factors might include district policies and procedures, budgets and resource allocation, technical assistance, etc.
- What were the results of the needs assessment? Describe the priority areas that emerged from the needs assessment that need to be addressed through the application amendment.

District Action

- Explain how the district-level organization, structure, and comprehensive plans will support a focused district intervention to assist identified schools in improving achievement in English language arts and/or mathematics. Where such support is not already in place, describe how district capacity will be built and district level changes made under this grant to better provide support to Title 1 Corrective Action Schools.
- Describe the corrective action steps the district will take for identified Title 1 Corrective Action Schools as required in IASA, Section 1116 (c).

Public School Choice

- List the schools not identified for SURR, Title 1 Corrective Action, and Title 1 School Improvement.
- Does the district have an existing policy allowing for public school choice?
- - If yes, please attach and explain how the policy will be used to meet the school choice provision of this amendment. Include a timeline for implementation under this amendment.
 - If the district does not have an existing transfer/choice policy, describe how it will develop and implement a program of public school choice. Include how the district will provide all students in schools identified for SURR, Title 1 Corrective Action, and Title 1 School Improvement, with an option to transfer to a public school within the local education agency, including public charter schools, that have not been identified. Include a timeline under this amendment.
 - If the district lacks capacity to provide all students with an option to transfer to non-identified schools, describe the district's equitable student selection criteria that will provide a transfer option to as many students as possible.

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