

Commercial Township School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Commercial Township School District is based on the New Jersey Department of Education's (Department) monitoring of the district that took place during the fall of 2007 pursuant to the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) system, N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-3 et seq., a School District Assessment Survey completed by the district in July 2008, and a site visit performed by a team of Department personnel¹ on November 13, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Commercial Township School District, located in Cumberland County, educates approximately 650 children in preschool through grade eight. Students in grades nine through twelve are sent to Millville on a tuition basis. Commercial has two schools, the Haleyville-Mauricetown Elementary School, serving approximately 460 students in preschool through fifth grade, and the Port Norris Middle School, serving approximately 190 students in grades six through eight. The total resident K-12 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 881², and 66.96% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 district enrollment has declined by 9.55% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group (DFG) A. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and State aid calculations for the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years are detailed below and are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the fall of 2007, the Department monitored Commercial pursuant to NJQSAC. Under NJQSAC, districts are evaluated, using an assessment tool known as the "District Performance Review" (DPR), in the five key areas of school district performance: Instruction and Program, Fiscal Management, Operations Management, Personnel and Governance. Districts that satisfy 80% of the indicators in any area are considered to be high performing in that area. The district scored over 80% in one area, Fiscal Management (88%). In the other areas, it received the following scores: Instruction and Program (41%), Operations Management (71%), Personnel (79%) and Governance (77%). The NJQSAC decision is attached.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on the 2006-2007 assessment results, Commercial met the definition of district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population in language arts literacy and

¹ The DOE site visit team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Donna Arons, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Joan Saylor, Director, Michael Elwell, County Superintendent and Wayne Knight, Cumberland County Business Administrator.

² This is the enrollment count used for the calculation of state aid, and includes students in grades 9-12 who are educated in Millville through a tuition arrangement.

mathematics. In addition, at least 70% of the district's total student population was proficient on the most recent State science assessments.

However, with respect to curriculum and instructional practices, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that the district did not have a curriculum fully aligned with the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) in that it lacks conforming art and world languages curricula. According to the monitors, the district also failed to articulate the district's curriculum vertically and horizontally across all content areas and grade levels and there was a lack of focus on transitioning students from middle school to high school (I&P DPR indicators B5, B6 and B7). The reviewers further noted that, at the middle school, there was no evidence of the following: that supervisory feedback impacts instruction, that the school engages in differentiated instruction or that it attempts to address diversity issues (I&P DPR indicators C1 and C2). Additionally, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed deficiencies in the instruction for students with disabilities at the middle school (I&P DPR C5).

In Personnel, the district did not satisfy indicators relating to the development of professional learning communities for teaching staff members (C2) and development of an appropriate mentoring plan (C5), among others. In Operations Management, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that the district does not conduct annual health and safety reviews of its buildings (A3), it does not annually review, revise and develop safety and security plans as required by regulation (C1), nor does it collect and analyze data on incidents of violence and vandalism as required (C2).

In Governance, Commercial did not satisfy indicator A2 because the school board does not comply with all of the requirements regarding adoption of a curriculum aligned to the NJCCCS. In addition, Commercial missed indicator F7 because the board's self-evaluation process does not include a professional development improvement plan directed towards increasing knowledge and skills in policy making and governance for members of the board. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-14, the district and Department will work together to develop and implement an improvement plan to address areas of weakness in Instruction and Program, Personnel and Governance.

District Assessment Survey

In July 2008, the Commercial Township School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need. Commercial described its needs as primarily stemming from the high concentration of at-risk students in its population. The district noted that there is a lack of emphasis on education in its students' families, and that transportation poses a problem in this rural area. The district is addressing these challenges by implementing after-school programs, increasing parental involvement, and providing enrichment programs. It further indicated that additional resources and professional development would assist the district in addressing those needs (District Assessment Survey, p. 7).

At the time of the survey, which occurred approximately six months after the NJQSAC monitoring, the district indicated that it had a board-approved curriculum that is fully aligned with the NJCCCs, and that the district's textbooks, instructional materials and technology are also aligned. More specifically, the district reported that it had a fully aligned arts and music curriculum in all grade levels and that there are classrooms dedicated to visual arts and music in each school building. There is also a room dedicated to performing arts in the elementary school, but not in the middle school. With respect to the visual and performing arts program, the district cited as unmet needs a bigger stage, curtains, sound, lighting, band equipment and air conditioning in the cafeteria.

In the survey, the district also noted that the world language curriculum was taught in every grade, in person, by a qualified teacher. The district indicated that this teacher is shared by the two schools, and that it would like to hire a second world language teacher.

The district also reported that the school district has a library and/or media center, but indicated that it needed more reading materials for grades 6-8. It also stated that it would like to obtain online services, technological upgrades, and additional books and resources for its students.

According to the survey, the district offers gifted and talented services in all grades. It does not have an alternative education program, and it has a suspension rate of 14%.

Commercial reports a special education classification rate of 10%, which is significantly less than the state average classification rate of 14.69% on which the SFRA's census-based funding is calculated. Of the classified students, 10% of the elementary school students and 13% of the middle school students are sent to out-of-district placements. Commercial does not have a backlog in conducting required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs, and IEPs are implemented as written. The district further reported that there are no services that the district is unable to provide for classified students because of lack of resources or availability, and that the district does not experience staff shortages that would require that compensatory services be provided.

Commercial stated that it was operating a full-day preschool program for 4-year-olds. It is a universal district, and it is working with Head Start to implement the preschool requirements under the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). It indicated that it has limited space to expand the program for 4-year-olds in addition to adding classes for 3-year-olds in the district.

With respect to facilities, Commercial indicated in the survey that it currently has adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS. However, it further noted that if the district's enrollment increased, it would need three additional classrooms for preschool and two

additional classrooms for grades 6-8. The district does not use trailers for additional classroom space. Commercial indicated that its unmet facilities needs include parking lots and sidewalk repairs, roof repairs, painting, new access road, and a bigger setting for the nurse's office in the middle school.

According to the district, it has embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas in the elementary school, and is working to do so in the middle school, using interactive whiteboards, distance learning and online textbooks. Commercial has assigned a technology coordinator or staff member to be specifically responsible for supporting skill development and technology infusion into the curriculum for staff and students. With respect to technological hardware, the district reports no unmet needs with respect to the elementary school in that area, but states that the middle school needs additional equipment and distance learning upgrades.

Finally, regarding the district's staffing, in the survey Commercial stated that 100% of its teachers are Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. It indicated that its staffing needs include full-time art, librarian and instrumental music teachers, a remedial teacher for kindergarten and two additional remedial teachers for third and fourth grades, and further, that its salary scale places it at a disadvantage in recruiting qualified teachers to the district.

Site Visit

On November 13, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to the Commercial Township School District and met with the district's superintendent and other administrators. During the course of this conversation, the team from the district discussed Commercial's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals, as well as the challenges still facing the district.

Commercial is a small district that, in the past several years, has made a concerted, largely successful effort to systematically analyze the needs of its student population and develop strategies to allocate available resources to meet those needs. The district has worked hard to improve proficiency in elementary mathematics by adopting a new math program—Everyday Math—in 2003, bringing in a consultant on a weekly basis to work with teachers, instituting intensive professional development during the summers and lengthening the time period for math instruction from 40 to 90 minutes daily. These efforts have paid off in impressive gains in the district's State assessment scores on the fourth grade assessments, which improved from a 53% proficiency rate in 2004 to a 92% proficiency rate in 2008. The fourth grade language arts scores have also improved, from 68% proficient in 2004 to 78% proficient in 2008. The district attributes this improvement in language arts to increased professional development through the use of a reading coach and teacher training from Stockton College and Rowan University. In addition, the district switched to the Harcourt reading program and introduced guided reading into the curriculum.

In eighth grade language arts and mathematics, student proficiency, as measured by the State assessments, has fluctuated over the years. On the eighth grade language arts assessments, proficiency rates ranged from 70% in 2004, 63% in 2005 59% in 2006, 74% in 2007 and 73% in 2008. The district has hired consultants to assist in professional development using the methodology of the AVID program, and it has better aligned its curriculum with the NJCCCS. In eighth grade mathematics, proficiency scores ranged from 56% in 2004, 41% in 2005, 51% in 2006, 49% in 2007 and 42% in 2008. The district used some of the funds from the increase in State aid under the School Funding Reform Act to hire middle school language arts and mathematics coaches to improve student achievement in these areas.

Although Commercial stated in its survey response that its curriculum was fully aligned to the NJCCCS, in a recent visit the Executive County Superintendent determined that the arts curricula were not yet aligned. The district will be required to prepare an improvement plan pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-14 to address this issue and the Department will assist the district in the process of meeting this requirement.

Commercial has been classified as a universal district for preschool. It currently offers full-day preschool to 4-year-olds. It is making plans to expand to offer full-day preschool to 3-year-olds, but anticipates that space will be a problem.

Commercial sends its high school students to the Millville School District. In the past several years, Commercial has seen a declining dropout rate for its high school students. The district is an active participant in a consortium made up of other sending districts of Millville. This group works to align and articulate their curricula with each other and with that of Millville and to share professional development opportunities.

Commercial has focused on reducing behavioral issues that have been a particular problem at the middle school. In 2008-09, it hired an additional guidance counselor at the middle school to work closely on behavioral issues with children and parents. Because many students at the middle school come from single-parent households, the district is developing programs to address this issue, and has worked diligently to involve parents from the community. The district is also in discussions with Maurice River School District to jointly work on a character education program. Commercial was the recipient of a 21st Century grant, through which it offers after-school programs at the middle school. Approximately 50 to 70 children participate in the program. The elementary school also offers after school clubs for students in grades three through five. Although in the past the district had indicated an interest in developing an alternative school, during the site visit district administrators stated that they no longer felt it was necessary. Instead, they believed that the reforms they have instituted, along with an in-school suspension program, were reaping the desired results, and the suspension rate in the district is declining.

Regarding the district's special education programs, at the elementary level, there are five children in grades K-2 and 11 children in grades 3-5 that are in self-contained in-district classrooms. The middle school has one self-contained classroom with seven

children. The district contracts with the Salem County Special Services District for the provision of all child study team services.

During the site visit, Commercial articulated a list of staffing needs. It indicated that it would like to hire a remedial teacher for kindergarten. According to district administrators, some parents resist sending their children to preschool, with the result that they do not know their colors and letters by the time they enter kindergarten. The district would also like additional remedial teachers for third and fourth grades. The district currently uses Title I funds for one remedial teacher per grade (except kindergarten) and that teacher provides both in-class support and pull-out instruction. The district would also like to hire an additional full-time art teacher, librarian, and music teacher. Presently, the art teacher, librarian and music teacher are shared by the schools, necessitating a commute of three miles.

The district received a 19.88% increase in State aid under the SFRA in 2008-09, amounting to \$1,692,654. It used this increase in aid to address what it felt were its most critical needs. It hired math and language arts coaches for the middle school and a guidance counselor. In addition, it instituted a new professional development program called "Teaching Strategies for Creative Curriculum" for the elementary school teachers, purchased new textbooks, interactive whiteboards and new flooring. The district also upgraded technology in the middle school, purchasing mobile interactive whiteboards and a wireless computer lab. In addition, the district improved security in both schools with new cameras and a new lock system. Finally, additional funds were placed into maintenance reserve and emergency reserve. For the 2009-10 school year, the district is receiving a 3.49% increase in State aid in the amount of \$355,339.

Facilities

During the site visit, district administrators described major improvements and renovations to the facilities that occurred in 2004 that greatly improved the district's physical plant. The district recently applied for State grant funding pursuant to amendments to the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c.39 (EFCFA), which authorizes additional funding for school facilities projects in regular operating districts. In the first round of funding, the district applied for funds to renovate the elementary school to add four preschool classrooms and a small group instruction room. The project, with a total estimated cost of \$1,359,972, was approved, with a State share of \$626,689 and a local share of \$733,283. The referendum for the local share of that project has not yet occurred. In the second round of funding, the district applied for four projects: two at the elementary school for new flooring in the classrooms and offices and for replacement of existing asphalt drives and parking areas, concrete sidewalks, doors and hardware and construction of a new fire lane; and two at the middle school for new floor finishes in existing classrooms and parking lot and sidewalk upgrades, new site drainage systems, new doors and hardware. All four projects were approved. The total projected cost of the four projects is \$631,786, with a total State share of \$494,452 and a total local share of \$137,364.

School Funding Reform Act

The Commercial Township School District received a 19.88% (\$1,692,654) increase in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY08-09 and will receive a 3.49% (\$355,339) increase in FY09-10. Under the formula, the district's "adequacy budget" is calculated by multiplying the district's K-12 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649.³ The district's enrollment of middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students are then multiplied by the additional weights of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of .57 for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$3,151,515 in FY08-09 and \$3,068,557 in FY09-10.⁴ The district's State equalization aid is calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and its local fair share. For FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$2,538,775, which is based on its aggregate property wealth and total income – for comparison, the district's per pupil property wealth was \$259,889 and per pupil income was \$72,355. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$2,654,088, with a per pupil property wealth of \$278,478 and a per pupil income of \$77,043. For both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy.⁵

The funding formula under SFRA also provides for categorical security aid as well as aid for transportation and special education. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-46, every three years the Commissioner will re-evaluate and recommend to the Governor and Legislature any appropriate changes to the funding elements of the SFRA (such as the State average classification rate for general special education students and the additional weights for at-risk and Limited English Proficient students). For the intervening years, the cost factors in the SFRA are updated according to the Consumer Price Index.

The SFRA also dramatically increases access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to eligible students within five years. As the Commercial Township School District is a DFG A, the district will be required to offer full-day preschool to its 3- and 4-year-old population within that time frame.

In addition to these State funds, Commercial will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through Title I and IDEA, as well as additional funds through those programs pursuant to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department finds that the Commercial Township School District has made great strides over the past several years in improving conditions in the district, which has resulted in a beneficial impact on student achievement. The district is to be commended

³ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY2010.

⁴ Once the components of the adequacy budget are summed, each district's adequacy budget is multiplied by a Geographic Cost index number to reflect regional cost differences.

⁵ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$1,535,870 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$2,538,775 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$1,558,870 compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$2,654,088.

for these accomplishments, which have occurred through the thoughtful and strategic use of resources and the dedication, commitment and talent of its leadership and staff.

Programmatically, the district has begun by improving the alignment of its curriculum to the NJCCCS and ensuring that it is being taught in the classrooms. As noted above, the district will be required pursuant to NJQSAC to prepare a plan to develop a fully aligned curriculum. The Department can provide important assistance in this regard through the Division of District and School Improvement, which offers on-site technical assistance and brokers additional technical assistance as well as support through its leadership networks in partnership with higher education institutions and professional organizations. The Commissioner directs the Division of District and School Improvement to meet with Commercial and develop a plan for the provision of these needed services to improve the district's curriculum.

The district has also focused on improving math and language arts literacy at the elementary level by introducing new programs and intensive professional development, and the district is now seeing large gains in student achievement in those areas because of the reforms. The district is targeting its resources at the middle school level, in part using additional State aid from the SFRA to fund math and literacy coaches.

The district has also begun to address behavioral issues that affected the middle school climate. Using aid from SFRA, the district hired an additional guidance counselor to work with parents and students and to develop programs to increase parental involvement in their children's education. The district no longer sees a need for an alternative school, as its in-school suspension program has been a success with the suspension rate declining. Commercial has also instituted after-school programs at the middle and elementary schools. It is discussing a possible joint effort with Maurice River School District to develop and implement a behavioral education program.

With respect to its facilities, the district made major renovations and additions to both buildings in 2004. The district has received approval for partial State funding for five remaining projects, including an addition to the elementary school for preschool classrooms. Assuming that Commercial is able to raise the local share, these projects should resolve what Commercial believes are the most critical problems with its facilities. The Department notes that N.J.S.A. 18A:7G-12 provides a mechanism for the district to petition the Commissioner to order issuance of school bonds if the voters in the district have twice failed to approve a referendum for a school construction project that is necessary for the provision of a thorough and efficient system of education in the district..

In analyzing the issues facing Commercial, it is important to recognize that the district faces many increased challenges due to its small size. Many of the positions the district has identified as priority needs are incorporated in the calculation of the SFRA per pupil base, LEP and/or at-risk amounts. The SFRA specifically provides for significant additional resources for districts like Commercial that have very high percentages of at-risk students; however, the statute was not designed to support the delivery of educational services in school districts this small. To the contrary, the

Legislature deliberately avoided creating a financial reward for small districts by basing SFRA funding on the resources needed to provide educational services in an efficient manner. A district that educates approximately 650 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. Smaller districts cannot offer diversity in programming options since they lack sufficient students to maintain reasonable class sizes for some types of course offerings. Moreover, small districts like Commercial must often rely on part-time staff or staff serving multiple roles, such as the teachers that Commercial shares between the two schools. As part of his responsibilities under the CORE legislation, P.L. 2007, c.63, the Executive County Superintendent is charged with recommending to the Commissioner a school district consolidation plan to eliminate all districts, other than county-based districts and preschool or kindergarten through grade 12 districts in the county, through the establishment or enlargement of regional school districts. As part of this effort, the Department will be commissioning regionalization studies. Due to the constraints facing Commercial because of its extremely small size, this district is being treated as a high priority and will be placed in the first group of districts for regionalization studies, which will begin in September 2009 and conclude by December 31, 2009.

During the site visit, district administrators discussed their plans and progress in including special education students in the general education classrooms and using differentiated instruction. The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offers professional development opportunities in differentiated instruction for the special education population, as well as other inclusive practices, through its Learning Resource Center (LRC) in the Southern Region. The Commissioner directs OSEP to coordinate such training with Commercial. In addition, the Department also offers training to districts on developing and improving Intervention and Referral Services. The Commissioner directs the Department's Office of Educational Support Services to coordinate a training on this topic, if Commercial so desires. Finally, the Department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Commercial and other rural districts to meet their needs for staff development in the various content areas as well as with special needs children who require particular attention and strategies in order to succeed. The leadership of the REL will contact the district shortly, if it has not already done so, to make arrangements to provide this assistance.

The NJQSAC monitoring identified a need for Commercial to improve its assessment practices in order to further student performance. The Department provides a computer based assessment system, called *Learnia*, free to districts. This system provides teachers with an important tool to manage instruction and adjust it to the needs of every student. The system also provides training on classroom assessment processes as well as how to use the new software. Commercial should take advantage of this free service to improve instruction.

With regard to Commercial's self-identified staffing issues, the Department notes that although the district is taxing far below its local fair share, it did not increase its levy for FY 2009-10. Moreover, the district's school tax rate is below the State average and it

does not appear to be municipally overburdened. In the future, the district should consider an increase in its tax levy which would provide additional resources to hire staff or run programs desired by the district. The district also had excess surplus funds according to its 6/30/07 and 6/30/08 Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFR) that could be budgeted to meet staffing needs.

In sum, the Department finds that while Commercial has made notable progress in student performance despite issues posed by its high at-risk population, it still faces enormous challenges due to its small size. The SFRA and complementary statutes such as CORE and EFCFA can provide the necessary tools to address those challenges, but the regionalization study to be conducted this fall will likely be the key to those efforts.