

Buena Regional School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Buena Regional School District is based on the New Jersey Department of Education's (Department) monitoring of the district that took place in the summer 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 October 10, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Buena Regional School District, located in Atlantic County, educates children in preschool through grade 12. The district has one K-3 school, two K-5 schools and one school for students in preschool, 4 and 5. In addition, the district has a middle school for students in grades 6-8 and a 9-12 regional high school. The elementary and middle schools serve three communities: Newfield, Buena Borough and Buena Vista Township.² The high school includes students from the same communities as well as students from Weymouth and Estelle Manor.

According to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA), the total K-12 population is 2,106.5 and 49.51% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 enrollment has increased by 2% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group A. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and state aid calculations for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the summer of 2007, the Department monitored the Buena Regional School District 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. Buena scored over 80% in four areas: Fiscal Management (85%), Operations Management (93%), Personnel (100%) and Governance (89%). Buena Regional satisfied 76% of the indicators in the Instruction and Program area. The complete results of the NJQSAC evaluation are attached.

¹ The Department site visit team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Rochelle Hendricks, Assistant Commissioner, Gerald Vernotica, Assistant Commissioner, Donna Arons, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Joan Saylor, Director, Thomas Dowd, Executive County Superintendent and Charles Muller, County Business Administrator

² At the time of the Department's review of Buena Regional, the district operated an elementary school, located in Newfield, and received Newfield children pursuant to a sending-receiving agreement. Newfield sought to end this relationship, and in a settlement approved by the Commissioner on June 11, 2009, the parties agreed to terminate that send-receive agreement. The parties have further agreed to transition students out of the Buena Regional School District over several years, beginning September 2010.

With respect to Instruction and Program, based on the 2005-06 assessment results, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that Buena has an up-to-date curriculum aligned with the most recent version of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) and that the district requires and verifies that the curriculum in each area is fully implemented at all grade levels and includes clear grade level benchmarks and interim assessments (NJQSAC I&P DPR indicators B1, B2 and B3). The district also demonstrated that its curriculum is horizontally and vertically articulated among all grades, content areas and schools through the use of strategies such as curriculum mapping, and that it convenes curriculum articulation meetings across regional and in-district schools, grades and content areas at least twice a year (NJQSAC I&P DPR indicators B5 and B6).

Moreover, Buena satisfied all of the indicators in Section C of the I&P DPR which measures whether the district employs instructional strategies and processes that support the achievement of the NJCCCS. Specifically, during the monitoring, Buena Regional demonstrated that it implements a supervisory process that ensures that all areas of the curriculum are taught in every district classroom and that teachers receive meaningful feedback, that it requires and verifies that lesson plans are aligned with the curriculum and reviewed monthly by supervisors, that supervisory practices focus on classroom instruction and that teachers and supervisors analyze student work to determine if instruction is aligned with the curriculum (NJQSAC I&P DPR indicator C1).

At the time of the NJQSAC assessment, the district as a whole had achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in language arts literacy and mathematics (QSAC I&P DPR indicators A1 and A2), but had a large number of students who were not yet proficient in literacy or math. While the Buena School District has made strides in improving proficiency on the State assessments, the district had not yet achieved 95% proficiency in those areas nor had proficiency rates increased by at least 5% from the prior year for the general population or subgroups (QSAC I&P DPR indicators A3, A4, A5 and A6). 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 Program and Instruction.

District Assessment Survey

In 2008, Buena School District completed a questionnaire designed by the Department to assess the needs of its schools. At that time, the administration reported that 30% of the population had an annual income of less than \$30,000. As a result, the district identified a great need for extensive school programming beyond the regular school day and school year. The district had two grants to help meet this need—a “21st Century Learning Grant” to provide after school programming and an “Even Start Grant” to support English learners’ families and students. While these two grants help meet some of the needs of Buena’s families, the district believes that there is still a great need to extend the school year, especially for students having academic difficulty during the regular year.

The district reported that with the exception of one teacher at the high school, its entire teaching staff is Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Buena further indicated that its staffing does not reflect the needs of the students in the district, particularly in the elementary schools. The district indicated that it has been unable to keep up with curriculum work in the district and that there are problems scheduling specialists in the elementary schools and providing enough guidance counselors in the elementary schools to meet the needs of the students. The Department notes that guidance counselors and specialist teachers were identified as necessary educational resources in the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA's determination of per-pupil costs. Moreover, according to information provided in the survey by the district, it has a contract with teaching staff that requires 3 hours and 20 minutes a day of instructional time from high school teachers, 3 hours and 45 minutes from middle school teachers and 5 hours and 20 minutes from elementary teachers.

Regarding its preschool program, the district stated that it has a half time program for four-year-olds. The district stated that there is a great need to expand the preschool program; students do not attend private programs and many students arrive at school without the skills needed for a successful experience. The district believes that additional facilities are necessary to accommodate all the early childhood needs.

In its survey response, the district stated that it does not have an approved curriculum that is fully aligned with the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS). It reported that it cannot pay for this work and that most resources used for instruction were obtained through grants obtained over the last 5-8 years. However, the Department notes that in its NJQSAC self-evaluation, which was completed prior to the survey, the district asserted that it did have a fully aligned curriculum, and the Department verified that fact.

The district stated in its survey response that it has fully implemented a visual arts and music curriculum in all grade levels and school buildings. However, it stated that it does not have classrooms dedicated to these instructional areas in each of the elementary schools. It further noted that two of the elementary schools do not have performance venues. Buena stated that limited space hamper its ability to fully deliver its arts curriculum.

The district stated that each school except for one has a library. In the school without a library, the librarian brings in books regularly. The district has three full-time librarians: one for elementary, one for middle school and one for high school. The librarian for elementary schools works among the four elementary buildings. The district reports that library space is used for meetings and other purposes as well as library work.

According to the survey, the district has implemented world language instruction in every grade and it is provided in person by a certified teacher. The district indicated that it would like to expand the elementary program. The district stated that it does not provide gifted and talented services in all grades; it offers enrichment opportunities in reading/language arts in grades 4-5, and enrichment opportunities in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies in grades 6-8. It also offers Honors/Advanced

Placement (AP) classes in the high school. The district reported that while there are no school-imposed obstacles to student participation in AP, the percentage of students taking the courses is small and the percentage taking the AP tests is less than half of those enrolled in the courses. The district stated that there is little incentive for Buena students to participate in AP courses and that it is trying to develop arrangements to obtain advanced programs with the Atlantic Community College.

The district does not have its own alternative education program and instead sends students to a school run by the county. The district stated that it hosts resources via Atlantic Care Health Systems which provide a variety of counseling and support services for the students at the middle and high schools. There is a high suspension rate, particularly in the high school.

The district stated that it has a special education classification rate of 20% which is higher than the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the calculation of the SFRA's census-based special education funding. Approximately 15% of classified students are placed in out-of-district facilities. The district indicated that it does have a backlog in conducting the required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs, which impacted one student. The district further stated that all IEPs for students with disabilities are implemented as written.

With respect to facilities, the district stated that it does not currently have adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS. At the time of the survey, Buena indicated that there was a new middle school under construction. However, the administrators still identify major facilities needs in the elementary buildings, including space for art and music rooms, small group instruction rooms, computer resource rooms, and multi-purpose rooms. According to the district, the high school needs additional science labs. The district stated that once construction on the new middle school is complete, it intends to renovate the old middle school and move students from the Donini and Edgerton Elementary Schools into that space. It has not yet secured funding for those renovations, however.

Regarding technology, the district stated that it has limited resources to ensure that all students have viable experiences with technology. The district reported that it has not embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas, but noted that it has secured a grant from the Department to integrate the topics of instruction in middle school mathematics, technology and inclusion classrooms. At the elementary school level, four computer terminals are shared with 25-28 students. The district further stated that while the district has a core infrastructure in place to support the schools via a gray-fiber Wide Area Network connecting all buildings, the buildings do not have sufficient bandwidth. It also indicated that it was challenged due to salary limitations in its hiring of appropriately qualified technicians to support the hardware/software needs throughout the district.

Site Visit

On October 10, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to Buena and met with the district's superintendent and various other school administrators. During the course of the meeting, the team from the district discussed the challenges still facing Buena since the self-assessment was completed.

Regarding student achievement, the administrators noted that while the elementary schools meet the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) the high school and the middle school are designated "Schools in Need of Improvement" (SINI). The administrators suggested that it was very difficult to provide an appropriate staff for all of the schools, affirming the statement in the needs assessment survey that, "Current staffing is as much or more a reflection of defeated budgets and savings by attrition than meeting the needs of students and programs."

In addition, the administrators reported that the employment contract provides teachers with legal remedies limiting their work beyond classroom assignments. Thus, teachers cannot be asked to work on a curriculum during the school day, teach another class or work more than a single period doing additional duties around the building. Administrators report that the contract cannot be changed. It has been like this for a very long time and, according to administrators, will be so forever.

In addition to issues related to limited staff, the district's special education population has increased. The district classifies more students than the average for the State and sends an increasing number out-of-district because several low-incidence disabilities require specialized programs not offered by the district, or the district does not have appropriate facilities to house certain programs. Buena has also identified a need for more early intervention services in the district, which would address over-classification concerns.

District administrators also report that many students come into the district from surrounding districts unprepared. In addition, students are often isolated in homes remote from one another and cannot easily get to other places or even to school because of the difficulty with transportation.

Further, the district staff talked about the lack of technology, noting that this was an area of need in the district and a priority of the district.

Even though problems persist, the Department notes that student achievement is improving. The middle school was placed in a "hold" status in 2007-2008 because it met the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements for the first time. Over 75% of the students in grades 4 and 8 are currently proficient in reading and math except in 8th grade math where 60% have reached the goal. As of 2008, the Buena Regional High School, however, had failed to make AYP for the sixth year in a row. Test scores for that year indicate that 83% of the total students are proficient in language arts and 74% are proficient in math.

In the 2008-2009 school year, the district received a 20% increase in State aid under the SFRA and used most of the increase to offset taxes. The administration reports

that the district is very poor with no ratables so the Board does not want to increase the tax levy. The district used the rest of the increase in state funding to hire a vice principal for the high school, a secretary for guidance, to support some staff development and to buy new textbooks.

Facilities

During the site visit, district personnel discussed their desire to construct an early childhood center so that the district could provide expanded preschool opportunities to its children. Subsequently, the district applied for and received State funding for this project through the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c.39 (EFCFA). The approved project includes a new early childhood center for 274 students, with 19 new classrooms and two special education classrooms, administrative offices, multipurpose room and various ancillary spaces. The State share of the project is \$3,719,643 of the total cost of \$9,521,039. The district postponed its planned April 2009 voter referendum on the project.

School Funding Reform Act (SFRA)

Buena Regional School District received a 20% (\$3,151,259) increase in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY 08-09 and will receive a 5% (\$943,771) increase in State aid in FY 09-10. 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 weight of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of .53⁴ (08-09) or .54 (09-10) for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$4,935,759 in FY 08-09 and \$5,437,988 in FY 09-10.⁵ The district's State equalization aid is then calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and the district's local fair share. For FY 08-09, the district's local fair share was \$9,070,242, which is based on its aggregate property wealth and aggregate income – for comparison, per pupil property wealth of \$422,353 and per pupil income of \$101,566. For FY 09-10, the district's local fair share is \$9,862,935, and per pupil property wealth is \$472,163 and per pupil income is \$111,512. For both years, the district's prior year tax levy exceeded its local fair share⁶ and the district's adequacy budget exceeded its prior year spending. If these trends continue, the Department anticipates that the district will continue to receive increases in funding pursuant to the SFRA in future years.

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

³ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

⁴ Weights are rounded to the nearest tenth.

⁵ 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.

⁶ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$11,908,289, compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$9,070,242, and its 08-09 tax levy was \$11,035,698, compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$9,862,935.

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 Buena Regional is a DFG B, 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, Buena will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through the 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 agrees that Buena faces challenges in educating the students in its region and notes the district's current success in increasing the number of students who are able to read, write and compute well enough to meet New Jersey's standards. To continue this trend and ensure that each student has the maximum opportunity to learn, the administration and faculty must use their resources efficiently and effectively for the benefit of the students in their schools.

With respect to its facilities, Buena is building a new middle school. In addition, the district has developed plans for a major construction project to build a new early childhood center and has received approval for a substantial State grant for the project. Assuming the voters approve the referendum for the project, this new construction, along with the new middle school, should resolve what Buena perceives to be its most critical facilities issues. If the referendum is not approved, Buena should explore contracting with private providers in order to expand its preschool program. The Department also 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..

There are a number of areas where Buena could improve, and the Department offers the following observations. The district needs to expand its staff development efforts so that teachers are better prepared to ensure that all students will be successful and it should find ways to help isolated students join the school community so they will feel a part of the school.

The greatest and most expensive resource in a school system is the staff and Buena's staff is constricted by a contract that limits its output and flexibility. The district must address the high personnel costs and loss of productivity that results from teachers spending so little time on instructional activities. It is imperative that the district address this issue so that it obtains maximum use of its teaching staff for up to at least five hours per day, as is common in many other districts. Whether those resources are used in the classroom or just in activities related to the classroom such as curriculum revision,

tutoring or planning meetings with colleagues, the additional time can be of great benefit to the Buena program. None of the other districts we visited had teachers who taught for so little of the day; the administrators and School Board cannot afford to ignore this major resource. It is unacceptable for the district to allege insufficient funds to provide a thorough and efficient education while at the same time to require teachers to provide only 3.5 hours of instructional time per day.

In the 2008-2009 budget year, Buena received 20% more state aid under the provisions of the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). Despite the needs the administrators described in their survey and during the site visit, the district chose to use a small amount of its new funds for staff development, texts and administration, reserving the bulk of the 20% increase for tax relief. The 5% increase in State aid that the district will receive for 2009-10 should be used strategically by the district to address the areas of critical need that it has identified.

With that said, the district has raised the test scores in a variety of grades and in both reading and math. We commend that work and expect that the district will continue to maintain the strategies used to achieve these results.

In addition, the district should look at models for community-building that have worked with other districts to help youngsters cope with the isolation at home and with the integration of students from other communities. It appears that Fairfield School District in Cumberland County has a well developed process that is working to build a more cohesive school community and to decrease disruption. The Department will arrange for Buena to work with Fairfield for training in this approach. In addition, Buena has had two grants that support its extended day and year. The district should continue its successful efforts to sustain these grants and apply for others that address this need.

It is important for Buena to consider strategies that will take its high school out of AYP status and improve high school graduation rates. Currently, although test scores for general students in both reading and math are high, a substantial number of students are not proficient in math and language arts. The Department will provide technical assistance for special education and non-special education students who are having difficulty meeting the requirements of the testing and the Commissioner directs the Department's Division of District and School Improvement to contact the district to provide assistance in that area.

The district also indicated an interest in improving early intervention services to avoid over-classification of students. The Department 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 Buena Regional so desires. The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) also offers professional development opportunities through its Learning Resource Center (LRC) in the Southern Region and the EIRC in Sewell provides excellent in-service opportunities at minimal costs. The Department will help coordinate with Buena to provide this training. In addition, the Commissioner directs OSEP to determine whether there have been any violations of the IDEA's Child Find requirements, and if so, determine whether compensatory services should be provided

Finally, the department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Buena Regional and other rural districts to meet their needs for staff development in the various content areas as well as with special needs children who need 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.

In sum, the Buena Regional School District, while facing significant challenges, could do more with the resources currently available to it. Critical in this regard is addressing the contractual issues that have teachers spending such a minimal amount of time involved in instructional activities and this must be a priority in negotiating the next teachers' contract. Moreover, the district needs to ensure that future State aid increases are first used to address the critical educational deficiencies that the district has identified before considering using these education funds in order to provide tax relief. Although a laudable goal in a district with such a heavy tax burden, the educational needs of its students must take precedence.