

Clayton School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Clayton 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 September 18, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Clayton School District, located in Gloucester County, educates children in preschool through grade 12. The district has two schools, the Herma S. Simmons Elementary School, serving preschool through grade six, and the Clayton Middle School/High School, serving grades seven through 12. The total K-12 resident enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 1,261.5, and 38.52% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (defined as being at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 district enrollment has increased by 4% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group (DFG) CD.² A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and state aid calculations for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years are described below and are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the summer of 2007, the Department monitored the Clayton 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. Clayton scored over 80% in four areas: Fiscal Management (87%), Operations Management (85%), Personnel (98%) and Governance (89%). Clayton satisfied 74% of the indicators in the Instruction and Program area. The NJQSAC decision is attached.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that Clayton has an up-to-date curriculum aligned with the most recent version of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS), and the district requires and verifies that the curriculum in each area is fully implemented at all grade levels and

¹ The DOE 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, Mark Stanwood, Gloucester County Superintendent, and Scott Henry, Gloucester County Business Administrator.

² Clayton had been classified in DFG B until 2004, when, based on data from the 2000 census, it was reclassified as DFG CD.

includes clear grade level benchmarks and interim assessments (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B1, B2 and B3). Moreover, Clayton satisfied almost 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 Clayton 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 (QSAC I&P DPR indicator C1). Based on the 2005-2006 State assessments, 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), an accomplishment that the district attributes to the following factors: increased exposure to the NJCCCS, adoption and implementation of aligned instructional materials, targeted professional development for teachers, English language learners receiving aligned instruction and support, and additional learning support (tutoring, after school summer school, etc.) (QSAC I&P DPR indicator A9b).

The QSAC monitoring also identified areas of needed improvement in Instruction and Program. Thus, while the Clayton 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). As a result of the analysis of its achievement data, Clayton identified teacher vacancies/substitutes and inconsistent implementation of professional development and new academic programs as possible areas of weakness in its program (QSAC I&P DPR indicator A9a). The evaluation also indicated that the district needs to address ways to support integrated/cross disciplinary instruction and to articulate the district curriculum both horizontally and vertically (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B4 and B5). 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 July 2008, the Clayton School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need in the district. Clayton described its needs as primarily stemming from two areas: the demographics of its student population with its relatively high at-risk concentration, and the age and unsuitable condition of its facilities.

As indicated above, 38.52% of Clayton's student population is considered at-risk, meaning that they are at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines.³ According to the district, this percentage of economically disadvantaged students has presented a

³ According to Department data, there are 106 districts in the State with a higher percentage of at-risk students than Clayton.

number of challenges. Specifically, the district noted that “the socio-economic make-up of the student population of the Clayton School district is a definite contributing factor in the district’s increasing high school dropout rate, the district’s inability to close the student achievement gap specifically among the male minority population, the poor school attendance rates for the district’s economically disadvantaged at-risk students, and the significantly higher disciplinary referral statistics seen across all grade levels in comparison to other school districts within the local geographic area” (Clayton District Assessment Survey, p.10).

According to the survey response, the district had begun to take steps to address the issues associated with this student population by implementing an Intervention and Referral Service (I&RS) to work with teachers of at-risk students, providing professional development aimed at addressing the special needs of at-risk students, implementing a school-based youth services program to provide counseling, retaining a part-time truancy officer, implementing a violence prevention program at the elementary level and offering a basic skills remediation program for all grade levels. The district also provides an after-school program for all grades in math and language arts, and a four-week extended school year program for K-8 students in math, language arts and basic skills. In addition, the district provides middle school students who fail math, language arts, science, or social studies with the opportunity to attend summer school at a neighboring school district. The Department notes that the special needs of at-risk students were specifically addressed during the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the School Funding Reform Act’s (SFRA) determination of additional weights for such students in determining funding for the district.

In its survey response, Clayton reported that it had a curriculum that is fully aligned to the NJCCCS in each content area and that all of its teachers are Highly Qualified as required by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. However, the district stated that its textbooks in certain content areas at the elementary and middle schools are old and outdated, that there is a need for more access to computers, and that additional textbooks are needed for special needs students so that they can keep a set of books at home. With regard to the visual and performing arts, the district stated that it has not fully implemented its curriculum in those areas due to a lack of dedicated space for those classes, particularly in the elementary and middle schools. Clayton stated that it also needed additional teachers, curriculum resources and materials.

The district further indicated that each school building has a library, but they have limited collections of books and resources and are not open on weekends or at night. (There is no public library in the community.) The middle school/high school library also serves as a computer lab, meeting room and classroom. With respect to world languages, the district indicated that Spanish and French are taught at the middle school/high school, but that no world languages are provided in the elementary school due to the lack of a qualified teacher and classroom.

Clayton reported in the survey that it offers gifted and talented programs to all students in K-6 by content area. Students in grades 9-12 can participate in Advanced

Placement and Honors classes. The district estimated that 10% of its students are precluded from taking AP courses due to insufficient staff, resources and facilities. It indicated that it needed additional teachers, resources and facilities to run a more comprehensive gifted and talented program at all levels.

The district stated that it does not have an alternative education program but it sends a number of students with behavioral issues to the county alternative school. The district does have an Intervention and Referral Services program and a school-based counseling program. The district's suspension rate is 16.9%

Clayton stated that its special education classification rate is 13.8%, which is slightly less than the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the SFRA's calculation of the census-based special education funding. Based on the data provided by the district, it appears that approximately 13% of its special education students are sent to out-of-district placements. The district indicated that it has a backlog in conducting required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs. According to the district, all IEPs are implemented as written. Clayton stated that it had a need to devise strategies to include more students in the general classroom and improve its Intervention and Referral Services.

Despite its efforts, the district indicated that it was seeking additional resources to address the issues facing its at-risk population. Specifically, the district identified the following as additional resources that it required: high school academic advisor, additional teachers skilled in working with at-risk and disaffected students, math, reading and literacy coaches, full-time Student Assistance Counselor, Truant Officer and Career Intern Advisor, expansion of the violence prevention program to the middle/high school, Behavior Specialist, Character Education curriculum and teachers, in-district alternative education program, additional school security staff, and playground/lunchroom aides. The district also indicated that its textbooks and instructional materials were old and out-of-date, and that it needed additional resources to improve its programs in the visual and performing arts, world languages, gifted and talented instruction, advanced placement, and alternative education.

With respect to its facilities needs, the district indicated in the survey that it believed it did not have adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS. In particular, it stated that, given the district's increasing enrollment, the elementary school needs additional general classrooms as well as preschool classrooms, music classroom, computer lab, world language lab, and a gifted and talented classroom. Regarding the middle/high school, the district stated that its needs include additional general classrooms, a science lab, computer labs, world language labs, special education classrooms, an auditorium, expanded gym facilities, and art and performing arts classrooms. The district also indicated that the small, aging library space for the middle/high school is insufficient, particularly as there is no public library in the community, and that the middle/high school does not have adequate space to meet student health needs nor to maintain the confidentiality of care. In addition, the district cited a number of health and safety concerns, including inadequate interior and exterior lighting, problems with climate

control in the classrooms, leaking roofs, crumbling curbs, sidewalks and parking lots, erosion problems and sewage and drainage problems. Finally, Clayton also believes that the state of its facilities inhibits its efforts to attract new faculty to the district.

In the area of technology, Clayton reported that it has not completely embedded technology into all curricular areas and that it is still in the process of doing so at the elementary level. In 2008-2009, the district hired a Technology Literacy Teacher for the elementary school; the district does not have a Technology Coordinator. According to the district both buildings have connectivity to the Internet, but there is a need to upgrade district computers and video display equipment. Clayton stated that its technology needs include more staff, additional hardware, software and on-line resources, as well as more lab and class space.

With respect to preschool, Clayton currently provides a half-time program for three and four year-olds. It anticipates that finding classroom space when it expands preschool to provide full-day preschool to all at-risk three and four year-olds, as required by the SFRA, will be a challenge.

Site Visit

On September 18, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to the Clayton Middle School/High School and met with the district's superintendent, the principals of the elementary and middle/high school, and various other administrators. During the course of the meeting, the team from the district discussed Clayton's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals, as well as the challenges still facing the district.

The Clayton administrators described a district that is quite ably and effectively channeling its available resources to address its most critical needs. The district received a 20% increase in State aid under the first year of SFRA (FY2008-09), amounting to \$1,536,389. This large increase in State aid presented Clayton with the opportunity to address many of the staffing needs it had identified in its response to the survey. With these additional funds, the district directed more resources toward addressing issues of its at-risk student population by hiring a full-time guidance counselor for the elementary school, hiring a Reading Specialist for grades K-8, hiring additional security personnel and upgrading technology and security, hiring two playground/cafeteria aides, and purchasing additional textbooks and instructional supplies. The Department notes that many of these personnel positions 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. The district also used the increased funding to hire other personnel, including an additional teacher, a world languages teacher for elementary school, a computer teacher for grades K-6, a part-time vocal music teacher, and a part-time nurse's aide. Even with these expenditures on new resources, the district was still able to reduce the local tax levy and put additional funds in its capital reserve and emergency reserve accounts. Specifically, in June 2008 the district deposited \$200,000 into its capital reserve account and \$150,000 into its emergency reserve account and still recorded over \$500,000 in excess surplus for the year.

Programmatically, the Clayton School District has analyzed its students' performance on the State assessments and is focusing its efforts and resources on those areas of needed improvement. The district has upgraded and improved its math curriculum with a program that is fully integrated between the elementary and middle schools. In the 2008 State assessments, the fourth graders showed improved proficiency in math, moving from 74% proficient to 86% proficient, and on the eighth grade mathematics tests, the district's scores improved from 45% proficient to 64% proficient. The district believes that it now needs to direct more attention to its language arts program, although there, too, the fourth and eighth grade scores show improvement. For the fourth grade tests, the overall district proficiency rate increased from 69% in 2007 to 78% in 2008, and in eighth grade, it improved from 65% to 84%. The district used its increased State funding to hire a reading coach, and develop new language arts programming and professional development. Overall, the assessments show a trend toward improvement, and the district and both schools achieved adequate yearly progress in 2008. Class size in the district generally ranges from around 23-24 in the lower grades to 25-26 in the upper grades. There are several classes with more than one teacher or with one teacher and an aide in order to facilitate inclusion of special education students. In addition, the elementary school has a transitional first grade class with a small number of students (9).

The Clayton School District has also done an admirable job eliciting grant funding and putting that money to use in effective ways. The district was able to expand its counseling program through grant funding and has obtained a grant to upgrade security and implement a character education program with a Behavioral Specialist.

During the site visit, the district administrators expressed their concern that the grants they received were time limited and therefore would not be available in the future. They also stated that despite the aid increase the district already received, they would like additional funding to overhaul the district's science program and to hire a math literacy coach. The district also seeks resources to enable it to operate an alternative high school in-district. Clayton currently sends approximately two students per grade level per year to a county alternative program.

Facilities

As indicated above, the Clayton School District identifies its facilities needs as some of the greatest challenges facing the district. During the site visit, the district personnel outlined their proposals for several large construction projects to address the deficiencies that the district had delineated in its response to the survey. They propose major renovations to both schools, and a large addition (30,343 square feet) to the middle school/high school. Under these plans, the sixth grade class would be moved to the middle school, and preschool classes would be added to the elementary school. The middle school/high school addition would include, among other things, a number of new classrooms, science and prep rooms, art room, general offices/teacher work rooms, new media center and nursing area.

At the time of the site visit, the district indicated that it was applying 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. Subsequent to the site visit, the district was notified that its three applications had been approved for State funding. The first project is a nearly \$5 million renovation to the elementary school, including reconfiguring existing space into three preschool classrooms and renovation of the parking lot and play areas. The State share of this project is about \$3.2 million. The second approved project is the renovation and addition to the middle school/high school, which will cost approximately \$14.5 million, of which about \$6.4 million is the State share. The final project, with a total estimated cost of \$600,000 consists of improvements to curbing and drainage for the middle school/high school parking lot. The State share of this project is approximately \$386,000. The State funding for all of these projects is contingent upon the district securing the local share through the referendum process. The district did not seek voter approval for the projects during the April 2009 election.

School Funding Reform Act

Pursuant to the SFRA, the Clayton School District received a 20% (\$1,536,389) increase in State aid in FY08-09, and will receive a 5% (\$460,364) 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 \$9,649⁴. The district's enrollment of middle (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students are then multiplied by additional weights of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of about .51 in FY08-09 and about .52 in FY09-10 for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$2,256,591 for FY08-09 and \$2,345,562 for FY09-10.⁵ 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 FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$5,544,472, which is based on its district-wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, its per pupil property wealth was \$382,316 and its per pupil income was \$111,415. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$5,818,750, as its per pupil property wealth is \$415,778 and its per pupil income is \$120,176. 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

⁴ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

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 \$6,437,878 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$5,544,472 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$6,563,869 compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$5,818,750.

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 increased access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to 90% of eligible students within five years. As the Clayton School District is a DFG CD with less than 40% of its students deemed at-risk, eligible students are defined as all at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds living in the district.

In addition to these State funds, Clayton 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 agrees with the district's assessment that it faces a number of challenges due to the demographics of its population. The district is to be commended for the ways in which it has thoughtfully dedicated and planned its resources to address these critical areas.

Programmatically, the district began by ensuring that it has an up-to-date curriculum, aligned with the NJCCCS, being taught in the classrooms. The district then identified areas of lower student achievement, analyzed the causes, and channeled resources to address those areas. The district is seeing the benefits of all of these programs in improved proficiency rates on the State assessments and expects to continue to see improvements in graduation rates⁷ and other measures of student success in the future. In this regard, the district benefited from the State aid funding changes brought about by the SFRA. This large increase in funding that the district received under the SFRA was effectively targeted by the district into areas such as early literacy, middle school and high school mathematics and professional development to address the highest priority needs of the district. In addition, the district has aggressively sought and obtained grants that it is using for increased security, violence prevention and character education.

With respect to its facilities, the district has developed several major construction projects for which the district has received approval for State grant funding. Assuming that the district's voters approve the referendum to fund the local share, the new construction should resolve the facility issues that Clayton views as most critical. The Department notes that N.J.S.A. 18A:7G-12 provides a mechanism for the district to

⁷ The Department notes that on the 2007-2008 School Report Card, Clayton reported a graduation rate of 86.5% and a drop-out rate of 4.9%. While these numbers are cause for concern, Clayton also reported that the enrollment for the 12th grade class was 79.5 students. With such a small enrollment number, slight increases or decreases in the number of students dropping out or graduating could have a large effect on the percentages.

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 Clayton, it is important to recognize that the district faces many difficulties due to its small size. A K-12 district of 1,200 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. Smaller districts like Clayton tend to have more administrators per pupil than larger districts. In addition, smaller districts simply cannot offer diversity in programming options since they lack sufficient students to maintain reasonable class sizes for some types of course offerings. This is one reason why State policy encourages the formation of larger, regional districts that include enough students to enable the cost-effective delivery of a wider variety of programs. Thus, for example, while the district would like to begin an alternative school in-district, this plan does not appear feasible or fiscally efficient at this time, given the small number of students that would participate. Clayton currently sends those students to the county alternative school, and this seems to be the best available option. 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. Although Clayton is already a K-12 district, many of the issues that it described regarding its inability to provide a greater variety of programming for its students is due to its small size. For these reasons, Clayton 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.

The district has also indicated a desire to hire additional staff to overhaul its science program and improve its mathematics program. The Department notes that the district has excess surplus from the 2007-2008 year that could be budgeted for this purpose. In addition, the district will receive a 5% increase in State aid, or \$460,364, for the 2009-2010 school year that can be targeted to those needs.

The Department further notes that the district is interested in improving its violence prevention programming. The Fairfield School District, located in Cumberland County, appears to have a very effective program, and the Commissioner directs the Executive County Superintendent to assist the two districts in coordinating efforts, so that Clayton can learn from the Fairfield experience, and perhaps implement a similar program.

The NJQSAC monitoring revealed that Clayton needs to develop ways to support integrated/cross disciplinary instruction and to articulate the district curriculum both horizontally and vertically. 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 Clayton and develop a plan for the provision of these needed services to improve the district's curriculum.

Clayton expressed an interest in procuring professional development for its staff in the area of differentiated instruction, particularly for students with disabilities, and in the area of Intervention and Referral Services (I & RS). The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offers professional development opportunities in differentiated instruction through its Learning Resource Center (LRC) in the Southern Region. The Commissioner directs OSEP to coordinate such training with Clayton. Moreover, the Commissioner directs OSEP to monitor Clayton to ensure that the backlog in providing required services is eliminated and that compensatory services are provided if appropriate. The Department also offers training to districts on developing and improving I & RS practices. The Commissioner directs the Department's Office of Educational Support Services to coordinate training on this topic for the benefit of Clayton. Finally, the Department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Clayton 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 Department finds Clayton has made real progress in the past several years in improving student performance. The SFRA and other complementary legislation such as EFCFA and CORE will provide the necessary resources for the district to continue to improve the educational opportunities available to its students. Like many districts in the State, Clayton can identify areas where improvements can be made in the delivery of educational services. The Department will work with the district, as described above, in that effort.