

## Lawrence School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Lawrence 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 personnel<sup>1</sup> on November 20, 2008 and subsequent follow up interviews. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

### **Background**

The Lawrence School District, located in Cumberland County, educates 472 children in preschool through grade 8. Students in grades 9 to 12 attend Millville, Bridgeton, or Cumberland Regional high school on a tuition basis. The district has one K-8 school, Myron Powell Elementary School, serving all 472 students. The total K-12 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 615.5<sup>2</sup> and of those, approximately 40% are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). 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 2008-09 and 2009-2010 school years are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

### **QSAC Monitoring**

In the summer of 2007, the Department monitored the Lawrence 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. Lawrence scored over 80% in all areas: Fiscal Management (89%), Operations Management (95%), Personnel (98%), Governance (100%) and Instruction and Program (86%). As a result of these scores, the district will be designated a High Performing district pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:30-4.1(d). The complete results of the NJQSAC decision are attached.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on the 2005-2006 assessment results, Lawrence met the definition of district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population in language arts literacy and

---

<sup>1</sup> 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, Michael Elwell Executive County Superintendent and Wayne Knight, County Business Administrator

<sup>2</sup> This is the resident enrollment count used for the calculation of state aid, and includes students in grades 9-12 (who are educated in Millville, Bridgeton, or Cumberland Regional through a tuition arrangement).

mathematics and that at least 70% of the district's total student population were proficient in the science assessments. The NJQSAC monitoring also revealed that the district 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 is fully implemented at all grade levels and includes clear grade level benchmarks and interim assessments (QSAC 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 (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B5 and B6).

Moreover, the district 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, Lawrence 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).

### **District Assessment Survey**

In 2008, the Lawrence School District completed a questionnaire designed by the Department to assess the needs of the schools. At that time, the administration reported that the poverty of the community along with the rural nature of the population posed significant educational challenges, particularly since children lacked transportation to participate in needed supplemental programs. In a community where approximately 40% of its students are at-risk, Lawrence identified a need for extensive school programming beyond the regular school day and school year.

The district reported that all of its teachers, with the exception of the world languages teacher, are Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. It stated that its staffing needs include a highly qualified full-time world languages teacher, a skilled full-time technology teacher, a library/media specialist, a full-time art teacher, a full-time health/PE teacher, and a minimum of one full-time basic skills teacher. The Department notes that many of these positions were identified as necessary educational resources in the process of developing the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA determination of per-pupil costs. Lawrence also described the problem of attracting teachers to the rural community which is remote from all the amenities of the region. Lawrence reports that its salaries are competitive and the working conditions are as good but it is still difficult to attract teachers to this site.

The district reported that it currently provides a full-day preschool program for four-year-olds. It anticipates challenges in finding appropriate space to expand the program to three-year-olds.

In its response to the survey, the district stated that it has a curriculum that is fully aligned with the NJCCCS and its textbooks, instructional materials and technology are also appropriately aligned. It indicated that it anticipates problems in maintaining this alignment once revisions to the NJCCCS are released. With respect to the visual and performing arts, the district reported that it had not provided visual art for the past three years due to budget constraints, but was able to hire a teacher in September 2008 to be shared with another district. The district stated that it has fully implemented a music curriculum in all grade levels and school buildings. The district reported that it suffers from a lack of space for these programs—the visual arts and music classes take place in homerooms, and instrumental music takes place in a trailer. Performing arts instruction is incorporated into other classes. The district indicated a need for additional staff to fully implement its visual and performing arts curriculum.

According to the survey, the district has a media center that is also used for faculty meetings and a LatchKey program. It further stated that there is only a small selection of books in the library and that many are outdated. It also reported that it does not have a library/media specialist.

Lawrence reported that its world language program is taught in grades K-4 one or two times per week using a video tape; grades 5-8 receive one period a week with a teacher although that teacher is not highly qualified. The district stressed that it needs a qualified world languages teacher to fully implement the curriculum. Lawrence also stated that it maintains a minimal Gifted and Talented program, sharing a teacher and space with the basic skills program. The teacher in charge of after-school suspension also runs an alternative program on an “as needed” basis and teaches world languages. The district reported a need for a full-time alternative education teacher and space for an alternative education program. The district offers an after-school program that is open to students that are below proficiency targets in grades five through eight. It also offers a summer program that is partially supported by parents.

In its survey response, the district reported that it has a special education classification rate of 13.3% which is slightly below the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the SFRA’s calculation of the census-based special education funding. The district sends approximately 1.5% of classified students out-of-district for services. The survey also indicates that all students have been served in a timely manner and the district reported that it implements all IEPs as written. The district, however, stated that it had no ability to provide in-class support services to special needs students and had difficulty finding space to house certain services, such as Occupational, Physical and Speech Therapy. The district also noted needs for professional development for regular education teachers who were working with the special education population.

The district stated that it does not have adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS, and that specifically, it needs space to deliver visual arts, music, science labs, world language, gifted and talented services, performing arts, and additional fourth grade classrooms, as well as room for occupational and physical therapy and to accommodate the child study team needs. It further noted that the gym and cafeteria are the same room, leading to difficult arrangements for delivery of physical education. Lawrence indicated that there is also need for major repair work on the HVAC system and the roof. The district uses a trailer to provide additional space for visual arts, music and health/physical education classrooms.

According to the district, the use of technology by students and teachers is hampered by the lack of space, the teachers' limited knowledge and the difficulty in retaining a support person who can maintain the hardware. Currently, there is one technology support person and he is shared by several districts, making it difficult to keep technology working properly at all times. The district indicated that it has not embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas due to lack of funding for staff, professional staff and space limitations. The district has assigned a highly qualified math teacher to teach technology skills to students and the district identified a need for more qualified staff to train teachers in technology use. The district also stated that it does not have the requisite equipment, connectivity and technical support necessary to provide e-learning opportunities in all learning environments.

### **Site Visit**

On October 10, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to Lawrence and met with the district's interim superintendent and various other school administrators. The team arrived just a few days after the interim principal/superintendent took over his post and he was just beginning to gain information about the district himself. Thus, this report includes information gained through the meeting and through a conversation with the chief administrator several months after the visit. During both, the Department team and the administrators discussed the challenges Lawrence is facing.

District administrators outlined problems dealing with the difficulties in the teaching/learning process in a school where many of the students are struggling. They report they employ 4 full-time basic skills teachers and 4 part-time basic skills teachers as well as a math coach and student tutoring service using Title I funds. The coach is scheduled to offer staff development opportunities to teachers as well as to observe classes and analyze data. In Language Arts, the district has undertaken a staff development effort in writing, and works with Maurice River teachers on increasing the number of students who are successful writers. In 2008, the district showed great improvement in the eighth grade language arts State assessment, increasing from 49% proficient to 77% proficient. The eighth grade math scores also showed an increase, from 52% proficient to 57% proficient. The fourth grade language arts scores remained nearly static, at 69% proficient in 2007 to 68% proficient in 2008, while the district showed a decline in the fourth grade math assessments, from 71% proficient to 65% proficient.

Students are sent to Millville and Bridgeton High Schools depending on where they live, pursuant to a send/receive relationship between Lawrence and these two districts. In addition, students can choose to go to Cumberland Regional High or Pittsgrove, where, according to the district, there is an outstanding arts program. Lawrence maintains an excellent relationship with Millville, participating in transition planning with the system. It has less interaction with Bridgeton but it does belong to a Math consortium with that district.

In 2008-2009, the district received a 20% increase in state aid (\$930,153) and used some of those funds to support an art teacher, a health/physical education teacher, a curriculum coach and an additional second grade teacher. The district also budgeted \$150,000 in emergency reserve and \$200,000 in maintenance reserve accounts. The superintendent has used some of the available monies to upgrade the technology in the schools and to add enough computers to ensure access for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The district also kept the local tax levy flat. For 2009-2010 the district is receiving a 5% increase in state aid (\$278,599) and, in combination with a small number of new ratables, was able to decrease the tax rate for the members of the community. In addition, according to the district's 2008 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, it had over \$500,000 in excess surplus that it was required to budget in the subsequent school year. In 2009-2010, the district budgeted additional funds for new teachers and a media specialist.

### **Facilities**

During the site visit, the district discussed its facility's needs. District administrators pointed out that fourth grade students are taught in trailers, class sizes are increasing and the lack of space for special subjects was limiting the opportunities for art, music and physical education in all grade levels. The administrators stated that class size was the major problem; in grades 1-6 there were now about 26 or 27 students in each classroom and, they pointed out, there could be some new enrollment arising from the unstable attendance of the migrant population. The district has applied and received approval for State construction funding through amendments to the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c. 39 (EFCFA). The proposed project would include an addition of (3) preschool classrooms, an elevator, a side entrance vestibule, interior classroom conversions to elevator, small group instruction rooms, and kindergarten and special education classrooms. In addition, the proposal includes roof, exterior doors/hardware, fire alarm system, interior door, corridor ceilings, interior lighting, emergency generator, HVAC, electrical service, and drinking fountain upgrades. The total estimated project cost is \$6,549,146, with a State share of \$4,032,360 and a local share of \$2,516,786. The district has scheduled a September 2009 referendum on the project.

### **School Funding Reform Act**

The Lawrence School District received a 20% (\$930,153) increase in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY08-09, and a 5% (\$278,599) increase in State aid 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.<sup>3</sup> The district's enrollment of middle school (grades 6-8) students are then multiplied by the additional weight of 1.04 and the enrollment of high school (grades 9-12) students are multiplied by the weight of 1.17. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of about .54 in FY08-09 and about .52 in FY09-10 for each at-risk child, which amounted to \$1,466,575 in FY08-09 and \$1,081,469 for FY09-10.<sup>4</sup> 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 \$2,223,519, which is based on its district-wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, its per pupil property wealth was \$340,862 and its per pupil income was \$90,852. For FY 09-10, the district's local fair share was \$2,317,882, and its per pupil wealth is \$367,853 and per pupil income is \$92,178. In both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy,<sup>5</sup> and the district's adequacy budget exceeded its prior year spending.

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 Lawrence 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, Lawrence 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 notes that during the 2008-2009 school year, district and school leadership was unsettled: the superintendent was out on an extended medical leave, and both the superintendent and principal positions were filled by people acting in an interim capacity. Thus, the Department observed that Lawrence's administrators were confronting the challenges facing this district without the benefits derived from a long history in the district in a leadership role. These circumstances contributed to the lack of

---

<sup>3</sup> This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$1,879,691 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$2,223,519 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$1,879,691 compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$2,317,882.

organizational focus observed by the Department that, based on follow up communications with the acting superintendent, seems to have been somewhat ameliorated. Despite this structural weakness, the district as a whole has succeeded in providing a fully aligned curriculum to all teachers so that they can deliver a cohesive program to the student body. Lawrence also appears to have a motivated staff dedicated to improving student performance.

The SFRA is providing new opportunities for Lawrence students including an enhanced arts program, curriculum coach and a full-time librarian. In addition the district has been able to update the technology in the building. The district has focused on improving instruction in math and language arts, bringing in a math consultant to work with teachers and analyze district data, and working with Maurice River on a writing program. The district has raised the test scores in a variety of grades and in both reading and math. The Department commends that work and expects that the district will continue to maintain the strategies used to achieve these results.

With respect to facilities, the district has developed a large construction project involving an addition to the school and has obtained State funding for a large portion of the construction costs. Assuming the voters approve funding for the local share, this new construction should resolve the perceived problems that Lawrence identified as most critical.

In analyzing the issues facing Lawrence, it is important to recognize that the district faces many increased challenges due to its very small size. Many of the positions and other resources that 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 Lawrence that have 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, such as Lawrence, that educates fewer than 500 K-8 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. Smaller districts like Lawrence 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, and must often rely on part-time staff or staff serving multiple roles. The leadership in Lawrence believes that it would most profitably consolidate with Millville where part of the high school population is currently enrolled. 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 Lawrence 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 the staff discussed the need for ongoing staff development. The Mid-Atlantic Regional Lab has offered to help the rural districts 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 in the Lab will contact the district to talk about needs, if it has not already done so.

In addition, the Department provides a computer based assessment system, called *Learnia*, free to districts. Lawrence is already examining the program knowing it will provide 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. Lawrence should take advantage of this free service to improve instruction.

With regard to Lawrence's additional staffing issues, the Department notes that the district is taxing below its local fair share and, for FY 2009-10, increased its tax levy by less than the 4% maximum permitted by law. Moreover, the district's school tax rate is below the State average and it does not appear to be municipally overburdened. In addition, the district budgeted excess surplus that year. If the district believes that it has additional urgent staffing needs, it should consider raising the tax levy and/or using the excess surplus to meet those needs.

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. 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 Lawrence can learn from the Fairfield experience, and perhaps implement a similar program.

In sum, although the SFRA and complementary legislation such as CORE and EFCFA provide the tools that will permit the Lawrence School District to improve educational opportunities for its students and address its identified needs, the extremely small size of this district poses significant challenges that, unlike a school district like the Quinton School District (of a similar size and percentage at-risk population), Lawrence has not yet been able to overcome. Regionalization, through the process outlined in CORE, will be critical to addressing those challenges in this district.