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Superintendents Speak Out on Education Reforms

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to improve educational opportunities for all students, Arkansas has made education reforms in many areas over the past three years. The Office for Education Policy (OEP) recently distributed a confidential survey to superintendents across the state to see what kinds of successes districts are having as a result of these reforms and what challenges they still face. OEP also asked superintendents about teacher quality and supply issues in their districts, particularly in light of No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) requirement that all schools be staffed with “highly-qualified teachers.”

METHODS & RESPONSE RATE

OEP mailed surveys to all 253 district superintendents, consisting of a mix of quantitative (i.e., scaled) and qualitative (i.e., open response) questions. As of October 18, 2005, superintendents from 101 districts responded (40%), with most coming from Northwest (32%) and Northeast (28%) Arkansas. The remainder of districts were from the Southwest (22%), central (13%), and Southeast (6%) parts of the state.

Responding districts were generally representative of the state in terms of geographic region, school size, teacher salaries, per-pupil expenditures, the percentage of minority and low-income students, and achievement test scores. When weighted by enrollment, responding districts were more likely to have slightly lower per-pupil expenditures, fewer minority students and students participating in free/reduced-lunch programs, and higher scores on the Grade 11 End-of-Course Literacy exam than non-responding districts (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparing Responding and Non-Responding District Characteristics

District Characteristics	Respondents	Non-Respondents
District size	5420	5917
Teacher salaries	\$39,618	\$40,018
Per-Pupil Expenditures	\$6303	\$6622
% Minorities	28%	33%
% Free/Reduced Lunch	51%	54%
Grade 11 End-of-Course Literacy Exam	197	195

FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

Survey respondents claim that they are using the majority of the recent per-pupil funding increase for professional development, hiring additional teachers and other staff, and increasing teacher salaries, among other uses (see Table 2). Of those districts receiving an increase in categorical funding for low-income students, most are using this funding for special programs, such as after-school tutoring, as well as hiring additional staff, such as reading coaches.

Nearly 48% of these respondents feel that the interventions that they were able to use as a result of the funding increases were indeed helping improve student achievement, though 39% believe it is too soon to tell. So far, one superintendent believes, “*the [achievement] gaps still exist, but the gaps are smaller.*” Another noted that “*programs that are developed to provide individualized instruction are very expensive, but they do work.*”

Table 2: Districts' Use of Per-Pupil Funding Increase	
Allocation	% of Districts
Professional development	37%
Hiring additional teachers	33%
Increasing teacher salaries	28%
Instructional materials	21%
Hiring additional staff (i.e., reading coaches)	20%
Other	10%
No new funding provided/ Not enough funding	11%
Smaller class sizes	7%
New classes/programs	6%
Special needs students	4%

But some disagreed that the funding increase was significant enough to matter, or that they received any funding increase at all. *“The increase did not even cover the required increase in the minimum teacher’s salary schedule,”* one superintendent writes. Another concludes, *“Until the legislators realize that money does matter, Arkansas will continue to struggle and suffer.”* Clearly, despite the real increases in resources that have been allocated in recent years, some administrators still believe more resources are needed.

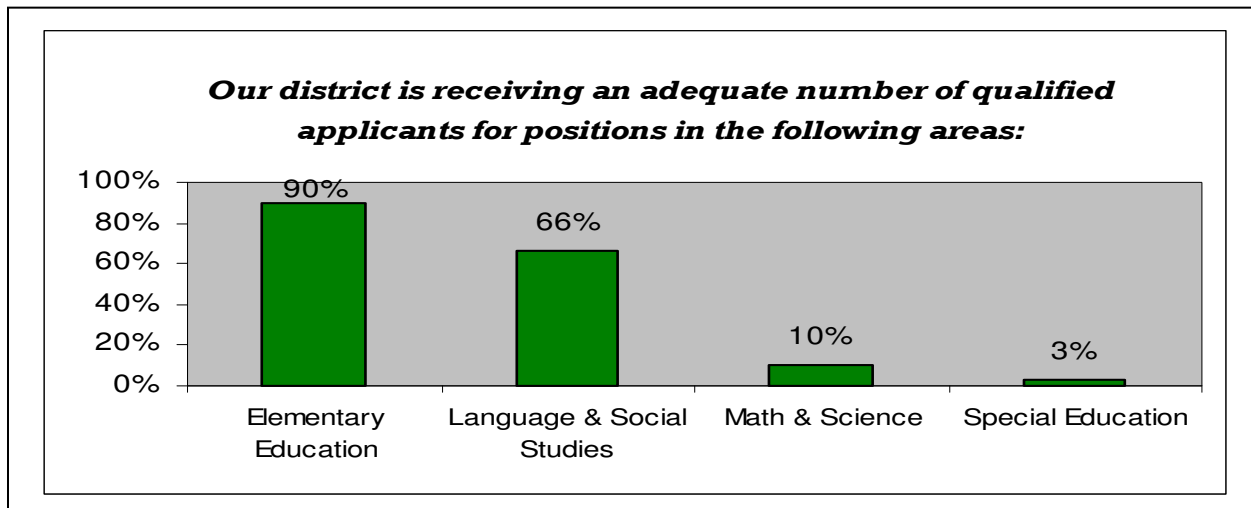
“Funding is sufficient to provide a quality education, but too many program requirements are being added and taking time away from instruction. The government is over-regulating us and driving quality educators away.”

TEACHER QUALITY & SUPPLY

Superintendents responding to the survey hired an average of 17 new full-time K-12 teachers in 2004-05, with a median of six (see Table 3) Of these, an average of 12 graduated from an Arkansas university with undergraduate degrees in education, while five received master’s degrees in education. However, most superintendents (76%) claim that the school from which teachers graduate does not matter much in hiring decisions, since most applicants graduate from the college closest to the district.

Superintendents had mixed responses on whether their district is receiving an adequate number of qualified applicants for positions in specific subject areas or levels. Most superintendents are able to attract sufficient numbers of language and social studies and elementary school teachers (66% and 90%, respectively). However, the vast majority of districts are facing a dire shortage of special education (97%) and math and science (90%) teachers (see Figure 1). Not surprisingly, higher-poverty districts have a harder time attracting teachers at all levels. As one respondent explains, *“we have no choice but to take whoever applies.”* Another replied: *“We have an absolutely critical shortage of minority teachers. We need African American staff, and we cannot find applicants.”*

Figure 1:



While most respondents (86%) believe that nearly all of the teachers who have applied to their district over the past three years are highly qualified, most also feel that their district does not have adequate funding to attract enough highly-qualified teachers to meet their needs (67%), or to provide an adequate education to all students (70%) (see Table 4).

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree/ Strongly Agree
Nearly all teachers who apply to work in my district are highly qualified.	86%
My district has adequate funding to attract enough highly-qualified teachers.	33%
The current funding level in my district is sufficient to provide an adequate education to all students.	30%
The school from which teachers receive their degrees matters a great deal in our hiring.	25%
A performance-pay system would help attract more highly-qualified teachers to our district.	41%

Notably, superintendents who deemed their resources as adequate to attract highly-qualified teachers (33%) were more likely to have much larger districts with higher teacher salaries, slightly less per-pupil spending, fewer minority and free/reduced-lunch students, and higher scores on the grade 11 Literacy End-of-Course Exam (see Table 5).

District Characteristics	Agree (n = 32)	Disagree (n = 67)
District Size	2,326	1,685
Teacher Salaries	\$37,089	\$35,347
Per-Pupil Expenditures	\$6,234	\$6,269
% Minorities	16%	20%
% Free/Reduced Lunch	53%	55%
Grade 11 EOC Literacy Exam	197	194

One surprising finding is that 40% of respondents believed that a performance-pay system would help attract more highly-qualified teachers to their district. Superintendents who supported performance pay were generally from smaller districts with slightly lower teacher salaries, higher expenditures per pupil, more poverty students, and lower Grade 11 End-of-Course Literacy Exam scores (see Table 6).

District Characteristics	Agree (n = 36)	Disagree (n = 58)
District Size	1,585	2,161
Teacher Salaries	\$35,224	\$36,445
Per-Pupil Expenditures	\$6,404	\$6,132
% Minorities	18%	19%
% Free/Reduced Lunch	56%	52%
Grade 11 EOC Literacy Exam	194	196

TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Most superintendents (54%) think there is little difference between teacher education schools in terms of how well they prepare new teachers. “*We find good and poor teachers from all universities,*” one writes. Others, however, insist that not all programs are created equal: “*Teachers from some institutions are simply prepared for the classroom. They do not understand alignment, differentiated instruction, or have the strategies to work with students with a wide range of abilities.*” Few were willing to name names.

Other thoughts included:

- “*The one-year internship in the MAT program does provide more experience, which generally produces a more well-prepared applicant.*”
- “*New teachers need at least one semester of school laws applying to teachers. Old teachers need this, also. There is no way a*

school can inform teachers while doing what is required.”

- *“As methods for teaching and accountability change with NCLB, teacher education programs must change. . .Most college instructors have not been in the classroom for several years and certainly have not taught with the new expectations. They should be required to spend one out of every five years in a public school classroom so they can better prepare teachers for their future.”*
- *“My biggest concern for all colleges is that they do not spend enough time on content mastery. If one teaches math, they should take many courses in math.”*

can get them over the 100-point requirement, though.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are still many challenges faced by superintendents from all types of districts across the state, despite the legislature’s recent increases in foundation and categorical funding. OEP will continue to monitor these issues over the 2005-06 school year.

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IMPACT OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

When asked how No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) “highly-qualified teacher” requirement is affecting teacher hiring in their district, most were unsure (42%), while one-third (34%) are finding the law to have a negative impact. One superintendent felt particularly strongly about the effect the law is having on his district: *“This requirement is crazy!! The Praxis Test has greatly reduced the number of young male teaching prospects.”*

Other reactions to the NCLB law include:

- *“Districts in south Arkansas had difficulty hiring warm bodies with degrees—much less ‘highly qualified teachers.’”*
- *“We are more concerned about some of our veteran teachers, and the requirements seem somewhat vague.”*
- *“The biggest difficulty is in applying the state rubric to relatively inexperienced out-of-state applicants who would have been highly qualified in the state they are coming from but because they can get only 50 points for their out-of-state test, and may have less than five years experience, they do not qualify as easily. In most cases, coursework*