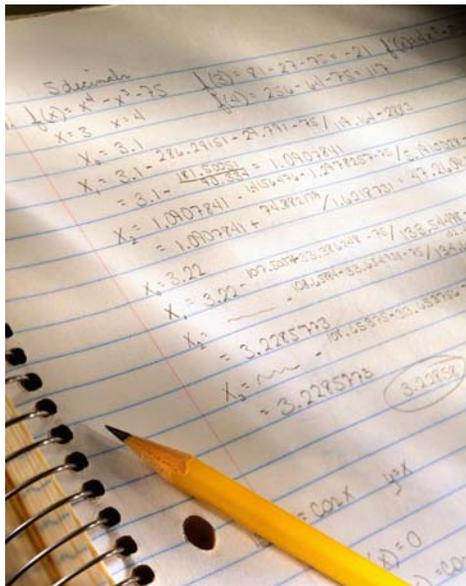


District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Hamilton County Department of Education



December 2006



STATE OF TENNESSEE

COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY

John G. Morgan

Comptroller

STATE CAPITOL

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December 20, 2006

The Honorable John S. Wilder
Speaker of the Senate
The Honorable Jimmy Naifeh
Speaker of the House of Representatives
and
Members of the House and Senate Education Committees

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Tennessee Code Annotated 49-1-602 requires the Office of Education Accountability and the Tennessee Department of Education to study schools and districts that have failed to meet state standards of adequate progress. Every year, the state Department of Education releases a list of high priority schools and districts that are at varying stages of meeting these standards. For the purposes of this report, OEA reviewed schools in the School Improvement 2 category of the state's high priority schools list during the 2004-05 school year, which included 24 schools in five districts. This system report for the Hamilton County Department of Education is one of five addressing the affected school systems. OEA also produced a statewide report summarizing trends noted throughout the five districts.

The scope for this study was limited to four education policy areas that impact the quality of instruction and student achievement: goals and governance; teaching quality; student discipline, attendance, and dropout; and instructional support. This report identifies areas for improvement and highlights exceptional and noteworthy practices in the Hamilton County Department of Education, and suggests recommendations for improvement.

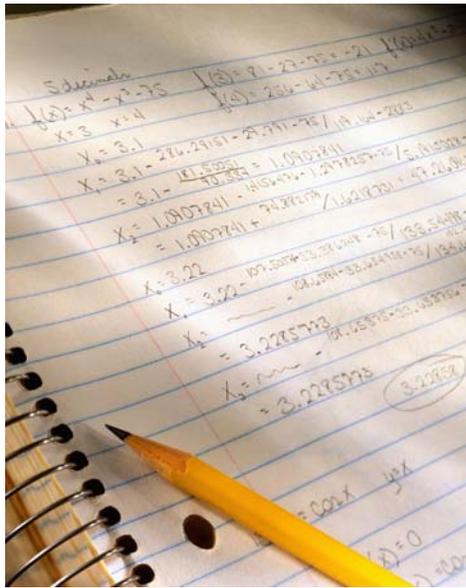
Sincerely,

John G. Morgan
Comptroller of the Treasury

cc: Commissioner Lana Seivers
Department of Education

District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools

Hamilton County Department of Education



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Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) had four schools on notice in the 2005-06 school year that had failed to make adequate yearly progress for three years in a row. As required by *Tennessee Code Annotated §49-1-602*, the Office of Education Accountability must study schools and districts placed on notice. This report is the HCDE portion of that study.

The Hamilton County Department of Education faces challenges about which school and district officials are well aware – attendance issues continue, tapping into parental support in some communities remains a struggle, and resources fall short at times. However, interviews with principals and district personnel for this report were marked by a solid focus on student learning. District and school officials in Hamilton County convey a clear sense that they are “all on the same page,” that the district leadership has succeeded in sharing a strong vision of what should be happening in schools every day, and that school leaders and teachers are carrying the vision forward with commitment. By aligning funding streams to target district and school goals and by partnering with local and national education funders, the district has concentrated squarely on improving student learning.

Specifically, the report concludes:

The district and schools foster collaboration both within and across schools to reach common goals. One of the most important means of fostering a collaborative environment appears to be the district’s twice-monthly principal meetings, focused solely on instructional issues. In addition, the district developed the New Teacher Network – a three-year support program for any new teacher, including experienced teachers who transfer to the district from elsewhere – and Critical Friends Groups – voluntary teacher support groups that meet monthly to look at student work in a structured way and explore ways to improve teaching practices. (See pages 5-7.)

The district gives schools accessible, specific student data reports and teaches school personnel how to understand and use the data to inform their instructional decision-making. Hamilton County provides a variety of data to schools and, perhaps more importantly, provides intensive support to ensure the data’s usefulness and school personnel’s understanding of it. The district data staff has created its own system of synthesizing state and district data into an accessible format that principals and teachers can easily use. Principals indicate that district support for data requests is timely and immediate – many reports can be generated within an hour of being requested – and personalized to each school. Central office data personnel meet on a routine basis and by request with both school administrators and teachers. (See pages 7-8.)

National and local funders have expressed a high degree of confidence in Hamilton County Schools, which has been awarded over \$90 million in competitive grants over the last few years. The district has benefited from a number of local and national education grantors and from the involvement of the Public Education Foundation (PEF), a Chattanooga-based independent, nonprofit agency that describes itself as a “critical friend” to the school system. Other grantors include the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Benwood Foundation, the Lyndhurst Foundation, and the Osborne Foundation. Although the focus of each grant differs, all share the same underlying purpose: to support comprehensive, whole school reform. (See pages 8-9.)

Principals have the authority to make some budgetary decisions, thus allowing schools more autonomy in allocating resources. Hamilton County schools have the authority to make some budget decisions, with some district oversight. Schools are given block grants with great flexibility, but they must demonstrate how their spending aligns with their achievement goals. Schools formally communicate with the finance department regarding how they will use their

budgets. The district requires monthly financial reports, which district personnel review and follow up on if problems are found. (See pages 9-10.)

Communication with the community about the district's efforts and successes has been an area of weakness. A 2005 report by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University reviewed Hamilton County Schools' central office, praising much about the district, but also identifying areas that needed improvement. The report found that the district did not "adequately communicate with key constituencies about student progress, resources, and decisions." The Superintendent concurred, responding that he believed the district had erred a few years earlier by not putting more resources into communications. (See pages 10-12.)

The district and schools have devised ways to give greater personal attention to each student. All Hamilton County high schools strive to meet four goals, one of which concerns student personalization: "Each student will attend a school where he or she will be known well and will complete a course of study that engages that student's passions and interests." The district's 17 high schools all contain smaller learning communities, which include one or more career academies and some 9th grade academies. In addition, individual schools have developed ways to provide students with increased personal attention. (See pages 12-13.)

Teacher learning and professional development in Hamilton County Schools is developing into a more school-directed, collaborative, daily function. Dr. Dan Challener, president of the Chattanooga Public Education Foundation, describes the district's purposeful shift from professional development to professional learning communities. Teachers' learning is driven by students' needs and teachers have opportunities to learn in several different ways, both formally and informally, from outside experts, building trainers, and from each other. The detailed data provided to schools by the district helps principals and teachers understand students' needs. (See pages 13-14.)

The district provides bonuses and incentives to high quality educators working in high poverty schools. Incentives include retention and recruitment bonuses, salary bonuses, team bonuses, and a housing incentive. In addition, the Osborne Fellows initiative, implemented by the Public Education Foundation, provides 100 teachers in some of the district's most needy schools with the opportunity to earn a free master's degree focused on reading, instructional strategies for urban students, and related issues. (See pages 14-15.)

Leadership development for aspiring, new, and experienced leaders supports the district's focus on instruction. Through the instructionally-focused principal meetings and a year-long leadership training program established by the Public Education Foundation, Hamilton County develops principals and others who aspire to school leadership as instructional leaders. One of the monthly meetings focuses specifically on the role of the principal as instructional leader and the other on the process of change and effecting change in instruction. Conversations with principals of schools in the Improvement 2 category illustrate that Hamilton County administrators view themselves as instructional leaders. (See pages 15-16.)

The district and schools use data to identify attendance and discipline problems and target preventive efforts. Attendance continues to be a serious problem for Hamilton County Schools. The district's 2006 Attendance Summary Report indicates that almost 35 percent of students missed 10 or more days of class during the 2005-06 school year. Interventions vary according to school needs – the district provides the data to schools and schools determine how to address any problems, with district support as needed. Several schools noted the reinstatement of in-school suspensions has been beneficial and may, over time, contribute to improvements in attendance rates. (See pages 17-18.)

The district has implemented multiple alternative learning environments for dropouts and at risk students, as well as providing options for all students. These include the Adult High School, the Virtual School, Evening Schools at some schools, Middle College High School, career

academies at all high schools, and 9th grade academies at some high schools. (See pages 18-19.)

The district reinstated in-school suspension (ISS). After termination of ISS a few years ago due to budget constraints, the district reviewed system-wide suspension rates and patterns of attendance and decided to reinstate the program in all middle schools. It also identified student behavior at the high school level as an area of weakness and placed four ISS monitors in four high schools with the greatest needs. Some other schools also have small ISS programs. (See page 19.)

The district is dissatisfied with the motives and quality of many SES providers. The district noted several concerns with providers. Although the district is prohibited by federal law from providing services because of its school improvement status, private providers are allowed to employ the district's own teachers as tutors and provide services using district facilities. Providers frequently charge the maximum amount allowed for services that district officials say are not always good quality. (See page 20.)

The state has funded a significant expansion of the district's virtual school offerings. In December 2005, the Tennessee Department of Education awarded Hamilton County a \$2.7 million grant to develop seven virtual school courses, which will eventually be available statewide. District officials indicate that Hamilton County was chosen because of its extensive experience developing online content. (See pages 20-21.)

District officials say technology is an area that hasn't yet recovered from budget cuts. Hamilton County has a personnel shortage of programmers and technicians in Information Services. The district also lacks sufficient capital funds to buy computers for schools. As one means to address teachers' needs for technology training, the district developed 15 online staff development courses, which have been popular with teachers. (See page 21.)

The report recommends:

Although it is experiencing a change in leadership, the district should maintain its focus on student learning through improving classroom instruction.

The district should make open communications with all stakeholders a priority.

HCDE should look into filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education to allow the district to provide supplemental education services.

(See pages 21-22.)

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INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Code Annotated §49-1-602 charges the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) to study schools and districts that have failed to meet state standards of adequate progress.¹ Every year, the state Department of Education releases a list of high priority schools and districts that are at varying stages of meeting these standards. For the purposes of this report, OEA reviewed schools in the School Improvement 2 category of the state's high priority schools list.

This report identifies areas for improvement and highlights exceptional and noteworthy practices in the Hamilton County Department of Education. In addition, OEA developed reports for the four other districts with Improvement 2 schools and a statewide policy report that looks at state actions affecting high priority schools.

SCOPE

The purpose of OEA's study is twofold. First, it informs the legislature of how well districts' existing policies and practices support the improvement of student achievement in Improvement 2 schools. Second, it includes recommendations that support improving student achievement. This report focuses on findings and recommendations for the Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE). The state-level report focuses on findings and recommendations at the state level.

There are 24 Improvement 2 schools in five school districts – the four large urban districts in the state and Fayette County. The study reviewed all 24 schools and the five districts.

The scope for the study was limited to four education policy areas that impact the quality of instruction and student achievement:

Goals and governance

- How clearly are districts and schools setting goals and assessing their progress?
- How well are districts and schools developing a positive and effective work environment?
- How effectively are districts and schools involving families and the community in improving achievement?
- Are resources allocated to schools in a way that allows them to be used for the most important student achievement improvement efforts?

Teaching quality

- How well are districts' professional development initiatives meeting the needs of teachers and administrators?
- How effective are teacher and administrator evaluations and how are teachers and administrators held accountable for improving student achievement?
- Are districts taking the necessary steps to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers?

Student discipline, attendance, and dropout

- What are districts and schools doing to establish safe and orderly environments in the schools?
- How effective are districts and schools at addressing drop out and attendance issues?

Instructional support

- How effective have supplemental education services, namely tutoring, been at targeting students' learning needs?
- How well are districts and schools using technology to improve student achievement?
- How effective is the district at ensuring that teachers have sufficient current textbooks and other instructional materials?

¹ T.C.A. §49-1-602 requires the OEA to study jointly with the Department of Education schools placed "on notice." The term "on notice" is no longer used by the Department; instead, the Department calls all the schools and districts on the list "high priority," and has renamed "on notice" schools and districts as those in the third year of failing to meet adequate yearly progress (also called School Improvement 2).

METHODOLOGY

The Office of Education Accountability used a variety of methods to collect information about schools' and districts' policies. Staff conducted a literature review to define the four areas of study and determine indicators of best practices. In addition, staff reviewed numerous school, district, and state documents pertaining to the four areas. OEA conducted surveys of district staff and school principals and also interviewed district superintendents, key district staff members, school principals, assistant principals, and other school staff.

SNAPSHOT OF THE DISTRICT

The Hamilton County Department of Education faces challenges about which school and district officials are well aware – attendance issues continue, tapping into parental support in some communities remains a struggle, and resources fall short at times. However, interviews with principals and district personnel for this report were marked by a solid focus on student learning. District and school officials in Hamilton County convey a clear sense that they are “all on the same page,” that the district leadership has succeeded in sharing a strong vision of what should be happening in schools every day, and that school leaders and teachers are carrying the vision forward with commitment. By aligning funding streams to target district and school goals and by partnering with local and national education funders, the district has concentrated squarely on improving student learning.

Hamilton County is strongly focused on improving classroom instruction through high-quality, ongoing learning opportunities for teachers. District and school officials believe its teacher professional development is one of the most outstanding aspects of the district's reform efforts. In addition, the district uses bonuses and incentives for educators in the district's neediest schools. In terms of instructional support, Hamilton County Schools is, on the one hand, a technology leader – the Tennessee Department of Education awarded it a \$2.7 million grant to develop online classes that will eventually reach students throughout the state. On the other hand, district officials note problems with technology adequacy and repair. Additionally, the district is dissatisfied with many outside supplemental educational service providers currently serving its students.

A defining moment for Hamilton County Schools occurred in 1997, when the county system merged with Chattanooga City Schools after the city voted to discontinue school operations. The merger combined two very different systems, one largely urban and the other primarily rural and suburban. About 63 percent of Chattanooga City students were African American and about 94 percent of Hamilton County students were white. Student achievement levels for Hamilton County were consistently higher than those in the Chattanooga City Schools.²

Dr. Jesse Register, having previously overseen two mergers in North Carolina, was hired to plan the merger and lead the new system. He was superintendent of Hamilton County Schools during this review, but retired effective June 30, 2006. The Hamilton County School Board recently voted Dr. Jim Scales, former deputy superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District, as Dr. Register's successor.

Dr. Register's tenure has been marked by a focus on curriculum and instruction. He created a Division of Data and Accountability within the central office with the ability to disaggregate data and allow schools and staff to use data more effectively. He created a Leadership Institute to provide professional development for school leaders and built professional development time into the school calendar. Before his tenure, the Chattanooga City Schools allocated no monies for professional development and Hamilton County Schools allocated very little.³ In 2003, the Hamilton County Board of Education approved the single path diploma, which creates a single academic

² Michele Foster, *When We Decide To Do Something, We Can Work Together to Get it Done: Collaborating in Chattanooga to Close the Achievement Gap*, Portland, OR: Grantmakers for Education, 2005, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

track for all students, increases the number of required math and science courses, and adds two years of a foreign language. The number of credits students must earn to graduate from a Hamilton County school exceeds the minimum number the state requires.⁴ The Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce passed a unanimous resolution supporting the change.⁵ The Class of 2009 will be the first to graduate under the new requirements.⁶

Hamilton County Schools has worked closely with Chattanooga’s Public Education Foundation (PEF), a nonprofit local education fund with the goal of increasing student achievement in the county. After the merger, the local Board of Education asked PEF to help it design a new system, rather than simply trying to combine the two existing systems.⁷ Among many other undertakings, PEF began a major study of teacher quality in 2000 using Tennessee Value-Added Assessment data. The study found that the district’s lowest performing schools had the least experienced teachers, the highest teacher turnover rates, and the greatest difficulty finding substitute teachers. Much of the district’s focus on teaching and instruction was informed by the results of this study.

Hamilton County’s “Strategic Plan for Success” for the school district, developed in 2001, remains the district’s guiding document. Its three major components are:

- 1) raising student achievement – it clearly defines effective, improving, and priority schools;
- 2) providing a quality teacher for every student – this part of the plan includes incentive pay for teachers and schools that achieve certain academic goals; and
- 3) increasing the district’s accountability standards – beginning in 2001-02, this part of the plan provides a variety of system supports to schools based on test score results. Schools not yet meeting the student achievement plan results receive increased support to help them improve.

Exhibit 1: Background facts for Hamilton County Schools, 2004-2005 School Year

Schools and Staff	
Number of schools	81
Number of Improvement 2 schools ⁸	4
Number of teachers	2,618
Number of teacher waivers	35
Number of teacher permits	50
Average teacher salary	\$42,515
Student Population	
Number of students	39,929
African American	14,532 (33%)
Caucasian	27,105 (62%)
Hispanic	1,240 (3%)
Other	767 (2%)
Limited English proficient	611 (2%)
Students with disabilities	6,772 (17%)
Economically disadvantaged	19,343 (52%)
Number of students in Improvement 2 schools	3,919 (10%)
Suspensions	5,258
Expulsions	90
Graduation rate	70%
Grades K-8 attendance	94%
Grades 9-12 attendance	91%

(Exhibit 1 continued on page 4)

⁴ Beverly Carroll, “Standards Higher to Achieve Diploma,” *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, Oct. 2, 2003.

⁵ Hamilton County Schools, “Important Facts About the Single Path Diploma Plan, accessed 5/15/06 at www.hcde.org/schools/media/pdfs/Single-Path-Fact-Sheet.pdf.

⁶ Hamilton County Schools, Hamilton County Graduation Requirements, accessed 5/15/06 at www.hcde.org/students/core.htm.

⁷ Foster, p. 3.

⁸ The Department of Education used performance data from 2004-05 when determining the 2005-06 high priority schools and districts.

Fiscal Information

Total expenditures	\$293,801,134
Expenditures per pupil (ADM)	\$7,432
Federal revenue	13%
State revenue	33%
Local revenue	54%

SOURCES: Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2005; State of Tennessee Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 2005.

HIGH PRIORITY STATUS

HCDE has four schools in the School Improvement 2 category. One of these schools, the Howard School of Academics and Technology, recently added grades 6-8, making it ineligible for safe harbor status because it has only had these grades for one year.¹⁰ The high school at the Howard School did qualify for safe harbor this year. Overall, the district has 21 schools on the High Priority list, with 11 in School Improvement 1, six in Restructuring, and no schools under Reconstitution.

Exhibit 2: Schools in School Improvement 2 in Hamilton County Schools – 2005-06

School Name	Reason for High Priority Status
Clifton Hills Elementary School	% proficient in math for all students and for economically disadvantaged students; attendance rate
Howard School of Academics and Technology	For elementary/middle grades: % proficient in math for all students, African American students, and economically disadvantaged students; % proficient in reading/language arts/writing for all students, African American students, and economically disadvantaged students
Soddy-Daisy Middle School	Attendance rate
Red Bank High School	% proficient in math for economically disadvantaged students, African American Students, and students with disabilities; % proficient in reading/language arts for economically disadvantaged students and African American; % tested in reading/language arts/writing for African American students

SOURCE: Tennessee Department of Education, 2005 Report Card

In August 2006, the Tennessee Department of Education released the 2006-07 High Priority Schools list. Three of the four High Priority Hamilton County schools from 2005-06 are listed as School Improvement 2 – Improving; only Howard School of Academics and Technology is now under corrective action. The district itself has moved to School Improvement 2 – Improving status, an improvement from School Improvement 2 in 2005-06.

CHANGES SINCE THE 2001 STUDY

The Office of Education Accountability (OEA) first reviewed schools on notice in 2001, per TCA §49-1-602. Both the 2001 study and this report look at goals and governance and instructional support issues. However, the 2001 study also looked at facilities and climate and class size. OEA broadened the study this year to include teaching quality and student discipline, attendance, and dropout issues.

¹⁰ NCLB recognizes gains in various subgroups not meeting AYP with the safe harbor provision. If a subgroup fails to meet AYP in reading/language arts/writing or math, the school would be eligible for safe harbor if a school or district does not meet an AYP target, but it reduces the percent of students who are not proficient by at least 10% from the previous year.

Howard School of Academics and Technology is the only one of the four Improvement 2 schools that also appeared on the 2001 list of 11 schools needing improvement according to Tennessee Department of Education criteria related to No Child Left Behind. Since it appeared on the 2001 list, the school has been completely reorganized and reconfigured. The school, extensively renovated during the past two years, now serves middle and high school students, grades 6 through 12. Administrative leadership is new and consists of an executive principal in her second year, two associate principals (one for middle and one for high school), one assistant principal, and two assistant principal trainees.

In the 2001 study, OEA made several recommendations for Hamilton County. Those that relate to the areas contained in the current study and brief updates follow:

1. The Hamilton County school system should continue to research ways to improve the teacher shortage problem in Hamilton County.
Teachers still sometimes take jobs in Georgia. However, the system has, for the past five years, offered bonuses and incentives for high quality teachers agreeing to work in the district's neediest schools. In addition, an initiative established by a local foundation also provides 100 teachers with a free master's degree in urban education. Once they sign up for the degree, teachers commit to stay for the duration of the program and also make a commitment at completion.
2. The system should increase the number of technology support staff.
Although the system views technology as an important component, recent budget cuts made completion of the technology plan more difficult. The district has made some progress in creating 15 online technology courses that all teachers can access, but it still has a personnel shortage for maintaining technology in the schools. Some schools also still lack a sufficient number of computers. The district has a goal of one computer per student, but that has not yet become a budget priority.
3. The system should communicate best practices within its schools and issue news releases about the positive happenings in the schools.
The district has made progress in its communication with schools and principals, but a finding from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) 2005 report found that the district needed to improve communications with key constituencies about student progress, resources, and decisions. In July 2005, the superintendent announced a new central office position for a Director of Communications and the reorganization of the communications department. He named an interim director, leaving the position to be filled permanently by the incoming superintendent.

CONCLUSIONS: GOALS AND GOVERNANCE

The district and schools foster collaboration both within and across schools to reach common goals.

Research shows that districts that improve achievement levels in low-performing schools do so partly by instilling visions that focus on student learning and guided instructional improvement.¹¹ Separate conversations with each of the four Hamilton County principals with schools in the Improvement 2 category reflected a common sense of purpose: to improve student learning by ensuring high quality classroom instruction across the district. Hamilton County school officials credit the district leadership with fostering conversations about instructional issues and providing ongoing opportunities for educators to network and learn from each other.

¹¹ Wendy Togneri and Stephen E. Anderson, *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools—A Leadership Brief*, A Project of the Learning First Alliance, Baltimore, MD: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003, p. 6.

One of the most important means of fostering a collaborative environment appears to be the district's twice-monthly principal meetings, focused solely on instructional issues. One of the monthly meetings focuses specifically on the role of the principal as instructional leader and the other on the process of change and effecting change in instruction. The district has permanently relieved principals from attending meetings centered around routine, administrative topics – anything that can be conveyed through e-mail or by some other means – in favor of substantive meetings focused on classroom instruction. For example, one recent district-initiated conversation concerned how to define 'rigorous curriculum,' which led some principals to initiate a similar discussion about rigor with teachers at their schools.

Research about other districts that have made large turnarounds in student achievement reflects a similar emphasis on the importance of principals' roles:

All districts regularly convened principals to share challenges, exchange strategies, and learn about emerging issues. Today principals regularly engage in classroom observation, use data to analyze student performance and teaching strategies, and seek to build structures that encourage collaboration.¹²

Two principals interviewed indicated that the principals' meetings have created better relationships among all principals and have stopped the "academic rock-throwing" that used to be more common. Principals note that they have – over time and through face-to-face communication with other principals – developed a deeper understanding of the challenges faced at all grade levels.

The principal of Red Bank High School indicated that the district continually initiates conversations centered around instructional issues. He believes that a shift from the old way of conducting these meetings began when principals started doing walk-throughs at colleagues' schools. Such experiences, he said, continually prompt conversations about how things work in each school and help principals consider new approaches.

One of the more significant district-sponsored efforts to promote collaboration and learning among educators is the New Teacher Network – a three-year support program for any new teacher, including experienced teachers who transfer to the district from elsewhere. The network includes bi-weekly forums on practical topics including disciplinary techniques, struggling learners, data interpretation, communicating with families, and multicultural issues. In addition, the district has developed a Mentoring Program based on the state's Tennessee Model for Teacher Mentoring. Teachers are trained as mentors in a three-day workshop (held twice each year) and are assigned in pairs to teachers in their first three years of teaching. Mentors must provide documentation of their service to teachers prior to receiving a modest stipend. Documentation will be used to evaluate the program's effectiveness.¹³

To galvanize on individual teacher strengths, the district developed Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), voluntary teacher support groups that meet monthly to look at student work in a structured way and explore ways to improve teaching practices. The program includes more than 600 teachers in 33 schools. Groups exist within schools and some have formed inter-school groups. In a 2002-03 survey at the close of the school year, 88 percent of teachers in Critical Friends Groups said their participation improved their teaching. Because the program has grown significantly without being mandated, district officials are thus far hesitant to require it. Principals in the four Improvement 2 schools indicated that CFGs are active in their schools.

In part because of the district's focus on collaboration, individual schools have developed innovative ways to improve communication and foster change. According to the principal of Soddy Daisy Middle School, which receives students from six feeder elementary schools, ten principals within the school's geographic area began meeting in an effort to secure grant funds. The initial meetings focused on reading after the participating high school principals found that many of their 9th graders weren't reading higher than the 5th grade level. As a result, they formed a group of teachers across the schools to work on common lesson design, and have since addressed

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ See also <http://www.hcde.org/hr/mentor.htm> for more information about the district's mentoring program.

teaching strategies, questioning techniques, assessment techniques, and vocabulary. Recently, the group began focusing efforts on disengaged and academically at-risk students. Several of the schools now have a common professional development focus.

In an effort to better understand incoming freshman at the Howard School of Academics and Technology, the principal there has begun working closely with East Lake Middle School – one of its main feeder schools – to understand what those students learn and what they bring to the 9th grade at Howard.

The district gives schools accessible, specific student data reports and teaches school personnel how to understand and use the data to inform their instructional decision making.

Districts that have succeeded in improving student achievement consistently make “decisions based on data, not on instinct.”¹⁴ Hamilton County provides a variety of data to schools and, perhaps more importantly, provides intensive support to ensure the data’s usefulness and school personnel’s understanding of it. Each of the four principals interviewed for this report rely heavily on data for school-related decisions, from what training teachers most need to efforts to diminish student absences from school.

Principals indicate that district support for data requests is timely and immediate – many reports can be generated within an hour of being requested – and personalized to each school. Central office data personnel meet on a routine basis and by request with both school administrators and teachers.

The district data staff has created its own system of synthesizing state and district data into an accessible format that principals and teachers can easily use. Routinely, district data staff meet with each school’s administrative team to help them analyze and interpret the data. They also have a second meeting to discuss the data with the school’s teachers. Before the school year begins, teachers are provided the student achievement data from the previous year for all incoming students.

The district uses data to determine the supports and assistance each school needs, including additional staffing to address particular areas of weakness. The district has a system-wide support team that meets with the school leadership teams to determine needs. For example, if the data indicates a weakness in special education, the district responds by organizing a special education team to provide assistance.

Other district responses to schools based on data findings have included: lowering pupil-teacher ratio, creating a retired teachers support administrative team, changing leadership, reconstituting schools, hiring reading interventionists, embedding staff development, creating an urban leadership academy, doubling the assistant principal ratio, and hiring full-time consulting teachers.

School officials indicate the district’s data provision and support are vital to them, allowing them to adjust teaching to fit student instructional needs and determine teachers’ professional development needs. At Clifton Hills Elementary, the principal and assistant principal have facilitated teacher learning groups focused on showing teachers how to use data to improve instruction. They begin each faculty meeting with a piece of data related either to the school or the district. Teachers have begun using student data to change their learning groups every two weeks to better instruct their students. Based on the previous year’s proficiency data, teachers determine which students they need to target. According to the school leadership team, teachers come to the assistant principal almost daily, asking for various data reports.

The Clifton Hills principal also described the power of data to bolster instructional reform efforts: “When you see children coming into your class at a [score of] ‘19’ and already at mid-year at a ‘55’ you don’t have to do a sell job [with the teachers]. When [the teachers] are using the data so much, we don’t have to verbally cheer them along.” She said that when they reviewed their data in the fall

¹⁴ *Beyond Islands*, p. 6.

and saw that they had grown in literacy in every single subgroup, the staff, including the teachers, knew they were taking the right instructional approach for their students.¹⁵

At Red Bank High School, the principal said that one of the greatest benefits he receives from the district is the vast amount of specific, timely, and targeted data disaggregated by subgroups—much improved, he adds, from the data the district used to dispense.

National and local funders have expressed a high degree of confidence in Hamilton County Schools, which has been awarded over \$90 million in competitive grants over the last few years.

Hamilton County Schools has benefited from a number of local and national education grantors and from the involvement of the Public Education Foundation (PEF), a Chattanooga-based independent, nonprofit agency that describes itself as a “critical friend” to the school system. Although the focus of each grant differs, all share the same underlying purpose: to support comprehensive, whole school reform.

District and PEF staff point to the district’s achievement in receiving competitive grants totaling over \$90 million in the last several years. Many of these organizations represent national business interests that make considered decisions about where to invest funds based on their expectations for success and their belief that grantees can meet them. According to PEF’s President, Dr. Daniel Challener, the district and PEF have purposely avoided grants that come with too many restrictions or that do not align clearly with the district’s focus. The grants in place favor a whole school, rather than piecemeal, approach.

Local organizations that are major financial contributors to the system include the Benwood Foundation, the Lyndhurst Foundation, and the Osborne Foundation. Benwood supports the district’s most challenged elementary schools with a focus on teaching quality. The Lyndhurst Foundation’s grant focuses on middle and high school reform initiatives to raise achievement and graduation rates in Hamilton County. The Osborne Foundation provides teachers in the Benwood schools with a free master’s degree at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga focused on urban education.¹⁶

National grantors include the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which in 2001 awarded Hamilton County Schools an \$8 million grant to reform secondary education. PEF committed a matching \$6 million also devoted to high school reform. Each high school has four basic goals but is allowed flexibility in achieving them. The goals are:

1. to establish a more challenging, relevant, and engaging curriculum;
2. to improve teaching by providing more professional development for teachers, leaders, and staff;
3. to create a more personalized and engaging experience for students; and
4. to allow more flexibility to meet student needs more effectively.¹⁷

Other national grants include:

- 1) a three-year \$1.5 million Smaller Learning Communities grant awarded in 2002 to create and expand work in three high schools (including Red Bank High School, in the School Improvement 2 category) involving 9th grade academies and career academies;
- 2) a five-year up to \$2.5 million National Education Association grant in 2004 awarded to help close the achievement gap by improving student academic performance; recruiting, developing, and retaining highly qualified teachers; increase the rate of

¹⁵ Interview with Krystal Scarbrough, Principal, and Julie Legg, Assistant Principal, Clifton Hills Elementary School, February 2, 2006.

¹⁶ See <http://www.pefchattanooga.org/> for more information about the various funders.

¹⁷ Public Education Foundation, “Many Strategies, One Goal,” 2004 Annual Report, accessed 5/25/06 at <http://www.pefchattanooga.org/images/user/PEF%202004%20Report.pdf>.

students attending college without the need for remediation; and engaging families and the community in student learning;

3) two Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) grants, \$8.1 million in 1998 and \$6.5 million in 2001, to start new magnet schools with the purpose of reducing minority group isolation following the merger; and

4) a National Science Foundation grant first awarded in 2000 and amended in 2005 that to date has amounted to nearly \$5 million to improve student achievement in math and science by focusing on quality teaching and staff development at the district and school level.

Principals note that, in particular, the grants have allowed schools to access quality professional development for teachers that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain.

Principals have the authority to make some budgetary decisions, thus allowing schools more autonomy in allocating resources.

Hamilton County schools have the authority to make budget decisions with some district oversight. Schools are given block grants with great flexibility, but they must demonstrate how their spending aligns with their achievement goals. Schools formally communicate with the finance department regarding how they will use their budgets. The district requires monthly financial reports, which district personnel review and follow up on if problems are found.

Schools determine how to use Title I, Reading First, and other grant funds within expressed grant limits. For example, Clifton Hills Elementary decided to use Title I funds to hire five part-time reading interventionists (who were retired teachers) for 20 hours per week and 10 extended contract teachers who provide services after school. In particular, educators note the flexibility of Title I funding and the willingness of the district finance department to help them make needed budgetary shifts with little notice.

The following excerpt from the Clifton Hills Elementary School Improvement Plan for 2005-06 illustrates schools' ability to direct some of their own funding:

Clifton Hills Elementary will utilize a total of \$521,600 from various sources to operate fiscally. The allocation channeled through the school district to the school is \$13,600. The leadership committee met to review needs and determined how these funds would be allocated. They examined all budgets and then communicated their decision to the remainder of the faculty before the operating budget was submitted to the school district. The Allied Arts Grant of \$8,000 was budgeted collaboratively and distributed equally among grade levels. The \$100,000 grant from the Benwood Foundation which focuses primarily on reading and math was allocated by community and faculty input. The \$200,000 Title I budget was reconfigured by the Administrative Team in the summer due to a deadline given because of the school's target status. The Reading First grant which provides \$200,000 was allocated with input at the school, district, and state level.¹⁸

The principal of Soddy Daisy Middle School noted that they also have budget flexibility within the several Career Ladder contracts they have. They have been able to use both Career Ladder and non-Career Ladder teachers for remediation. The school also has a Title V grant this year – it doesn't qualify for Title I status with just over 40 percent children living in areas with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged families and children from economically students on free and reduced lunch. Title V funds, however, may be allocated to school systems with

¹⁸ Clifton Hills Elementary School Improvement Plan 2005-06, Hamilton County Department of Education, p. 11.

disadvantaged families.¹⁹ Soddy Daisy Middle School uses its \$10,000 Title V grant mostly for student remediation. In addition, the school has a block grant which it can use to pay substitutes when teachers need to attend professional development trainings.

Communication with the community about the district's efforts and successes has been an area of weakness.

In 2005, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University released a study of Hamilton County Schools' central office. The Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) study praised much about the district, including its focus on academic performance, and identified communications as one key area that needed improvement. CORRE participants, the study said, "felt that HCDE does not adequately communicate with key constituencies about student progress, resources, and decisions."²⁰ (See shaded box

on page 11 for more information about the CORRE report process.)

One of the CORRE report's recommendations was that the district make communicating about and marketing the achievements, priorities, and needs of HCDE a district priority. The Superintendent noted in his formal response to the report that he believed the district a few years earlier had "made a mistake...by not putting more resources into communications."²¹ Communicating clearly with the community is essential to school system accountability and to building a broader commitment to public education.

According to Dr. Dan Challener, President of the Chattanooga Public Education Foundation, the district has made great progress in the communications area, but he believes more needs to be done, including work in getting schools' voices heard. Improvement in this area also will expand the potential for collaborative relationships.

One likely obstacle to meaningful communication about public education in Hamilton County resulted from lengthy public dissension concerning school funding between the County Commission on one side and the Superintendent and the Board of Education on the other. According to numerous local newspaper accounts, the County Commission refused, over a five-year period, to provide fiscal increases the school system requested and needed. During that time, the district received several competitive grant awards from national and local foundations. Some influential members of the commission raised concerns that the district was accepting grant awards that would create a future need for local funding increases. In 2004, the district was forced to make budget cuts after five years with no additional funding in local tax rates. In 2005, the county commission relented and authorized an increase in public education funds for schools, which allowed the system to improve teacher salaries, address deferred maintenance needs, and undertake a three-year building program.

The issue apparently still resonates in the community and likely has made open communication more challenging for all stakeholders. A newspaper editorial dated April 18, 2006, reads:

There's a lot that county commissioners could be doing to move the community forward and enhance our potential for quality growth. Specifically, county officials should be supporting ways to improve education, rather than tearing down and publicly tarring the reputation of public schools and the community's rising workforce – the most critical element in any economic development strategy.

It is telling commentary on the present commission's mindset, for example, that in a state that ranks dead last among all 50 states in per-capita support for education, and in a county that strangled the school system for an unprecedented six years

¹⁹ P.L. 107-110, Section 5112, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

²⁰ Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, *Hamilton County Department of Education: Findings and Recommendations from the Central Office Review for Results and Equity*, June 22, 2005, p. 6.

²¹ Hamilton County Department of Education, Central Office Review for Results and Equity, Response – June 22, 2006 – Dr. Jesse B. Register.

before allowing a minimal tax increase to offset inflation last year, the motion to adopt that tax increase barely carried on a narrow 5-4 vote.²²

In July 2005, partly in response to the CORRE report finding, Dr. Register announced a new central office position for a Director of Communications and the reorganization of the communications department. He named an interim director, leaving the position to be filled permanently by the incoming superintendent. The Director of Communications will be charged with both external and internal communications responsibilities.

Opinions among principals within the four Improvement 2 schools about communications within the district are somewhat mixed. All confirm that the “lines of communication” between schools and the district are open and that district level directors spend much of their time in schools. Their communications concerns focus on improving interaction with the public about district and school efforts and successes.

Despite the complaints about communication, it is evident that HCDE leaders and other community stakeholders have sought public involvement in schools in several different ways over the last few years. The CORRE report sprang from an Education Summit organized by Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey in 2003. The summit formed six task forces comprised of community volunteers on subjects ranging from parent involvement to curriculum and reading. The Finance and Statistical Resources Task Force recommended that Hamilton County Schools work with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, a national policy-research and reform-support organization affiliated with Brown University, on a Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) report.²³ Carnegie paid for most of the staff time and travel expenses by Annenberg Institute staff and Annenberg provided additional staff time for data analysis and documentation.²⁴ The Hamilton County CORRE team included about 20 members, including the superintendent, parents, principals, teachers, community members, and union leaders. It began meeting and visiting schools in January 2005, held focus groups and interviews with people throughout the community in April and May, and released its final report in late June 2005.²⁵

Annenberg Institute Reviews HCDE's Central Office

In 2005, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, a national policy-research and reform-support organization affiliated with Brown University, worked with the Hamilton County Department of Education on a Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) report. The CORRE essentially is meant to help a district and community identify key priorities and areas to work on. The Annenberg Institute's School Communities that Work Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts describes a “smart district” as one that:

- 1) provides schools, students, and teachers with needed supports and timely interventions;
- 2) ensures that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and
- 3) makes decisions and holds people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices.

Hamilton County is one of only a handful of school systems that have participated in CORRE. Others include systems in California, New Jersey, Oregon, and Rhode Island.

To further bolster parent communication, the superintendent established monthly Parent Advisory Council meetings beginning in school year 2002-03. The purpose of the council is to establish open communication lines with the parents of children attending Hamilton County Schools and “to give parents an opportunity to have a common voice that will be effective in expressing their suggestions.” Principals may select two parents as council representatives. Minutes from all meetings are posted on the district's web site.

The Public Education Foundation designed a Family Partnership Specialist position, which has been filled in five middle schools associated with the NEA Foundation grant, including Howard School of Academics and Technology. The goal of this program is to communicate with stakeholders and bolster parental and community support. The family partnership specialist positions are funded through the federal Title I program. Dan Challener, President of the PEF, indicates that the foundation is working with the district in the Benwood schools to further develop

²² “For the County Commission,” *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, Editorial, April 18, 2006.

²³ Hamilton County Office of the County Mayor, *Hamilton County Education Summit, Comprehensive Report 2004*, pp. 4-6.

²⁴ Hamilton County Department of Education, *CORRE in Hamilton County, Fact Sheet*, not dated.

²⁵ See the Hamilton County Department of Education web site at www.hcde.org for a copy of the Findings and Recommendations from the district's CORRE report.

the family engagement effort, a difficult goal. Rather than the traditional parent-teacher conference approach, the model now is concerned with showing parents how they can help their children learn more.

In 2004, the district held a series of ten area faculty meetings and four community meetings to ask input on the impact of budget cuts to the classroom and on their suggested priorities for the following year's budget allocations. More than 2,500 teachers and parents attended.²⁶

The district and schools have devised ways to give greater personal attention to each student.

Under Hamilton County's redesign of its high schools, driven in part by the \$8 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the matching \$6 million from PEF, high schools are to meet four goals, one of which concerns student personalization: "Each student will attend a school where she or he will be known well and will complete a course of study that engages that student's passions and interests."²⁷ As a result, each high school has created smaller learning communities – one or more career academies – in each of the district's 17 high schools. Several also have created 9th grade academies to help students transition into the often difficult freshman year. (See also the finding under 'Student Discipline, Attendance, and Dropout' about alternative learning environments for more information on the academies.)

Principals of the two high schools in Improvement 2 status identified additional methods they use to provide assistance during the school day to students, both to act quickly when a student's academic difficulties become apparent and to create a stronger, more positive connection between students and their schools. For example, the executive principal of the Howard School of Academics and Technology carved out an hour during each school day to send failing 9th grade students back to their teachers for help. Called "pause time," it is spent reteaching and retesting failing students. The assistance is designed to teach the lower quartile students for 30 minutes while the middle and higher quartile students are tutored. During the next 30 minutes, the two groups change places. According to the principal, scores are improving and the process has helped teachers develop improved relationships with students.

Howard's principal also started an "Opportunity School" – it provides extra help during the day for students who are failing and who may have a discipline issue that isn't severe enough to remove them from the regular school day. The students receive assistance from a group of six teachers who agreed to teach through their planning periods for this purpose.

At Red Bank High School, the principal notes that its teacher advisory system, in development for about three years, is designed to ensure that students receive teachers' ongoing, personal attention. The advisory concept stems from the Smaller Learning Communities grant. Red Bank staff see the academies as a "collaborative effort that will continue to improve high school outcomes among students at risk of dropping out to keep them motivated and involved...Advisors hope to improve the attendance of their students and provide counsel and support in order to graduate on time."²⁸ During advisory periods built into the regular daily school schedule, teachers are assigned to meet with small groups of students, helping them create personal learning plans, introducing them to career clusters, helping them select courses, and working on students' postsecondary plans as well as employment skills.

The principal at Soddy Daisy Middle School also spoke about ways the school provides early intervention for students. Soddy Daisy Middle School created an "intensive care" unit for students who do not qualify for special education, but may be at risk in other ways. Using district-provided data, the principal identified students who were failing and who also fell into the at-risk category. With the help of a teacher certified in elementary education, the school created a half-day class containing about 19 students, each with individual attention. Most of the focus is on teaching

²⁶ Hamilton County Department of Education, "Hamilton County Schools Under Dr. Jesse Register's Tenure."

²⁷ Public Education Foundation, Schools for a New Society Progress Report Year Two: 2003-04, accessed at www.pefchattanooga.org/www/docs/3.15.html 5/10/06.

²⁸ Red Bank High School, School Improvement Plan, 2005-06, p. 44.

language skills and math. The principal noted that many of the students in this class lack regular study habits and a steady home life, but are intellectually capable. His goals are to accelerate them enough so they can remain within a grade level appropriate to their ages and keep them from eventually dropping out of school.

He also notes that the district no longer provides summer school, having concluded that immediate intervention during the school year is more effective at improving students' learning. At Soddy Daisy, a few weeks after school starts staff begins to consider which students need immediate intervention to prevent them from falling behind. Teachers who provide the intervention also supply the principal with written assurance that a particular student has completed an intervention program in a given subject.

CONCLUSIONS: TEACHING QUALITY

Teacher learning and professional development in Hamilton County Schools is developing into a more school-directed, collaborative, daily function.

Research demonstrates that schools with model professional development for teachers share certain characteristics, including:

- what teachers learn is driven by students' needs, across the whole school, at specific grade levels, and in individual classrooms; and
- teachers learn in a variety of ways, both formally and informally, from outside experts, building trainers, and from each other.

These elements establish the opportunity for teachers' collaborative learning that is embedded in the school day.²⁹

Districts help create this within schools in part by providing useful data, assisting with data analysis and interpretation, and supporting the conditions that foster collaborative learning, such as ongoing opportunities for teachers to spend time together.³⁰ Hamilton County principals describe the district's efforts similarly.

Hamilton County has worked to provide district and outside, grant-funded professional development for both teachers and administrators. Both district and outside professional development options are available, and schools that have developed the capacity to provide teacher training themselves have the flexibility to do so. School officials say that the district fosters opportunities for continuing constructive conversations about teaching and learning among school administrators and teachers, which helps create a more cohesive and focused instructional staff.

School officials at Clifton Hills Elementary, one of the schools receiving funding under the Benwood initiative, indicate that the quality of professional development they receive makes the biggest impact on their teachers. They are able to access high-quality training from both national and international education experts. The five-year Benwood grant focuses on teaching efforts, particularly in literacy, in the district's nine most challenged elementary schools, including Clifton Hills Elementary. Funding is used to train classroom teachers, hire reading specialists to work with struggling readers, hire coaches for new teachers, and place a wide variety of books in all classrooms. Prior to the initiative, eight of the nine Benwood schools were among the 20 lowest performing schools in Tennessee, based on the state's standardized achievement test in use at the time. Most of the students in those schools could not read at grade level in the 3rd grade. Since the initiative, at least 60 percent of 3rd graders in the nine schools have attained the proficient or advanced level on Tennessee's new assessment. According to Hamilton County's data, the

²⁹ WestEd, *Teachers Who Learn, Kids Who Achieve: A Look at Schools with Model Professional Development*, WestEd: San Francisco, CA, 2000, pp. 22-32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

proportion of Benwood 3rd graders scoring at the proficient or advanced levels grew from 53.1 percent to 74.4 percent between 2003 and 2005.³¹

Dr. Dan Challener, President of the Chattanooga Public Education Foundation, describes the district's purposeful shift from professional development to professional learning communities. He notes that in every Benwood school, the daily focus is on strong teaching. Along with the instructional leadership of principals and assistant principals, Benwood schools also have consultants who coach teachers and spend between 30 and 40 days at a school, providing both job-embedded training as well as after-school training. Teachers can experience a deeper kind of learning when a consultant spends time with them in their classrooms every day talking about instruction, much different from the traditional professional development event or workshop.

With the capacity to act as true instructional leaders, the principal and assistant principal at Clifton Hills Elementary frequently lead some training for teachers themselves. Recently, for example, under the Reading First grant terms, only K-3 teachers were provided training in instructional techniques. Realizing that the training was needed for all Clifton Hills elementary teachers, the principal and assistant principal were able to adapt and provide essentially the same training to the school's 4th and 5th grade teachers.

Clifton Hills' leadership staff also emphasizes that the school has embedded professional development within the school day as well as other more informal methods of teacher learning. For example, the school is one of several in the district that have formed Critical Friends Groups (CFG), a PEF-sponsored program that promotes a collaborative effort among teachers. At Clifton Hills, the principal said this group has evolved from a monthly meeting into a weekly faculty night, where teachers and other school personnel usually share the evening meal while discussing topics relevant to the school and its students. Dr. Challener notes that more than 40 HCDE schools have formed over 100 CFGs, including between 600 and 800 teachers. PEF offers an annual five-day training session for prospective CFG coaches and a \$500 stipend, plus \$250 more for meals and materials.

Individual schools in Hamilton County also have the authority to determine the use of funds obtained through Title I and Title V, as well as other grants, for professional development purposes. School officials note that several years ago the district mandated all training for teachers, which meant schools might or might not get what their teachers actually needed. This began to change when the district allowed schools to request site-based professional development by making a proposal to the curriculum department for approval and possible revisions, followed by central office monitoring. School officials at Clifton Hills Elementary indicate that because their abilities to address their own professional development needs have progressed greatly, these transactions between schools and the central office have become largely informal.

The principal and assistant principal at Clifton Hills Elementary also indicate that the school improvement plan contains many of the professional development needs for their school. They note that because the process of creating the plan is collaborative, their teachers play an important role in identifying the school's collective needs.

The district provides bonuses and incentives to high quality educators working in high poverty schools.

Teachers willing to teach in Hamilton County's 13 urban schools qualify for financial incentives, including:

- Retention and Recruitment Bonuses—An annual salary bonus of \$5,000 for three years goes to existing and recruited teachers with records of high performance. (A three-year average of 115+ on the state's value-added assessment system, TVAAS, or a recommendation by the K-3 committee is required.)
- Salary Bonus—Principals at schools whose students achieve high performance are eligible for salary bonuses of \$10,000. (Average TVAAS scores must meet or exceed 115.)

³¹ Claire Handley and Robert A. Kronley, *Challenging Myths: The Benwood Initiative and Education Reform in Hamilton County*, March 2006, p. 5, <http://www.pefchattanooga.org/downloads/challengingmyths.pdf> (accessed Sept. 25, 2006).

- Team Bonus—If any of the eligible schools achieves an average minimum TVAAS score of 115, each teaching professional will receive a salary bonus of \$1,000. If schools achieve an average score of 120 or higher, each receives a salary bonus of \$2,000.
- Housing Incentive—Benwood teachers can buy homes in nine central downtown neighborhoods through the Chattanooga Teacher Next Door Program and receive a loan of up to \$10,000. If they live in the homes for five years, the loan is forgiven. A second mortgage of up to \$20,000 can be applied to the down payment and closing costs.³²

In addition to these incentives, the Osborne Fellows initiative, implemented by the Public Education Foundation, provides 100 Benwood teachers with the opportunity to earn a free master's degree focused on reading, instructional strategies for urban students, and related issues. The program, which began in 2003, is also open to tenured teachers who want to move to Benwood schools. Courses focus on the actual challenges that teachers face in urban settings and are taught by University of Tennessee-Chattanooga faculty, outside experts, and district master teachers and administrators. The program is designed to promote teacher networking both (1) among the Osborne Fellows who work as a group in seminars and study groups within actual classrooms during the two-year program rather than blending with the larger university student body and (2) among entire faculties who benefit from the required project each Fellow must design and share with school colleagues addressing a teaching issue relevant to his or her school.

District officials indicate that teacher turnover, which had been a major problem in the Benwood schools, has dropped since the initiatives' inception. In 2002, 31.4 percent of the Benwood teaching staff were new to those schools – by 2005, the percentage dropped to 17.9 percent.³³ Originally the teacher and principal bonuses were funded by the Mayor's Office and Title I funded the team bonuses. Effective May 2006, federal title money pays for the entire program and will continue throughout the 2006-07 school year. According to staff, ongoing evaluations and funding availability will determine the program's continuation.³⁴

Clifton Hills Elementary administrators note the continuing value of the Osborne initiative: the school, which after the 2005-06 school year will have 14 teachers with the master's degree, gets quality teachers who stay. Once they sign up for the degree, teachers commit to stay for the duration of the program and also make a commitment at completion. Clifton Hills Elementary now has more teachers with a master's degree than the district average.

The district also provides alternative teacher certification in partnership with the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Tuition, fees, and books are paid for those teaching in Title I schools. Those accepted to the program must agree to teach in Hamilton County Schools in a designated critical subject area – for the 2006-07 school year, recruitment efforts are targeted at mathematics (middle and high school), science (middle and high school), foreign language (French and Spanish), and special education.³⁵

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

Leadership development for aspiring, new, and experienced leaders supports the district's focus on instruction.

Through the instructionally-focused principal meetings and a year-long leadership training program established by the Public Education Foundation, Hamilton County develops principals and others who aspire to school leadership as instructional leaders. One of the monthly meetings focuses specifically on the role of the

³² Hamilton County Department of Education, Division of Human Resources, Benwood Schools, www.hcde.org/hr/benwood.htm (accessed 11/1/2005).

³³ Hamilton County Department of Education, "Percentage of Benwood Teaching Staff that are New to the Benwood School," PowerPoint presentation, email to author from Connie Atkins, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources, HCDE, June 15, 2006.

³⁴ Email to author from Connie Atkins, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources, HCDE, June 15, 2006.

³⁵ See http://www.hcde.org/hr/alt_cert.htm for additional information.

principal as instructional leader and the other on the process of change and effecting change in instruction. (See more about the

principal meetings in the 'Goals and Governance' section on page 5.)

Conversations with principals of schools in the Improvement 2 category illustrate that Hamilton County administrators view themselves as instructional leaders. The principal of Howard School of Academics and Technology indicated that she had never come away from one of the principals' meetings without learning something useful to her work. She patterned the structure of her faculty meetings after the principal sessions, no longer holding strictly informational meetings about routine administrative topics, but instead focusing on professionally developing the staff.

Clifton Hills Elementary School's principal and assistant principal frequently lead professional development training for their teachers. Clifton Hills administrators also benefit from Benwood coaches who review and provide feedback on written classroom teacher observations, thus helping them improve classroom instruction via substantive teacher evaluations.

The Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga offers a year-long, 20-day Leadership Fellows program "designed to give emerging leaders in Hamilton County the skills and knowledge needed to participate in decision-making and school improvement."³⁶ Participation is free and is a collaboration between PEF and the district, which provides substitutes for the ten days a leadership fellow is out of the classroom. Any qualified teacher or assistant principal with a total of five years' teaching experience can apply. A class of 30 is selected each year in early May based on applications to and interviews conducted by committees comprised of a principal, a central office representative, and community representatives.

Additional PEF-sponsored leadership training includes:

- Sessions for assistant principals on teacher development, effective teaching, and management skills.
- Veteran principals designated as mentors for new principals, including participation in workshops.
- A leadership seminar series, including a recent four-day series for principals and assistant principals on the Principal as Instructional Leader and a series on the Four Frames of Leadership.
- A leadership book club in which participants (45, currently) read and discuss six books each year.
- A four-day program called "Creating the Learning Centered School" for school leadership teams.
- The Winter Leadership Institute, a two-day learning retreat for 81 principals and selected central office personnel.
- The summer institute, held annually in June, involves all layers of district leaders: principals, assistant principals, leadership fellows, consulting teachers, and central office personnel.
- National level consultants work with clusters of Hamilton County schools on professional development days on improving instruction. Topics have included brain research, research-based strategies to improve student achievement, and cooperative learning.

³⁶ See <http://www.pefchattanooga.org/www/docs/4.355.html>.

CONCLUSIONS: STUDENT DISCIPLINE, ATTENDANCE, AND DROPOUT

The district and schools use data to identify attendance and discipline problems and target preventive efforts.

Attendance continues to be a problem for Hamilton County Schools. The district's 2006 Attendance Summary Report indicates that almost 35 percent of students missed ten or more days of class during the 2005-06 school year. The district routinely reviews monthly attendance and suspension/ discipline rates by school. They look at attendance weekly and sometimes

daily. Social workers compare the discipline report against lists of students referred to them for attendance problems. District staff look at dropout rates on an annual basis and track GEDs monthly.

Interventions vary according to school needs – the district provides the data to schools and schools determine how to address any problems, with district support as needed. As noted in the finding on page 19, the reinstatement of in-school suspension (ISS) has been beneficial to several schools and may, over time, show improvements in attendance rates.

Sheila Young, Associate Superintendent of Secondary Education, said the district formed a task force two years ago to look at the large number of dropouts: 1,263 at the time. Through the task force, the district created a planning position with the responsibility for data collection, transcript review, and meetings with dropouts to determine their reasons for quitting. This study ultimately led to the district creation of the Adult High School, for which they used the guidelines in the state's minimum rules and regulations. In 2004-05, the school graduated over 30 students, and in the following spring another 100-plus students graduated. In December 2005, more than 70 additional students graduated from the Adult High School. Several had dropped out of Hamilton County's high schools – none would have otherwise received a diploma without the school. The Adult High School program does not provide GED classes – it provides only core classes with no electives, although some vocational courses are available. The school has five teachers: two for English, one math, one science, and one social studies.

In addition, data review and analysis partly provided the impetus in Hamilton County to create 9th grade academies in some high schools. Patterned after report results from the Consortium of Chicago School Research, Hamilton County high school principals reviewed student data from the first nine weeks of the first semester of the 9th grade to identify students at risk of dropping out. The Chicago report found that a student in the top quartile of their class in the first semester of 9th grade who fails two semester courses their freshman year is much less likely to graduate than those who were in the bottom quartile and passed all freshman courses.³⁷ Hamilton County results indicated the need to focus more on this population, which led to the creation of the 9th grade academies in some high schools and a 9th grade transition program. Incoming 9th graders go to the school for orientation prior to the start of the school year. Both efforts are promising, but results cannot yet be determined since the programs are relatively new.

Fred Carr, Assistant Superintendent for Technology and Student Services, also indicated that in 2003 the district initiated a truancy program called AIM (Attendance Integrity Model) To Be In School! in partnership with the Chattanooga Housing Authority. When CHA residents sign a lease, they agree that their children will attend school regularly and have no more than ten unexcused absences during the school year. Excessive absences could result in CHA refusing to renew a lease. CHA authorities indicate that during the 2004-05 school year, the AIM program resulted in a 50 percent improvement rate among the number of children missing from school ten or more days unexcused when compared to the previous year.³⁸ The program also uses data to identify critical students who are truant (so those who go to court are likely to be students with whom an

³⁷ Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, "The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation," June 2005, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, pp. 10-11.

³⁸ See www.openingdoors.org/index_files/AIM.htm.

intervention will be effective). In addition, the district also has a liaison with juvenile court and has reorganized school social workers around the issue.

Soddy Daisy Middle School, which had an average attendance rate of 90.9 percent in 2005 (the sole reason it failed to make AYP), indicated that at the time of this review during the 2005-06 school year it increased its rate to 94 percent. The school is in a largely rural area of Hamilton County and the principal noted that attendance sometimes remains an issue related to dates of agricultural importance, when students might help on a family farm. The school uses several approaches to improve student attendance, such as creating incentives to increase attendance on specific days identified through data analysis (incentives include dress-down days, for example); monitoring students with a high incidence of non-attendance and interviewing them one-on-one to try to get at the root of the problem; assigning staff to call every absentee's home every day, particularly noting those with multiple absences; sending letters to parents periodically about the importance of sending their children to school; forming an attendance committee; and staff picking up children at their homes if needed. The principal has found that some students' attendance rates improve once they realize they are not "invisible" to school staff.

Red Bank High School also has looked at zoning changes that have affected the demographics at their school and likely play some part in a low attendance rate, 92.4 in 2005, just under the state target of 93 percent. The school's zone extends to a public housing project that was previously in a different zone. The school identified an issue for students from that area who were given detention – transportation back home was a problem. School officials located a neighborhood community center with a strong support system willing to develop a detention program at the center. The center staff now calls the school about specific students and the two share information about student progress and student needs.

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

The district has implemented multiple alternative learning environments for dropouts and at risk students, as well as providing options for all students.

Hamilton County has created several alternative learning environments and approaches to help prevent students from dropping out, as well as provide a return to high school for those who dropped out and later realized the value of a high school diploma. These include the Adult High School, the Virtual School, Evening Schools at some schools, Middle College High School, career academies at all high schools, and 9th grade academies at some high schools.

The Adult High School offers an opportunity for anyone who is at least 17 years old and who has dropped out of their home school to graduate with a high school diploma. Students may take one course at a time and up to eight courses per year from the staff of five teachers. The school also offers career and technology courses. When a student drops out of a Hamilton County high school, the adult high school staff reviews his or her transcript and calls to offer the student a place in the school. In 2004-05, more than 30 students graduated from the adult high school in December and more than 100 the following spring. In December 2005, over 70 more students graduated. According to PEF staff research, about 40 percent of the students who have graduated from the Adult High School since its inception are enrolled in college.

The Hamilton County Virtual School allows students to recover course credits for graduation thus allowing some students to remain with their entering graduation class. It also offers students a way to take courses their schedules might not otherwise permit. It offers pre-advanced placement and advanced placement courses to students in all schools, as well as courses to students who want to graduate early. Tapping into the district's expertise, the state has awarded Hamilton County a \$2.7 million grant to develop online courses that will be used statewide. (See page 20 for more on the virtual school.)

Some schools, including Red Bank High School and Howard School of Academics and Technology, have created Evening Schools. Students may attend an Evening School because of

attendance, truancy, or other behavior issues. Some may also attend who for various reasons, such as work obligations, cannot attend the Adult High School. Some participating students are solely evening students, and others are day students attending to catch up on credits. The district evaluates the Evening School program annually.

The district has a Middle College High School at Chattanooga State Technical Community College (CSTCC), which serves students who want an academic challenge beyond high school courses in a nontraditional setting. It is a dual enrollment program with flexible scheduling. Most courses are taught by CSTCC instructors.

Every high school in Hamilton County has one or more career academies that students choose to be part of. Largely the result of the Carnegie Comprehensive High School Reform initiative, many of the academies are in their first year in 2005-06. Howard School of Academics and Technology has academies in the following areas: Engineering and Construction Technology; Health Science and Human Services; and Multimedia and Information Technology. Red Bank High School has Health Careers, Education, Leadership, and Major Studies academies.

The academies help schools foster collaborative community relationships that result in student learning outside the school. Red Bank, for example, has established partnerships with the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, several local hospitals, and the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Medical Society for its Health Career Academy; and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Covenant College, Southern University, and Lee University for its Education Academy.

Several high schools, including Red Bank High School and Howard School of Academics and Technology, have developed 9th grade academies funded in part through a Smaller Learning Communities grant. The academies represent a way to improve students' connection to their school and to decrease drop out rates. Teachers in Red Bank's 9th grade academy teach only 9th grade. One wing of the school is devoted to the academy and the teachers have common planning periods. The principal said early results indicate an improvement in discipline and in teacher satisfaction with the 9th graders.

Additionally, some schools have created other ways to ensure more one-on-one attention for students. At Howard School of Academics and Technology, every adult on staff meets with an assigned group of students daily. The adults' role as an advocate at Howard is to encourage school attendance, call home when the student is absent, and keep tabs on the student's grades and academic progress. Red Bank High School has an advisory system similar to Howard's program—teachers meet daily with small groups of students to provide personalized assistance. (See also page 12 for more about Red Bank's program.)

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

The district reinstated in-school suspension.

The district terminated in-school suspension (ISS) a few years ago because of budget constraints, but as of 2005-06 ISS has been reinstated in all Hamilton County middle schools. The district decided to direct district money into ISS after reviewing system-wide suspension rates and patterns of attendance. It has also identified student behavior at the high school level as an area of weakness and has placed four ISS monitors in four high schools with the greatest need. Some other schools, such as Clifton Hills Elementary, also have small ISS programs.

Principals place a high value on ISS, noting a reduction in suspension rates. Schools use ISS Coordinators in various ways. Soddy Daisy Middle School uses its ISS Coordinator to call parents of absent students, paying particular attention to those with multiple absences. Clifton Hills Elementary was able to rearrange staffing to have a position to operate ISS for a small group of students. That person was also trained in small group reading instruction, so ISS time can also be used to help Clifton Hills students with reading.

CONCLUSIONS: INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

The district is dissatisfied with the motives and quality of many SES providers.

District officials note several concerns associated with supplemental education services (SES) providers in Hamilton County.

Although the district is prohibited by federal law from providing these services because of its school improvement status, private providers are allowed to employ the district's own teachers as tutors and provide services using district facilities. Providers frequently charge the maximum amount allowed for services that district officials say are not always good quality. According to district officials, Title I can serve children for \$500 per child, but SES providers charge Title I up to \$1,400 per child.

Providers, who are state-approved, often persuade parents to enroll their children by using offers such as gift cards to popular retail stores. District officials believe this approach entices many parents, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, to place their children in programs because of the incentives rather than because the program is the best choice academically. In addition, providers are not required to conduct pre- and post-testing to determine program effectiveness.

District officials believe they could provide better quality services for less money if they did not have to set aside 20 percent of their Title I funds for SES. Because of this constraint on the district budget, officials had to discontinue some previously existing tutoring programs that evaluators from the University of Memphis rated as adequate and above average. Some private providers that were rated marginally by the same evaluators have been allowed to serve as SES providers. (Some district schools have been able to continue some before- or after-school programs using federal title monies where available.)

Hamilton County district officials believe that providers should be required to charge a standard rate, disclose any incentive bonuses, and have pre- and post-testing to assure effectiveness. However, they would also prefer that the district be allowed to provide those services.

(See the Office of Education Accountability's state report, State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools, for a related finding.)

The state has funded a significant expansion of the district's virtual school offerings.

In December 2005, the Tennessee Department of Education awarded Hamilton County a \$2.7 million grant to develop seven virtual school courses, which will eventually be available statewide. District officials indicate that Hamilton County was chosen because of its extensive experience developing online content.

The district began work in virtual schools about five years ago in part to help students prepare for Gateway testing. Since 2003, the district has had a team of technology specialists and teachers knowledgeable about technology focused on developing state standards-based coursework.

The e4TN grant covers three years – during the first year, already underway, Hamilton County has 15 core high school teachers spending full-time developing high school courses. The second year will expand the work to middle schools and complete the high school work – the district currently uses vendor courses at the middle school level. Year three will complete work for the middle schools and focus largely on elementary schools. All courses must be developed according to Tennessee standards, and geared toward all students rather than a particular achievement level. The grant requires Hamilton County to use 25 percent of grant funds for ongoing, sustained,

intensive, and high quality professional development aimed at integrating technology into curricula and instruction, content creation, and using technology to create new learning environments.³⁹

District officials say technology is an area that hasn't yet recovered from budget cuts.

Hamilton County has a personnel shortage of programmers and technicians in Information Services. The district currently employs 30 technology-related personnel, six of which are in the schools on a daily basis. The district would like to hire an additional 35 technicians as well as five additional technical coordinators.

The district also lacks sufficient capital funds to buy computers for schools – something district officials say they were able to do four years ago, prior to budget cuts. The district-wide ratio of computers to students is about three to one – however, officials say this figure is somewhat inflated because it includes all lab computers as well as every computer that works at all, not taking into account the age and capability of each machine.

Officials indicate that the automated services request system for technology-related requests from schools, however, is fully implemented and working well. One full-time person operates the help desk, but the shortage of technical staff means they cannot always respond to requests in a timely manner and that they must prioritize responses as efficiently as possible. To assist the district in prioritizing, given the staff shortages, each school has a designated technology contact (usually a teacher). The district prefers that any contact regarding technology problems come through the technology contact.

The shortage also affects classroom instruction. The district has implemented computer-based math programs for middle schools, but is short 25 high school labs because of funding shortages. They have pushed for change in math instruction, implementing Carnegie's Cognitive Tutor program in algebra, which integrates interactive software sessions, text, and teacher-led classroom sessions. District officials note that the system has 5,000 students taking Algebra I – to complete implementation using this program would cost \$4 million.

As one means to address teachers' needs for technology training, the district developed 15 online staff development courses. The courses are not required, but district staff estimate that, as of the end of the 2005-06 school year, about 450 teachers had accessed the online courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although it is experiencing a change in leadership, the district should maintain its focus on student learning through improving classroom instruction.

Sustaining educational reform is challenging, based on experiences in other urban districts. Researchers acknowledge that it is unusual for systems to maintain focused reform efforts long enough to make real differences – from that perspective, Hamilton County is just beginning its effort. Reviewers of reforms in Houston and Chicago note the positive school improvements in those two systems are the result of long-term efforts based on clarity of mission, consistency in approach, and openness to evidence – that is, adjustments in approaches occur as the result of systematic consideration about what is working and what is not.⁴⁰

A change in leadership often signals other changes. Although Hamilton County should remain flexible and allow improvements and changes where warranted, district leadership needs to ensure that the focus remains on improving student learning through creating high quality instruction in every school. Much of Hamilton County's promising approaches could inform the work of other

³⁹ Tennessee Department of Education, Press Release: School Districts Awarded Grants for Advanced Online Coursework, Dec. 6, 2005, <http://www.state.tn.us/education/news/nr/2005/nr051206.htm> (accessed Sept. 25, 2006).

⁴⁰ Paul T. Hill, "A New Reform Agenda for Houston's Public Schools," *Education Next*, Fall 2001, pp. 20-23.

Tennessee school systems, as well as urban systems in other states, but the effort must be sustained over time.

The district should make open communications with all stakeholders a priority.

Although the district and other actors in Hamilton County have undertaken various efforts to communicate with the public – surveying attitudes and opinions of students, the business community, and others; convening groups of parents to keep them informed and get feedback; and forming focus groups on various education-related topics – the CORRE report found that the district needs to make this a priority. Others in the community support that recommendation.

Dr. Register responded by creating a director-level communications position, which the incoming superintendent will fill with a permanent candidate. A stronger communications effort could help the district by making successes better known to the public and also providing the public with information that make district decisions more understandable. Recently, the public responded negatively to the district's announcement that 21 principals were being moved to different schools in the next school year. Little explanation accompanied the district announcement and media accounts in the following days indicated that the administration seemed to be avoiding a response.⁴¹ Although the district cannot make everyone in the community agree with all its decisions, more direct communication with the public would at least put on record the district's reasons for its actions.

Shortly after the district's announcement about principals' moves, the district convened a public meeting to celebrate the success of the Benwood schools. Such acknowledgements about the positive achievements of students in Hamilton County schools should occur regularly to allow the public to celebrate school accomplishments as well.

HCDE should look into filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education to allow the district to provide supplemental education services.

At least ten districts in the country have formally requested to provide supplemental education services from the U.S. Department of Education, and most are expected to be granted. Chicago and Boston have been approved by the U.S. Department to provide supplemental services. A request to provide such services by HCDE would likely be considered.

⁴¹ Beverly A. Carroll, "Parents up in arms over school principal changes," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, May 12, 2006; David Carroll, "Register Responds to Principal Moves," *Eyewitness News 3 School Patrol*, May 18, 2006.

APPENDIX A – PERSONS CONTACTED

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Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources,
Hamilton County Department of Education
(HCDE)

Pat Bowers
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Fred Carr
Former Assistant Superintendent of Technology
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Dale Isabell
Chief Financial Officer, HCDE

Robert S. Jenkins
Principal, Soddy Daisy Middle School

Christie Jordan
Director of Accounting and Budgets, HCDE

Kirk Kelly
Director of Accountability and Testing, HCDE

Wade Kelley
Former Principal, Red Bank High School

Julie Legg
Former Assistant Principal, Clifton Hills
Elementary School

Lucille Phillips
Director of Federal Programs, HCDE

Dr. Jesse Register
Former Superintendent, HCDE

Krystal Scarborough
Principal, Clifton Hills Elementary School

Rick Smith
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Note that former OREA staff members Corey Chatis and Jessica Lewis also assisted with this project.