

Chapter 1: Overview

Background of the Problem

This inquiry project focused on using the gap analysis framework to examine the implementation of school reforms in making two high schools highly effective. This chapter provides an overview of school reform policies—in particular, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The response to such policies are also explored, as well the challenges school districts face. The chapter concludes with the importance and purpose of this project, providing context for where the project was carried out.

Educational access, academic performance, and educational attainment remain the centerpieces of educational reform policies at the federal, state, and local levels. Following the landmark 1954 court decision, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* (which declared racial segregation in Southern school systems unconstitutional), federal policies have aggressively sought to remedy the practice of providing unequal educational opportunities to particular groups of students—a practice that, in many cases, has been tolerated by state and local policymakers (Kirst, 2004). During the past five decades, the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act of 1965 (ESEA), the Coleman Report, A Nation at Risk, Goals 2000, and the Improving America's Schools Act have radically shaped the culture of American education, creating a culture that currently seeks educational excellence for all students through academic standards, funding equity, and systemic accountability.

No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 is the latest and most comprehensive of all educational policies that have followed the *Brown* decision. NCLB addresses access, performance, and attainment with provisions driven by standards and accountability, to hold schools and districts accountable for teacher quality, instructional practices, and student performance (Stecher, Hamilton, & Gonzalez, 2003). Specifically, NCLB intends to improve student outcomes by establishing and measuring against academic performance standards, with the expectation that 100% of all students perform at the proficient or advanced level in reading and math on state adopted standardized tests by the end of the 2014 school year. The ultimate goal of this federal mandate is to afford all students a quality education and access to post-secondary careers.

In response to the standards-based accountability context set by NCLB, school districts across the country continue their aggressive efforts to successfully implement comprehensive reform strategies to meet this federal policy's noble but daunting expectations, especially those expectations that pertain to student performance. Popular school reform strategies aimed at engendering academic parity among all student groups typically include some combination of curricular alignment, building teacher capacity, reading and math interventions, common formative assessments, and targeted resources (Carter, 2001). An important part of these efforts is the need to use a data-based approach, as it is central to improvement (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). In education, the use of data assure that the right problems or barriers to student performance are being targeted, that resources

are used most effectively, that solutions are implemented, and that solutions are monitored and adjusted on a continuous basis.

Problematic Situation

Despite the accountability measures of the No Child Left Behind Act and the many accountability provisions found in state and district policies, establishing parity in educational access, academic performance, and educational attainment among all student groups continues to remain elusive. At the national level, minority and economically disadvantaged students continue to trail their White and Asian counterparts on various achievement tests, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). For example, in 2007 44% of White students and 46% of Asian students in Grade 8 were proficient or above in reading, compared to only 13% of Black students and 16% of Latino students. In math, 51% of White students and 67% of Asian students in Grade 8 were proficient or above, while only 12% of Black students and 17% of Latino students scored at this performance level. This disparity in academic performance between ethnic groups corresponds to a veritable disparity in educational attainment. In 2006, for instance, White students registered a dropout rate of 5.8%, Black students 10.7%, and Latino students—although a decrease from previous years—a rate of 22.1% (NCES, 2007).

In California, trends in student performance and educational attainment in recent years have striking similarities to those observed at the national level. Data from the 2007 California Standards Test (CST) reveal that 62% of White students

and 64% of Asian students were proficient in English-language arts, compared to only 36% of Black students and 26% of Latino students. In math, 36% of White students and 45% of Asian students performed at the proficient or above level, compared to only 23% of Black students and 16% of Latino students. As for educational attainment, in 2007 White students posted a dropout rate of 8%, Asian students 5.5%, Black students 23.9%, and Latino students 18.3% (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.).

Importance of the Problem

It is imperative that policymakers and educational leaders find solutions to bring parity in educational access, academic performance, and educational attainment among all student groups to keep America vibrant and competitive in global economic markets. Addressing and meeting the educational shortcomings of ethnic minorities must be the national priority, given that current labor patterns show a growing demand for well-educated, technology savvy workers with strong cognitive skills—skills that include abstract reasoning, problem-solving, and effective communication (Karoly & Panis, 2004). This demand for a better-prepared workforce intensifies at a time when the percentage of ethnic minorities in U.S. population exceeds 33%. With Latinos being the fastest growing of all ethnic groups, the PEW Institute projects that by the year 2050, Latinos alone will represent 30% of the population (Pew Institute, 2008). In other words, 30% of America's population alone will be comprised of an ethnic group with a history of low-academic performance and a high dropout rate.

These market and demographic trends are especially critical to school districts that serve ethnic minorities—especially the districts that oversee one or more of the nearly 2,000 high schools nationwide that are deemed “dropout factories” for having dropout rates that exceed 40% (Tucci, 2009)—as these school districts have a moral obligation to successfully address current educational practices to improve the academic performance and educational attainment of ethnic minorities, particularly among Latinos. If ignored, these trends will likely produce an educational and economic breakdown of catastrophic proportions, as the number of students who fail to meet proficiency standards or dropout of school altogether will skyrocket, producing a workforce that is cognitively anemic and incapable of sustaining the nation’s economic vitality. This ill-prepared workforce will, in fact, adversely impact the American economy by exacerbating the ongoing financial losses exclusively attributed to low academic performance, which reached a staggering \$2.5 trillion between 1990 and 2002 (Hanushek, 2007).

The State Context

School reform policy conventionally includes two components, funding and regulation. In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act. The ultimate goal of NCLB is to afford all students a quality education and access to post-secondary education and careers. Specifically, NCLB intends to improve student outcomes and to hold schools and school districts accountable by establishing, measuring against, and reporting academic performance standards. In California, the annual academic accountability

requirements consist of the state accountability measure known as Academic Performance Index Report (API) and the federal accountability measure known as Adequate Yearly Progress Report (AYP) (CDE, n.d.).

The Academic Performance Index Report (API) is the state academic performance accountability system, mandated by the state's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999. The API indicates a school's progress year to year based on statewide test results. The API is a number that ranges from 200 to 1000, and the state target for all schools to meet is 800. If a school falls below 800, it must meet annual growth targets until that goal is attained. If a school meets or exceeds 800, it is expected to maintain an academically rigorous environment for all students. In addition to meeting API growth targets for the whole school, a school must also meet API growth targets for all numerically significant subgroups (at least 100 students or at least 50 students who make up 15% or more of the student population). The subgroups include African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Filipino, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, English Learners, and Students with Disabilities (CDE, n.d.).

The Adequate Yearly Progress Report (AYP) is the federal academic performance accountability system, mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The AYP indicates how successful schools and school districts are in attaining common standards of academic performance. Each year AYP targets increase until 2013-14, when all schools must have 100% of their

students proficient or advanced on statewide tests. For high schools to make AYP, four requirements must be met: (1) student participation rate (95%) on statewide tests, (2) percentage of students scoring at the proficient level or above in English-language arts (55.6%) and mathematics (54.8%) on statewide tests, (3) API Growth (680 or 1-point growth), and (4) graduation rate (83.2% or +0.1% one-year change or +0.2% two-year change). Furthermore, a school or school district that receives Title I funds will be identified for Program Improvement (PI) if it does not make AYP for two years in a row. A PI school must notify its parents and guardians about its status and offer supplemental services to students. To exit PI, a school must make AYP for two years in a row (CDE, n.d.).

Although API and AYP provide information about school performance, one shortcoming is that these accountability systems can oversimplify the intricate components of student achievement at each school. For example, a school can meet API with a score of 850 but fail to make AYP if a subgroup missed the mathematics target on the statewide test. On the other hand, a school can be below the API target with 625 but make AYP if all subgroups meet the statewide proficiency targets.

Furthermore, fixed targets can obscure school progress data and thereby penalize schools unfairly (Linn, 2005). To illustrate, a low-performing school can increase ten percentage points toward a proficiency target but since the target was not met, the school's improvement is not captured in making AYP. On the contrary, a high-performing school can drop ten percentage points, but if the proficiency targets have been exceeded, the school remains off any watch list. In other words, a

low-performing school can show gains similar to a high-performing school, but NCLB treats the low-performing school as failing because of its use of mean proficiency measures (Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

Additionally, although the mission of NCLB is to highlight student groups that traditionally have been underserved, the subgroup reporting method means that a school serving a diverse student population has more ways to fail making AYP (Linn, 2005). For instance, most urban high schools in California have a range of numerically significant subgroups (i.e., various racial/ethnic groups, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, English Learners, and Students with Disabilities), whereas a school in an affluent neighborhood may only be responsible for one subgroup meeting proficiency targets. Kim and Sunderman (2005) report that in schools with only one subgroup target, 22% failed to make AYP, whereas 75% of schools with six subgroup targets failed to make AYP. Likewise, Elmore (2002b) testifies that such external accountability measures intensify the inequalities between low-performing and high-performing schools because they merely echo the social capital of the students instead of a school's organizational capacity. In sum, although NCLB has produced initial gains amongst students with low achievement in our nation's public schools, there remain many challenges within the accountability system that warrant attention in order for NCLB to justly close the achievement gap in the long run.

The District Context

The Rowland Unified School District is located in the San Gabriel Valley and serves students in grades K-12 from several local communities, including the cities of Rowland Heights, City of Industry, and parts of the cities of La Puente, Hacienda Heights, and West Covina. The school district serves a linguistically and ethnically diverse population of approximately 16,500 students. For example, Latino students account for 60% of the student population, followed by Asians students at 20.8%, Filipino students at 8.3%, White students at 3.7%, and African American students at 2.4%. Of the district's total population, 34.1% were classified as English language learners (ELL) (R-30 Report, 2009).

The RUSD is currently recognized as a good school district as measured by numerous awards, including 4 National Blue Ribbon Schools, 1 mention in Newsweek Magazine's America's Top High Schools, and 16 California Distinguished Schools. However, the district's API score of 777 remains below the state standard of 800, the minimum score required to be considered a high-performing district. Additionally, during the 2009-2010 school year, the district entered year one as a Program Improvement district under NCLB accountability guidelines for not meeting district-wide AYP benchmarks among its Hispanic/Latino, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and English language learner subgroups for a second consecutive year.

The district's two high schools, Nogales and Rowland, serve relatively different populations of students. For example, of the total student body at Nogales High School, Latino students account for 77% of the population, followed by

Filipino students at 10.7%, Asian students at 3.46%, African American students at 3.29%, and White students at 2.5%. Additionally, 67% of the student body is represented by students considered to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 27% of students are classified as English language learners (NHS SARC, 2009).

Meanwhile, of the total student body at Rowland High School, Asian students account for 44.5%, while Latino students account for 35.6%. The remainder of the population is represented by Filipino students at 8.6%, Whites students at 7.3%, and African American students at 3.0%. In addition, 37% of the student body is considered be socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 18% of the students are classified English language learners (RHS SARC, 2009).

RHS is currently a California Distinguished School, a National Blue Ribbon School, and an International Baccalaureate World School. Yet, based on data from 2009, it remains below the state's API standard of 800—albeit, by only three points, with a score of 797. Also, the school failed to meet the AYP benchmark in English-language arts among its English language learner subgroup.

NHS is also an International Baccalaureate World School, but based on data from 2009, remains below the state's API standard of 800, with a score of 695. Moreover, the school failed to meet the AYP benchmark in English-language arts among its Hispanic/Latino, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and English language learner subgroups. Additionally, the school failed to meet its AYP in math among its English language learner subgroup.

District Request for Assistance

The overall challenge communicated this year by the administration at the RUSD is to exit from its Program Improvement (PI) status. The RUSD was identified as a PI Year 1 school under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. NCLB requires that federally funded Title 1 schools be reviewed annually to determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Stecher et al., 2003).

According to Goldberg and Morrison (2003), there are several accountability issues underlying the problem of the RUSD's PI Year 1 status. First, it is a *bureaucratic accountability* problem because educators at NHS and RHS are accountable to federal and state rules and regulations regarding student achievement and may face sanctions for not meeting them. This represents an external locus of control, where educators are held accountable under NCLB for student outcomes as measured by the California Standards Test (CST). Additionally, a *professional accountability* problem exists at the RUSD for the administration and teachers, who should possess sophisticated knowledge that facilitates critical decision-making in favor of their clients, the students. All staff should communicate and embody high expectations for the students and offer a rigorous curriculum for every learner. Furthermore, the RUSD has a responsibility under *community accountability* to meet a public demand, which includes parents, to provide the best education possible for their students. When community accountability is executed properly, schools and communities can cultivate trust and support, gaining allies and resources to help each other achieve their intertwined missions. Lastly, the students are accountable to

themselves and are responsible for their performance on the CST and graduating from high school.

Purpose of the Project

The Rowland Unified School District, which serves a predominantly ethnic minority student population, has responded to external pressures with a comprehensive school reform effort to support good instruction, enhance learning at the elementary and middle school levels for Latino students, and make its two high schools highly effective in both perception and reality. This project was undertaken by a three-person team and focused exclusively on the implementation of the district's reform efforts at the district's two high schools, Nogales and Rowland. The team used a consulting model based on the gap analysis framework, with the purpose of analyzing the reform efforts to identify potential causes of student performance gaps. The major goal of this project was to provide the district with a set of recommendations to maximize the impact of its reform efforts at the two high schools. The team was guided by the following questions:

- What were the school district's goals?
- What were the perceived root causes/gaps?
- What solutions were proposed?

A Note on Common Text

Due to the thematic dissertation format, the project team wrote the following sections jointly. In Chapter 2, the Methodology and the Findings were collaborative

efforts. In Chapter 3, the entire chapter was co-authored, including the Recommendations Literature Review and the Recommendations Summary.