

Wallington Boro School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Wallington Boro School District is based on a School District Assessment Survey completed by the district in July 2008, and a site visit performed by a team of New Jersey Department of Education (Department) personnel¹ on December 1, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.²

Background

The Wallington Boro School District, located in Bergen County, educates children in grades K-12. The district has three schools, the Frank Gavlak Elementary School, serving K-6 grades, the Jefferson Elementary School, serving grades K-3, and the Wallington Junior-Senior High School, serving grades 7-12. The total K-12 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 1,148, and 21.86% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 district enrollment has declined by 6.89% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group (DFG) B. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and state aid calculations for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years are detailed below and are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

District Assessment Survey

In July 2008, the Wallington Boro School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need. Wallington described its needs as primarily stemming from the demographics of its student population and in particular the fact that a large proportion speaks a language other than English at home. In addition, the district noted that the age and unsuitable condition of its facilities hampered its ability to deliver quality educational services to the students in the district.

According to the district, over 50% of its students come from families where English is a second language. The vast majority of these families speak Polish. The district states that these language barriers impact the district's ability to progress in the area of language arts, particularly in the State assessment and SATs. In addition, the district faces challenges communicating with parents and passing school budgets. District budgets failed 29 years in a row before passing in four of the previous nine years. According to the survey response, the district is addressing these challenges by focusing on language arts at every level, offering a Language Immersion Program after school for

¹ The DOE site team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Rochelle Hendricks, Assistant Superintendent, Donna Arons, Special Assistant, Joan Saylor, Director, Aaron Graham, Bergen County Executive County Superintendent and John Boreman, Bergen County Executive County Business Administrator.

² The district is also scheduled to be monitored by the Department pursuant to the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) system, N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-3 et seq., during the fall of 2009.

limited English students (when funding permits) and employing four full-time English as Second Language (ESL) teachers. In addition, the district prepares most of the parent mailings in English/Polish and retains a good representation of Polish-speaking staff.

Despite these efforts, the district indicated that it needs additional funding to continue the Language Immersion Program and to expand it to serve adults in the community. Wallington also identified the following additional staffing needs to address the issues facing its at-risk population: Basic Skills math teachers in the Jefferson School and junior/senior high school, Gifted & Talented Coordinator/Teacher, counselor for the Jefferson School, and a second principal for the two elementary schools administered by the same principal.

With respect to its facilities needs, the district indicated in the survey that it believes it does not have sufficient space to deliver the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS). According to the district, the Jefferson School has no gymnasium, computer lab, related arts room or room dedicated to language immersion. One floor has no lavatory provisions. The school has trailers that house four classrooms. The Gavlak School has insufficient space for special education (three teachers meet in the same room), no room for art or music programs and no computer lab. The school has a trailer that houses two classes. The Wallington Junior/Senior High School is also cramped, with an abandoned wood shop used for storage and instruction. None of the schools have auditoriums or cafeterias. The district believes that a minimum of eight additional classrooms are needed for the Jefferson School, six additional classrooms for the Gavlak School and three additional classrooms for the junior/senior high school. The district indicated that it will also need additional space to provide a preschool program.

Despite the challenges facing the district, Wallington indicated in its survey response that it has a curriculum that is fully aligned with the NJCCCS and is implemented in all grade levels. The district's textbooks, instructional materials and technology are also aligned to the board-approved curriculum and the NJCCCS. All of the teachers in the district are Highly Qualified, as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The district provides gifted and talented services in all grades and Advanced Placement (AP) courses at the high school level. Currently, 17% of the students participate in AP courses. The district has a graduation rate of over 90%.

The district conducts an analysis of all assessment scores for each grade level annually, comparing them to the same grade level the prior year, the previous grade (cohort study) the prior year, building to building (grade 3), DFG groups, county and State scores. The district examines the results and revises curriculum scope and sequence, staffing, procedures and professional development as a result.

The district does not have an Alternative Education program, but has a successful early intervention program. Intervention and Referral Service (IRS) committees meet monthly at the elementary and secondary levels to discuss "at-risk" students and to develop strategies for assistance and intervention. The district has a full-time counselor who assists with all non-educational issues. Wallington has an in-school suspension rate

of 6% and an out-of-school suspension rate of 3.5% The district also offers a Saturday Enrichment Program for six weeks in the fall and six weeks in the summer for grades 2-10, as well as its Language Immersion Program.

Wallington has a special education classification rate of approximately 10% which is less than the state average classification rate of 14.69% on which the School Funding Reform Act's (SFRA) census-based funding is calculated. It sends approximately 30 children a year to out-of-district placements. The district does not have a backlog in conducting the required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs and all IEPs are implemented as written.

The district further indicated in its survey response that it has embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas, that all classrooms and offices have Internet access and that tech-based lessons are required of all teachers on at least a weekly basis. Wallington has a Technology Coordinator and a Technology Assistant, who are responsible for the planning, implementation, installation, maintenance and budgeting for the technology program. All of the district's buildings have the necessary equipment, connectivity and technical support necessary to provide e-learning opportunities in all learning environments. Specifically, the district has fiber optic connectivity, desktops and internet in every classroom, wireless laptops, media centers with desktop and wireless access, projection systems, interactive whiteboards and distance learning.

Finally, in its response to the survey, the district also identified other additional staffing shortfalls, including a Substance Abuse Counselor (SAC) for the elementary school level, additional social studies teacher to reduce class size, media specialist for the Jefferson School and an elementary school secretary.

Site Visit

On December 1, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to Wallington and met with district administrators. During the course of this conversation, the team from the district discussed Wallington's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals, as well as the challenges still facing the district.

Wallington Boro is a small municipality of 11,000 to 12,000 inhabitants that occupies approximately one square mile. It has a large Polish immigrant population, with the result that over 50% of the students in the Wallington Boro School District come from homes where English does not predominate. The district addresses this challenge through enhanced ESL classes and an emphasis, particularly at the elementary level, on language arts literacy. The Department notes that the special needs of at-risk and Limited English Proficient students were specifically addressed during the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA's determination of additional weights for such students in determining funding for the district.

Wallington's efforts have proven largely successful in terms of student performance as measured by the State assessments. All schools in Wallington have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. For school year 2007-2008, the district achieved proficiency rates of 78% on the ASK4 language arts assessment, 81% on the ASK4 mathematics assessment, 85% on the ASK8 language arts assessment, 71% on the ASK8 mathematics assessment, 87% on the HSPA language arts assessment and 85% on the HSPA mathematics assessment. The district has a high graduation rate of over 90%.

The district has a basic skills instruction program to assist struggling students. Assignment to the program is based on a student's scores on the State assessments. In the Gavlak School, there are full-time language arts and math basic skills instructors. At Jefferson, there is one teacher for basic skills. At the junior/senior high school, there are two basic skills teachers for language arts, and one for mathematics. The district would like to hire an additional one half- to full-time teacher for basic skills math instruction at the junior/senior high school and one for the Jefferson School. Approximately 10% of the students in the elementary school and 20% of the students at the middle school level receive basic skills instruction.

The district's curriculum is fully aligned with the NJCCCS and is available electronically. Lesson plans are also online. Class sizes range from 18 to 20 students per class. The Department notes that the staffing ratios identified as part of the development of the SFRA are 18:1 in elementary school and 20:1 in middle and high school. Wallington's specialist teachers (e.g. art, music) are shared by the two elementary schools. Art and music take place in the elementary school regular classrooms, and instrumental music is provided to children in grades 4-6 on the stage in the Gavlak School. World language instruction (Spanish) begins in kindergarten, and is delivered in person by a certified teacher.

Wallington administrators noted that the district has a good technological infrastructure. There are computers in all of the classrooms and media centers and all buildings are connected to the Internet.

Wallington is a universal preschool district pursuant to the SFRA. According to the district, its eligible universe is approximately 178 children. It currently does not provide a preschool program. The district is developing plans to meet the SFRA requirements, but the main constraint is a lack of space for preschool classrooms. The district states that there are also no private providers in the community, so the district is exploring sites outside of the municipality.

The district received a 20% increase in State aid under the SFRA in 2008-2009, amounting to \$521,147. It used this increase in aid to address what it felt were its most critical needs, namely, balancing its budget, purchasing supplies, and maintaining an after-school program, an enhanced instructional program for LEP students and a Saturday enrichment program. It did not increase its staffing except to add a part-time person to

assist with technological needs. The district also used a portion of its State aid increase to expand its interactive whiteboard technology.

Facilities

During the site visit, district administrators emphasized that the district's most critical need was to upgrade and expand its facilities. The district would like to replace the Jefferson School with a new school and reconfigure the elementary school such that the new school would serve preschool through grade 3 and Gavlak would serve grades 4-6. There are also renovations and upgrades required for Gavlak and the junior/senior high school. At the time of the site visit, the district was in the early stages of planning these construction projects. Wallington was aware of the amendments to the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c.39 (EFCFA), which authorizes additional funding for school facilities projects in regular operating districts. Subsequent to the site visit, the district applied for State funding for these projects, and was awarded funds to renovate and expand the Jefferson Elementary School in the second round of funding. The plans include expanding the school by 40,700 square feet, which will include 16 general classrooms, small group instruction room, art room, media center, multi-purpose room and kindergarten classrooms, and upgrading various building systems. The estimated total cost of the project is \$19,786,288, with a state share of \$3,506,107 and a local share of \$16,280,181.

School Funding Reform Act

The Wallington Boro School District received a 20% (\$521,147) increase in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY08-09 and will receive a 5% (\$153,013) increase in State aid in FY09-10. Under the formula, the district's "adequacy budget" is calculated by multiplying the district's K-12 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649.³ The district's enrollment of middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students are then multiplied by the additional weights of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget includes an additional weight of .47 for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$1,007,956 in FY08-09, and \$1,182,441 for FY09-10. The adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of .5 for each Limited English Proficiency child, which amounted to total of \$404,872 in FY08-09 and \$308,463 in FY09-10.⁴ The district's State equalization aid is calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and the district's local fair share. For FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$10,615,626, which is based on its district-wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, per pupil property wealth of \$1,009,359 and per pupil income of \$186,962. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$10,982,170, as its per pupil property wealth is \$1,063,904 and its per pupil income is \$207,096.⁵ For

³ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

⁴ Once the components of the adequacy budget are summed, each district's adequacy budget is multiplied by a Geographic Cost index number to reflect regional cost differences.

⁵ In FY09-10, the district's per pupil property wealth and per pupil income exceeded the State averages.

both years, the district's prior year tax levy exceeded its local fair share,⁶ and the district's adequacy budget exceeded its prior year spending. If these trends continue, the Department anticipates that the district will continue to receive increases in funding pursuant to the SFRA in future years.

The funding formula under SFRA also provides for categorical security aid as well as aid for transportation and special education. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-46, every three years the Commissioner will re-evaluate and recommend to the Governor and Legislature any appropriate changes to the funding elements of the SFRA (such as the State average classification rate for general special education students and the additional weights for at-risk and limited English proficient students). For the intervening years, the cost factors in the SFRA are updated according to the Consumer Price Index.

The SFRA also dramatically increases access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to eligible students within five years. As the Wallington School District is a DFG B, the district will be required to offer full-day preschool to its 3- and 4-year-old population within that time frame.

In addition to these State funds, Wallington will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through Title I and IDEA, as well as additional funds through those programs pursuant to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department agrees with the district's assessment that it faces a number of challenges due to the demographics of its student population and the state of its facilities. Nevertheless, the district is to be commended for the resourceful ways in which it has addressed these issues and maintained high performance levels of its students.

Programmatically, the district has developed an up-to-date curriculum, aligned with the NJCCCS that is fully mapped, available electronically, and fully implemented in the classrooms. The district has identified language arts literacy as a major issue facing its student population given the large proportion of at-risk and bilingual students, and has made this a focus of the elementary school curriculum. The district also offers enhanced ESL instruction and an English Immersion program to address the language barriers faced by its students. Despite the obstacles they face, the Wallington students do quite well on the State assessments and the vast majority graduate from high school.

With respect to facilities, the district recently received approval for a grant to assist in funding a major renovation and addition to the Jefferson School. The State share of this \$19,786,288 project is \$3,506,107. In addition, the district has the opportunity to apply for additional grants in the future if necessary. Assuming that the local share of the

⁶ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$11,041,074, compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$10,615,626 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$11,381,012, compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$10,982,170.

Jefferson School project is approved by the voters, it should resolve what Wallington considers to be its most critical needs regarding facilities. The Department notes that N.J.S.A. 18A:7G-12 provides a mechanism for the district to petition the Commissioner to order issuance of school bonds if the voters in the district have twice failed to approve a referendum for a school construction project that is necessary for the provision of a thorough and efficient system of education in the district..

In analyzing the issues facing Wallington, it is important to recognize that the district faces many increased challenges due to its small size. A K-12 district, such as Wallington, with fewer than 1,200 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. The Department notes that the resources identified in the SFRA were based on an efficiently-sized K-12 district of 5,240 students. Smaller districts simply cannot offer diversity in programming options since they lack sufficient students to maintain reasonable class sizes for some types of offerings. Moreover, small districts like Wallington often must rely on part-time staff or staff serving multiple roles. In addition, given the very small size of Wallington Boro, the district noted that it was even having difficulty finding available space to serve its preschool children within the boundaries of the municipality. Given the current issues with Wallington's facilities, regionalization with another district would result in a larger tax base and provide the communities involved with more options regarding school facilities. District administrators indicated that they had been exploring possible options for regionalization. As part of his responsibilities under the CORE legislation, P.L. 2007, c.63, the Executive County Superintendent is charged with recommending to the Commissioner a school district consolidation plan to eliminate all districts, other than county-based districts and preschool or kindergarten through grade 12 districts in the county, through the establishment or enlargement of regional school districts. As part of this effort, the Department will be commissioning regionalization studies. Although Wallington is already a K-12 district, due to the constraints facing Wallington described above, this district is being treated as a high priority and will be placed in the first group of districts for regionalization studies, which will begin in September 2009 and conclude by December 31, 2009.

In sum, the Department finds that, to the extent that Wallington has educational deficiencies that need to be addressed, the SFRA and other complementary legislation such as CORE and EFCFA provide the necessary tools to address those deficiencies. While Wallington can identify areas where it could improve the delivery of educational services, those services can be addressed within the current statutory framework with the assistance of the Department.