



**1998 LSS Needs Assessment Survey:
Priorities of Teachers and Administrators**

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INTRODUCTION

The general goal of the Laboratory of Student Success (LSS) is to address the resources, professional development, and technical assistance needs of teachers, administrators, and superintendents in the mid-Atlantic region. The annual Needs Assessment Survey analyzes the progress of LSS programs and activities designed to have the greatest influence on student success. Findings from previously conducted surveys have led to changes in current approaches and the identification of new priorities. The role of LSS is interactive and relies on the involvement of families, schools, grassroots community groups, businesses, universities, and social service agencies to respond to the educational needs of the mid-Atlantic region. Since 1995, LSS has been conducting needs assessments to research practical applications that work. This *Spotlight* features the findings of the 1998 Needs Assessment Survey.

MEASUREMENT

In response to the task of implementing federal, state, and local training and technical assistance resources, LSS surveyed educators and administrators on preferred results of reform initiatives. The data from this survey was gathered from a systematic sampling of 2,000 school board members,

superintendents, principals, and practitioners in the mid-Atlantic states. For future longitudinal inquiry, 37 variables were measured using the research instrument that originated in 1995. Opinions were ranked using a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). Respondents were asked to rate (a) the overall quality of current programs, facilities, and practices; and (b) the current and future priority of improvement efforts.

The response rate was 9%, a relatively low response rate for a survey of this type. Of the surveys returned and analyzed, 47% were elementary and secondary school administrators and teachers, and 38% were superintendents; 4% of the surveyed respondents held board memberships or associations with boards and departments of education. Thirty-nine percent — the mode value of respondents — were from suburban school districts, 23% associated with urban agencies, while 19% affiliated with rural districts. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents had been in their current position for more than 10 years, with only 11% holding their position for less than one year.

PROGRAM RANKINGS

For the overall quality of current programs, facilities, and practices, 56% responded either *high* or *very high* to

the quality of the mathematics curriculum based on the new NCTM standards. This is the most astounding finding considering that, in 1996, 74% of the respondents ranked this program — designed to upgrade the mathematics standard — as inadequate. Fifty-two percent responded *high* or *very high* to the quality of programs that promote the inclusion of students with mild disabilities in regular education classrooms. It is not surprising that this initiative is also given high priority, since there is little argument on the *separate is not equal* maxim when it applies to serving children with special needs. Ranking the overall quality of the use of new technology in instruction, 49% responded that the practice is either *high* or *very high*, while 45% ranked upgrading science curriculum based on the current standardized benchmarks for science literacy as *high* or *very high*. Highly ranked were professional development of school staff and effective response to student diversity, 44% and 41% respectively.

Data from the survey provided some other significant findings as well. Most of the respondents were less than satisfied with the overall quality of many current programs, facilities, and practices. Ranked *high* by only 10% of the respondents were initiatives designed to illustrate the notion of resilience. Ex-

isting programs designed to answer why some students beat the odds were rated *low* by 54% and only 11% were satisfied with initiatives to start and manage charter schools. Sixty-six percent of the respondents reported *low* or *very low* the quality of relations with U.S. Department of Education sponsored Regional Educational Laboratories (RELS).

FUTURE PRIORITIES

Of the 168 respondents, 80% assessed the early efforts to prevent problems in reading and early intervention programs for students with developmental delays as the highest future priorities for improvement efforts. A high frequency (78%) of the participants considered the use of technology in instruction as a high future priority. Also noteworthy, 72% of the responses suggested that a high level of priority be given to active involvement of parents in school activities. A considerable amount of respondents rated *high* the priority of upgrading science curriculum based on current standardized benchmarks for science literacy. For 70% of the respondents, initiatives to enhance school climate, violence prevention, and conflict resolution are high priorities, and 69% placed a priority on drug and alcohol prevention and student self-regulation and responsibility. (Figure 1 displays the 1998-1999 respondent ranking priorities of 60% or higher.)

Future dissemination of charter

school initiatives was the low ranking modal response, with 69% giving this item a *low* or *lowest* priority rating. While 74% of respondents were not satisfied with the current collaboration with health and social service agencies, 88% considered this item to be a *moderate* to *very high* priority. Only 22% of the respondents rated the current quality of adult literacy programs as *high* or *very high*, but more fascinating is that only 36% of those rated adult literacy as a *high* or *very high* priority. Given the current public policy incentives for reducing adult illiteracy, these findings are still alarming. To deter the increasing levels of economic dislocation of this vulnerable population, delivery of these programs must be reexamined.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Many of the respondents provided open-ended comments that are also particularly interesting. Their input varied, but a noticeable pattern emerged. Respondents were interested in the political sphere and the role that it plays in the advancement of education. Many of the comments suggested that respondents find problems with the questions and final consummation of this empirical investigation. In fact, one respondent thought we should “reform the assessment.” Another practitioner in an urban secondary school expressed, “There is too much testing and regulation already ... please give us time to

teach.” As the survey indicated, many respondents objected to charter schools, including one rural school administrator who wrote, “The district is very opposed to the charter school concept as set forth by the state.... Top priority for teachers is planning time and staff development.”

CONCLUSION

Developing priority strategies for educational reform continues to unfold. The 1998 Needs Assessment Survey indicates that shifts in opinion have occurred concerning overall quality of programs, facilities, and practices. In addition, opinions of current and future priorities have changed. Charter school initiatives and relations with the U.S. Department of Education sponsored RELs ranked *lowest* for future priorities; when compared to their mediocre showing in quality, it suggests respondents deem strongly those sets of issues. *High* ratings in the use of technology in instruction, upgrading science curriculum based on current standardized benchmarks for science literacy, and intervention for improvement of basic and advanced skills suggest resolutely that initiatives are synergistic with precedence. Through this and future evaluations, LSS can identify the priorities of its constituents in the mid-Atlantic region and address the quality of those services, products, and programs enacted to rectify the needs of education.

Figure 1: Rankings of Future Program Priorities for 1998-1999

