



## Informing the Education Policy Process: What State Leaders Need

by

Joan L. Wills, Institute for Educational Leadership

This *Spotlight on Student Success* is the first in a continuing series that the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) will produce for policymakers in the mid-Atlantic region, that is, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC. In creating this series, LSS aims to connect policymakers to the ever-growing knowledge base about what works in educating our nation's children, a knowledge base to which LSS—one of the ten federally funded, regional educational laboratories—has ready access. This series of *Spotlights* is one way LSS will ensure that policymakers receive educational policy information and procedural knowledge in a timely and useful fashion.

LSS recognizes that the region's policymakers want and need high-quality, objective research to guide their decisions on educational issues. To meet this need, LSS has partnered with the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), an organization based in Washington, DC, to assist in designing and implementing a state-based and state-focused network of policymakers in the mid-Atlantic region. This inaugural issue of a *Spotlight* for policymakers summarizes the initial policy mapping exercise that was conducted to

identify the educational policy issues on each jurisdiction's agenda. This study serves as the starting point for LSS's efforts to establish valuable connections with the policymakers in its region.

### The Mapping Exercise

Initially, the two collaborating organizations identified an individual in each jurisdiction to serve as his/her state's "mapper." This person interviewed policymakers and advisors. The data that was collected helped answer the following questions about each jurisdiction in the mid-Atlantic region:

- What are the key issues on the agenda of the policymakers and policy advisors?
- What sources do the policymakers and advisors use to get research-based data to inform decisions?
- What are the preferred methods used to obtain research and other information?
- Who are the key policymakers and advisors in each jurisdiction?

The answers to these questions are summarized below and will guide LSS in its efforts to connect policymakers to the education

information they need most. These *Spotlights* will be an important vehicle for this work.

### State Priority Issues

The mapping exercise focused on four major education issues that are the core of LSS's ongoing agenda:

- Inputs and Outputs
- Structure and Process
- Teaching and Learning
- Broader Education Context

Within this framework, each jurisdiction's policymakers and advisors identified a subset of issues on which to focus:

#### *Inputs and Outputs*

- Finance
- Accountability
- Personnel
- Regulatory environment

#### *Structure and Process*

- Governance
- Structure of schools
- Desegregation
- Collective bargaining

#### *Teaching and Learning*

- Professional development
- Student-related issues
- Teaching strategies

### *Broader Education Context*

- Community collaborations
- Working with parents
- Transition from school
- Improving the infrastructure

### **Mapping Priority Issue Findings**

#### *Inputs and Outputs*

Predominantly, the region's five jurisdictions are working on issues surrounding the inputs and outputs of education. Four of the five were focused (or poised to focus) on:

- general finance issues,
- refinement and/or expansion of assessment systems, and
- teacher qualifications.

#### *Structure and Process*

The structure and process of education is currently receiving the least amount of attention by these policymakers. Yet, three states are working on intervention strategies for low-performing schools.

#### *Teaching and Learning*

At least three jurisdictions identified concerns in the following teaching and learning areas:

- inservice support for professional development (with mentoring),
- remediation strategies,
- alternative education strategies (for high school dropouts),
- special education, and
- use of technology.

### *Broader Education Context*

Four jurisdictions indicated confronting the issue of working with employers to improve the transition to work. Also, at least three jurisdictions indicated work in the following areas:

- collaboration with health and social services,
- after-school services with organizations that serve youths, and
- articulation with higher

education organizations.

### **General Observations**

Based on the data collected from the mapping interviews, a few general observations can be drawn about the education issues and priorities of the mid-Atlantic region. First, there is solid and pervasive acceptance that standards, new modes of assessments, and various forms of accountability are the central tools of today's education enterprise. Yet, no jurisdiction's work is complete in terms of the final form of the standards, assessments, or the accountability strategies that will gain common acceptance both within the schools and the larger communities. Second, issues of quality—especially for the most vulnerable students—are implicit throughout the agenda issues. No jurisdiction indicates that it has found solutions to these quality issues, and all are struggling with finding and financing effective solutions. Third, governance issues, always a thorny topic, appear to center on who establishes and enforces standards for the professionals populating the schools, as well as the content to be learned. Fourth, with the exception of charter schools, there is no preference in the region for what should be a regulated commodity versus what should be open to market forces. Fifth, in some jurisdictions, there seems to be a growing awareness that more needs to be done to reach out and work with after-school services, health and human services, and career preparation activities.

### **State Leaders' Needs**

The word "rhythm" was used in more than one place when discussing the timing, content, and presentation of issues for key policymakers such as governors and legislators. For these key actors, this rhythm is driven by budget development and

legislative calendars; brevity is essential. The policy issue, cost, and potential benefits comprise the core informational formula.

The mapping exercise found that no one is completely satisfied with the current content, depth, relevance, analysis, presentation, and timeliness of research findings and related information used in policy making. However, the study revealed that policymakers know and trust the source of information. In addition, national sources are valued for ideas and comparisons, but generic information must be linked with state-specific data.

### **The Goal of LSS**

LSS's goal is to use the information about priority issues gleaned in this extensive project to design the kinds of support it will provide mid-Atlantic policymakers. The regional map suggests LSS take a two-pronged approach in the development of a policy support network:

- First, establish a presence in each jurisdiction that creates and connects with ongoing networks of government officials and policy-influencing organizations.
- Next, organize and implement an information services team that is predominantly web-based and targeted to meet the needs of policymakers in the region.

Obviously, the *Spotlight on Student Success* for policymakers cannot achieve these interdependent goals alone. It is hoped, however, that these briefs will provide relevant, useful, and timely information to mid-Atlantic policymakers. In combination with other efforts to develop a policy support network, the *Spotlight* series will aid LSS's efforts to establish real and valuable connections with the policymakers in its region.