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COMMENTARY

Technical Assistance Can Play a Key Role for Poorly-Performing Schools

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High-stakes accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) hold schools and districts responsible for student achievement. However and whenever the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reauthorized, it is clear that schools and districts will continue to be held accountable for student performance. Although research and media attention has focused largely on the punitive aspects of accountability policies, there is more to these policies than just consequences for failure. Rather, high-stakes accountability policies, including ESEA, are also intended to provide districts and schools with support—technical assistance—to help build their capacity to reach their student achievement goals. However, little empirical evidence exists as to the efficacy of capacity-building technical assistance in improving student achievement.

In this study, we examine the efficacy of California's response to the technical assistance requirements built into NCLB. Specifically, the California Department of Education (CDE) separated the state's lowest-performing districts—those in Program Improvement Year 3 (PI3)—into three groups, and required those in the most severe need of assistance (the bottom two groups) to work with District Assistance and Intervention Teams (DAITs). DAITs and districts were to work together to identify the areas in which districts needed the most assistance and then to work on those areas to build district capacity to improve student achievement. These districts were given substantial funds that were to be used to contract with DAITs for two years. The PI3 districts that needed the least support were given fewer funds and were asked to contract with less intensive non-DAIT technical assistance (TA) providers.

Our three-year study examines the impact of District Assistance and Intervention Teams on increasing student achievement in both math and English language arts (ELA), relative to non-DAIT technical assistance. The study provides evidence on the efficacy of the DAIT intervention for the first two cohorts of PI 3 districts, districts that first contracted with DAITs in 2008–9 (Cohort 1) and 2009–10 (Cohort 2).

We find a statistically significant impact of DAITs on student math achievement relative to students in PI3 districts that received only TA. We also see suggestive evidence that ELA scores improve for students in DAIT districts, although the effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Furthermore, we find that DAITs reduced achievement gaps between white students and Hispanic and black students, between non-English language learners and ELLs, and between students who do and don't qualify for the Free/Reduced Price Lunch program.

Although we cannot definitively point to what, specifically, it is that DAITs do that leads to improved student achievement, we provide descriptive evidence that math and ELA achievement gains were higher over the course of the DAIT treatment when

districts worked with DAITs to increase their focus on using data to guide instruction, shift district culture to generate and maintain high expectations of students and staff, and increase within-district accountability for student performance.

Thus, the results from our work indicate that intensive technical assistance interventions may provide a cost-effective method of improving student achievement in low-performing schools and districts. This aspect of accountability policies has largely been ignored in the accountability literature and more study is clearly needed. It would be worthwhile for both researchers and policymakers to evaluate the implementation of assistance provisions in other settings to see if the impact of DAITs is unique to California. Practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers would all benefit from an increased focus on the technical assistance provisions in accountability policies.

The full study: Strunk, Katherine O., Andrew McEachin, and Theresa N. Westover (2012), The Use and Efficacy of Capacity-Building Assistance for Low-Performing Districts: The Case of California's District Assistance and Intervention Teams. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management.

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