
SECTION I: GENERAL FINDINGS: DISTRICT LEADERSHIP AND CENTRAL OFFICE

AIR staff who have been involved in this review unanimously conclude that the Mansfield City School District should not be a district in “Academic Emergency.” We do not wish to minimize the challenges presented by the many high-need students served by the District or the compensatory needs of a significant number of low-income children in Mansfield. However, other districts in Mansfield’s comparison group and, indeed, many of Ohio’s larger urban districts facing far greater challenges, have successfully raised achievement in a manner that has thus far eluded the Mansfield schools.

At every level, AIR reviewers working in Mansfield encountered professional, well intentioned, and, in most cases, hard working staff with ideas on how to improve student outcomes. Current efforts, however, are segmented, disconnected, and for the most part not aligned or explicitly supported by District resources. The District lacks an articulated plan for raising student achievement that can provide direction, define priorities, and focus a finite amount of staff energy and organizational capacity.

We attribute this situation to a historical lack of administrative leadership and decision making and the failure of the Board of Education to engage in planning, setting strategic direction and holding the administration accountable for results. The District currently lacks any strategic planning. No staff member interviewed could articulate the organization’s vision. There is no evidence of a unified or shared theory of action/theory of improvement that is guiding program implementation or even a plan for emerging from “Academic Emergency.” As a result, there are no long-term goals or explicit annual goals supported by the annual operating budget. Consequently, there is no real basis for evaluating the Superintendent or individual school leadership.

The lack of planning and direction has fostered a number of central office systems and practices that are weak and require improvement. Currently, the central office lacks adequate capacity for K–12 instructional coordination and intervention and reallocation of resources relative to the achievement of goals. Moreover, the lack of a common understanding and language regarding the district’s priorities and change agenda limits individual initiative and leadership development at all levels.

We have discussed with the Interim Superintendent research and practice around two major theories of action for district improvement that could potentially be adopted in Mansfield: the Managed Instruction approach and the Performance-Based Empowerment or Portfolio model (McAdams, forthcoming). The appropriateness and degree of applicability of these models should be determined by context factors unique to the Mansfield schools at this time. Our observation suggests that the district may benefit from pursuing a blend—a managed instruction approach at the elementary level (K–5) and a portfolio approach at the secondary level (6–12). We are encouraged by the receptivity of the Interim Superintendent to these ideas, by his high level of energy and commitment to improved performance, and by the positive steps he has already taken during his short term, which began in July 2004.