

A MarketSearch *Topline*

Technical Assistance Program

The Superintendents' Perspective

June 2007

This report provides a summary of the findings of a study conducted on behalf of Chernoff Newman and for the Education Oversight Committee.

The study was conducted in order to gain a better perspective on the role the state's superintendents are playing at the school level with the planning, implementation, and assessment of the plans written under the Technical Assistance Program.

The sample included the sixty-six superintendents who represent districts that have received technical assistance at least once through the 2005-2006 school year.

A total of 31 superintendents were interviewed by telephone between April 16 and May 4, 2007.

Key Findings

Overall, study findings indicate that the Technical Assistance Program is working well from the superintendent's perspective. Superintendents feel:

- ✓ The program has evolved in a positive manner,
- ✓ That superintendents are working in concert with the individual schools, and
- ✓ Most importantly, that progress is being made.

Major Study Findings

The Evolution of the Technical Assistance Program

- Most superintendents view the evolution of the Technical Assistance Program positively. Although many supported the prescriptive approach initially, they are pleased with the way the program has evolved, giving them greater flexibility in the use of funds.

"Initially prescribed funding was a good idea – it was a new program. But the transition to allow schools to determine needs has been effective in our district."

"I am very glad to see the evolution because each situation is different."

"I think they put together a strong plan at the Department and as needs changed, they gave schools more local authority and control. It's evolved well, and I commend them. They are trying to let each school district get what they need."

"I appreciate those early parameters."

"Today I am good with it. I am glad we had the structure first because now we have the mind set that this is how the funds are to be used. In the beginning we were focused on getting the programs started and now we understand we need to get the funds to the local districts."

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

"Prescribed funding can be stifling and we know the teachers and administrators are here to make things better and who would know better than them. Alternative technical assistance is much more beneficial to the schools. The schools have been able to use the funds to continue what they have already started. We get guidelines but then having that freedom has helped the schools tremendously."

"I think the evolution has been very positive. The state heard the input of the districts and listened and made the changes to allow the schools to determine their own needs."

"It's much better the way it is today than where we started. Schools have a clearer picture of their needs than someone external. I've seen situations in the past where you're told to spend money in a certain way, you comply, but it doesn't meet the true needs. Flexibility is better."

Superintendents' Priorities

- Superintendents were asked what their priorities are when it comes to improving schools with regard to the Technical Assistance Program.

While there are a myriad of problems and needs to be addressed, recruitment and retention of quality teachers is by far the dominant themes. While recruitment and retention is fairly universal problems, rural schools tend to struggle a little more than their urban counterparts with these issues.

"Teacher quality. To impact skills knowledge of teachers so that their instructional practices become strengthened. We balance between using the funds for professional development and professional expertise – hiring specialists to bring coaching and expertise to the schools that need it."

"Focus is on quality of teaching. Looking for effective teachers willing to stay long enough for continuity in curriculum in order to show results, especially in the core areas of math, science and language arts."

"Teacher quality spills over into staff development and providing supplies for teachers. In an ideal world we would use all of that money to lure in good teachers but they aren't lined up 30 deep to come to our schools."

"My focus is to find the best staff and keep them for at least 3 years."

"To ensure that schools have professional development for teachers, align curriculum with standards, coaches to help monitor along with the principal."

"Our focus is on teacher quality. That is our challenge. No matter how much money is provided, we only have so many teachers certified in subject areas. There are only so many teachers in the market."

"Teacher quality is key to success in the classroom and bringing people on board with enthusiasm to get motivated moving in the same direction as a team. If you get everyone on

the same mission with the same goal that's the key."

"My focus is usually on the quality of instruction and therefore the staff development piece."

"Teacher quality and retention. Professional development, our priorities all revolve around teachers."

Clearly, recruitment and retention are not the only priorities. A number of other issues, including reading, curriculum work, and general oversight were also mentioned.

"We focus on reading level. If a child can't read, he can't learn science or social studies. So assessment of reading is our top priority. Right now we are instructing every child in our district at the reading level they are supposed to be at. My principals know where every child is – the children are assessed every two weeks. Not tested; assessed. Then the teachers decide what to teach next."

"My focus is on remediation, and I'm not talking about high tech computer driven remediation, I'm talking the old fashioned way of small groups, teachers, reading remediation, and smaller pupil to teacher ratios. A lead teacher and one circulating. We spend a lot in teacher power, as in manpower. It makes a difference."

"My focus is to work with the principals on monitoring what they're doing and making sure their recommendations are sound. My staff and I work with them to ensure that their

initiatives will make a difference for our students."

"My focus is working with individual schools to help develop school renewal plans. We follow the process. Have a needs assessment, develop a plan to benefit schools, look at data, review needs and make sure action steps meet the needs and reflect data."

"A lot of emphasis on curriculum work."

Acceptance of Superintendents' Priorities

- For the most part, superintendents feel they are working in concert with the individual schools and principals of those schools.

"We are all on the same page. We have a district plan and within that plan we pick those components that we feel are important to meet student needs."

"Our principals want to do, our teachers want to do everything for the children because we love them so much but we also know the accountability hammer will and is going to come down. All of our schools use the strategic plan to develop their local school portfolios or strategic plan. We all have the same philosophy of what we want to do for our students. So in turn when accountability comes down at the school level then it is the same as the district. The district rating is the same as the schools. If you go to our schools you will know that they are part of that same philosophy."

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

"I think they are the same and I think that's because we do school improvement at the school level and carry that across the district. Helping that continued improvement process that is key. To really be successful we have to be moving in the same direction doing the right thing for the kids."

"Pretty much everybody is on the same page. The district works with the schools more than dictating what they must do. The schools are responsible for the renewal plans and they do that with guidance from district personnel. We work hand in hand rather than dictating."

- At the same time, some superintendents have had to step in when conflicts have arisen.

"One of our schools wanted to use the money to send 11 staff members to a conference for professional development and we are in the middle of a budget crunch in this district. We had to say, "Step back and take a look at what you are wanting to do and how much it's going to cost."

- Similar to experiences with school principals, superintendents feel their priorities are aligned with those of the their respective boards.

"We're all on the same page, which is a good thing."

"They have been the same so far."

"No, they would agree with this focus."

"I think they are supportive of what we are doing. We're all on the same page."

"100% the same. They approve all of the plans that we use."

"No difference in our priorities."

"All properly aligned."

"Pretty closely. If they deviate, it's not an adversarial thing, it's 'we would like to do this because of this' and we make accommodations. I believe in holding folks accountable and giving them the tools and training they need to be successful."

Superintendent Involvement at the School Level

- Overall, findings indicate that superintendents are very involved at the individual school level.

"Very involved in how funds are being used to implement school renewal plans. We have 3 formal, lengthy meetings with principals wading through their needs, the data, the gaps, how to best use the revenue allocated."

"Very involved. I sit in on every meeting with the assistant superintendent and I have benchmark meetings with schools to go over MAP scores, analyze the data. We've had 3 benchmark meetings this year and 2 'stop plan' meetings. We have principal meetings and a monthly district meeting. I'm heavily involved in visiting. I know what they're doing [and I] discuss with principals about what they're intending to do."

"I keep a very visible presence. I come from an instructional background so, what is happening is not something that I have given to someone else to

implement. I think it's important to make clear our business is education and coming from that background I am able to make that clear. I would say pretty heavily involved."

"I monitor how the funds are spent to make sure they're spent in the way they say they're going to be spent."

"It is a shared decision. The principals rely on the district administration that has experience. Plans are approved by assistant superintendent for instruction and reviewed by the superintendent to ensure the way they want to spend the money is using research-based practices. At times we ask them to rethink because it has to be aligned with the district vision."

"I coordinate the efforts with the principals. I offer guidance and then serve as an auditor for them to make sure of how they plan to spend the funds."

"I visit schools on a regular basis. Our conversations are focused on the fidelity and implementation of the plan."

"In the end process all of the Technical Assistance Plans come through me to go to the state department."

"Very, totally hands on. Daily, not every school, but one of my schools every day."

- As a general rule, superintendents of smaller districts are more involved than superintendents of larger districts at the individual school level. Some superintendents who represent large districts find it difficult to "micromanage" at the school level.

"I am not personally involved at the school level. At the school level, the plans are reviewed by a team that includes the Assistant Superintendent, the Academic Supervisor, and the Deputy of Schools. I bring the team together to work on the district plan. It's the size of our district. I have [large number of] schools here. My colleagues have smaller districts with maybe 6 or 7 schools but here it's impossible."

- Due to the close working relationship between superintendents and principals and the "shared vision" approach that most say are operating under, most superintendents say they don't do a great deal of influencing how Technical Assistance funds are being used at the individual school level.

"We ask the schools to make their plans; they understand the umbrella, the district vision and initiatives. The principal calls and asks questions. We're not there on a daily basis so it's not our role to dictate. They come up with ideas and we respond to make sure they meet best practice models."

"We see ourselves as enablers of the schools to get their work done. The people who have the responsibility (principals and district) need to understand how the funds work so that they can get their highest yield for those dollars."

"I met with the principals, and all the district level department heads, and set some broad parameters based on the four-point assessment program and had principals bring ideas to the

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

table on how they wanted to spend those funds. We had open dialogue concerning what's currently happening at the individual schools and this is what they would like to see happen in their schools. There is no veto process at all but if I have a question I will call that principal ..."

"I don't really unless someone wants to do something out of left field."

"I really don't try to impose my wishes. I consult with the principals and serve as a resource and give them guidance. I have a good group of principals that want to do what's best for their schools."

"I do and I don't. I influence it in that we set spending on an individual school basis. They know what their targets are and where they should be spending their funding."

Plan Development and Execution

- The vast majority say plans they see are well thought out and tend to focus on the critical areas.

"I think they are well developed. The ones that are poor are generally a reflection of some other things that we need to address including weaker principals. If there is a weaker principal that we can't bring around then that's a principal that will be in the pool for replacement."

"They are very detailed. They have sections on student achievement, strategies and

activities, teacher quality goals and strategies, school climate – safety, parental involvement. We list the resources, what we are using each of the different funds for, performance goals, who is responsible, what are the specific costs. We have a process for reviewing and updating annually."

"They set clearly defined achievement goals."

"It's not a shotgun approach. They prioritize. We are so data driven, they look at the MAP and PACT scores, focus on data and the plans are wrapped around this. They understand that more programs are not the answer. Quality is what matters, not a laundry list."

- In the plan development process, the most typical scenario is for the burden of "needs identification" to skew toward the individual school, with oversight at the superintendent level.

"We have in our schools a group of people called SIC (School Improvement Council). SIC, in their meetings along with the principals in their meetings use the data. We have taught them to read the data to identify areas of weakness. We give a lot of thought to the people we put on this council. We have very well trained people on the SIC who can recognize issues. They speak with our teachers and we conduct parent surveys. We look at all of the data, including attendance, teacher attendance, and the staff attendance to come up with our final thoughts."

"They are determined at the district level and a team is pulled

together. It's made up of stakeholders and we talk about where we want to go. Then it goes back through groups for readings then set performance goals. Schools work with their teams, school improvement councils and look at their data and decide where they want to go on an individual school basis."

"ERT teams, SIC on the local level, school teams all identify critical areas. The district office looks at the plan to see if it meets state benchmarks and to see if the strategies are going to meet intended student audiences."

"A team of teachers, principal, federal coordinator of special projects and myself."

- Because plan development happens at the school-level, principal turnover can negatively affect plan execution, as new principals want to modify existing plans or create new plans to address the needs as they see them. These findings suggest there should be a push for greater participation on the part of superintendents who oversee schools with frequent principal turnover.

"Some principals are more sophisticated and experienced. Their plans come in more refined than the less experienced ones. The principal and assistant superintendent identify areas and the board develops performance goals. They are all trying to impact student achievement. It has to target needs from analyzing data from the test scores."

"The other thing is that it depends on the school

leadership. Some schools have really good leadership and have for a while and it shows. Some of the schools have either weaker or new leadership and those plans will be changed considerably and if the district comes out with something, then that's reflected."

- There are different philosophies about the plans. Some see them as a plan you settle on and execute. At least in part, this view is a result of the difficulty involved in putting a plan together in the first place.

"Not too often, occasionally tweak if we don't need as much of one thing or more of something else. We try to give a good shot at a good plan that requires less changes down the road. In the middle school, we are focusing heavier on remediation, which is one of our guidelines to strive for."

"At least once a year. We review at least quarterly and update the board on the review process. I wouldn't say they change a lot mid year; we may modulate a little bit but not totally change goals or implementation."

"Some change occurs but not too much. We make sure they are written well to begin with. You must have consistency. If plans change every year, you're thrashing around a lot for a silver bullet. We may tweak it in the first year. We'll stay with the plan 3-5 years to provide consistency to the faculty, students and the parents. If people were changing their plans every year, I'd say that should throw up a red flag. Stick to the basic, fundamental things."

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

"We review annually and change as needed."

"They are updated annually."

"Yearly. They are updated yearly so at the minimum they change then."

- Others, however, not only feel it advantageous to make revisions to the plan as the year goes along, they view the plan as something that should change.

"They should be a living document, not done once a year and put on a principal's shelf. It should be revised periodically and changed as needed or as the circumstances change. We use the amendment process the state has. We approve amendments before they go to the state department."

"We review at least annually and may change during the interim if there is a particular need."

"We need to keep revisiting the plan. Even Bill Cook, the guru of strategic plans in the late '80's stated you had to have a plan for 5 years. But schools have such high turnover in so many areas; it can't be a 5 year plan. A 1-2 year plan is more realistic. You constantly revisit, tweaking based on results you're seeing. A systematic change takes 3-5 years. We have to ask ourselves "What year are we in?" We can't always be in Year 0."

"They change on an ongoing basis. They are constantly changing but at the same time there are constants that hold the district together. You fine tune them or adapt them to meet student needs."

"Formally yearly; informally mid-year. We only do them once a year but schools are asked to always make notes in the sidelines. They are reviewed constantly asking ourselves: are we on task, are we on time and if not, what adjustments do we need to make? We are monitoring, changing throughout the year and in mid March we start talking about changes for the next year."

- All superintendents say they or someone in their office is aware of any changes to the plan. At the same time, both the "shared vision" approach and the different philosophies about the permanence of the plan raise some questions. For example,
 - ✓ Is there enough oversight on plan implementation?
 - ✓ Are schools staying with plans long enough?
 - ✓ Can the superintendents or the state do more to help schools remain focused on the plan?

How the Money is Being Spent

- When superintendents were asked about their priorities, recruitment and retention emerged as critical areas. Findings indicate that many schools are, in fact, spending money in these areas.

"Teacher quality and professional development, specialists, training."

"Mainly in personnel."

"Additional personnel, to target students that need immediate attention."

“Right now professional development and additional staff to improve instruction.”

“Professional development targeted more to a school than a group of people and are allowing for model instruction of appropriate strategies in certain classrooms. Those schools really need that professional development. You need people who are current in rigor in the classroom for the kids. That money is spent on people who can do that.”

“Majority on professional development. Secondly, purchasing ancillary supplies.”

“Increased the number of teachers, hired a science lab person, hired math and curriculum specialists. We are focusing on two basic areas: 1) specialists and science lab to build sustainable efforts to help teachers 2) immediate return – reducing class size by giving extra teachers in major study areas.”

“Professional development around differentiation and rigor, tutoring, teacher specialists, and principal specialist.”

“In the previous year, funds were spent primarily on staff development; we hired a literacy coach for the middle school. Refining tools for teachers. We have a class of teachers being trained by a literacy coach on that model.”

“Where they are required to be spent, first teachers and small class sizes and then technology and what those needs are, programs.”

“We have two schools where we have principal specialists and teacher specialists. They are providing the curriculum support to our teachers and we plan to keep them in place for the next two years. We were involved in a [specific dollar figure removed] grant for instructional coaching - mentoring for teachers. This will align with the plans for the TAP [Teacher Advancement Program] master teacher and curriculum specialists, district instructional facilitators or consultants that we may hire 2 or 3 days a week. Most of the money will be going to personnel.”

- As indicated in the comments above, many are using the Technical Assistance Program funds to hire teachers, leaving open the question as to how schools will do when the Technical Assistance funds run out.

Although most say they are making plans as best they can to prepare for when Technical Assistance Program funds are taken away, it is clear that this will represent a problem for some schools.

“We do all we can but there is no bottomless pit of money. We will try to sustain initiatives but it is difficult to do.”

“If it works, believe me, we’re going to maintain it.”

“Not a great deal. I’d like to be able to tell you we were stashing away funds for the future but small, rural districts don’t have that luxury.”

“That’s going to be a real challenge.”

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

"We try to do things we can sustain with better-trained staff and not things that will have a total negative impact when we lose them. As far as additional funds, I would expect we'll have to cut positions and our class sizes will rise, but hopefully our teachers will have learned diagnostic teaching, looking at test scores."

"How long do you stick with a school on [the technical assistance program]? If it's working in a school, one of my greatest anxieties is once you get better, you stop getting the funds."

How the Plans Are Impacting Student Achievement

- Overall, superintendents feel the program is having a positive effect on student achievement.

"They are having a positive impact."

"We have seen positive changes. Our track record is good. The school that has been on the plan the longest has gone from unsatisfactory to below average to average to good. They've seen improvement every year."

"We saw a good bit of growth in each of our schools. In our four schools we saw gains for our students in all four. We aren't there yet but we are making progress."

"Positively. We saw double-digit gains to our MAP scores and look forward to what we see in August."

"We are making improvement. We aren't making quantum leaps but say for example a couple of the schools have no kids below basic in the 3rd and 4th grades and they are high poverty and 80% African American. This is the challenge area. We have actually exceeded our goals."

- At the same time, most recognize that progress won't happen overnight and that change is a long-term process. Also, it should be noted that this is the first year in which schools have had greater flexibility in the use of funds.

"We have seen progress every year but it takes time, it's not an overnight thing."

"Well, looking at test scores, I'd have to say not very much...but it is a plan that gives us focus and guidance. We need to stick to one thing and give it time to see the effects. But time is not on our side."

"You can see students moving there but it is still taking longer than we thought it would or should."

"We're making progress. We had a long way to go, when our program is operating at full steam, with modification from last year, more coaches, I feel we're going to make excellent progress."

"We're not satisfied with student achievement at this point. It's not all about the plan. There are not a lot of funds for good-sized schools. I wouldn't say it's the plan itself or it (the plan) not being executed. I want to see increased accountability of specialists and those hired as a result of the plan. I think there

have been some real successes but would like to see more dramatic improvements.”

Why Some Schools Aren't Making Progress

- Superintendents were asked why there are some schools that continue to be designated as under-performing. For the most part, responses are along two lines:
 - ✓ The “moving target” that schools are trying to hit (this tends to be the greatest critique of the Technical Assistance Program) and
 - ✓ Socio-economic factors.

With respect to the “moving target” comments, many feel their schools are making progress, but the target is moving faster than they can.

“Unfortunately, the target is moving faster than the progress.”

“With the bar raising and the number of kids you have to move from below basic to make 1/10 point of an impact... I feel like I'm an airplane and the runway is raising, I'm spiraling downward trying to land my plane and it's just a matter of time before the crash.”

“We have a flawed education system in SC and in this country. No Child Left Behind is a very flawed mess. The accountability system in SC is flawed. It's a moving target you can't hit. We shoot ourselves in the foot every year. The standards are raised every year. They pour water on us when we are drowning. That's not to say we haven't used TA funds appropriately. It is now even affecting the high

achieving schools, which is kind of laughable to have them join the party lamenting and wailing.”

“The rising scale. Most of the 16 schools that are unsatisfactory are middle schools. Their scores would be average when they started and are below average now. Two years from now they'll be unsatisfactory. We've raised scores some but not enough to keep up with the rising scale. It's a continuous fight. From a small district perspective, so few kids can make a significant difference. A couple of kids' scores can seriously impact the school rating.”

“The bar is set so high in SC as to what is considered proficient. What is considered basic in SC is considered proficient in other states.”

Others, particularly those representing rural districts, feel that socio-economic factors make it difficult for these schools to make gains. This problem is compounded by the fact that these schools also have teacher and principal retention problems.

As there was little mention as to how plans are addressing these types of issues, there might be a need to push schools to address these issues in future plans.

“We believe in the funds but there are so many other obstacles that those students have to overcome.”

“This is the 2nd year we've had the same administration and that's the longest we've kept the same administration. The stability at the administration

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

level, and other changes impact alongside technical assistance.”

“There are lots of factors involved, any of which could be part of the reason. Factors overlooked during the writing of the plans, implementation of the plans, holding people accountable. I’m very confident in saying it’s not the plan itself. Principal specialists and leaders certified by the state have been brought in to be turnaround agents and weren’t able to turn the schools around. There are many factors involved.”

“The history of the schools in the district. The high turnover of faculty. It’s hard to attract and maintain quality staff in some areas. Leadership within the school and district. Some districts have more resources to give to the schools than smaller districts. High transient student rate. The percentage of special needs children. It depends on where the school is when they receive the funds. The ceiling is rising. Schools can make gains but not meet all the expected gains and then still be unsatisfactory or below basic.”

“You have to answer school by school. Where it is, the community involvement, parental involvement, understanding of the importance of education in those communities. Teacher retention, you have to build a culture – what the community expects of the school, whether education is valued.”

“This school struggles to get parental involvement. It’s in an area where crime and gangs are growing. These are all factors

we know are there and we have the demographics but when it comes right down to it it’s the PACT score. When you have children from the time they leave school to when they get there the next morning have no stability in their lives I don’t think they are going to come in and perform at their peak.”

“You’ve got to look at some of the areas, the conditions these children have to survive in just to get to school, and it contributes to non-performance, not that they cannot perform. Their attention has not been pointed in that direction. Normal children are not expected to be deprived of sleep, too much noise to study, they’re trapped, environment makes a big difference, as much as 60% in some studies I’ve read. It is important to expose a child to the right process and they respond to it.”

“The great impact that poverty has on children and learning, getting them ready for school. We need to continue to provide types of intervention and the support they need to be successful in school. Our challenge is employing and retaining high quality teachers that will stay long enough to make a difference in our schools and communities. Ours is a high poverty community and very few of our teachers live here and become part of the community. Although they care and work hard, they aren’t part of lifting up the community as a whole. It is a very challenging situation from that standpoint. 90% plus of our children are free or reduced

lunch. We have a high concentration of poverty.”

“The bottom line is the quality of teacher in the classroom. That is the driver behind academic achievement.”

“Personnel, leadership, retention of teachers. Strong leaders plus good teachers equals good gains. The most frightening thing we face is teacher quality. The number of applications keeps dwindling.”

“The plan does work but if you don’t have quality leadership it doesn’t matter. If you don’t have people who can execute the plan it doesn’t matter.”

Funding Issues

- Superintendents did not identify any significant or systematic problems with respect to this year’s funding for technical assistance.
- While most say their schools don’t have trouble spending the money in the allotted period of time, some say they are aware of problems in this area.

“There have been cases where folks have not spent the money in that year due to changing needs and not doing the appropriate amendment, perhaps a change in leadership.”

“Money is not the problem. Spending it appropriately is. Use it or lose it. Most schools in need are high poverty schools. They already receive Title One money, now they receive TA money. Money is not the problem. Being able to spend it

as fast as the state may want us to is.”

Taking Stock and Looking Forward

- In addition to helping address the critical areas of retention and recruitment of quality teachers, superintendents feel the Technical Assistance Program has forced schools to do a better job of self-assessment.

“It forces the district and schools to focus on what our needs are and do some self-examination and to make us accountable.”

“The psychological accountability it places on administrators, teachers and schools. It creates more of an urgency to try and improve learning opportunities for kids, puts you behind the 8 ball.”

“Forcing schools, not hammering over the head, but making the schools become analytical in implementing the instruction of their materials and implementing the initiatives.”

“It provides additional resources to rural, poor districts that they wouldn’t otherwise have.”

“It has provided some assistance in professional growth for teachers, overall strengthening our teachers and helping them become more effective instructors.”

“For us, it was our ability to attract talented people to assist our teachers: teacher specialists and principal specialists. They provided the coaching needed.”

Technical Assistance Program/The Superintendents' Perspective

"It's put some high quality personnel in the schools. It provides additional funds for schools that need it to meet the needs of the students."

"It's impacted student learning. Sometimes we don't qualify for programs at the state level and they let us sign on like the science and math coaches and they have had an impact on student learning."

- Superintendents feel the State Department of Education (SDE) has been supportive and helpful when help was needed.

"They have. When we have questions, we feel free to call. They have workshop opportunities. They made us aware of changes. They have a hotline you can call if you have a problem filling out the technical assistance forms. They give us guidance and answer questions but they can't do it for you. It must come from the schools, from the bottom up."

"They assist us with questions and resource people when we ask. No problem with them. They are good, a little slow at responding at times, but willing to resolve your problems."

"They have been very helpful and they answer our questions regarding funds. Nothing specific, just no problems."

- Some, however, feel the SDE could be more proactive.

"Somewhat. If we have questions, they have been of assistance."

"If we call with questions about the program or modifying the plan, they've been fine."

"It does what it can. They have been so understaffed that substantive assistance is limited. They are put in the position where they are paper shufflers with reference to the technical assistance program more than anything else. They follow through with procedures. They've done the best they could under the circumstances."

"Well, we are looking forward to a lot more assistance."

"Simply put, the Department of Education is what it is. There are people there, friends and colleagues, that have been in the classrooms a few days ago, a few months ago and some that have been there centuries ago and some that have never been there. They simply hand down the edicts handed down to them. They are a good system of support to the schools and do a decent job."

Conclusion

Overall, study findings indicate that the Technical Assistance Program is working well from the superintendent's perspective.

Superintendents say they have close working relationships with the principals in their districts and tend to have similar views on goals and objectives. Through this "shared vision" approach, most superintendents say they don't do a great deal of influencing how technical assistance funds are being used at the individual school level. Instead, most leave that

responsibility with the individual schools; only stepping in when they feel the scope of a plan is drifting outside of the districts priorities. For the most part, however, superintendents say this type of interference is rare.

This system of giving principals so much autonomy raises a concern. In areas where there is a good deal of principal turnover, plans are often changed. In these districts, superintendents might be encouraged to help maintain continuity with respect to the plans.

Superintendents identify teacher recruitment and retention as the most pressing need. Many say individual schools are, in fact, spending money in these areas. This strategy clearly raises concerns about what will happen when Technical Assistance funds are cut. While many are thinking about how to deal with that situation, many do not have firm plans.

Other questions raised by the research findings include:

- ✓ Should superintendents play a greater role in schools where there is frequent principal turnover?
- ✓ Are schools trying to do too much or too little?
- ✓ Is there enough oversight on plan implementation?
- ✓ Are schools staying with plans long enough?
- ✓ Can the superintendents or the state do more to help schools remain focused on the plan?
- ✓ How can the state help with increased rigor/increased expectations?
- ✓ What will happen when schools are no longer eligible for technical assistance funds or the funding is reduced?.