

December 11, 2006

Superintendent Steven Adamowski
960 Main Street
Hartford, CT
06103

Dear Superintendent Adamowski,

We are Educational Studies majors at your alma mater, Trinity College, doing a public policy project on Educational Curriculum in Hartford schools for a Child Development course. For our project we have focused on the Success for All (SFA) program and teacher's concerns regarding it. We have conducted extensive research in the local elementary schools and talked to teachers, SFA coordinators, and students. One of our findings has been that Hartford elementary schools need more resources such as tutors, appropriate books, and more SFA coordinators, in order to make the SFA program beneficial to students. We recognize that the answer is not to distribute resources without knowing the needs of each individual school. Each school has different needs depending on the materials they already have and what resources they still need.

For example, M.D. Fox Elementary received sets of books at the beginning of this year, which they could not use because there were not enough of them for all their students. Instead, that money could have been used to hire tutors that they desperately need. For the nearly one thousand students at Fox, there is only one tutor. This is in marked contrast to the recommendations of the SFA program which are that: 30% of 1st graders behind in reading, 20% of 2nd graders, and 10% of 3rd graders reading below grade level should be tutored one on one for 20 minutes each day. As you can imagine, it is not possible for the one tutor to help all the students that need additional support. Fox has estimated that they would need about 30-35 tutors to actually follow the SFA guidelines.

We learned that Fox received money through the Reading Excellence Act grant which helped them hire more tutors whose assistance greatly benefited the students. As you are aware, the economic situation in Hartford makes it difficult for many parents to help their children with homework because they are either working long hours or may not have the necessary academic background to assist them. One key task that the tutors were able to focus on was to assist students with their homework. This, therefore, increased the likelihood that children would complete assignments and learn more.

A second issue we found was that when students repeat a reading level they often read the same stories and repeat the same evaluating activities for the stories. This can severely reduce children's motivation to acquire the reading skills to succeed. A solution to this problem could be to supply schools with a wider choice of books so that even if a child repeats a level, there are still books that they have not read that are appropriate to their level.

The materials that are offered by SFA and the district tend to be very dry and boring; both students and teachers have expressed this opinion. Studies have shown that children learn better when materials are interesting and challenging. Fox used money from their grant to supplement their reading list by adding novels and non-fiction books that were more appealing to students. Teachers have told us that the children really enjoy the novels especially non-fiction books about animals.

One of the main components of SFA is the rigid pacing of lessons. Teachers are informed that given lessons should only take a certain amount of time and once they have run out of time, they must go on to the next activity. Teachers have told us that the timing is unrealistic and that it is very difficult to stay within the time frame. If SFA “timing” was strictly followed, teachers would not be able to spend extra time answering questions or clarifying the concept taught if the children did not understand. Teachers expressed feeling guilty for spending more time on lessons when children did not understand because they were not following SFA guidelines. In order to make teaching more sensitive to students’ needs, the pacing guidelines need to be made less restrictive. For instance, some schools no longer use stopwatches to time their activities, as SFA recommends. Most teachers feel that they are most effective when they are able to be flexible and cater to their students’ individual needs within the classroom.

Another issue that was brought to our attention was that Special Education students have a difficult time with the SFA pacing. We learned that low Special Ed. readers could not keep up with the fast pace that SFA expects of all students. Activities take a longer amount of time for Special Ed. students and many teachers thought that the timing was completely unrealistic for their type of classroom. Special Ed. students should not be expected to be on the same schedule as the mainstream students.

As Superintendent, we know that you plan to visit the schools when assessing their quality. We would like to suggest specific issues you should focus on during your visits:

- **Types of books used by the schools.** We have learned that students are more stimulated by novels and nonfiction books and SFA Basal textbooks. We have learned that children reading dull stories (such as the Basal textbooks) that are on their level or below often get many questions wrong because the stories were not engaging. On the other hand, a child reading an appealing story that was above their level tended to get more questions correct, because they found the story challenging. Therefore, the type of books being used may influence how students perform.
- **How many tutors are available compared to the number of students in the school.** We have observed that one tutor for one thousand students is not adequate and many students are not receiving the extra help that they need.
- **Types and number of grants a school has received.** The amount of money the grant offers influences the type and number of materials available to the school. Some schools that do not have extra money for books are still using reading textbooks. Others are either using a mixture of reading textbooks and novels, or only using novels. The amount of money they receive directly influences what type of books they are using.
- **Differences in the student populations such as the number of students with special needs or second language English speakers.** These students will require special programs which will need additional funding. These students could also be affecting the test scores negatively if their needs are not properly addressed.
- **Observe Special Ed. classrooms at the beginning and the end of the school day in order to see the progress they make.** We have learned that these students need more time for activities and it would be interesting to see how much they achieved in one day. If time allows, a follow-up in a week or two would also be interesting.

- **Meet with teachers and SFA coordinators one-on-one or in small groups** because we found this to be extremely helpful for our research. While this is labor intensive, it is the one way to really understand the specific issues that teachers face in implementing SFA.

We hope that you find our recommendations helpful and feel free to contact us if you have any questions about our research.

Sincerely,

Christina Ramsay
Trinity College # 701902
(860) 297-3494
christina.ramsay@trincoll.edu

Cintli Sanchez
Trinity College # 702172
(860) 297-2715
cintli.sanchez@trincoll.edu

Resources

Contacts:

- At Eleanor Kennelly Elementary School: 695-3860
Mrs. Ciparelli, 4th grade
- At McDonough Elementary School: 695-4260
Taran Gruber, SFA coordinator
- At M.D. Fox Elementary School: 695-3600
Mrs. Bond, 2nd grade
Ms. Burgess, SFA coordinator 695-3651
Mrs. Dungfelder, Special Ed.
Ms. K, 2nd grade
Mrs. E. Murphy, 3rd grade
Mrs. L. Murphy, 3rd grade
Mrs. O'Rourke, SFA coordinator
- At Moylan Elementary School: 695-4500
SFA coordinator
- At Trinity College:
Professor Jack Dougherty: john.dougherty@trincoll.edu
Professor Andrea Dyrness: andrea.dyrness@trincoll.edu
Professor Barbara Henriques: barbara.henriques@trincoll.edu (if this is no longer working, speak to Jack Dougherty)
Professor David Reuman: david.reuman@trincoll.edu

Literature:

Kozol, Jonathan. (2005). *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishers.

In this book Kozol discusses inequalities in public schools, especially in districts with a high percentage of minorities such as Hartford, CT. He talks about how high minority districts use militant curriculums such as the Success For All program and how it is detrimental to their students. He stresses that suburban schools are not using these types of curriculums.

Powell, Rebecca, McIntyre, Ellen, and Rightmyer, Elizabeth. (2006) Johnny won't read, and Susie won't either: Reading instruction and student resistance. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. 6(1): 5-31.

The findings in this article demonstrate that the rigid structural curriculums have a negative impact on children's motivation and leads to their resistance. This is an important article in understanding why rigid curriculums are not successful because the researchers look at several characteristics of these curriculums that have negative affects. This article provides support for our argument that SFA needs to be modified in order to better serve Hartford students.

Slavin, Robert, Madden, Nancy A. Dolan, Lawrence J., and Wasik, Barbara. (1996)
Every Child, Every School Success for All. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press,
INC.

This book was written by the founder of the Success for All program. It describes how the program is implemented, and why it is needed. This book also contains sample curriculums and research that has been done on SFA.