District Description

Orleans Central Supervisory Union (OCSU) is the coordinating body for seven one-school districts in scenic northeastern Vermont, each of which is held accountable for demonstrating adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act as both a school and a district. At the end of the 2004-05 school year, Orleans Central Supervisory Union faced a five-day teacher strike over benefits and pay. Although the strike was contentious, there appear to be few lasting effects, according to the supervisory union’s superintendent.

Key Findings

- Reading First has had a positive impact on reading instruction and students’ reading achievement in the Orleans Central Supervisory Union.

- The supervisory union has demonstrated little growth in achievement in math; district officials say this is because it has focused its energy and resources on improving students’ reading proficiency.

- Schools in OCSU are focusing on reading to such a degree that subjects such as science and social studies are receiving significantly less attention than they did before implementation of NCLB, and these subjects are not being taught at all in some schools, according to a local official.

- Vermont has made significant changes in the way schools and districts are held accountable under NCLB. These changes have created confusion at the school and supervisory union levels.

- The supervisory union has significantly increased the percentage of its Title I paraprofessionals who are highly qualified by helping them to develop portfolios that demonstrated their qualifications.

Overall Impact of NCLB

NCLB in general and Reading First in particular have had a positive impact on reading instruction and students’ reading achievement in Orleans Central Supervisory Union, according to superintendent Ron Paquette (see section below on Reading First). In addition, NCLB has pushed OCSU to serve preschool children and adults. The supervisory union realizes that it can-
not meet achievement goals without ensuring that children are better prepared for learning when they enter kindergarten, and without recognizing that parents can make a difference in helping their children learn to read. School year 2005-06 is the third year of OCSU’s early childhood center, which now serves approximately 100 students, an increase over the 22 students served when it first opened. Adult education classes are being offered to parents before and after school to help improve their reading skills.

Despite these benefits of NCLB, Paquette believes that NCLB has set an unrealistic goal of achieving 100% student proficiency, even though OCSU has made significant gains in reading achievement in the last three years. He also said that NCLB required the district to spend money on “things like making sure teachers are highly qualified,” a significant challenge for the supervisory union due to its lack of staff and data systems. To achieve 100% proficiency, added Paquette, OCSU would need a “ton of new resources,” including greater investments in preschool. Even such an investment, he said, might not result in achieving the proficiency goal, since schools cannot change the impact of a low socioeconomic environment. “What we really need here,” he said, “are jobs.”

NCLB and Student Achievement

OCSU student achievement in reading has been increasing steadily over the past three years for grades 1 through 3, thanks largely to NCLB and Reading First, said Paquette. In 2002, just over 40% of students in grades 1 through 3 were proficient in reading. In 2005, 83% of all 2nd graders and 74% of low-income 2nd graders met or exceeded the state standard in reading. Despite these gains, over 40% of students enter 9th grade as “at-risk readers,” said Paquette, with reading proficiency in 10th grade hovering just above 50%.

And whereas the district has made gains in early reading, it has made no gains in math, and achievement in this subject remains low. For example, the percentage of 10th graders scoring proficient and above on the state math assessment ranged from a low of 30% in math concepts to a high of 48% for math skills. For low-income students, the percentages were lower, ranging from 24% proficient in math concepts and math problem solving to a high of 39% in math skills. The reason for the lack of growth in math, said Paquette, is that the district has been focusing on improving reading achievement and has made little effort to improve math instruction.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

In accordance with NCLB, the state changed the way it determines whether a school has demonstrated AYP. Beginning in 2005-06, the new process will reflect the change in the district’s assessment system, from one that tests in grades 2, 4, 8, and high school to one that tests in grades 3 through 8 and high school. According to Gail Taylor, director for standards and assessment for the Vermont Department of Education, this system is still in the development stages, but she noted that schools will be starting with a clean slate for AYP purposes in 2005-06.

The way the state holds districts accountable for demonstrating AYP is changing as well. Through the 2002-03 school year, the state considered the supervisory union accountable as the district. Under this framework, OCSU did not demonstrate AYP in reading in 2002-03 due to the performance of students with disabilities and was therefore placed on the state’s watch list for 2003-04. Beginning in 2004-05, however, the state stopped considering the supervisory union as the district and started using the town as the entity held accountable. Many towns in Vermont—including all in OCSU—have only one school, in which case the state does not distinguish between the school and the district.

The evolving methods of determining whether a school and district have demonstrated AYP have understandably confused educators in OCSU. For 2005-06, only the high school, which
does receive Title I funds, did not make AYP, failing to demonstrate progress in both reading and math for all students. Paquette said that administrators are less concerned about the reading scores—which barely missed the bar for demonstrating AYP and have been improving over the last several years—than the math scores, which missed the bar by a wider margin and took a significant dip. As a result of not making AYP for the first time, the high school is to receive a $45,000 grant from the state. OCSU and the school have hired a consultant to determine how to spend the extra funds.

All other OCSU schools (which are also considered as districts) made AYP, and no schools in the supervisory union are in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. One reason for this success, according to Paquette, is that no school has sufficient numbers of students to create any other subgroup than “whole school” and low-income students. Although all schools in Vermont, regardless of their size, must demonstrate AYP annually for the whole school, the state aggregates scores across two years for subgroups such as students with disabilities, since most schools in the state are too small to have sufficient subgroup sizes (80 students under Vermont law). Under this system, which is still under development according to Taylor, some schools in OCSU will have a subgroup for students with disabilities in the 2006-07 school year.

Testing Issues

Established by the Vermont State Board of Education in 1996, the Vermont Comprehensive Assessment System (CAS) evaluates student performance in the state’s schools based on Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities, with the goal of improving teaching and learning. Statewide assessments include the Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment (VDRA), administered in grade 2; the New Standards Reference Exams (NSRE) in English/language arts and mathematics, administered in grade 10; and the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) of mathematics, reading, and writing assessments, which are being administered for the first time in fall 2005 in grades 3-8 (writing in grades 5 and 8 only).

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

According to Paquette, NCLB has pushed OCSU to focus on reading to such a degree that virtually every other subject, including math, is getting squeezed. Some, such as social studies and science, are not being taught at all in some schools.

CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS

Using state funds, OCSU hired the University of Vermont to conduct a study of how its schools are serving students with disabilities. The evaluators found that the district was over-identifying middle school students for special education services and failing to identify enough elementary students for services. Based on these findings, schools worked to differentiate instruction to ensure that all students received instruction and support services appropriate to their learning level. Schools also created teams of teachers and administrators to identify students at risk and ensure that they receive appropriate services before they are referred to special education and that, once referred, they receive a high-quality education.

English Language Learners

The district has no English language learners and does not receive Title III funds.
NCLB School Choice

No school was in its first year of school improvement, so none was required to offer choice to its students.

Supplemental Educational Services

No school was in its second year of school improvement, so none was required to offer supplemental educational services. Moreover, schools in OCSU and other rural areas, according to the superintendent, face a special challenge in providing services after school due to the high cost of providing transportation to students.

Nonetheless, schools have tried to offer after-school programs for interested students. From 2001-02 until 2003-04, the supervisory union had a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant under NCLB that paid for after-school programs in all schools. In 2004-05, OCSU was awarded another 21st Century grant, this time for $250,000, which didn’t become available until the end of the school year. In 2005-06, the grant is enabling all elementary schools to hire teachers to provide 45-minute tutoring sessions for students below proficiency three nights a week. Although no formal assessment of the program is being conducted, teachers are reporting that the grades of participating students are going up, Paquette said.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Almost all teachers in OCSU—95%—are highly qualified. Although ensuring that all teachers are highly qualified has not been as difficult as the district anticipated, tracking the qualifications of veteran teachers has cost the supervisory union “a great deal of money,” said Paquette. The district has been helped in a way by last year’s strike, he added, because it required the district to increase salaries and therefore be more competitive with surrounding districts. Nonetheless, OCSU is hard-pressed to pay for the increase in teachers’ salaries and for the extra professional development required to meet the goals of NCLB.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All OCSU school administrators are focused on improving students’ reading achievement, and therefore allocate most of their professional development dollars—including those from Reading First, Title I, and Title II—for improving teachers’ instruction of reading. Most of the staff development is focused on reading. Math, according to Paquette, is currently receiving significantly less attention, although two schools have used their Title I funds to hire a math coach.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support

Virtually all 85 of OCSU’s Title I paraprofessionals are highly qualified. This is a significant improvement over 2004-05, when only 55% of paraprofessionals were highly qualified. The supervisory union worked with paraprofessionals who were not deemed highly qualified to develop a portfolio that demonstrated their qualifications. The state has neither developed nor adopted a standardized test that, if passed, would demonstrate that paraprofessionals were highly qualified.

Funding and Costs

OCSU received a significant increase in Title I funding, from $605,000 in 2004-05 to $684,000 in 2005-06, due to an increase in the number of low-income students. These funds are primarily used by OCSU schools that run schoolwide programs to hire teachers in order to reduce class
sizes. Paquette said that the additional resources provided by NCLB do not offset the costs of the highly qualified teachers, professional development, and data systems required by the law.

Reading First

In 2004-05, three OCSU schools received a $250,000 Reading First grant. In addition, three other elementary schools are using Title I and other funds to implement programs similar to those in the Reading First schools.

Four of these six schools are using a Houghton Mifflin reading program, and two schools are using a Scott Foresman reading program. All six schools, said Paquette, have significantly changed their approach to teaching reading. They are placing greater emphasis than before on phonemic awareness. All students receive 90 minutes a day of reading plus an additional 30 minutes of language and writing. Schools are also using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and Gates McGinnity criterion-referenced reading assessments to diagnose students’ reading problems. The Gates McGinnity tests are being used by all K-6 schools in the supervisory union. In the high school, they are being used to diagnose reading problems for at-risk 9th graders. The high school has also hired two reading teachers to help 9th graders who are struggling with reading.

The result of this work, said Paquette, has been obvious. Instruction in reading has improved greatly, and reading achievement has increased in elementary schools. The emphasis on reading, however, has limited the amount of teaching that can be done in social studies and science. “Time is not on our side,” said Paquette.

Data File—Orleans Central Supervisory Union

Location: Northeastern Vermont
Type: Rural

Number of schools
- Total: 8
- Elementary: 1
- High schools: 1
- Other: 1 Early Child Center and 5 K-8 schools

Number of Title I Schools: 7

Student Enrollment and Demographics
- Total enrollment: 1,142
  - White: 96%
  - African American: 2%
  - Latino: 0.5%
  - Asian: 0.5%
  - American Indian: 0.5%
  - Other: 0.5%
  - Low-income students: 75%
  - Students with disabilities: 25%

Teachers
- Total number of teachers: 145
- Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 95%
Paraprofessionals
Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 85
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 99%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing
Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 1

Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action
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<tr>
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<td>Schools in corrective action (Did not make AYP for four consecutive years):</td>
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<td>Schools in restructuring (Did not make AYP for five or more consecutive years):</td>
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Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES
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