

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic Plans for Students

The Views of School Principals

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Introduction

An important provision of South Carolina's Education Accountability Act (EAA) of 1998 requires academic plans to be developed "for each student in grades three through eight who lacks the skills to perform at his current grade level based on assessment results, school work, or teacher judgment" (South Carolina Code 59-18-500). The law stipulates that the parents or guardians of students lacking these skills be notified and that conferences, attended by the parent/guardian, the student, and school personnel, be conducted to determine the services to be provided and the actions to be taken "to further student success." If, after repeated attempts to gain parent participation, the parent can not attend the conference(s), an adult mentor will be appointed by the school to work with and advocate for the student.

The law includes sanctions, including ultimately grade retention, for failure to reach grade level or satisfy the terms of the academic plan. A legislative proviso to the general appropriations bill in 1999 provides that students placed on academic probation might be required to participate in summer school or "an after school hours year-long comprehensive remediation program...designed to address objectives outlined in the academic plans."

The academic plan provision of the 1998 Education Accountability Act is intended to focus resources and additional instructional services on students who are not currently meeting state grade-level standards. Districts are given the flexibility to select instructional strategies and materials that best match the academic needs of their students. The current study was designed to gather information on how districts in the state have chosen to implement academic plans with their students. The South Carolina Educational Policy Center conducted this study during the 1999-2000 school year in collaboration with the Education Oversight Committee and the State Department of Education. Subsequent sections of this Executive Summary describe the study design, present the results of the academic plan study, and make recommendations for future research.

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate schools' implementation of the legislative requirements for academic plans as specified in the Education Accountability Act of 1998. Specifically, the study was designed to identify the instructional strategies used by state schools to improve student achievement, to solicit the school principals' views on the effectiveness of various strategies, to collect descriptive data on summer school and extended day programs, and to better understand the issues and challenges faced by schools in implementing student academic plans. Based upon reviews of district policies and procedures, preliminary interviews with State Department of Education personnel, district coordinators, and building administrators charged with implementing the provisions of the statute, and anecdotal information, it became clear that a systematic data gathering effort was needed. Of particular interest were the following: a better understanding of how summer school and extended school day programs were structured in the various districts, the number of students served, the number of days and hours per day of instructional time, and the perceived effectiveness of the individual programs for students varying in the degree to which they were below grade level.

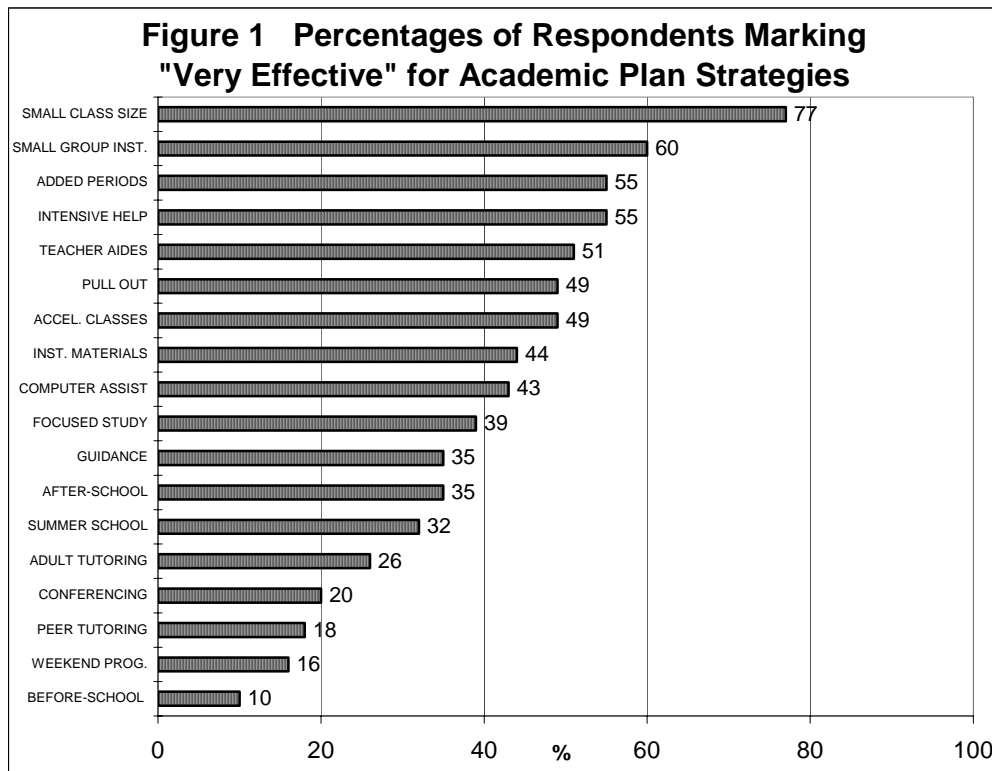
A sample of 175 schools was drawn from 18 school districts serving all geographic areas of South Carolina, and the principals of the schools were mailed surveys in May of 2000. Follow-up telephone calls and faxes yielded a 77% return rate. Principals rated the effectiveness of strategies for improvement actually implemented in their schools during the 1999-2000 school year and provided additional details on four prominent educational components: parent conferencing, summer school, after-school programs, and before-school programs. They were also asked to judge the overall effectiveness of the academic plans initiative, and to comment on challenges faced and resources needed to better address the requirements of student academic planning.

Results

Academic Plan Strategies

The first section of the survey requested principals to indicate whether or not their school had employed any of the 18 strategies listed in Figure 1 during the 1999-2000 school year. In addition, respondents were provided space to describe up to three "other" strategies not included in the 18 listed. If a respondent indicated that the school used a particular strategy during 1999-2000, the principal was asked to rate the effectiveness of the strategy. The reader should keep in mind that some strategies represent a small number of schools. One of the most frequently employed strategies, small class size, was also judged the most effective strategy;

more than three-fourths of the principals rated it very effective. The second most effective strategy, small group instruction, garnered the “very effective” label by six in ten respondents. Among the extension of learning time, added periods was rated as highly effective by 55% of the principals. About a third of the respondents judged after-school and summer school programs very effective. Parent conferencing, required by the statute, was judged very effective by only one in five respondents.

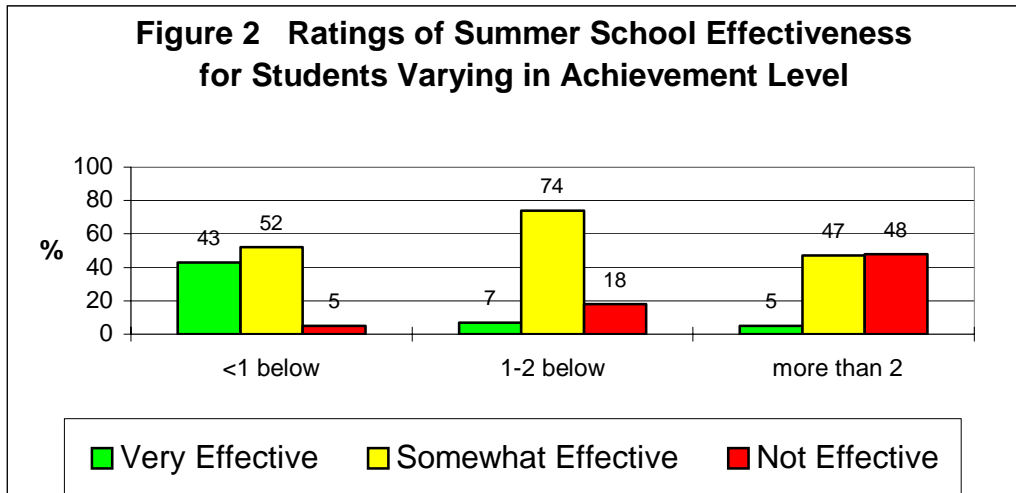


Summer School, After-School Programs and Before-School Programs

Both summer school and after-school programs were quite variable in the total instructional time offered to students. The average number of days of operation of summer school was 20, but the range was from 12 to 30. While two-thirds of the principals indicated that their after-school programs operated for 60 days or fewer, one in ten schools reported that their programs operated for more than 120 days. Before-school programs were reported to be operating in only 9 of the 133 schools in the sample. They served between 6 and 70 students and ranged in duration from 30 to 160 days. Two-thirds of the programs operated for 1 hour daily and the other third for 30 minutes.

Among the most interesting findings of the study was that students further below grade level were judged less likely to benefit from participation in any of the three programs. Thus,

while 43% of the principals judged summer school to be very effective for students less than one year below grade level, only 5% believed it to be very effective with students two or more grades below grade level. In contrast, the percentage of respondents judging summer school not effective increased from 5% to 48%. These summer school data are presented in Figure 2.

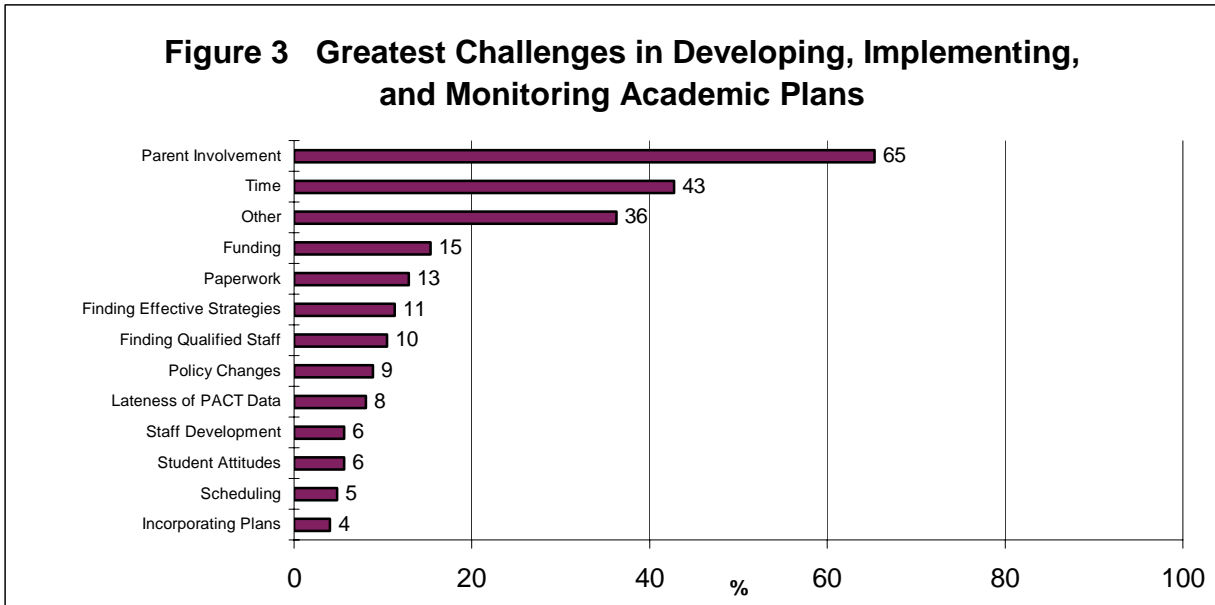


After-school programs were rated as very effective for students less than one grade below grade level by 38% of the respondents; the comparable figure for students two or more grades below grade placement was only 4%. The perceived effectiveness of before-school programs were quite similar, varying with student achievement level.

Major Challenges and Added Support Needed

About two-thirds of the principals said that getting parents involved in the planning process was a major challenge. Administrators and teachers had difficulty finding the *time* for meetings with parents, monitoring the process, developing plans and providing needed professional development activities for the staff. Figure 3 depicts these data.

Figure 3 Greatest Challenges in Developing, Implementing, and Monitoring Academic Plans



The respondents indicated that added support was needed to fund additional staff positions and provide the resources needed to operate the programs.

Overall Rating of Effectiveness of the Initiative

Overall, the student planning initiative was rated as somewhat effective by the great majority (73%) of the principals. Only 6% saw it as very effective (a rating of “3”) and 21% rated it not effective (a rating of “1”). The comments of several principals were typical:

- Rating = 3* *Everyone (is) on the same page.*
- Rating = 2* *Lack of funding to provide options for assistance; lack of sufficient parental support; transportation issues for majority of eligible*
- Rating = 2* *It is effective if parents are involved - not so effective if no parent involvement.*
- Rating = 2* *It made teachers and parents actively focus on plans to improve deficit areas.*
- Rating = 1* *No funding from legislative body who mandated this initiative. As usual mandated to schools to improve instruction through some program or plan put into law by non-educators and no \$ support for aides, additional enrichment programs.*
- Rating = 1* *Plans require a tremendous effort on the part of classroom teachers. Parents often do not follow through on their part of the plan.*

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study document that schools have implemented a variety of strategies to address student needs identified in academic plans. School principals were able to rate the effectiveness of these strategies, but there is no current research that links student achievement with specific strategies. Future research in the following areas would extend the work of this study and provide guidance to South Carolina schools searching for ways to improve student achievement.

- Research should be conducted to investigate the relationship between student achievement and participation in specific academic plan strategies. An evaluability assessment should be performed in selected districts to ascertain if sufficient data exists to specify the types and amounts of additional instructional strategies received by individual students so that these data can be related to student achievement.
- Student achievement data of students with varying initial achievement levels should be analyzed for students participating in summer school, after-school, and before-school programs. Detailed data on the specific instructional services and the amount of participation would be needed on an individual student basis in order to conduct this research.
- Data should be gathered on 1999-2000 summer school programs so that information on the specific length and content of summer programs experienced by individual students can be linked with student achievement data.
- A study should be conducted of schools that were very successful in gaining parent and student participation in the academic plan initiative. The techniques used by these schools should be chronicled and shared with schools across the State.
- A case study of schools in which the academic planning initiative has been deemed “very effective” by the school principals should be conducted in order to identify the factors and specific strategies associated with their success. Information regarding these programs should be disseminated to other schools and districts.