



October 9, 2009

Dr. Jim McBride  
State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Wyoming Department of Education  
Hathaway Building  
Cheyenne, WY 82002

Dear Dr. McBride:

We are pleased to submit the final report for the Wyoming School Use of Resources 2 (SUR 2) study. The attached document provides a detailed account of our study methods and findings which we hope you will find useful as Wyoming continues to move forward in linking resources to student learning in ways to efficiently and effectively improve learning for all children.

As requested, this letter summarizes our findings and offers a number of suggestions for ways the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) can use our findings to continue its work in supporting schools and school districts as they use the resources available through the State's school funding model to improve student learning.

As described in the attached document, the Wyoming School Use of resources was a one year effort that followed up on our earlier study of how school districts use the resources received through the funding model. In our first study (SUR 1), through collaboration with the Educational Leadership Department at the University of Wyoming, we visited virtually every school in Wyoming and compared the use of resources at those schools to resources each school generated through the model.

Following the completion of that study, we worked with the WDE to define a second, more in-depth study in a smaller sample of schools. Our goal was to identify high performing schools and study their instructional improvement strategies, and how they allocated and used educational resources to implement those strategies. The first step in this work was a day long meeting with 30 of Wyoming's leading educators to develop a vision of a Wyoming improving school. The document that resulted from that meeting identified a set of strategies that, if implemented, would in the view of the committee lead to substantial improvements in student performance. That document is incorporated in the first part of our report. We note that the strategies identified by these leading Wyoming educators were very aligned with the theory of school improvement embedded within the funding model, and required a very similar set of resources.

Next we attempted to identify a sample of high performing schools. As documented in the report, this task was more difficult than anticipated due to the way the state's testing system has

operated and substantially changed in recent years. Eventually, we identified a sample of 16 schools, four in each of two large districts, along with 3 schools in one small district and five schools in a second small district, although we do not think that any of the schools produced large improvements in performance or actually doubled performance on state tests – the initial objective of the study.

We conducted in-depth site visits to each of the four districts and 16 schools, meeting with and interviewing central office administrators, school principals, teachers and other staff as appropriate. We also observed classroom instruction, attended school level faculty meetings, and where possible conducted focus groups with teachers. Our findings from these case studies are summarized in the first part of our report, and detailed case study reports are included as appendices. Our overall findings and recommendations to the WDE are included below.

First, as in SUR 1, we found that the allocation of many resources differed from the theory of action embedded in the Evidence-Based funding model implemented by the Legislature in 2006. We found schools generally had fewer teachers than funded through the model; at the high school level we continued to find schools offering more elective courses and fewer core courses than envisioned in the model. We also had some concerns about the way instruction was provided and with the approach to student assessment in the schools. We suspect this is where the WDE can have the greatest impact on helping schools improve student performance in the future.

Based on our observations and interviews we found the general approach to teaching was to offer relatively short periods of whole group instruction to students, followed, by substantial time in small groups and then by what might be considered an excessive focus on providing interventions. Most schools used what we would characterize as a workshop approach to instruction – initial “mini-lessons” followed by less effective small group work and interventions. Our conclusion is that schools need to focus more on longer times for whole group instruction and to enhance instructional practice with more explicit approaches to teaching reading and mathematics, or any content area. We believe that such a change would produce more student learning with the first dose of instruction and therefore lead to less extensive need for interventions.

The WDE can play an important role in helping districts modify instructional practice to follow these suggestions, and by providing Professional Development designed to offer district staff at ALL levels better training in effective instructional practice. Though we found what we believe is an excessive use of interventions for students, we found very little use of the most powerful extra help strategy – 1-1 or very small group tutoring, which is the most effective initial intervention. We also would encourage the WDE to initiative efforts to help districts understand how to use tutoring more effectively, especially since tutoring resources are including in the Wyoming funding formula.

While all districts conduct annual PAWS assessments, we found most of the schools in our sample also relied on a wide range of additional assessment instruments such as multiple diagnostic assessments, formative assessments, benchmark assessments including the NWEA MAP tests (which we understand are being used by 46 of the 48 districts in the state), as well as the state tests. Our sense is that the battery of assessments used by schools and districts is larger than needed and not used well in curriculum planning *before* material is taught to students, which should be the primary use of diagnostic and formative assessments. We would suggest a more

parsimonious set of assessments, that include initial diagnostic and formative assessments, combined with regular benchmark tests to assess student progress and learning, all of which would compliment the data collected through PAWS and help teachers meet student needs by providing a framework for curriculum development that led to high quality initial instruction and the resulting need for fewer interventions. Again, the WDE's role in this work would be provide the professional development necessary to establish an assessment system that met these criteria and helped teachers and other school staff interpret and use the data the assessments offer to help students meet the expected state-wide goals. The development of a more cohesive set of diagnostic, formative, end-of-curriculum unit, benchmark and state assessments could be created through the \$350 million that has been set aside for states to work in state collaboratives to create this battery of assessments linked to state curriculum standards.

Similarly, we found most districts had fragmented reading and math curricula – in one case finding the use of three different Algebra books by teachers who taught the same level course in the same school. The WDE could help school and district personnel understand the key aspects of a good reading and a strong math program, and then give them the tools needed to evaluate and choose among the many alternatives available to them, including having a common systemic curriculum in all subjects across all schools.

Finally, we found most schools and districts did not establish particularly ambitious goals for student learning. High goals are central to school and student success. Here the WDE could help schools set specific, ambitious, numerical goals and then provide local school staff with professional development to give them the tools to establish those goals, measure progress toward the goals, assess student needs in meeting the goals, and plan curriculum that will meet student learning needs with respect to achieving the goals.

These expectations for the WDE are no less ambitious than the goals we recommend each school and district establish. The WDE has a considerable responsibility to both help schools improve student learning and to hold those same schools accountable for that learning.

We hope this report will provide a good first step in helping Wyoming schools along with the WDE ensure all children in Wyoming have an opportunity to learn all they are capable of learning.

On behalf of all the staff at Lawrence O. Picus and Associates who worked on this and previous projects, we want to thank you for your support of our work, and hope that the findings in the report will help everyone in Wyoming continue to improve student learning.

Sincerely,



Lawrence O. Picus and Allan Odden