

Evaluation of an Innovative School District-Wide Assessment System

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Executive Summary

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was enacted in 2001 by the federal government to centralize educational standards in the United States (U.S.). NCLB has met numerous challenges in practice. Academic underperformance among disadvantaged youth has persisted, and in some cases, been exacerbated by NCLB (Ryan, 2004). As a result, a national waiver system was offered to individual states to develop accountability systems that are better-suited to address educational challenges at the state level. In the state of California, the California Office to Reform Education (CORE) successfully received a federal waiver in 2013 by proposing a new accountability system for the state. CORE developed a system that measures student, faculty, and school-family outcomes, the School Quality Improvement Index (SQII). This measure accounts more holistically for student outcomes, compared to accountability measures associated with NCLB, by examining multiple student dimensions, including socio-emotional competence.

The Unified School District¹ (USD) is one of ten school districts participating in the CORE waiver and in 2014 conducted its first assessment of schools in the district using the SQII. USD is now interested in integrating their existing data systems with student-level data collected from the SQII in order to address academic disparities of students in the district. USD seeks to link academic and socio-emotional data from the SQII to data collected quarterly by USD in an effort to make data-informed decisions to enhance student outcomes within the district.

The current investigation will assist USD by providing consultation and data analytic assistance to answer specific questions about socio-emotional and academic disparities among students. In collaboration with the Head of Pupil Services at USD, the investigators will develop an integrative data system, build research capacity within the district, and conduct analyses of interest to USD. This community research partnership has policy implications at the district, state, and national level.

¹ To ensure confidentiality, Unified School District is used throughout as a pseudonym.

Public Policy Background

Public Law PL 107-110, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was enacted by the United States (U.S.) federal government in 2001 in an effort to enhance the academic proficiency of all children in the nation (Bush, 2001). NCLB provided centralized standards-based educational reform particularly targeted at addressing disproportionate rates of academic underachievement among the nation’s most disadvantaged youth (Bush, 2001). In practice, NCLB has met numerous challenges associated with rigid standards and solutions that have not been able to consistently translate to gains at the state and district levels (Goertz, 2005). Gaps in academic achievement, particularly among the nation’s most disadvantaged youth have persisted and punitive standards under NCLB have often exacerbated this disparity (Ryan, 2004). U.S. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, stated the current law was “forcing districts into one-size-fits-all solutions that just don't work.” In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education informed states that they could apply for waivers that would allow decentralization of the current education standards of NCLB.

In August of 2013, The California Office to Reform Education (CORE) was approved for a district-consortium (ten public school districts) request for a NCLB waiver. In the waiver, CORE proposed to reorient school district goals to collaboratively improve the college and career readiness of all students. In an effort to address shortcomings associated with standards of NCLB, CORE takes a holistic approach to school improvement that aims to enhance schools by developing students, faculty, and school-family relations. In order to measure these outcomes, CORE has developed the School Quality Improvement Index (SQII) which measures academic, socio-emotional, and school climate domains. Figure 1 compares NCLB performance and accountability outcomes to the SQII.

Figure 1
NCLB and CORE Waiver SQII Outcome Domains

	Academic	Social-Emotional	Culture and Climate
NCLB	Performance measured against ELA, Math, API, and graduation rate targets	Not included	Not included
CORE Waiver	Academic performance broadened to include other subjects (e.g., science, history, writing) and other metrics (e.g., growth, 5 th and 6 th year graduation rates)	Non-Cognitive skills will be included, in addition to measuring absentee and suspension/expulsion rates	Student, staff, and parent surveys included, in addition to Special Ed identification and ELL redesignation rates

(This figure is taken from CORE, 2012)

Unified School District (USD) educates approximately 55,000 students annually and is one of ten school districts in California using the SQII through CORE. In accordance with CORE’s belief that each school district has unique challenges in need of collective accountability (CORE SQII) and district-specific strategies, USD recently released its strategic plans for reimagining

the district in its USD Vision 2025 report (USD, 2014). Of particular interest to USD, and the focus of this investigation, are persistent achievement gaps among students.

While this city is the highest achieving urban district in the state of California it evidences some of the largest achievement gaps between and among student subgroups, including English Language Learners (ELL), African Americans, and students with disabilities (USD, 2014). These students not only struggle academically but also evidence disproportionate rates of behavioral problems resulting in referrals to special services and school suspension (USD, 2014). Nationwide, deficits in socio-emotional skills have been noted among low-income, ethnic minority youth, and elevate youths' risk for academic failure (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). In order to address these disparities in achievement and to ensure that all students within the district are prepared for the 21st century, USD seeks to link academic and socio-emotional data from the SQII to data collected quarterly by USD (e.g., special services referrals, socio-economic status indicators [SES], suspensions, school-based behavioral interventions) in an effort to make data-informed decisions to enhance student outcomes.

Project Description and Deliverables

Given that the CORE waiver in the state of California is in its infancy, critical questions exist around the SQII assessment tool. USD is interested in partnering with the investigators of this study to integrate student measures from the SQII with student data regularly collected by the district. USD has existing support through CORE to assess SQII outcomes at the district-level but not at the student-level. USD is interested in using data to assess individual students in an effort to personalize efforts targeted at students at-risk of academic failure (i.e., African American, ELL, and students with disabilities). Specifically, the current investigation aims to answer questions about achievement gaps among USD students by using SQII outcomes and USD data. To reach this aim, we are focusing this Society of Community Research and Action Public Policy Grant on assisting us in two phases of the project:

Phase I (Winter 2015- Spring 2015)

The first phase of the project will focus on developing data management procedures to integrate the SQII with USD data systems. The SQII was first delivered to students in the Spring of 2014. The student-level SQII measures that USD is interested in examining for this project are academic performance and socio-emotional competence. Student-level data collected by USD (not measured by the SQII) include, referrals to student support services, school-based socio-emotional and behavioral interventions, student (e.g., race/ethnicity, SES) and teacher (e.g., race ethnicity, teacher training) characteristics. Students are assessed on all measures quarterly. USD currently does not have any student-level data management assistance that allows them to link SQII measure to data that they have been collecting on students in the district.

In this phase of the project, strategic efforts will be made to build capacity within USD to create a data system and procedures for basic descriptive analyses. The primary investigator will be working within USD as the key support for this effort. Core data management development shall be completed within 6 months, but will be on-going throughout the project. Specific deliverables from this phase of the project include:

- 1) Data system integrating SQII data with additional data collected by USD
- 2) Presentations to key stakeholders within USD communicating data management procedures and answering questions that will help inform a data management manual.
- 3) Data management manual explaining basic procedures for linking the SQII measures to USD data systems.
- 4) The primary investigator will provide on-going training to specific staff members to build capacity within USD.

Phase II (Summer 2015 – Spring 2016)

The second phase of this project will focus on preliminary analysis of SQII and USD data to ask questions about disparities in academic achievement among USD's three target student groups (i.e., African American, ELL, students with disabilities). Given the novelty of the socio-emotional outcome measures of the SQII, USD would like to examine the extent to which deficits in socio-emotional functioning is associated with gaps in achievement and student support services referrals.

A small subset of the nearly 55,000 students within the district will be selected for preliminary data analyses. This study will include detailed descriptive and multivariate analyses of disparities in socio-emotional outcomes at SFSUD and their relationship to academic performance, student characteristics (e.g., race, SES, gender, grade, etc.), classroom level characteristics (e.g., teacher characteristics), and intervention referrals. Specific deliverables from this study will include:

- 1) A detailed report on disparities in socio-emotional functioning at USD, generally. The report will also seek to provide insights to USD on the relationship between students' socio-emotional functioning and academic outcomes.
- 2) Presentations to key stakeholders within USD communicating study findings and practice recommendations.
- 3) Developing an advisory committee and grant submission to support on-going research within the district. Specifically, if socio-emotional deficits are associated with academic outcomes, USD would like to evaluate the quality of existing socio-emotional/behavioral interventions implemented in the district.

Community Partners

The principal investigator for this project, Dr. Roundfield, is a National Institute of Mental Health T32 postdoctoral fellow with a Ph.D. in Clinical-Community Psychology. Her current program of research focuses on school-based preventive mental health services. The primary investigator has over 6 years of school-based participatory research experience within the Chicago Public School system and plans to leverage her community psychology training to collaborate effectively with USD. The co-investigator, Dr. LeWinn, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). The co-investigator has established collaborative relationships with USD faculty and staff. In particular, she has worked closely with the Head of Pupil Services who is heading the student-level evaluation efforts within the district. Staff within the department will be our primary resources to accessing the student data, consulting with the district about their needs, and providing feedback

on study findings.

Currently, several actions have been taken to ensure the success of this project and to enhance capacity within the district. First, an agreement has been established with USD to provide support through the use of office space for the primary investigator to conduct the evaluation. In this capacity, the primary investigator will be able to work with staff to ensure that the project is completed collaboratively. Second, bi-weekly meetings have been established with the two investigators and Head of Pupil Services to address challenges and develop questions that are feasible and of direct interest to the district. Finally, a challenge to the completion of this project is limited funding within USD. As a result, the two investigators of this project have been in collaboration with USD staff in an effort to secure internal (USD) and external (SCRA Public Policy Grant, Institute for Education Science Research-Practitioner Partnership Grant) grant funding.

Relevance to Community Psychology

Within the field of community psychology, the link between positive youth development and academic achievement has been well-documented (Durlak, Taylor, Kawashima, Pachan, DuPre, et al., 2007). It has not been until recently that schools and educational policies have begun to take a more holistic approach to student development. The current study integrates community psychology theory on positive youth development and educational policy reform efforts in the state of California by examining socio-emotional functioning and academic outcomes within one school district. This study will provide evidence for the unique ways in which community psychologists can bridge research and practice in school-based settings.

Public Policy Implications

An important shortcoming of educational policy reform under NCLB that the CORE waiver seeks to address is the focus on math and English, at the exclusion of more holistic student development (Elias, 2009). The CORE waiver takes a “whole-student” approach to understanding academic performance by measuring and developing students’ socio-emotional functioning.

Preliminary analyses of the SQII’s socio-emotional outcomes as they relate to academic achievement gaps have important implications at the district, state, and national level. Within USD, policy implications include prioritizing socio-emotional interventions promoting specific competencies, rather than implementing more punitive courses of action (e.g., suspension) among struggling students. As stated previously, the CORE waiver is a consortium of eight school districts in California, study findings from USD will be reported directly to CORE. USD may serve as an important model of how to integrate the SQII with district-specific student-level data to inform decisions to improve student outcomes across participating districts. Finally, disparities in academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning among specific minority students are a national concern. The current study will elucidate the link between socio-emotional functioning and academic achievement. To this end, the current investigation will be able to inform public policy efforts aimed at educational reform of our nation’s youth.

Dissemination Timeline

In addition to USD project deliverables outlined in the Project Description and Deliverables section of this grant proposal, this project includes policy dissemination at the local, state, and national levels.

Policy advocacy at USD and CORE: At the conclusion of Phase I of the project (Summer 2015), the current investigators will begin to advocate for data management policies to be established at the district and state levels. These policies would provide clear guidelines for the integration of district's student-level data with the statewide SQII. Although the current project focuses on the USD data system, it is expected that policies associated with one district may be useful to the participating CORE districts. Goals of these policies will be to ensure that districts have consistent data reporting across their schools, adequate support and resources for continued data management and analysis, and guidelines for using their data to make decisions to improve student outcomes. These policies will be directly informed by the data management manual (produced from Phase I of the project) as well as by insights from the primary investigator after working on the data integration system. By the conclusion of Phase I of the project (Summer 2015) we will:

- a. Produce a report and provide a presentation highlighting policy recommendations to board members at USD and at CORE located in Sacramento, California.

Policy advocacy at the national level: The current investigators will seek to strategically disseminate findings from this study to platforms that will influence policy. We hypothesize that there will be disparities in socio-emotional functioning based on student demographics, and those disparities will partially explain disparities in academic functioning. These findings have both educational and health policy implications (socio-emotional deficits are associated with mental illness). By the conclusion of this project (Spring 2016) we will:

- a. Disseminate policy briefs documenting our findings to appropriate government agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Education.
- b. Publish results in the journal of Health Affairs. This journal reaches a broad audience of government policy makers who are interested in taking action to address health disparities.

Budget

In order for the primary investigator to conduct this study, she must be formally employed by USD to access sensitive student data protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). We are requesting \$5,000 to employ the primary investigator as a part-time data analyst within USD. This funding will help to offset the cost of employing the primary investigator at \$25/hour for approximately 10-15 hours per week. Grant funding will be managed by collaborating with the grants department at UCSF and USD and dispersed to the primary investigator for the duration of the project.

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