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Baltimore City Public Schools: Implementing Bounded Autonomy (B)

In the late spring of 2012, Dr. Andres Alonso was finishing up his fifth year as CEO of the Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). The school system was remarkably different from the one Alonso entered in June 2007. High school dropout rates had declined by 55%, from 9.4% in 2006 to 4.2% in 2010, and graduation rates were up nearly 10 percentage points to 71.9%.[1] Elementary and middle school students' reading and math scores on the state test had also increased (**Exhibit 1**).[2] The rise in performance corresponded with a continuously evolving relationship between BCPS's central office and its schools. Principals still controlled a large percentage of their budgets through Fair Student Funding and received assistance from their school support networks.[3] However, the network teams had been expanded to include specialists in family and community engagement, human capital, and data analysis.[4] More significantly, BCPS appointed executive directors to each network to coach and evaluate the principals.[5] During the same period, Alonso had overseen the approval and implementation of an innovative teachers' contract and responded to evidence of cheating on state tests.

Expanding Networks and Executive Directors

Before the 2011–2012 school year, two executive directors were responsible for supporting all principals in the 204 schools across the district. In this role, the executive directors worked with the lead facilitators and support teams in school support networks to help principals meet the needs of their teachers, students, and community.[6] Alonso and members of his leadership team recognized that the ratio of more than 100 schools to each executive director was problematic.[7] Rather than providing clear standards and processes for accountability or direct support for school leaders, the two executive directors were primarily handling crises.[8] For their part, principals were asking for additional coaching from people who had a deep understanding of their schools.[9]

During the 2010–2011 school year, the district worked on plans to restructure the executive director's role.[10] Then, in the spring of 2011, the district began interviewing and hiring more executive directors, with the eventual goal of providing one executive director for each of the 16 networks.[11] Throughout the summer, executive directors were matched to the leadership needs of the various networks. For example, executive directors with turnaround experience were matched

with networks that included turnaround schools.[12] The executive directors were under the Office of the Chief Academic Officer and reported directly to Chief Academic Officer Sonja Brookins Santelises, while the network lead facilitators were under the Office of School Support Networks, headed by Chief Network Officer Jonathan Brice. The arrangement created a unique matrix structure in which the executive directors, network teams, and principals were expected to share knowledge and supports, and hold each other accountable.[13] In the new structure, schools not only received support from a network team of five to eight specialists and a lead facilitator, but were also supported by an executive director. With the expansion of the administrative and network staff, the average ratio of schools to network teams and executive directors declined to 12 to 1, and most network teams and executive directors served 8 to 10 schools.[14]

New Teachers' Contract

As the district moved forward with its plans to overhaul the position of executive director, it also engaged in contract negotiations with the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU). In a collaborative process that continued through the fall of 2010, BCPS and BTU agreed to a landmark contract that replaced the traditional "steps and lanes" pay scale with 4-tier career ladder pathways, which tied teacher pay to performance.[15] However, in the first ratification vote in October 2010, teachers rejected the agreement.[16] The contract had been finalized only two weeks before the vote, and many teachers felt they had not had the time to fully understand its sweeping changes.[17] Teachers also had concerns about how their performance would be measured and linked to pay.[18] Over the next month, leaders from BCPS and BTU worked together to answer questions and address concerns by making minor changes to the agreement. When a second ratification vote was held in November, 65% of those voting endorsed the revised agreement and, thus, ratified the contract.[19]

The contract established four self-paced career pathways—standard, professional, model, and lead—that teachers could progress through by earning "achievement units" and passing a review by a panel of peers.[20] Teachers earned achievement units through a number of different activities, which could include receiving high marks on an annual evaluation, attending professional development sessions, improving student achievement, and engaging in approved coursework.[21] Once a teacher accrued 12 achievement units, he or she would move one pay interval within a pathway.[22] Movement from professional to model or model to lead pathways required review and approval from the Professional Peer Review Committee—a group of expert teachers who were trained to evaluate teacher candidates based on their instructional practice, leadership, continual learning, and growth of student learning.[23]

Although the basic framework of the career pathways was outlined in the new contract, its details and implementation were left to a Joint Oversight Committee and Joint Governing Panel.[24] The Joint Oversight Committee (JOC) was a 10-member panel that included five district and five BTU leaders. The JOC provided general oversight for the planning, development, and implementation of the contract. The day-to-day work of implementing the new career pathways was the responsibility of the Joint Governing Panel (JGP), which included eight former teachers—four appointed by the district and four by BTU—who worked full-time to generate the many guides, protocols, and rubrics required to move from the old standardized salary scale to the new career pathways. In an iterative process, the JGP submitted its proposals and documents to the JOC for review and approval.[25]

By June 2011, the JGP and JOC had developed the roles and responsibilities for the model pathway. Model teachers were expected to mentor new teachers, coach struggling teachers, serve on the Professional Peer Review Committee, attend special training sessions, and serve in school-based leadership roles.[26] From June through November 2011, the first cohort of teachers was invited to

apply for the model pathway. [27] Model pathway candidates submitted an application that included a video of their teaching and samples of student work.[28]   In all, 341 teachers applied for the model pathway in the first cohort.[29] The Professional Peer Review Committee used a rubric developed for a model teacher pathway to assess the applicants. Those who earned a score of 80% or better were placed on the model pathway.[30] By the end of November, 100 teachers, or 29% of model pathway candidates in the first cohort, had been granted model pathway status.[31]

Addressing Allegations of Cheating

During that same summer (2011), the Maryland State Department of Education reported that it had found widespread cheating on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) at two BCPS elementary schools. The scandal emerged just over a year after the revelation of cheating at another nationally recognized BCPS elementary school.[32] Evidence of testing violations included test booklets that were completed after the close of the testing period and an unusually high number of erasure marks where incorrect answers had been corrected.[33] In addition, school records had been altered to show higher-than-actual attendance rates.[34]   Alonso responded by making it clear that cheating would not be tolerated. He asserted:[35]

> Cheating is an insult to our kids and their hard work, to our families and partners who support them in school, and to the huge majority of City Schools school leaders and staff who work so hard to ensure that they succeed. We have made it clear in the past that we will catch cheaters and the consequences we levy will be dire.

Alonso responded to the problem by making a significant financial investment in expanding the district's test security protocol beyond state requirements. It included training all district staff on the importance of test integrity, investigating any significant year-to-year increases or decreases in schools' test scores, and allocating $390,000 for external monitors at each school that administered the MSA.[36]   In addition, Alonso moved to dismiss and revoke the licenses of school administrators involved in the scandals.[37]   As a result of these actions, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which conducted its own investigation of suspicious test scores in 50 states, declared that "few districts have attacked cheating as aggressively as Baltimore."[38]

Continuing to Evolve

Alonso and BCPS continued to respond to the challenges of managing and leading a large urban school district. By the late spring of 2012, BCPS had nearly completed its first year with an expanded support network and executive director structures, a new teachers' contract incorporating career pathways and peer review, and increased test-security measures. There likely would be new changes and adjustments as the district moved forward and sought to meet the evolving needs of its students and community.

Exhibit 1   Percentage of Students Proficient or Advanced in Reading and Math

Grade 4 Reading

Grade 4 Math
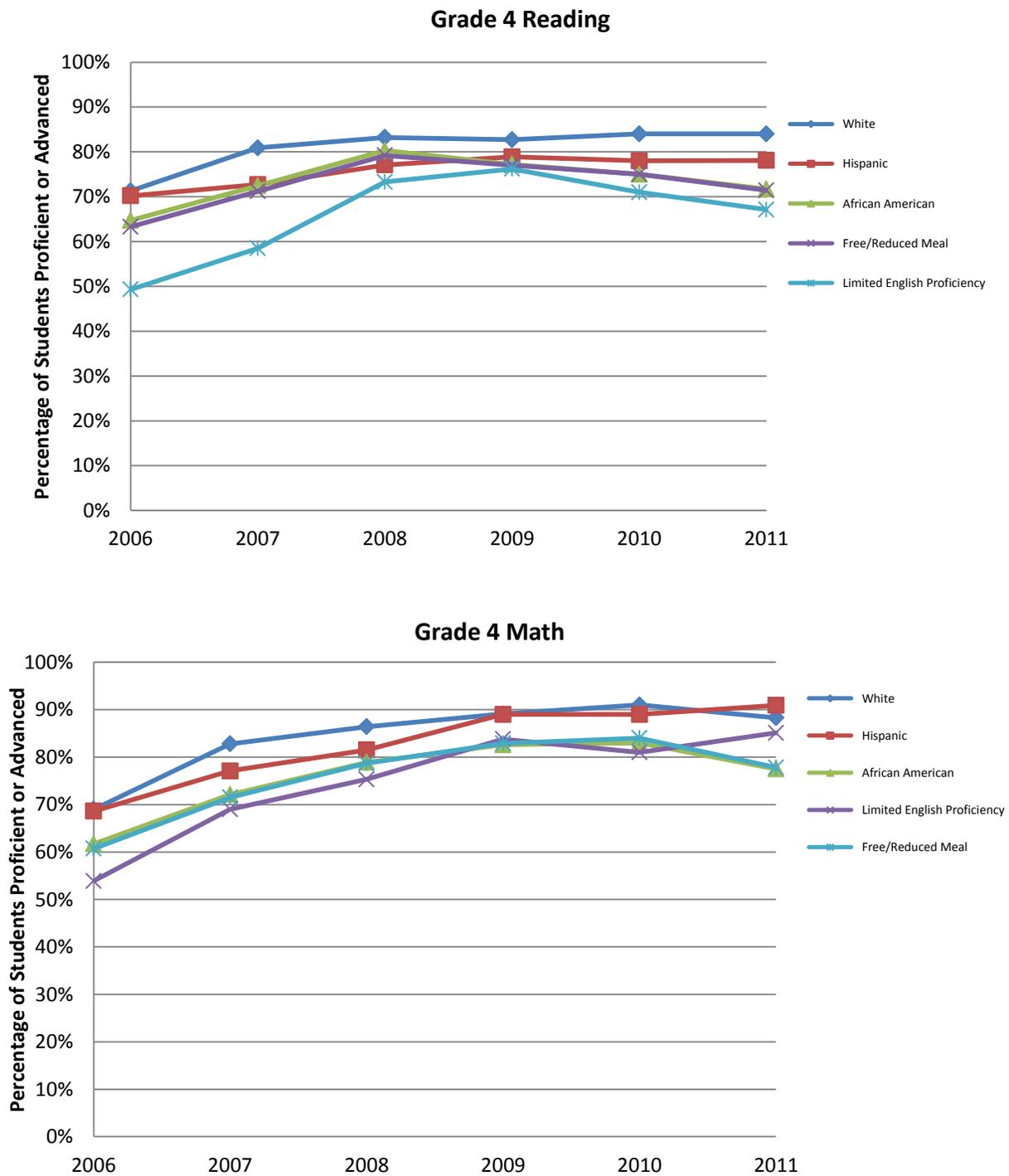
Source: Casewriter analysis. Maryland State Department of Education, "Maryland Report Card," Maryland State Department of Education website. Retrieved June 2012 from http://www.mdreportcard.org.

Endnotes

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