



The Influence of Local Politics on Educational Decisions

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This ex post facto, causal-comparative research study examined student reading performance data within a school district before and after a school district-wide decision to alter the reading curriculum in response to local political pressure from parents. Data analysis revealed that test scores dropped to a significantly lower level, especially for students who were economically disadvantaged, after the reading curriculum was altered. This study underscores the importance of making data-driven, rather than politically-influenced, decisions related to pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment by educational leaders.

Keywords: local politics, reading, reading curriculum, reading assessment

Working through the political dynamic in the public school systems falls within the realm of school leadership. Politics are present at every level of the school leader's involvement in the educational process, ranging in scope from local to national. The challenge facing the school leader is to acknowledge the reality that politics is a part of the daily routine and to work with that process to ensure that educationally sound decisions ultimately result for the students in the school.

Politics isn't some evil, dark discipline. It's just one more way to use relationships to get things done. Good leaders understand this and use politics to their advantage. This requires understanding power structures and learning when to negotiate and when to draw the line. (Ramsey, 2006, p. 80)

The term "politics" is commonly found in the organizational context, and often carries with it a negative connotation. So, exactly what is politics, where is politics found, and how is politics recognized? According to Ramsey (2006), "Wherever there is power to be had, resources to be divided, recognition to be earned, or

influence to be brokered, there is politics" (p. 79). Furthermore, Ramsey (2006) went on to say, "Wherever there are leaders and followers, there is politics" (p. 79). Thus, throughout any school system, politics must be everywhere, but that is not necessarily all bad. Ramsey (2006) added that "politics is another basic tool that all successful leaders use to achieve goals through other people" (p. 79).

The decisions made by school leaders, regarding educational processes for students in the school, potentially have a greater overall impact than the decisions made by other certified personnel in the school district. Moreover, the level of political involvement is likely the greatest at higher administrative levels. With these two thoughts in mind, there is no question that extreme caution and good judgment must be exercised in the final decisions that are made with respect to student learning. While recognizing the importance of national-level politics, most experienced educational leaders would attest to the statement that local politics are very real and have the ability to influence decision-making processes. The responsibility of educational leaders is to ensure that

students learn, regardless of political implications. Ultimately, the educational decisions made must be based on what is best for the students in the school.

Background

This ex post facto study was conducted in a U.S. school in the state of Texas. For purposes of confidentiality, the name of the school will remain

anonymous. The data examined for the study spanned two school years. As can be seen in *Figure 1: Ethnic Backgrounds of Students*, demographically, within the school's student body, 60 percent of the students were Hispanic, 38 percent of the students were White, and 2 percent of the students were African American (TEA, 2011a).

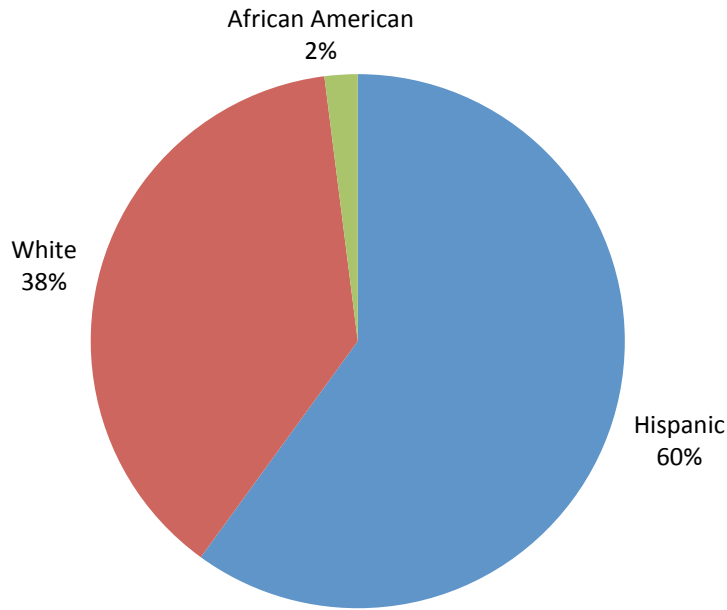


Figure 1. Ethnic Backgrounds of Students.

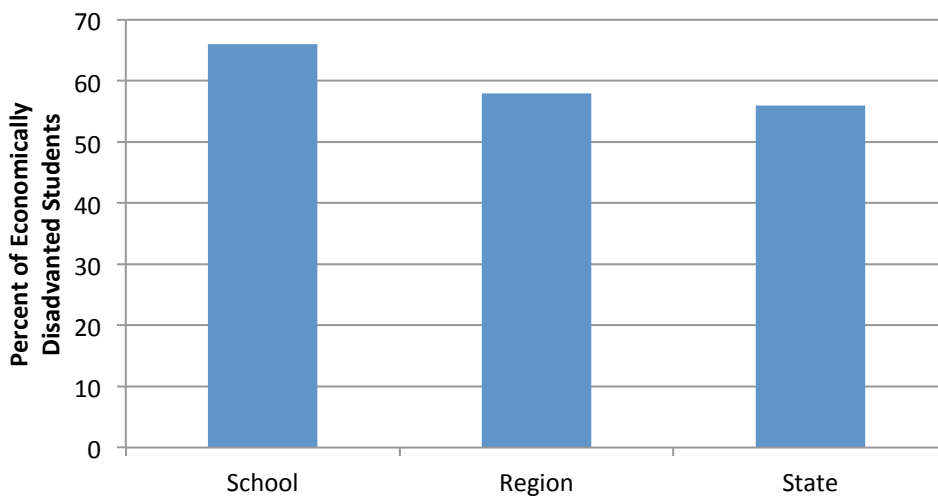


Figure 2. A comparison of economically disadvantaged students in the school, the region, and the state.

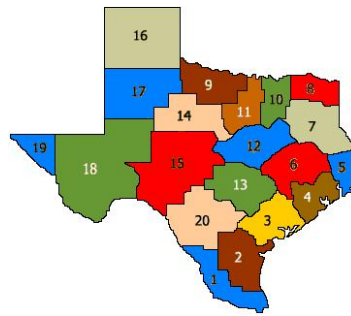


Figure 3. Educational Service Center (ESC) Regions in the State of Texas (TEA, 2011c).

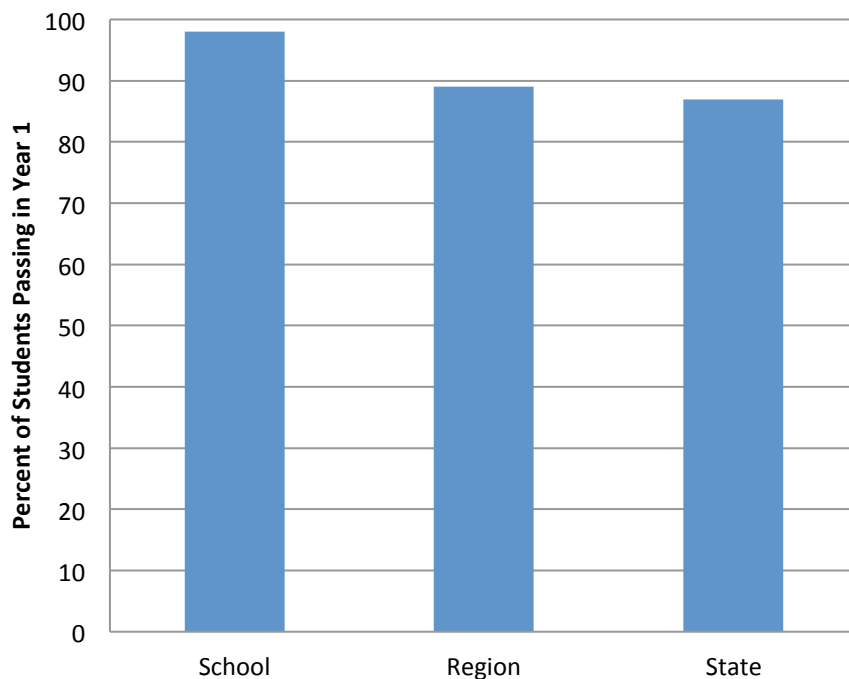


Figure 4. Composite percentage of students meeting the state-wide standardized reading/ELA assessment passing standard in the school, the region, and the state prior to reading curriculum changes.

The data presented in the histogram in Figure 4, is organized in three columns. The first column represents the percentage of all students tested in the school district who met the standardized reading/ELA assessment passing rate established by the state for that year. The second column represents the percentage of all students tested in the ESC region, within which the school was located, who met the state-established standardized assessment passing rate. The third column represents the percentage of all students who met the state-established standardized assessment passing rate across the state of Texas.

The student subpopulation of particular interest in this study was the economically disadvantaged students, and the academic discipline of interest was reading. During the first school year of this study, the school's overall (all students) reading/ELA passing percentage was 98 percent. Although the school's students were performing exceptionally well in reading achievement, a growing level of parental opposition existed with regard to the methods by which reading was being taught. The school relied heavily on a specific reading program as an integral part of the reading curriculum throughout the district, but the political

adversaries argued that the reading program was not being implemented correctly and that the assigned reading demands placed on students were excessive and unreasonable.

The reading program used by the school district was designed to be supplemental to the school's reading curriculum, extrinsically motivating students to read through a point accumulation and reward system (Renaissance Learning, 2011). In the school's implementation of the reading program, students were initially assessed by means of a computer administered standardized test to establish their reading levels. The students were then encouraged to read fictional and non-fictional books that were written at or slightly above their reading achievement levels. Upon completion of the reading of each book, the students were tested via a standardized computer administered examination to assess their comprehension of the material in the books they read. A designated number of points were awarded through the computerized process for correctly answered questions. Through this process, the teachers had access to a computerized printout that revealed the number of points attained by each student and a comprehension score to reveal the student's intellectual growth (Renaissance Learning, 2011). Procedures established by the school permitted students to "spend" their points for various rewards. Although conflicting views existed between the school and certain factions of the community with regard to using reading points for grading students, the school used these reading points as a percentage of the students' final grade calculations. The school's philosophy was that in order for the students to improve their reading, much like developing a winning athletic team, practice and repetition was required. While some students enjoy reading and are intrinsically motivated to do so, others are not. By requiring a minimal number of points for students to attain a certain grade, all students were literally "forced" to read, thus obtaining the needed practice and repetition for improvement and growth, and all students were able to enjoy the privileges of the reward system. The school's design required a minimum quantity of reading from every student while encouraging those who were motivated, either extrinsically or intrinsically, to surpass the minimum requirements. These students reaped the largest educational benefit from the reward system.

After hearing numerous parental complaints about the amount of reading required of the students, the school's leadership scheduled a public meeting at the beginning of the second school year in this study to allow parents to voice their concerns. Prior to the meeting, all of the school's reading teachers were asked to compile their past rules and procedures with specific regard to their implementation of the reading program and to consider alternative rules and methods if possible. While a sizable percentage of parents attended the public meeting, according to school officials, the student subgroups were

not equally represented. Interestingly, although the white students made up only 38 percent of the student body, the majority of the parents in attendance were white. School officials estimated that of the total attendees, roughly 1/8 were Hispanic. No parents of African American students attended, and it was noted that the representation of the economically disadvantaged students, who made up the majority of the student body, was virtually non-existent.

After hearing the concerns and complaints from the parents in attendance, the decision was made by the school leadership to reduce the total number of reading points required of students at every grade level in every grade category (accumulated points) while leaving the respective grade received by the student constant. For example, prior to the public meeting, if 10 points were required for the grade of A, 8 points for the grade of B, and 6 points for the grade of C, after the public meeting, 5 points were required for the grade of A, 4 points for the grade of B, and 3 points for the grade of C. (These points and grades are presented for demonstration purposes only and do not reflect the actual point and grade scale used in the school). The reduction in the point requirement ultimately resulted in less reading required of the students. The unfortunate complement to the reduction in the reading requirement was a decline in student performance as measured by the reading/ELA state-wide assessment scores.

The Problem

The reading/ELA composite student passing rate conveyed on the school's AEIS report dropped from the previous year's passing rate following the decision to decrease the required reading in the reading program. While the reduction in student performance was the observable and most immediately pressing issue, the underlying problem appears that an educationally unsound decision was made by the school to reduce the amount of reading required of students in the reading curriculum in response to political pressures imposed by local adversaries.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a politically imposed decision by the school to make curricular changes in the district's reading program from one school year to the next, and to determine the soundness of that decision. The ramifications of the decision to reduce the amount of reading required of students were analyzed through an examination of changes in student performance on reading/ELA state-wide assessments from one year to the next in overall student performance and in student performance by selected student subpopulations.

Research Hypotheses

For statistical testing purposes, null hypotheses were developed. Using state standardized test results, as conveyed on the district's AEIS reports, the overarching hypothesis focused on the reading/ELA performance of

all students in the school following the decision to decrease reading requirements in the curriculum. Subsequent hypotheses addressed the performance of designated subgroups of students, including the Hispanic and white ethnicities of the student population and of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. African American student performance was not analyzed due to the minute number of students in the school. The four null hypotheses were:

1. Ho: The politically influenced decision to decrease the amount of reading required of students will have no effect on the reading/ELA composite passing rate for all students in the school as conveyed on its AEIS report.
2. Ho: The politically influenced decision to decrease the amount of reading required of students will have no effect on the reading/ELA composite passing rate for Hispanic students in the school as conveyed on its AEIS report.
3. Ho: The politically influenced decision to decrease the amount of reading required of students will have no effect on the reading/ELA composite passing rate for white students in the school as conveyed on its AEIS report.
4. Ho: The politically influenced decision to decrease the amount of reading required of students will have no effect on the reading/ELA composite passing rate for economically disadvantaged students in the school as conveyed on its AEIS report.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design selected for this study was causal-comparative, also known as ex-post facto, meaning after the fact. The ex post facto design was most appropriate because the study was developed after the occurrence of the events described in the background section of this study. There was no experimentation on the part of the researchers; however, it so closely followed a quasi-experimental design that it was a study most worthy of conducting.

In causal-comparative research, or ex post facto research, the researcher attempts to determine the cause, or reason, for existing differences in the behavior or status of groups of individuals. In other words, it is observed that groups are different on some variable, and the researcher attempts to identify the major factor that has led to this difference. Such research is referred to as ex post facto because both the effect and the alleged cause have already occurred and must be studied in retrospect. (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 217)

Causal-comparative studies attempt to identify cause-effect relationships, typically involve two or more

groups and one independent variable, and involve comparison (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The cause-effect relationship sought in this study centered on determining whether the reduction in the amount of reading required of students caused any significant difference in student performance as measured by the reading/ELA state-wide assessment. The groups were identified as the year one and year two student groups. Within that categorization, comparisons were made on all students, as well as the Hispanic, white, and economically disadvantaged subgroups. The independent variable was the reduction in the amount of reading required of students from the previous school year and the dependent variable was student performance on the year two reading/ELA state-wide assessment.

In framing this study, reading/ELA standardized test score data from year one were used to establish a baseline for comparison. The public meeting that prompted the curriculum change in the reading program was held just prior to the beginning of year two. This causal-comparative study is unique in that the only treatment (independent) variable identified was the reduction in the amount of reading required of students from one school year to the next. All other variables remained constant from the previous year. With no resignations, retirements, or teacher replacements, there were no changes in the reading faculty at any level. Every reading teacher throughout the entire school district held the same assignment in year two that they held in year one. There were no changes in the length of the school year, nor were there changes in the class schedule, thus making the amount of class time in year two identical to what it was in year one. The same reading curriculum was taught with the only change being the reduction in points required of the students. Of course, as with all educational research that extends from one year to the next, confounding variables, including students progressing from one grade level to the next, seniors graduating, and new students entering into the early childhood grade levels must be mentioned. Moreover, migration of students into and out of the school district was normal. Lastly, there are always the confounding variables associated with personal issues that every student has, such as family matters, illnesses, deaths of loved ones, etc., all of which potentially affect student performance on any given day.

Data Collection

The sources of the data collected for this study included the school district's AEIS reports (TEA, 2011a), the school district's state accountability rating data table (TEA, 2011b), and informal interviews of key personnel who were employed in the school during the scope of the study. The AEIS reports revealed reading/ELA data from both school years during the study. The interviews provided insight into the political dynamics surrounding the reading program issue and the method by which

changes were made to the reading curriculum. The information gained from these data sources provided invaluable insight that could not have been gained solely from the analysis of test scores.

The school's year one and year two AEIS reports (TEA, 2011a) were accessed to obtain state-wide assessment results in the discipline of reading. The layout of the test results in the AEIS reports was such that it listed the percentage of students who met the state's passing standard in each subject tested by grade level starting at the third grade and ending with the eleventh grade. Within each grade level grouping, the AEIS report revealed, from left to right, the passing percentage, by column, for the state, ESC region, district, each ethnic subgroup of students, student genders, and other subgroups, including economically disadvantaged, special education, LEP, and at risk. At the time of this study, Texas required students in grades three through nine to be tested with a reading test, and the reading component for the tenth and eleventh grade students was incorporated into the reading/ELA test. At the conclusion of the assessment results by grade level in each AEIS report was a section titled "Sum Of All Grades Tested," which combined all grade level scores for each category into one composite score for the school district. Since the focus of this study was at the school district level, all scores reported were derived from this composite score section of the report.

The school district's state accountability rating data table (TEA, 2011b) contained basic assessment results. The one piece of information that the accountability data tables contained that the AEIS reports did not was the total number of students tested in each group of interest in this study. Since that critical piece of information was needed for the statistical analysis of the student performance data, the accountability rating data table served as another integral source of data used in this study.

From the informal interviews, insight was gained regarding the types of complaints parents voiced about the reading program, which parents were the most vocal, the dynamics of the public meeting, who attended the public meeting, the changes made in the reading requirements for the students, etc. The data gained through this collection process enriched the entire study by demonstrating how powerful the local political process truly was, why certain decisions were made, the ramifications of the decisions, and how students were affected in the end.

Data Analysis

To methodically analyze the data in a non-biased fashion, it was necessary to first choose a quantitative research method to apply to the study followed by the selection of an appropriate data analysis technique. Although the data collected for this study encompassed more than numerical assessment data, the numerical data

were the only data appropriate for statistical analysis. Since individual students' state-wide assessment results were not available to the researcher, the overall passing percentages reported on the school's AEIS report were used. This reduced the analysis to two categories of students—those who passed and those who failed the state-wide assessment. Since only passing percentages were reported on the AEIS reports, the need for the accountability data tables came into play, because they furnished information regarding the numbers of students tested. Through simple mathematical procedures, frequencies were calculated to determine the total number of students who passed and the total number of students who failed the year one and year two state-wide assessments.

Based on the categorical assessment results, the chi-square test was selected for the purpose of quantitative data analysis. The chi-square test is a non-parametric test that uses frequency counts rather than actual test scores. Since the data being analyzed consisted of numbers of students passing and failing the reading/ELA assessment, the chi-square for goodness of fit was the most appropriate statistical test.

The chi-square test for goodness of fit uses sample data to test hypotheses about the shape or proportions of a population distribution. The test determines how well the obtained sample proportions fit the population proportions specified by the null hypothesis. (Gravetter & Wallnau, 1996, p. 548)

The null hypotheses stated that the independent variable (treatment) has no effect on the dependent variable for the population. For the purposes of this analysis, the independent variable or treatment was the required amount of reading assigned and the dependent variable was the composite state-wide reading/ELA assessment passing rate.

Two methods of setting up the chi-square test for goodness of fit are (1) No Preference, where nothing is known about the potential outcome, and all categories are weighted equally, and (2) No Difference from a Comparison Population, where information is known about the probable outcome based on prior knowledge (Gravetter & Wallnau, 1996). Since the null hypotheses stated that no change would occur in the passing rate from year one to year two, "No Difference from a Comparison Population" was deemed most appropriate for this analysis. The obtained frequencies from the year two administration were compared with the expected frequencies, which were derived from the year one results. The expected frequencies defined an ideal hypothetical situation where 98 percent of the students tested in year two would pass, while the remaining 2 percent would fail. A rigorous alpha level of $\alpha = 0.01$ was used for the level of significance, and with only two

categories--passing and failing--the degrees of freedom equaled one. For $df = 1$ and $\alpha = 0.01$, the critical chi-square value is 6.63 (Gravetter & Wallnau, 1996). The establishment of expected frequencies resulted in two categories, representing the 98 percent of students who passed in year one, which calculated 192 of the 196 students tested in year two, and the 2 percent of students who failed in year one, which calculated 4 of the students tested in year two. The year two obtained frequencies were compared to the expected frequencies and the chi-square statistic was calculated. In each of the four hypotheses tested, when the chi-square value fell into the critical region, the null hypothesis was rejected and it was concluded that the reduction in the amount of reading required of students significantly affected student performance. The hypotheses tests resulted in four chi-square analyses, each of which is discussed in the findings section.

Findings

The sources of data for analysis consisted of student performance test score data measured by the state-wide assessment that was reported on the school district's AEIS reports, and interview data obtained from school personnel involved in the process that prompted this study. Throughout the findings section, the numerical data

was graphically organized by means of histograms and linear graphs. The four research hypotheses were tested and all findings were organized by hypothesis test.

All Students

The data analyses began with an examination of the effect of the politically influenced decision to reduce the amount of reading required of all students on their state-wide reading/ELA assessment performance. The analysis was tested by means of a chi-square test where a comparison was made of the assessment results from the prior year.

An initial review of the raw data revealed a drop in test scores for all students in the school district from 98 percent passing to 95 percent passing, as shown in Figure 4. These results suggested that the curriculum change may have adversely affected student performance. While a 3 percent drop in scores of all students in the school from year one to year two did not appear to be significant on the surface, a real point of interest was that during that same test administration, both the regional and the state averages rose. However, the rise in the regional and state scores was small—1 percent and 2 percent respectively. As statistics will show, caution must be exercised in the interpretation of the meaning of these changes even though they were small.

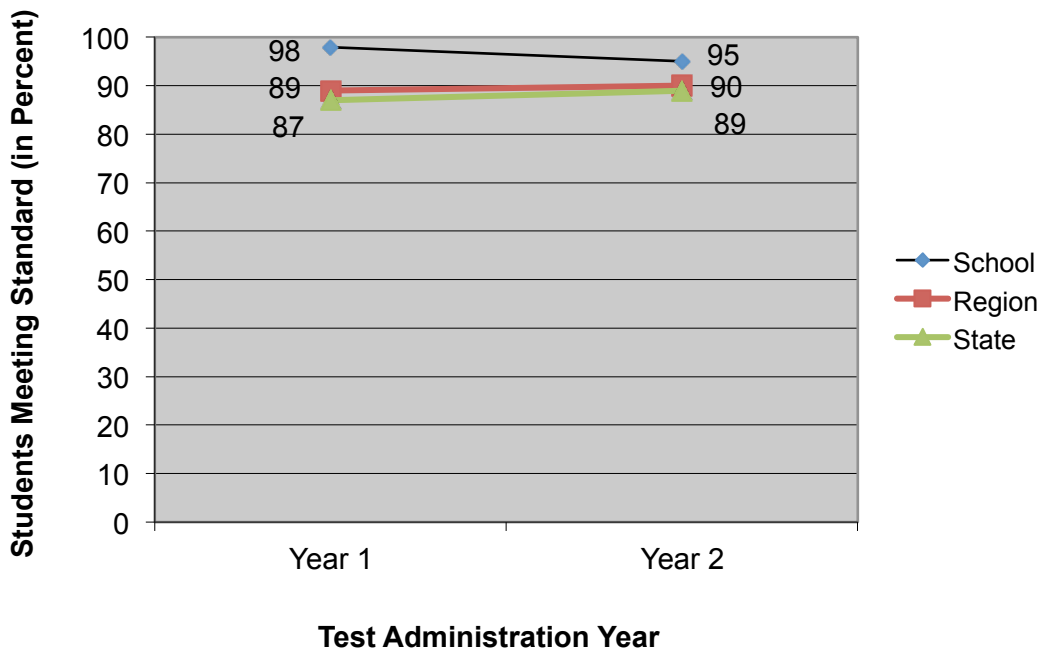


Figure 5. Comparison of State-wide Reading/ELA Assessment Passing Percentages from Year 1 to Year 2 for All Students.

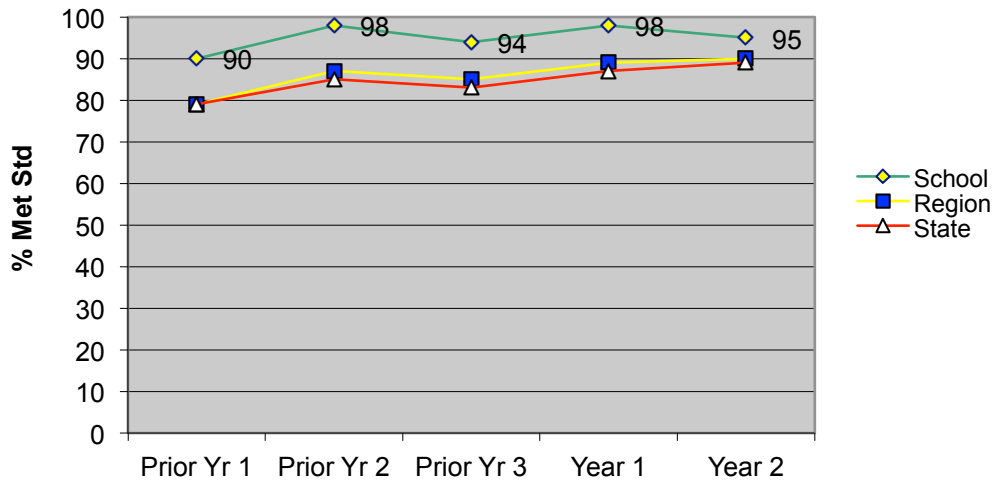


Figure 6. Five-Year Trend Comparison of State-wide Reading/ELA Assessment Passing Percentages for All Students.

Table 1

Observed and Expected Frequencies of Passing Rates on the Year 2 State-Wide Assessment for All Students

Frequencies	Pass	Fail
f_o :	187	9
f_e :	(.98) 196 192.08	(.02) 196 3.92

Holding all variables constant, except for changes in the state-wide examination itself, a reasonable expectation would be that the passing rates of the school district, the region, and the state would all respond similarly. That assumption prompted a deeper probing of test score results. An examination of five consecutive years of test data held that the assumption appeared true. As revealed by the data plotted linearly in Figure 5, the passing percentages of the school district, the region, and the state responded similarly to the perceived changes in the state-wide examination for the four years prior to the final year of analysis in this study. However, the school district responded negatively from year one to year two of the study, whereas the region and the state responded positively.

One hundred and ninety-six students were tested with the state-wide reading/ELA assessment in the school district during the year two test administration. The

passing percentage from year one to year two dropped by three percentage points—from 98 percent to 95 percent. The chi-square test was utilized to determine the significance of that drop. The null hypothesis stated:

Ho: The politically influenced decision to decrease the amount of reading required of students will have no effect on the reading/ELA composite passing rate for all students in the school as conveyed on its AEIS report.

The observed and expected frequencies are shown in Table 1.

The chi-square calculation yielded 6.71765, which exceeded the critical value of 6.63 at a 0.01 alpha level. Based on these results, the null hypothesis was rejected, and it was concluded that the decrease in passing rates for all students in the school district from year one to year two on the state-wide reading/ELA assessment was a

Table 2

Hypotheses Test Results for Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged Student Sub-populations

Student Sub-Group	N	% Passing		f_o		f_e		χ^2_{crit}	χ^2	Significant
		Yr 1	Yr 2	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail			
Hispanic	96	96	94	90	6	92.16	3.84	6.63	1.27	No
White	95	100	98	93	2	95	0	6.63	0.04	No
ED	93	96	90	84	9	89.28	3.72	6.63	7.81	Yes

statistically significant decrease. The treatment variable attributable for the change was the reduction in the amount of required reading from the students.

Student Subgroup Performance

As reported in Table 2, the application of the same analysis pattern for the Hispanic, white, and economically disadvantaged student subgroups as was applied to “all students,” revealed decreased performance in every subgroup, but with significantly reduced performance being found only in the economically disadvantaged students. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected regarding the economically disadvantaged subgroup of students, whereas the decision was to fail to reject the null hypothesis specific to the Hispanic and white student groups.

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

In summary, the causal-comparative research design was used to study the phenomenon of a U.S. public school district in its struggle to maintain an exemplary level of student reading performance while simultaneously attempting to maintain local political harmony. Whereas extensive discussion was devoted to student performance before and after the district-wide decision was made to alter the curricular reading requirements of students, it is particularly germane to note that the focus of the study was on the role of local political processes that influenced decision-making. While the use of the reading program in the curriculum and associated state-wide assessment results were integral to the study, it must be emphasized that the study was not about the reading program, reading instruction, or student performance on state-wide assessments. However, all of these components warranted attention as they were obvious tools of measurement in the analysis of the decision to make curricular changes based on local political pressures.

Conclusions

The data analyzed in this study revealed that local political pressure coerced a misguided decision by educators in the school. Reading/ELA test scores on a school district-wide basis indicated that the curriculum that was in place and the methods used to deliver it were

highly effective—assuming that a 98 percent passing rate of all students on the state-wide assessment was desirable and indicative of the level of learning sought. Immediately following the decision to reduce the required amount of reading of students, state-wide assessment scores dropped to a significantly lower level in accordance with the rigorous level of the statistical test applied in this study. Worse yet, the subgroup of students who made up the majority of the student body—the economically disadvantaged students—suffered the most, according to assessment results, and was the least represented group in the political process.

Implications

Regardless of political pressures that exist, educators must never forget that they have been trained and are typically the most knowledgeable individuals in their community about pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Moreover, decisions to make curricular changes should be far more data driven than politically influenced. While acknowledging and understanding that local politics are very real and present at many levels, good educational leaders must use politics to their advantage. “This requires understanding power structures and learning when to negotiate and when to draw the line” (Ramsey, 2006, p. 80). Educational leaders must keep in mind that though it may bear a negative connotation, “politics is another basic tool that all successful leaders use to achieve goals through other people” (Ramsey, 2006, p. 79).

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