



Public Schools of North Carolina  
State Board of Education  
Department of Public Instruction

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# Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee

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## *Evaluation of Initiatives to Assist High-Priority Schools*

*S.L. 2001-424, sec. 29.6(d)*

*S.L. 2003-284, sec. 7.10(c)*

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**Date Due: December 1, 2008**  
**Report # 23**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **History of the High Priority (HP) Schools Initiative:**

Aiming to provide the state's highest priority elementary schools with immediate assistance, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation in 2001 that appropriated supplementary funds for the state's lowest performing elementary schools. Approximately \$10.8 million for the 2001-2002 fiscal year and \$12.2 million for the 2002-2003 fiscal year were to be used to provide these schools with tools needed to substantially improve student achievement, creating the High Priority Schools Initiative. The set of high priority schools targeted for this assistance was defined as those in which over 80% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches and no more than 55% of the students performed at or above grade level during the 1999-2000 school year. Across the state, 36 elementary schools were identified as high priority (HP) schools.

### **The HP schools legislation specified that funds be used to:**

Reduce class size in kindergarten to grade 3 so that there is a 15:1 student-teacher ratio (component 1); Pay teachers to extend all teacher contracts at these schools by 10 days, including five days for professional development (component 2) and five additional days of instruction (component 3); and Provide one additional instructional support position at each HP school (component 4).

Importantly, the legislation did not allow funds for teaching assistants to be allotted to these schools. Rather, the school districts' teaching assistant allotments were to be reduced based on average daily membership (ADM) for each of the HP schools. In place of the teaching assistant allotments, additional teaching positions were to be allocated to each HP school so that all classrooms at the targeted grade levels reached an allotment ratio of 15:1.

Given the late approval of the legislation in 2001-2002, a waiver clause was included that allowed districts to "opt out" of implementing the class size reduction component for Year 1. Among the 36 HP schools, 17 applied to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) for a waiver. With all waivers being approved by NCDPI, those schools' allotments were reversed, withdrawing the additional teaching position allotments and reinstating the teaching assistant position allotments. In Year 2, despite not being afforded waiver status again, one elementary school (Wadesboro Primary, Anson County) opted not to accept the HP resources and did not implement any of the HP components. Thus, in Years 1 and 2, the total pool of HP schools was reduced to 35 elementary schools, representing 15 school districts across the state. In Years 3 and 4, no waivers were granted, and all 36 schools were to be fully implementing all four of the components that comprise the HP Schools Initiative.

In order to remain eligible for the additional resources provided by the HP funding, schools were required to meet expected growth for each year and achieve high growth for at least two out of three years based on the State Board of Education's annual performance standards set for each school. High growth denoted a school that achieved at least ten percent above its expected growth goal. Based on these criteria, 24 schools of the 36 schools were no longer eligible in FY 05-06, Year 5 of the HP Project.

In addition to the schools that were no longer eligible in Year 5, three eligible schools took advantage of a special legislative provision that allowed schools to remove themselves from the project if they demonstrated high growth for at least three consecutive years.

A total of nine HP schools, representing 6 districts, remained in the Initiative during the 2005-2006 year: Aulander Elementary (Bertie County), Clara J. Peck Elementary (Guilford), East Elementary (Union), James C. Braswell (Nash-Rocky Mount), O.R. Pope Elementary (Nash-Rocky Mount), Shamrock Gardens (Charlotte-Mecklenburg), Thomasboro Elementary (Charlotte-Mecklenburg County), W. G. Pearson (Durham), and Walter Bickett Elementary (Union).

### **Summary of Findings:**

During the 1999-2000 school year, 36 schools participated in the High Priority Schools Initiative; however, after several years of receiving supplementary funds, most schools either did not meet the requirements and lost their eligibility for the additional funds or opted not to participate in the program. Consequently, five schools participated in 2006-07 and only two were eligible to participate in 2007-08. During the 2007-08 school year, one LEA, Union County, opted for the two-year phase out mandated by this year's budget bill.

After four evaluations and less than adequate results, the General Assembly enacted legislation eliminating the funding for the High Priority Schools Initiative (legislation below). As a result, the annual evaluation of the High Priority schools was discontinued.

*SECTION 7.34.(a) The State Board of Education may develop a policy for a two-year phase out of the special supplementary funding currently provided to the two remaining high priority elementary schools and may use funds in the ADM Contingency Reserve to support any additional cost of the two-year phase out.*

*SECTION 7.34.(b) The State Board of Education shall not use funds appropriated for State Aid to Local Administrative Units to contract with an outside organization to evaluate the high priority schools initiative begun in the 2001-2002 fiscal year. The Board may, however, use up to five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) previously identified for this purpose to support the ongoing evaluation of the Disadvantaged Student Supplemental Funding Initiative.*

We have attached the fourth edition (2005-06) for consideration because that is our final externally prepared report on the High Priority Schools Initiative.

