

Horizonte School Improvement Grant Site Visit, October 2011
Executive Summary
November 10, 2011

In our role as external evaluators for the School Improvement Grant (SIG) at Horizonte, Angelina E. Castagno and Charles Hausman spent five days at Horizonte in early October. The purpose of this visit was to collect baseline qualitative data for the SIG evaluation as well as to collect data for the SIG appraisal required by the Utah State Office of Education. Castagno and Hausman spent the week observing classes; interviewing teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community partners; reviewing documents; and visiting sites. We took extensive fieldnotes, audio-recorded most interviews, and debriefed with school leaders during our visit. The appraisal report has been completed and shared with school and central office staff. This evaluation report is also being made available to appropriate school and central office staff.

The following sections represent major themes that were present in the dataset from our October 2011 site visit. We have attempted to convey the patterns and themes succinctly but also in a manner that will be helpful for school and central office personnel. All material in quotation marks are direct quotes from respondents during interviews or focus groups. It is important to note that we have hundreds of pages of data, so issues and quotes that are included below represent those that were prevalent across the entire dataset and multiple respondents.

SIG goals: Horizonte staff were very clear about the goal of the SIG at their school being to “increase academic rigor” among students. There was a clear message that although Horizonte has consistently done well with students in terms of their social needs, students’ academic needs were now also a top priority. In particular, staff want to see improvements in students’ scores on the CRT in math and language arts. However, staff were explicit that it wasn’t “just about test scores.” Instead, they wanted to “build an academic skill set” and prepare students for college. There was also an explicit message that “this is a reachable goal.” And finally, the goals related to academics were viewed as compatible with the social support that the school provides. As one respondent noted, Horizonte staff ask “both is this best for students and is this best for achievement.” And as another explained, they want to “do all of this but not change what Horizonte is.” The necessity of a culture of caring to support the expectation of providing access to a grade level curriculum to prepare students for college was highlighted by one teacher who commented, “students don’t care what you know until they know that you care.”

Related to the goals articulated for SIG, staff were also clear that these goals are not simply in place because of SIG. We heard over and over that SIG is simply providing support “to do the things we wanted to do anyway” and that SIG “makes it possible” to do the work Horizonte staff know is needed. As one respondent explained, “SIG is giving us a chance to shine.”

SIG successes thus far: At the time of our site visit, Horizonte had only had the SIG funding for a few months. Although early in the life of the grant, there was already much that the school felt had gone well. When asked about things that had gone well thus far, respondents shared the following:

- The process of developing the SIG application and plan. All felt like this was a cooperative endeavor with input from all relevant stakeholders. Teachers' ideas were heard and used. School leaders really drove the direction and tone of the grant. Central office supported school leadership when requested.
- Leadership and support from school leaders and central office personnel. School leaders were described as having a "clear vision," engaging in "strategic hiring" of "people who can carry out this work," and consistently "saying we're going to do what's best for kids." School leaders have been with Horizonte for a long time and, as one community member explained, "have been raised in this culture." All respondents spoke positively about the support and leadership provided by the central office as well, and central office leadership was clear that they are there as "invisible partners" and "take direction from Horizonte" regarding their needs and the appropriate level of involvement from the central office.
- School climate and culture. Students, parents, community partners, teachers, and leaders all spoke positively about the climate and culture of Horizonte. One community partner articulated that "Horizonte is an institution that smiles." Other indicators of a healthy school climate included that students and teachers use first names, that "teachers are the students' best advocates," and that the teachers know and care about students. In addition to their relationships with teachers, students also consistently noted that they got along with one another, that there was "less drama" than at other schools, and that there was a shared expectation of respect within the school. The culture among Horizonte staff was consistently described as "flexible," willing to "embrace change," and "cooperative." Related specifically to the work happening with SIG, one person explained, "there is dialogue that we're turning a ship but we're doing it together."
- Curriculum mapping, alignment, and pacing in Language Arts and Math. The SIG provided funds for Horizonte to hire a fulltime Language Arts coach and a fulltime Math coach. These coaches have developed grade level curriculum aligned to state standards and the core for all teachers teaching in these subject areas. The curriculum is mapped and assessments have been (or are being) developed to determine the extent to which learning goals are being met. These curricular innovations, as well as the curricular consistency across teachers and sites, are brand new for Horizonte this year. They have undertaken a huge task, and it appears to be going well thus far. Most (though not all) teachers are on board with the changes.
- Community partnerships and programs. Horizonte partners with a large number of community organizations to provide services to students and families. This was evident in conversations with students, parents, administrators, and community leaders. In our focus group with some of the community partners, respondents overwhelmingly said that they "work well together" and that they all refer students and families to each other's programs. In addition, we heard from multiple sources

that “the community trusts us” and that “they know they can come here and be treated fairly and get the services they need.” Parents and guardians validated this perception. In the focus group with parents, more than one parent cried as they expressed their appreciation of the difference the school has made for their son or daughter.

It was difficult to assess the degree to which some of the strengths were directly related to the SIG effort, or simply strengths of the school irrespective of the SIG. However, given the comprehensive nature of the “turnaround” effort SIG attempts, it seems relevant to capture a broad vision of what is going well at Horizonte at this point in time.

SIG challenges: There were a number of areas that emerged from the data as “bumps” or challenges for Horizonte’s efforts related to SIG. Overall, school leaders seemed aware of each of these issues, but we highlight them here in an effort to encourage strategic planning around them.

- **Technology.** The lack of current technology was striking to us at Horizonte. Classrooms typically only had one (or maybe a few) computer that looked quite old, a ceiling-mounted projector, and an older-style overhead projector for transparencies. Internet access on classroom computers was extremely slow, and some of the outside sites did not have internet access at all. The main Horizonte campus had a large computer lab, but teachers told us that it was fairly difficult to take their classes there without planning well in advance because other classes were taught there. Teachers indicated that they believed teaching and learning could be significantly enhanced with better technology, including, for example, Smart Boards, Elmos, iPads, laptops, etc. As one teacher said, “we can’t do research-related anything.”
- **Textbooks.** The lack of books was most apparent at the outside sites. Teachers there explained that they go “textbook hunting” every year; they go to the other district high schools and ask for old or leftover books. As another teacher explained, “textbooks are hard to come by,” and others told us that classroom sets of books are virtually non-existent. Teachers also noted that the class set model does not work given the mobility of their student population.
- **Curriculum and assessment.** Although the mapping and alignment of curriculum in language arts and math is a strong point of Horizonte’s SIG efforts at this point in time, the newness of this presents some obvious challenges. Not all teachers have the preparation to enact the new curriculum and others are not interested in enacting it. Those who are “on board” with the changes are still “getting used to it” and, as one explained, they sometimes, “feel like a first-year teacher again.” In addition to the curriculum piece, the assessment piece is presenting some challenges in terms of “what exactly to do with the data.” Horizonte hired a full-time “data person” and the coaches appear to be working with data as well, so there is good progress in this area. We believe utilizing SIG resources to hire fulltime content coaches and an individual dedicated to supporting data-based decisions at the site level were prudent use of resources. As the SIG effort moves forward, school leaders will need to be thoughtful about how to use formative assessment data in efficient and effective ways.

- Professional development. Although the first week of professional development and the monthly PD with coaches were strong areas of the SIG efforts at Horizonte, there was some ambivalence about how to move forward with future professional development. There is a feeling of “not wanting to overwhelm teachers with too much” as well as an awareness that “we need to know what we’re trying to do with PD.”
- External perceptions and reputation of Horizonte. A challenge noted by everyone we talked with, and the biggest concern especially among students, is the negative reputation of Horizonte among people in the community and district. One respondent explained that the “alternative school label” is “both a blessing and curse” since it allows flexibility and yet leads to people making assumptions about the school. Students consistently told us that many people have told them that “you don’t want a diploma from Horizonte” (or that graduation from Horizonte doesn’t even include a diploma!) and that counselors and teachers at the other high schools “threaten” students with going to Horizonte. Students were adamant, however, that “we’re not bad people” and that “this isn’t a bad school.” On the contrary, they spoke of the school with pride. Marketing efforts to correct the misperception held by some of Horizonte as a bad school for bad kids would be beneficial.

Other issues to consider: In addition to the issues raised above, a few themes were so strong in the data we collected, that they warrant some discussion in this report. We are hesitant to call these items either “strengths” or “challenges,” which is why we’ve listed them here as simply “issues to consider.”

- Multiple sites of Horizonte. Respondents identified multiple pros and cons of the “outside site” concept. Although they allow Horizonte to serve students in smaller settings closer to home and/or in strategic groups, as well as enabling lateral transfers to be made, the sites are not able to provide the same level of programming, and students at some sites do not have access to teachers with the same level of subject-area preparation. It is clearly challenging for one teacher and an assistant to offer three or four different levels of a course in the same class. In addition, one site teacher explained that they “are the last to get serviced” and that it is a challenge to get to the main Horizonte campus for meetings and professional development opportunities. In addition, community partnership programs were almost exclusively offered at the main site. We do believe that utilizing SIG resources to fund a fulltime position to coordinate work across the sites and to serve as a liaison with the main campus was a wise use of resources.
- Mobility of students. The movement of students is a challenge the community partners identified, and it also may present some challenges for student assessment and performance pay among teachers. The central question highlighted was: how long does a student need to be enrolled at the school for the effect on student achievement to be attributable to school personnel?
- Performance pay bonuses. There was some inconsistency in the ways teachers and school administrators talked about the performance pay bonuses associated with SIG. Most teachers indicated that this issue had “already been decided” and that “everyone’s going to get it or none of us will.” Most administrators, on the other

hand, indicated that they were still trying to work out the details and how to manage this aspect of the SIG in order to ensure it is done “in a way that’s thoughtful” and that it does not become “demoralizing.” Criteria regarding how performance pay will be awarded merits further discussion, and we are available to discuss models that have been used elsewhere.

- Maintaining energy and momentum. While some respondents felt the SIG has made their work “more focused,” others noted that they “already feel tired, and it’s only October.” We sensed a strong energy at Horizonte about wanting to serve students and being excited about the possibilities that SIG was opening up, so school leaders may consider how to maintain that energy. We strongly recommend consciously celebrating achievements throughout the school year to keep energy from dissipating.
- Sustainability of changes and resources. The SIG has clearly provided the funds to make some key hires within Horizonte; it has also allowed for changes like the extended school day and added professional development. This all costs money and school leaders need to consider from now through the life of the grant how to ensure some of this is sustainable beyond the funding SIG provides. Collecting empirical evidence on how various SIG expenditures lead to school improvement and enhanced student learning are recommended.

Overall, Horizonte staff were quick to point out that it is very early in the SIG and there is much they simply do not know yet. Most teachers and school leaders seemed genuinely eager to start getting assessment data on students, reports and feedback from us as evaluators, and other indicators that they could use to inform decisions about how to move forward with the SIG.

On a final note, we extend our gratitude to the staff, students, parents, and community members for the time they spent with us during our visit and the professional treatment which we received. It is clear that the culture of the school is an extremely positive one in which the community and staff wanted to make a difference in the lives of students.