

Sunday, December 2, 2007 Statistics Pinpoint Problems in Paterson Schools By WINNIE HU

PATERSON, N.J. -- Assistant school superintendents here are routinely summoned to a 10 a.m. Thursday meeting where they must answer for missing test scores, overdue building repairs and other lapses, which are presented in painful detail on PowerPoint slides. Excuses are not an option.

It is the latest evolution of Compstat, a widely copied management program pioneered by the New York Police Department in 1994. Paterson is one of a half-dozen school districts around the country that have embraced this confrontational approach, known here as SchoolStat, in an effort to improve school performance and overhaul bureaucracies long seen as bloated, wasteful and unresponsive to the public.

SchoolStat borrows the tactics of the Compstat program -- regular, intense meetings in which police officials famously pick apart crime data and, just as often, their subordinates -- to analyze police performance and crime trends, and to deploy resources to trouble spots. The school version taps into an ever-expanding universe of data about standardized testing and school operations to establish a system of accountability.

In Maryland, the process has been credited with reducing teacher vacancies and increasing student immunization rates in Baltimore schools. In Montgomery County, Md., it has pushed principals to come up with strategies like encouraging students to take the Preliminary SAT by offering a free pancake breakfast if they attend.

In Jackson, Miss., the state's largest district has used it to increase food sales in high school cafeterias by adding salads and hot breakfast items, after the data showed that more than one-third of the students were not buying meals. In Philadelphia, where as many as 42 SchoolStat meetings are held each month at all levels in the district, officials say it has helped develop strategies to reduce the number of suspensions, increase attendance and raise standardized test scores.

SchoolStat has attracted the financial backing of influential organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which spent \$268,000 this year on consultants to start a version called EdStat in the District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent of Education to monitor federal grant use, special education referrals and programs for low-performing schools.

The Stupski Foundation, which has supported reform efforts in 17 urban school districts around the country, spent \$85,000 this year to bring SchoolStat to Paterson.

Some critics say that SchoolStat relies too heavily on easily quantifiable standardized test scores to gauge academic progress, only adding to the pressure on schools that face sanctions under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"The result is classrooms that are little more than test-coaching factories," said Robert A. Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, an advocacy group that opposes the broad use of standardized testing.

The SchoolStat approach has also alienated some school employees, who say they feel that they are being unfairly attacked, and has put others in embarrassing situations.

During a meeting in Paterson last month, Brenda Patterson, an assistant superintendent, was chided for showing up a few minutes late because she had stopped at the bathroom. Another assistant superintendent had to explain why one elementary school's test scores were missing. (There was no one trained at the school to put in the data, prompting district officials to send over help immediately.)

"Who wants to sit among colleagues and not know the answer?" Ms. Patterson said afterward, adding that she tried to anticipate what questions would be asked and brought along thick binders of information to keep at her fingertips.

"You may leave there feeling uncomfortable, but you also get a direction," she said.

In some school districts, there has been a backlash against SchoolStat. Bryan Richardson, a former director of Baltimore's program and now a consultant who helps implement SchoolStat nationwide, said that after Baltimore stepped up its efforts in 2005, the windows in his car were broken on school grounds, and a school employee called him and his staff derogatory names on a local radio show.

"Is it a dramatic shake-up of a school culture? It certainly can be," Mr. Richardson said. "When you start moving from a culture that rewards relationships to one that rewards results, there are people who feel a sense of diminished importance and loss, and that's upsetting and makes them angry."

In New York City, where the Compstat model has been applied to the Correction Department and the Human Resources Administration, Rudolph W. Giuliani proposed a version for the school system, called LearnStat, when he was mayor in 2001.

But the schools chancellor at the time, Harold O. Levy, rejected the proposal, saying that it was too confrontational for the school culture and not flexible or nuanced enough to take into account education variables like truancy, disciplinary problems and the number of special education students in a school.

Mr. Levy said recently that while the quality and analysis of education data had become more sophisticated, he was concerned about how that data would be used in

a SchoolStat system. "The best use of data is when it's used collegially in an analytic way to improve the teaching practice, and not when it's used simply as a 'gotcha' game to cull the herd," he said.

Some school districts, in response, have sought to adopt a version of the process that avoids criticizing people or making it part of job evaluations. Instead, these districts seek to provide help to failing schools rather than assess penalties. Questions are typically addressed to a group rather than to individuals.

Questioning administrators about their schools is hardly a new practice, although it is often not as formalized as SchoolStat. Michael E. Glascoe, the Paterson superintendent since 2005, recalled that as a district official in Montgomery County, Md., he would be called to meetings to explain test scores and disciplinary issues.

"We called it 'hell' because some of us would go in there and be there for four or five hours," Dr. Glascoe said.

In Paterson, an industrial city once known for its silk factories, district officials rolled out SchoolStat last spring to help turn around a school system that has been under state control since 1991 because of fiscal mismanagement and poor academics. The district's 27,222 students are among the poorest in the state, with 75 percent qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunches.

SchoolStat is directed by a panel of a half-dozen district officials who decide what areas to focus on, and to follow up, in weekly meetings. Data specialists compile statistical information on the topics, be they test scores, staff assignments or repair orders.

While school officials have pored over data like test scores for decades, in SchoolStat the information is broken down into unusual detail, not just by school but also often by student, and presented in elaborate charts and graphs so the SchoolStat panel can look for problems or trends that are not evident in routine reports. The data is updated every three to five weeks in "relentless follow-up," said Michael Kanarek, a district official who plans the meeting.

For instance, when the SchoolStat panel examined the backlog of work orders in the district's 52 schools last spring, the data specialists created an electronic tracking system to find out when work orders were being completed, and also kept a running tally of the results in weekly and monthly charts. When SchoolStat looked at classroom instruction, it started keeping tabs on the number of visits by instruction support staff who are required to -- but do not always -- go to schools three times a week.

Once the data has been analyzed, SchoolStat follows a predictable pattern in which assistant superintendents and their staffs are called into meetings to answer questions and explain problems.

The process of being "stat-ed" -- as some participants have termed it -- begins promptly at 10 a.m. Thursdays and lasts for one hour; district officials stick so closely to the agenda that they periodically call out the time and even cut off conversations.

"When we ask a question, it's not a gotcha; it's not at you, it's to try to solve the problem," the deputy superintendent, Michael Rush, said at a November meeting.

Derrick Hoff, the principal of School 6, said he felt empowered by the changes. Two years ago, it took more than three months to repair a chair in the school auditorium that he had reported as broken -- so long, in fact, that a woman tried to sit on it during a parents' meeting with the superintendent and fell to the ground.

"There would be a lot of breakdowns in communication," he said. "And you'd never be quite sure when they'd come to your building."

But this fall, Mr. Hoff reported a broken gym door, and it was fixed the next day.