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Introduction

Best Financial Management Practices Reviews are designed to help Districts meet the challenge of educating students in a effective and cost-efficient manner. The Miami-Dade County Public School District was selected to be the first District reviewed under the State of Florida “Sharpening The Pencil Act.”

Overview

Best Financial Management Practice Reviews are designed to assist school districts meet the many challenges of educating Florida’s students in an effective and cost-efficient manner. During these reviews, the school district’s management and operational activities are evaluated in comparison to “best practices” established by the State of Florida. These best practices were developed based on national best practices determined by looking at the management and operations of school districts across the county as well as published educational and operational research.

Given the depth and scope of these best practices and the high standard of performance set by the best practices, it is expected that the vast majority of school districts will not be in full compliance with all best practice indicators during their first review. When the District is not meeting a best practice, an action plan is developed with the District which, when fully implemented, will result in the District meeting the best practice with the ultimate goal of improving its effectiveness and cost-efficiency. The Miami-Dade County Public School district was selected by the State of Florida as the first District to be reviewed under the new “Sharpening The Pencil Act”.

Background and Scope

The mission of the Miami-Dade County Public School District is to support the improvement of student achievement by strengthening instructional leadership, by launching innovative systemic initiatives, and by disseminating resources that enhance curriculum and instruction.

In accordance with Florida law, Berkshire Advisors, Inc., assessed the operations of the District under the thirteen review areas illustrated in Exhibit 1-1.

Exhibit 1-1

Best Financial Management Practice Review Areas ¹

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|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Management Structures | 8. Facilities Construction |
| 2. Performance Accountability Systems | 9. Facilities Maintenance |
| 3. Educational Service Delivery | 10. Student Transportation |
| 4. Administrative & Instructional Technology | 11. Food Service Operations |
| 5. Personnel Systems & Benefits | 12. Cost Control Systems |
| 6. Use of Lottery Proceeds | 13. Community Involvement |
| 7. Use of State & District Construction Funds | |
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¹ The District’s Safety and Security Program was evaluated as part of this review. The finding and recommendations related to Safety and Security will be published in a separate report.

Introduction

OPPAGA and Berkshire Advisors thank the Miami-Dade County Public School Board and the District employees who provided information and assistance for their cooperation and courtesy throughout this review.

Methodology

In conducting this best practice review, Berkshire Advisors, Inc. employed a variety of approaches to gathering information related to the District's performance in relation to the Best Financial Management Practice indicators. The Berkshire Advisors team made several site visits to the Miami-Dade County Public School District. Refer to Exhibit 1-2 for a timeline of major project activities. The review team conducted interviews with District administrators and staff, regional administrators and staff, and school board members. Four public forums were held at locations across the District. Likewise, an e-mail address and 800 number were established so District stakeholders could provide input into the study.

Site visits were conducted to schools, transportation centers, regional offices, maintenance offices, safety and security offices, construction sites and food service operations. In addition, visits were made to over 60 schools where interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, parents, and School Advisory Council members.

Staff also reviewed documents provided by the District including program documents, compliance reports, strategic plans, financial data, programmatic data, performance data and audit reports. Additionally staff reviewed national, state and District web-based reports and databases related to the performance the District and its peer districts.

Berkshire Advisors also surveyed six groups of stakeholders: school board members, school-based administrators, school-based certificated staff, school-based noncertificated staff, nonschool-based administrators and nonschool-based staff.

Exhibit 1-2

Miami-Dade County Public School District Best Financial Management Practices Review Timeline

Activity	Date
OPPAGA and Berkshire Advisors, Inc Teams Conduct First Site Visit (Team members review MDCPS self-assessment with District staff, conduct initial interviews, request additional data, being to identify potential issues and cost savings)	August 2001
Berkshire Advisors, Inc. Conduct Public Forums (Four public forums were conducted to obtain citizen and community input on District performance)	August through October 2001
Berkshire Advisors, Inc Conduct Second Site Visit (Meetings held with District staff to present preliminary findings and recommendations and gather District feedback, determine issues requiring further investigation and check accuracy of findings)	December 2001
OPPAGA and Berkshire Advisors, Inc. Conduct Third Site Visit (Meetings held with District staff to review draft report and obtain feedback to insure accuracy and to review and revise action plans)	January 2002
Presentation of Final Report to Miami-Dade County Public School Board	March 2002

Source: Berkshire Advisors, Inc.

Interviews

Berkshire Advisors conducted over 1000 on-site interviews to gain an understanding of Miami-Dade County Public Schools operations and programs. The project team interviewed District personnel representing all areas of operations and all levels of staff. Interview participants included school board members, superintendent, deputy superintendents, associate superintendents, assistant superintendents, regional superintendents, regional directors, program executive directors, directors, supervisors, principals, assistant principals, teachers, instructional support staff and noninstructional support staff. In addition, the team held numerous telephone conversations and exchanged e-mails with District staff to gather information and feedback on relevant issues.

On-Site Visitations and Observations

Berkshire Advisors team members conducted on-site visitations and observations of all aspects of District operations. These visits included traditional school campuses, alternative school campuses, ESE centers, early intervention centers, food service operations, transportation centers, security and safety centers, and maintenance operations. Not only were numerous staff interviewed during these visits, but also operations and instruction were observed.

Public Forums

The review team conducted four public forums in different areas of Miami-Dade County. These forums were conducted at two-week intervals over a two-month period. Forums were held in at locations throughout the District to allow all citizens to have input into the review process, to express their concerns regarding District issues and discuss outstanding District programs and/or operations. Forums were conducted so that citizens were able to meet individually or in small groups to share their input.

Peer Districts

Berkshire Advisors, Inc. in collaboration with OPPAGA and the Miami-Dade County Public Schools identified four peer districts, two Florida Districts and two out-of-state Districts for the purpose of benchmarking District performance with Districts facing similar challenges. Many challenges were presented when attempting to identify benchmark Districts within the State of Florida. Due to the size of Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the uniqueness of the student population served, it is difficult to compare them to anyone within the State of Florida. When comparing Miami-Dade to their counterpart Districts nationally, differing state laws and assessment procedures make the comparison data murky.

Florida benchmark Districts identified were Broward and Hillsborough County. In some noninstructional areas comparisons were also made with Orange and Palm Beach county (Florida) school districts. National peer district identified were Houston Independent School district (Texas) and Clark County Public Schools, (Nevada). These Districts were chosen not just because of their size but because they too are experiencing a large influx of immigrants into the system. Clark County, most especially, is faced with a rising immigrant student population, school overcrowding and the need for an ever increasing pool of teachers.

Benchmarking data was gathered by contacting District superintendents, who referred the researcher to the Districts' public information offices where data collection was coordinated. Additionally data was gathered from District websites, Florida Department of Education, and the Council of Great City Schools.

Surveys

To receive input from a broad range of District staff, Berkshire Advisors, Inc. surveyed six groups of stakeholders as illustrated in Exhibit 1-3. The nature of questions varied dependent on the group surveyed and the results have been incorporated into the report, where applicable.

Exhibit 1-3

Berkshire Advisors, Inc. Surveyed Six Groups of Stakeholders

Survey Group	Total Surveys Distributed
Board Members	9
School-based Administrators	978
School-based Certificated Staff	4800
School-based Noncertificated Staff	4236
Nonschool-based Administrators	386
Nonschool-based Staff	2591
Total	13000

Source: Berkshire Advisors, Inc.