



3-2005

## High Hopes: How High Schools Respond to State Accountability Policies

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## High Hopes: How High Schools Respond to State Accountability Policies

### Abstract

This report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) focuses squarely on strategies for instructional improvement in American high schools. Specifically, this study examines how high schools that perform below average incorporate their state's accountability goals into their own goals, identify their challenges, and search for strategies for instructional improvement. We focus on how high schools of differing performance levels and contexts, residing in states with different forms of high-stakes accountability and support systems, identify, understand, and respond to the gap between their current levels of performance and external expectations for their performance.

### Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Methods | Education Policy | Secondary Education and Teaching

### Comments

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# **Holding High Hopes: How High Schools Respond to State Accountability Policies**

Edited by

Betheny Gross  
Margaret E. Goertz

CPRE Research Report Series  
RR-056

March 2005

Consortium for Policy Research in Education  
University of Pennsylvania  
Graduate School of Education

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# Acknowledgments

This report is based on research conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, United States Department of Education, under Grant No. R308A960003. Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute of Education Sciences, the United States Department of Education, CPRE, or its institutional members.

The work in this volume required the goodwill and patience of countless people to whom the contributors would like to extend a sincere thank you. First, the editors, the authors, and the greater research community owe a deep debt of gratitude to the hundreds of teachers, school administrators, and district administrators whose openness in sharing their experiences provided invaluable insights into the context of high schools and the impact of accountability policies. We hope this compilation provides them with an analysis that is even half as valuable as the insights they shared with us. The authors would also like to thank Robert Floden, Charles Thompson and Mark Rohland for their thorough and thoughtful reviews as well as Kelly Stanton for her efforts in producing the final product. Finally, this work was a collaborative effort of many researchers including those not represented among authors. This work would not have been possible without the efforts of Martin Carnoy, Richard Elmore, and Susan Fuhrman, all of whom provided guidance in the research design and analytic discussions.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Betheny Gross and Jonathan A. Supovitz

### **State Accountability Policy and Our Special Focus on High Schools**

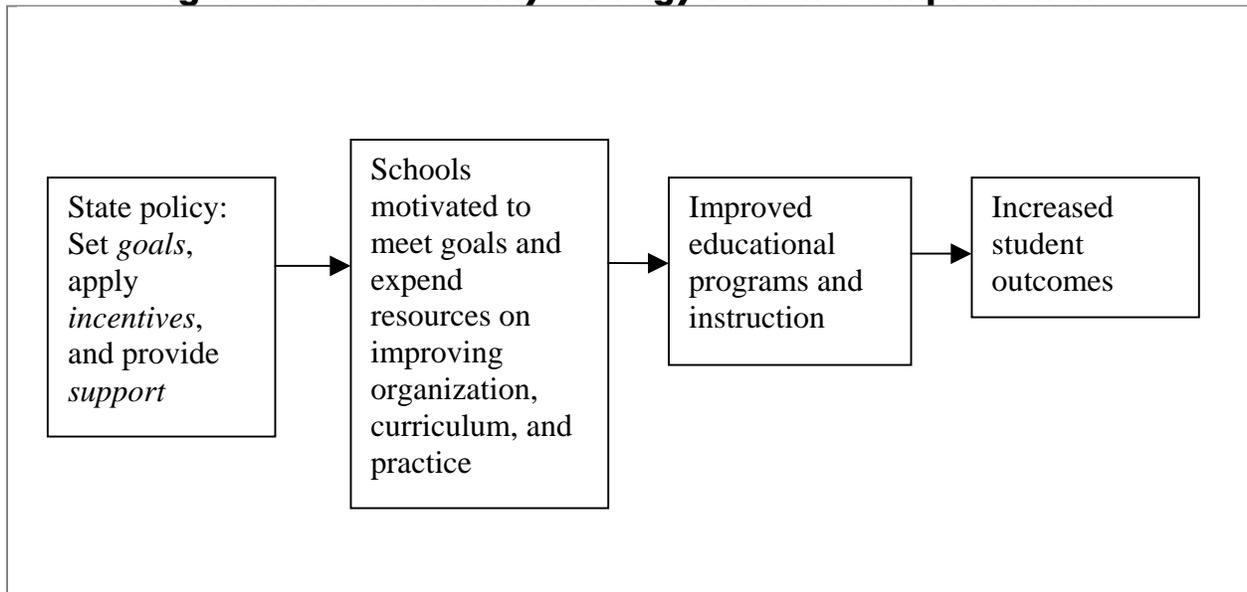
American public education faces increasing pressure to demonstrate the competence of all of its students as they progress through the grades and, especially, as students exit their high schools. In response, policymakers are developing sophisticated accountability and support systems in efforts to steer schools toward improved performance. These systems, as illustrated in Figure 1, combine a set of academic goals and standards with a battery of incentives to focus and motivate organizational and curricular change. In addition, these systems often provide resources to support local reform efforts. Although accountability systems such as these are not new to the educational policy environment, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in January, 2002, ensures that accountability systems focused on academic outcomes will continue for some time to come. This report shines a spotlight on high schools, which bring students to the last benchmarks in the K–12 system, and analyzes the response of teachers, school administrators, and the district administrators to these policies.

The importance of accountability in local, state and national policy over the past 15 years has led researchers to examine the impact of accountability on student achievement in a variety of contexts.

Although not all studies prove gains in student performance due to accountability (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000), many studies suggest that these policies can and often do have an impact on the performance of students. For example, a RAND study analyzed National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gains of fourth and eighth graders attributed the performance gains to the states' high-stakes accountability systems (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). In another example, a recent Consortium for Policy

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**Figure 1. Accountability Strategy for School Improvement**



These studies, and other studies of effects, can only infer that changes have been made to the educational program within these schools. Many policy researchers argue that we must pay careful attention to the instructional and organizational changes that occur with accountability, as some logical consequences of the policy such as teaching to the test, strategic targeting of students, cheating on assessments, and narrowing curriculum potentially compromise the benefits of the policy (Darling-Hammond & Ascher, 1991; Education Commission of the States, 1998; Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Linn, 2000; McNeil, 2000). In this study we respond to these concerns by looking inside schools to see how accountability shaped the goals and improvement efforts described in high schools.

In this study we also give attention to the high school organization which, due to the age of the students served and to organizational complexity, is often viewed as more challenging to study than the elementary school. High schools confront

the challenge of working with adolescent students who express a great deal of agency in their schooling, which makes it difficult to separate the effect of students from the effect of their teachers or school. In addition, high schools tend to be larger organizations with many complex layers due to the specialized content focus and deeply held sense of professional autonomy held by high school teachers, making high schools very difficult to understand as a single organization. For these and other reasons, high schools have received less attention in the research community. However, high schools are of particular interest today in light of the emphasis accountability places on benchmarks and exit exams.

This report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) focuses squarely on strategies for instructional improvement in American high schools. Specifically, this study examines how high schools that perform below average incorporate their state's accountability goals into their own goals, identify their challenges, and search for strategies for instructional improvement. We

focus on how high schools of differing performance levels and contexts, residing in states with different forms of high-stakes accountability and support systems, identify, understand, and respond to the gap between their current levels of performance and external expectations for their performance.

## **Interpreting and Implementing: A Conceptual Framework of Accountability and School Context**

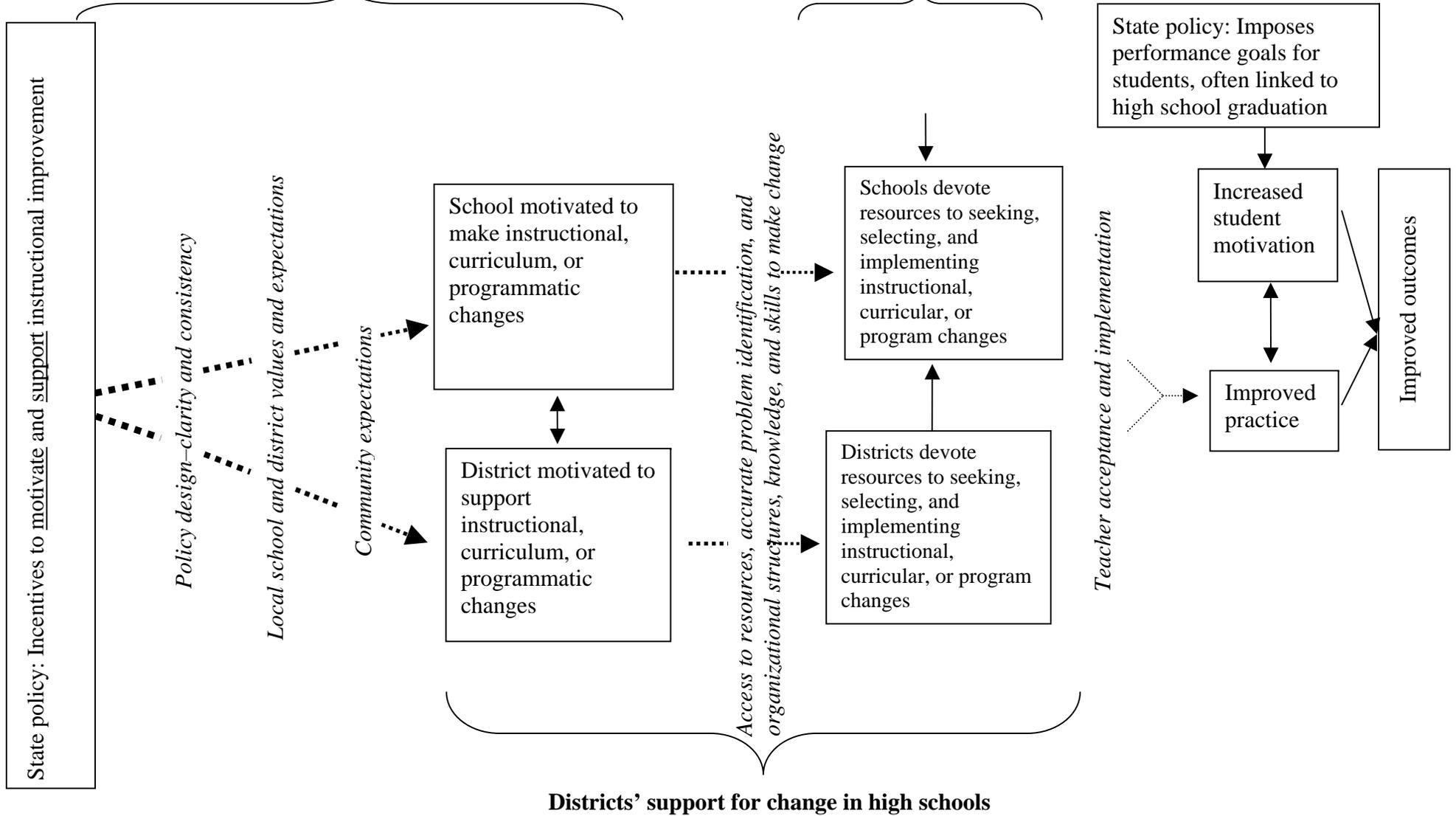
The theory of outcomes accountability and the assumptions embedded within accountability policies, like many state administered policies, faces considerable challenges in practice. The reality that carries these policies from paper into the schools is a complicated picture in which the state's message is interpreted through local values and expectations (McLaughlin, 1987). The school's response is then shaped by local interests and constrained by the school's ability to make change (Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Finally, as happens often in policy implementation, we can expect teachers and students to accept, challenge, and/or alter programmatic changes on the basis of their own expectation and motivation (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). The chapters in this report and the discussion of the framework, diagramed in Figure 2, of school response to accountability policy focus on the first two stages of policy implementation in which schools *interpret the state policy and become motivated* (or not motivated) to focus on the policy's goals and standards and when they focus their resources and

other support to *generate a response to the policy*. These chapters do not attempt to evaluate the impact of accountability on student outcomes. Instead we discuss the implementation of state accountability policies and the impact of these policies on the goals and activities of teachers, school administrators, and district administrators. As Hargrove (1983) explains, implementation is the extent to which the target of the policy "goes beyond compliance to incorporate the required action into the organizational routines of the implementing agencies" (p. 281).

**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of School Response to Accountability Policy**

**State policy is interpreted by local actors (school and district level)**

**School Response: Search, decision making, and strategy selection**



## **The Acceptance and Interpretation of the Policy**

The acceptance of the policy and appropriate interpretation of the policy by those at the school and district level is an important condition for the implementation of the policy at the local level. However, obtaining this condition is not a simple matter of announcing the goals and articulating sanctions. This process may take time and may not happen at all. Individuals in schools must hear and be compelled to acknowledge the policy and the expectations laid out in the policy at least amid, if not above, the chatter generated by the schools many stakeholders inside and outside the school. Teachers and administrators must then interpret, hopefully in concert, the policy and its components as intended by the state policy designers. While a great many issues influence the acceptance and interpretation of policies by policy targets, in the chapters that follow, the authors focus on two influences on policy interpretation: (a) elements of the policy design to make the policy clear, reliable, and stable and (b) the filtering of varied interests in the local context in interpreting the state's intentions and accommodating local interests.

Of the many aspects of the policy's design, clarity and stability of policy are of particular importance to the acceptance and interpretation of state accountability policy. Researchers of policy and policy implementation have continuously argued that policy clarity is very important in that it reduces the likelihood that policies will be

misinterpreted or that the policy targets will fail to implement the policy out of confusion (Baier, March, & Saetren, 1988; Hargrove, 1983; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Odden, 1991). Given that focusing educators' attention on specific performance targets and accountability standards is the centerpiece of this policy, clarity is of critical importance to accountability policies. Since the early days of outcomes accountability, states have had to negotiate the trade-off between varied and multiple assessment and measurement with the transparency of accountability. Many educators argue in favor of using multiple assessments that recognize multiple outcomes (e.g. achievement, discipline, and dropout) as well as accounting for growth and student subgroup performance. However, incorporating each of these elements into a performance measure leads to a complicated rubric for evaluating schools. Such a scaling technique that evaluates a set of outcomes and creates a composite score that makes statistical adjustments for reliability generates scores that are difficult for schools to predict on the basis of the performance reports they have at hand. In addition to clarity of performance goals, the policy must also demonstrate consistency and predictability in its incentive structure. Schools cannot be expected to respond to incentives if they do not know or understand the basis on which they will be delivered (Brooks, 2000). For example, we found that the performance bonuses offered to Pennsylvania schools were generally not a salient component of the accountability system. Few Pennsylvania teachers we spoke with commented on these rewards or

understood how they received these rewards.

Researchers observing accountability policy argue that alignment to standards with performance targets presents a significant change for schools (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), especially high schools, which have offered differentiated curriculum and whose teachers have exercised considerable autonomy for decades (Siskin, 2003). For schools to embark on the change expected by these policies, schools must be assured that the policy will last. The stability of policies and administrators' commitment to policies over time give the policy targets time to learn about and understand the policy and thereby increase the likelihood that the policy targets will see value in responding to the policy and engaging in the goals of the policy (Hargrove, 1983). The six states in our sample have had their policies in place for different lengths of time and have had different degrees of the change over the years. In this report, researchers comment on how the maturity of the state policy seemed to impact the response of schools we visited.

Beyond the elements of policy design, the goals and practices articulated by the school respondents reflected the influence of the local context including the values, beliefs, and expectations of local teachers and administrators as well as external expectations placed on schools. While the policy administrators may have control over the design of the policy and to some extent the stability of the policy over time, these policies enter local environments that vary across the region in which the policy is applied and that the policy administrators often have little control over (McLaughlin, 1987). These

local environments are vitally important to the acceptance and interpretation of the policy. The motivation of policy targets to accept the policy and its goals depends on how well their own assessment of what should be accomplished aligns with the expectations embedded in the policy's goals (Hatch, 1998; McLaughlin). Teachers who do not believe that the state assessment accurately reflects their students' skills or who do not think the standards reflect appropriate material for their students will be less motivated to adjust their lessons or curriculum to align with the assessment or standards. Even though the incentive structures built into accountability policies intend to force local interests into alignment with the policy goals, McLaughlin argues that these incentive structures confront very powerful local norms and values that can pose a substantial challenge to the policy when they do not align. These situations require a strong and long-term commitment by the state to the policy.

The local context, however, includes much more than the values and beliefs of individuals inside the school. A great number of educational stakeholders such as parents, local community members, business members, and educational organizations outside the school compete with each other and the states to influence local schools toward their agendas. Schools then filter these external interests through the values, expectations, and goals of teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. They also prioritize their goals and interests on the basis of the relative authority and influence of each of their stakeholders. Local agents position the goals embedded in the state accountability policy among the various

goals, according to the alignment of state the state board of education, and the influence gained through an incentive structure. The chapters that follow illustrate the competing interests present in the schools and the extent to which states' accountability goals and expectations focused attention in schools.

## **Generating a Response**

For accountability to impact the practice of teachers and the organization of schools, the policy must do more than focus teachers' and administrators' attention on the policy's goals. People in schools must now respond by devoting their own resources, pulling in outside resources, drawing from their districts, and utilizing any assistance offered through the state policy to seek, select, and implement changes in the school. The ability to generate a change response by organizations as well as the nature of change in schools is central to understanding the impact of accountability in schools. Of particular concern is the extent to which the pressure and focus provided by the policy combined with the local resources and interests lead to instructional and organizational changes that hold the potential to create long-term improvement in schools.

Unfortunately, a response that leads to long-term, consistent improvement is not automatic, even in cases in which the local teachers and administrators have acknowledged and incorporated the policy's goals into their own goals. Actions taken (or not taken) by schools in response to accountability will be shaped by the interests of teachers and administrators, and perhaps more importantly, the changes pursued will be

goals with local goals, the authority of shaped by the resources, knowledge, and skills (often referred to as capacity) available to schools attempting change. As Hargrove (1983) points out in a discussion of regulatory policy, the capacity of the policy targets is a critical issue determining policy implementation. The ability to make change is of particular importance in the context of accountability in high schools because, as mentioned before, these policies expect substantial change from many high schools but the policy rests on the notion that schools should be free to select and enact their own strategies for improvement.

Although it may be argued that the sanctions should compel capacity development, many policy researchers and educational researchers question if spontaneous development of resources, knowledge, and skills is possible without substantial support from outside the organization. McLaughlin (1987) argues that pressure from policy alone does not necessarily imply a change in fundamental values and practice. For example, Newmann, King, and Rigdon (1997) found that prior capacity and capacity development in the school determined the extent to which a restructuring school improved under the context of high-stakes accountability. In another example, a study of high schools found that the internal coordination and coherence of the staff along with the alignment of these teachers' beliefs with the policy's goals predicted how well the schools' response actually aligned with the intentions behind the accountability policy (Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003).

For these reasons, researchers observing and commenting on accountability have called on states enacting accountability to support

schools with programs and resources to & Elmore, 1999) or for the broader educational environment including districts and external providers to step in and provide support to schools in need of organization, curriculum, or instructional change (Brooks, 2000). As the authors of this report discuss the change and reform efforts seen in high schools, they discuss the support offered as part of the state accountability policy, the support offered by other external agents, particularly districts, and the resources and information both within and outside the school that were available for schools' decision making.

## Methodology

The results reported in this study are based on a nested sample of 48 schools in 36 districts in six states. Our sampling strategy and methodological approach was designed to confront a couple of important data collection issues. First, we wanted to focus on relatively low-performing schools, believing that these schools would be most affected by the state accountability policy. We also wanted a variety of school contexts to be represented in our sample. To meet these concerns we developed a sampling strategy—described in more detail below—that differentiated schools along both performance level and social context. Second, we wanted to include a

assist in their change efforts (Abelmann relatively large sample of schools in states across the country, which introduced complications for data collection and analysis. To do so, we used techniques that would allow multiple researchers to visit schools, analyze transcript data for the schools they visit, and provide materials for a cross-case analysis. The details regarding our sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analysis methods are given below.

## Sample

We started by identifying six states within which we planned to conduct our fieldwork. Using discussions of the strength of state accountability systems conducted by Goertz and Duffy (2001) and Carnoy and Loeb (2004), we identified four strong accountability states and two weak accountability states, listed in Table 1. Our definition of a strong accountability state was one that had sanctions in place for schools and students during the 2002–2003 school year. A weak accountability state had no sanctions (but possibly rewards) at the local level for either schools or students. The state sample consisted of the following (a more detailed description of the accountability systems in these states can be found in Chapter 2 of this report).

**Table 1. Sample of Six State Accountability Systems**

State	Student Accountability	School Accountability
California	Strong in 2005	Strong
Florida	Strong	Strong
North Carolina	Strong	Strong
New York	Strong	Strong
Michigan	Weak	Weak
Pennsylvania	Weak	Weak

Within each of these six states, our sampling strategy was designed to produce eight schools with varying school performance and context. Our school selection process was deliberately developed to obtain a range in student achievement and context in order to examine the conditions under which a range of schools search for responses to their performance problem.

To develop a sampling frame we collected school-level mathematics and English language arts achievement data and school context indicators for 1999–2000 for the population of high schools in each of the six states in our study. After observing a high correlation between the two subject-matter tests, we decided to use the mathematics assessment as the measure of school achievement, because this measure is often thought to be more sensitive to differences in schools’ instructional programs than is the measure of reading performance. In addition to math achievement scores, we collected all publicly available school context indicators including percentage of free and reduced-price lunch, percentage minority, percentage English language learners, and teachers’ years of

experience. Because states collect and report different statistics on their schools, the number and nature of context indicators varied across the states in our study.

Using only the below-average half of the sampling frame, we developed a regression model that predicted 2000 school-level achievement, controlling for the available school context indicators in that state. We then produced a residual for each school to determine which schools performed better than, worse than, or as would be expected given their context. We examined the residuals for each school and placed each of the schools on a 9-cell matrix of predicted achievement relative to context reflected in Table 2. We focused this study on school in the highlighted cells because they represent a range of predicted performance and context. We selected eight schools that fit into the following categories:

- *one* school that was underachieving given a relatively high context,
- *one* school that was underachieving given an average context,

- *one* school that was performing as expected given a relatively low context,
- *one* school that was overachieving given a relatively high context,
- *two* schools that were overachieving given a relatively low context, and
- *two* schools that were overachieving given an average context.

As we selected schools for our sample in accordance with the rubric given above, we made efforts to select more than one school from some districts in order to examine the differential impact of accountability in similar district contexts. We selected multiple schools from one district when two of the district’s schools fell into one of the six desired cells in the achievement/context

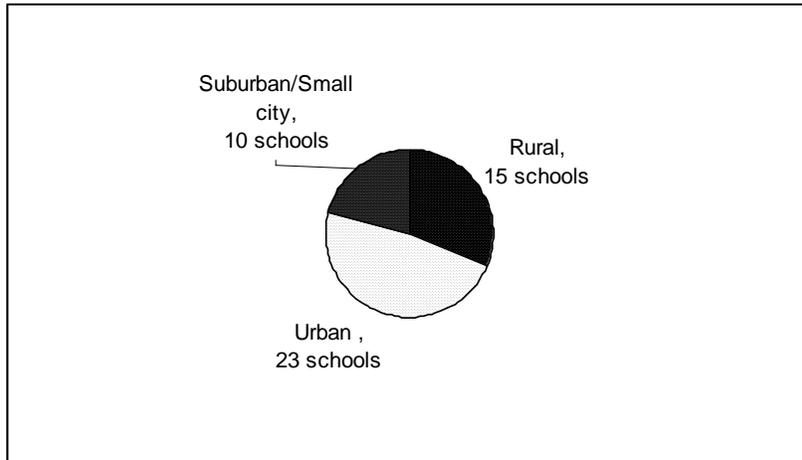
matrix. Due to difficulties in obtaining permission from schools to visit, our sample included a handful of schools that fell on the borders of these categories. In addition, we only visited seven schools in New York because of access issues. We visited nine schools in Michigan to accommodate district nesting. For the most part, however, our sample remained true to our intended sampling frame.

The final sample consisted of 48 schools nested within 34 districts representing a range of contexts. Figure 3 shows that urban schools made up almost half of our sample, but rural and suburban schools were well represented in the sample. In addition, our sample included many different-sized schools as illustrated in Figure 4. Figures 5 and 6 show that our sample included schools serving varied concentrations of free- or reduced-price lunch students and varied concentrations of ethnic groups.

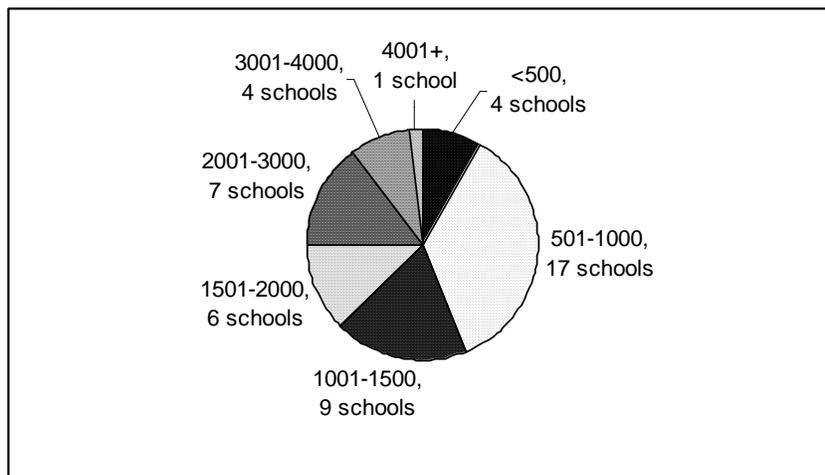
**Table 2. Achievement/Context Matrix**

	Under Predicted achievement	Predicted Achievement	Over Predicted Achievement
Low Context	Underachieving given a relatively low context	Expected achievement given a relatively low context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Overachieving given a relatively low context <i>(2 schools per state)</i>
Average Context	Underachieving given a relatively average context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Expected achievement given an average context	Overachieving given a relatively average context <i>(2 schools per state)</i>
High Context	Underachieving given a relatively high context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Expected achievement given a relatively high context	Overachieving given a relatively high context <i>(1 school per state)</i>

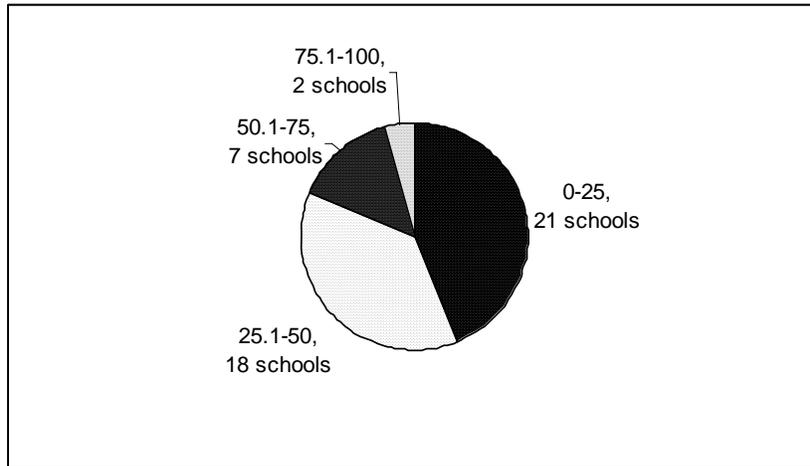
**Figure 3. Geographic Locale of Visited Schools**



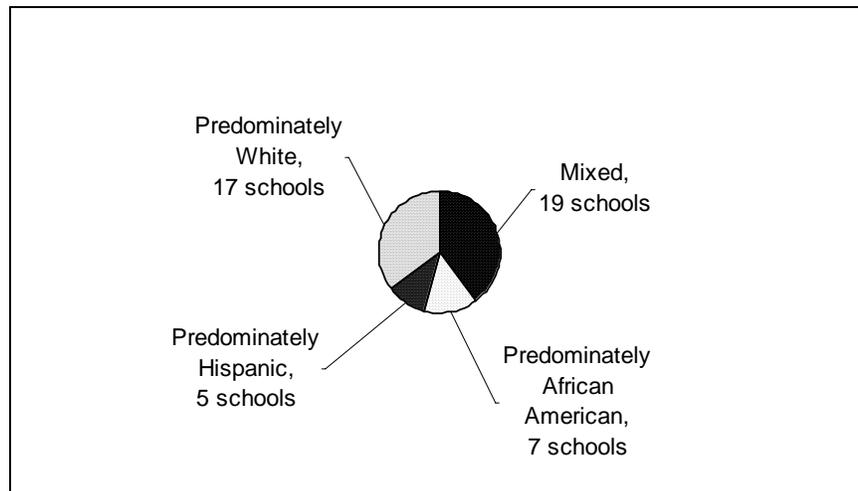
**Figure 4. Enrollment Numbers in Visited Schools**



**Figure 5. Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch in Sample Schools**



**Figure 6. Ethnic Composition of Visited Schools**



## Data Collection

Fieldwork in each of the 48 high schools was carried out during the 2002–2003 school year and involved structured interviews with a set of school and district representatives. As with most studies of policy it is important to take note of the year in which the data was collected with respect to the policy context. The 2002–2003 school year is significant in that each of the states had implemented their current form of accountability prior to our visit, and all were just beginning to respond to the accountability provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The structured interviews were carried out with district administrators (directors of secondary education, directors of assessment, curriculum specialists in English and mathematics, and the superintendent), school leaders (principals and assistant principals), department leaders in both English and mathematics, and English and mathematics teachers. We also interviewed the foreign language department chair to get a different perspective on the school and the perspective of a nontested subject. Because the question of who was searching for new instructional strategies was critical to our data collection efforts, we employed a *sliding emphasis* strategy in which the emphasis of our data collection efforts was adjusted to match our identification of the key individuals or groups who sought new strategies in that particular school. For example, although the core data collection always included interviews with district administrators, school leaders, departmental chairs and teachers, our protocols included auxiliary questions and probes to go deeper into the search

process as we identified the locus of the search. These data collection efforts involved two researchers for two days in each school.

## Data Analysis

On the basis of the framework developed for this phase of the study, using ATLAS.ti qualitative research software, researchers coded the interview transcripts using a coding system related to the interview protocols used in the field. The coding scheme was designed to highlight interview responses related to teachers' goals and challenges, teachers' understanding of accountability, the response of teachers to accountability, teachers' perceptions of their school's response to accountability, the process through which instructional and organizational changes were sought and implemented, and the nature of improvement strategies attempted in the school. The coding allowed the research teams to investigate patterns in the data they collected, and case reports facilitated cross-case analysis.

Each of the research teams that visited a school used the coded transcripts to complete an internal case report for each of the schools and districts they visited. These case reports focused on the articulation of accountability, goals, challenges, searches for improvement strategies, and improvement strategies currently in the school. These case reports also described the patterns of response within schools and included extensive data extracted from the field transcripts. Researchers investigating the issues in this report—accountability press, decision making in schools, strategies employed by schools, and the response of districts—used the

data assembled into case reports to develop data matrices with focus areas relevant for their studies. These matrices, which compiled information from each of the 48 schools arranged by state, aided researchers as they looked for patterns across schools and states to inform cross-case discussions.

## **Reading Across the Chapters**

The chapters that follow examine issues related to the interpretation of accountability policy and the response of high schools and districts. While the next four chapters draw from the same sources of data, each one brings a different perspective to these data. The chapter by Diane Massell, Margaret E. Goertz, Gayle Christensen, and Matthew Goldwasser and the chapter by Elliot Weinbaum discuss how school and district agents have interpreted the various components of their states' accountability systems, while the chapter by Betheny Gross, Michael Kirst, Dana Holland, and Tom Luschei, that by Weinbaum, and especially that by Donna M. Harris, Melissa Prosky, Amy Bach, Karen Hussar, and Julian Vasquez Heilig highlight the local improvement response made by the high schools in this study. The chapters also differ in the level of the educational establishment they bring into focus. While Massell et al., Gross et al., and Harris et al. take a school-level perspective, Weinbaum discusses the interpretation and response of districts, which in many ways face a different set of incentives and sanctions

from both the policy and their local contexts than their schools face.

Chapters 2 through 5 are presented in an effort to show how the policy has unfolded for schools by beginning with a discussion of schools' interpretation of the policy and continuing with discussions of the schools' response to the press they experience. In chapter two, Massell et al. begin the conversation with their school-level analysis of the press teachers and administrators feel and attribute to their state's accountability policy. This study of the press shows how school-level agents are interpreting and incorporating the goals and sanctions their states have put in place. Gross et al. follow in chapter 3 with a discussion of how local agents' interpretation of their states' policy shaped their prioritization of goals and challenges. This chapter also begins to discuss the nature of schools' response to accountability by showing the influence of accountability on the decision-making process and a general picture of the range of strategies adopted by high schools in recent years. The work by Harris et al. in chapter 4 shows the types of strategies adopted by high schools in response to accountability pressure. The fifth chapter offers a different but very relevant perspective with Weinbaum's discussion of the accountability story as experienced by districts. We conclude the report with a discussion that looks across each of the papers to discuss the themes of states' influence on local agents through accountability policy, the consequences of this influence, and policy directions states should consider as this policy is further developed.

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# Chapter 2

## The Press From Above, the Pull From Below: High School Responses to External Accountability

Diane Massell, Margaret Goertz, Gayle Christensen, and Matthew Goldwasser

### Introduction

In the research literature, high schools are often portrayed as the level of the educational system most resistant to reform initiatives. Unlike elementary schools, for example, high schools are balkanized into subject matter departments, teams, academies, and other substructures, making communication and influence very complex and challenging (see Siskin, 2004). Perhaps because of their reputation for intransigence, high schools have received comparatively less scrutiny and focused attention from policymakers than elementary and middle schools.

Recent state standards-based reform initiatives, however, do include high schools under the umbrella of performance accountability. In contrast to conventional efforts to monitor school compliance with input and process regulations, these newer forms of accountability focus on student academic outcomes, schools' continuous improvement on explicit performance targets, the public reporting of test results, and greater consequences for failure to succeed (see Fuhrman, 1999). Many states have also attached incentives for high school students to improve their performance on state tests, ranging from scholarships to grade promotion or graduation.

This chapter explores high school teachers' and school and district administrators' response to their state accountability system. This system includes not just the particular design of

accountability programs, but also the state tests and content standards to which they are tied. In the following section, we offer an overview of those systems for high schools during the time of our fieldwork in 2002–2003, the year preceding the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). We evaluate the strength and stability of state accountability programs, and compare the nature of different state assessments and content standards.

Then we look at whether educators were aware of and understood the accountability expectations, and explore their perceptions about its value. We anticipated that educators' knowledge and awareness of the system and its demands (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Elmore, Abelmann, & Fuhrman, 1996) would contribute to a greater likelihood that they would act on its behalf. And ever since the early RAND studies of program implementation in the 1970s, it has become a truism that action on behalf of policies and programs is highly dependent upon the will and commitment of the “street-level bureaucrats” expected to carry them out (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Lipsky, 1980). As expressed by one of the original authors of the RAND reports 15 years later:

*Policy cannot mandate what matters [italics added]. . . . The presence of will or motivation to embrace policy objectives or strategies is essential in the generation of the effort and energy necessary for a successful project.*  
(McLaughlin, 1990, pp. 12–13)

This view is now deeply embedded in reform strategy. So, for example, when national and state education policymakers decided that content standards were an essential tool for school improvement, they tried to gain the consensus of the public and professionals through an inclusive standards development process. They assumed that such participation would produce the buy-in needed for strong implementation (Massell 1994, 2000).

Next, we discuss the salience of the accountability system to high school educators and administrators, e.g., the extent to which high school educators and administrators reported feeling pressure from the accountability system, and acted in response to its demands. The salience of the system predictably differed across schools. At the low end of the spectrum were schools where individual actors felt some pressure and took some initiative to address accountability demands, but the departments or school did not act as a whole. By contrast were schools that collectively launched one or sometimes many accountability-related initiatives.

In the remainder of the chapter we analyze how these various factors—accountability system designs, knowledge and perceptions, and salience—and others that emerged as important (notably, district press and school leadership), contributed to high schools' response to their state's accountability system.

## **Standards, Testing, and Accountability for High Schools in the Six States**

Accountability policies, as applied to high schools in 2002–2003 in the six states selected for study, varied on a number of dimensions that could affect educators' understanding and acceptance of, and response to, state policies. These include the target of the accountability system (student, school, and/or district), the type of assessments used for student and institutional accountability, the nature of the accountability measure and its consequences, and the overall strength and stability of the accountability system. Table 1 summarizes these variables across the six states, and Table 2 provides specifics about each state assessment; the tables appear at the end of the chapter. Note that we gathered information on state assessment and accountability policies from extant reports (Center on Education Policy, 2003; Goertz & Duffy, 2001), state Web sites and published information, and follow-up interviews with personnel from state departments of education. As described in greater detail later, these policies represent variation in the incentives used to capture schools' attention, the assessments used to measure student performance, the support provided for school improvement, and the historical and political contexts of the policies.

In this section, we look across state policies to discuss the strength of the accountability systems (as measured by the target and consequences of the policies) and their stability, the nature of the state testing program and its perceived alignment with state standards, and the specificity of state guidance.

## **Strength and Stability of Accountability Systems**

We categorized the six state accountability systems by the scope of their coverage (student, school, district) and the nature and strength of the consequences applied to the accountability targets. We consider four of the states—California, Florida, New York, and North Carolina—to have strong accountability systems, and the other two states—Michigan and Pennsylvania—to have weak accountability systems.

### ***Strong Systems***

The four strong systems each held high school students accountable through a high school exit examination. This requirement had been in place in Florida, New York, and North Carolina since at least the mid-1980s, although all three states have increased the rigor of their high school assessment over that period of time. Passing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) became a requirement for class of 2003, while passing the Regents Comprehensive Exams (RCEs) applied first to the class of 2000, and the Competency Test in North Carolina went into effect in 1994. These assessments replaced minimum competency tests as high school graduation requirements in all three states. In addition, North Carolina high school students take a series of End-of-Course (EOC) exams that count for 25% of their course grade. California's High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)—the state's first—was implemented in 2000–2001, and applied to the class of 2004 at the time of our fieldwork. In July 2003, just after the completion of our site visits, the State Board of Education voted to make the class of

2006 the first students subject to the graduation requirement.

These four states also held high schools accountable for student performance through a combination of rewards for high and/or improved performance and sanctions for low performance. Although the formulas for identifying schools differed across the states, all four took into account both the absolute level of student performance and changes in achievement over time. Low-performing schools received technical assistance (TA) through state assistance teams (NC, NY) and additional funds (CA, NY). Schools that failed to improve over a designated period of time could lose their students (FL), principal (NC), or accreditation (NY), and/or be subject to reconstitution (FL) or state takeover (CA). While the school was the primary target of accountability in these states, districts in North Carolina could have their superintendents and other administrators replaced and lose their accreditation if over half of their schools fell into the lowest performance category.

Accountability policy in California, Florida, New York, and North Carolina was relatively stable. High school students in the last three states had been subject to a high school exit examination for many years. Florida and North Carolina's school accountability systems were also at least a decade old, and could be characterized as "mature." North Carolina's ABCs program was enacted in 1994. Although Florida's A-Plus program dates only from 1999, it refined and expanded an earlier accountability policy that focused on the state's lowest performing schools. As California and New York's school accountability policies are of more recent vintage, we have designated them as "emerging." California's Public School

Accountability Act was passed in 1999. New York has held its very lowest performing schools accountable for several years under its Schools Under Registration Review program, but only extended its accountability policies to all schools in the state in 2000.

### **Weak Systems**

While high school students in Michigan and Pennsylvania must also take state assessments, passage was not a state requirement for graduation. Students who passed the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP; Basic or above) received an endorsement on their diploma and could qualify for a college scholarship (score at Proficient or above). In Pennsylvania, local school districts determined whether to use the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and/or a local assessment as a graduation requirement. The state had considered, but not implemented, a policy of rewarding students who passed the PSSA with diploma seals.

At the time of our fieldwork, Michigan did not hold high schools accountable for student performance. The state's accountability system was initiated in 1994, but was placed on hold in 2000 while the state designed a legislatively mandated system based on multiple indicators of student performance and school context variables. State accountability ratings were not released until fall 2004. Michigan did not have a system of district accountability, either. Pennsylvania, however, held districts accountable for aggregate student performance. Under the state's Empowerment Act of 2000, districts in which half of the tested students score Below Basic on the state assessment were

subject to a series of sanctions, from the development of a district improvement plan to technical assistance to state takeover. Schools could receive rewards for improved test performance and/or attendance, but were not subject to sanctions.

### **State Assessments**

High school assessments in the six study states varied on several dimensions: the number of assessments, grade level tested, content coverage, and remediation policy. All six states asserted that their tests are aligned with state standards.

Three states—California, New York, and North Carolina—administer multiple tests to high school students that are, in turn, used for different accountability purposes. High school students, for example, take the CAHSEE in grade 10, the California standards tests (CSTs) in grades 9–11, and the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in grades 9–11. While only the CAHSEE counts for high school graduation, all three tests are used to calculate a high school's accountability index. Similarly, in North Carolina, only the eighth-grade End-of-Grade (EOG) exam is used for high school graduation. Scores on end-of-course (EOC) examinations count toward students' course grades, and both of these exams, as well as the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade High School Comprehensive Test, are used to calculate a school's status and growth rate under the ABCs. The New York RCEs are given in multiple subjects. Students in the class of 2001 had to pass two exams (English and mathematics), and, starting with the classes of 2003 and 2004, students must pass five examinations (two additional in social studies and one in science). The other three states administer only one high school examination.

The high school exit exams are administered at different grade levels: grade 8 (NC), grade 10 (CA, FL), and at the end of the specified course (NY). Similarly, EOCs in North Carolina are administered when students complete a tested course. Michigan and Pennsylvania administer 11<sup>th</sup>-grade high school tests. While the high school exit exams tend to be limited to English/language arts and mathematics (CA, FL, NC), high school students are also assessed in science and/or social studies in exams that count toward graduation and/or school accountability in California, New York and North Carolina. While not a high-stakes test at the time of our fieldwork, Michigan's 11<sup>th</sup>-grade MEAP also covers science and social studies.

The grade level and focus of the test (specific course versus more general skills and knowledge) also affect test content. For example, North Carolina's exit exam covers the state's eighth-grade standards, and students are expected to perform at grade level on that material to graduate from high school. California's HSEE is aligned with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts (ELA) standards and with sixth- through eighth-grade mathematics standards (which include algebra). Michigan's 11<sup>th</sup>-grade tests cover algebra and some geometry, while Florida's 10<sup>th</sup>-grade and Pennsylvania's 11<sup>th</sup>-grade mathematics tests include material through precalculus. North Carolina's EOC exams assess the state's Standard Course of Study in 11 courses in English (through English II), mathematics (through Algebra II), science (through Chemistry), and social studies.

Finally, the four states with high school exit exams require that students who fail the tests receive remediation. Local districts design these remedial programs, which often receive additional funding from the state. Neither Michigan nor Pennsylvania fund nor

require intervention services for students who fail their high school assessments.

## **Standards: Specificity of State Guidance**

In 2002, the specificity of state guidance for the high school curriculum varied as well. At one end of the spectrum is North Carolina, with its course-specific guides and EOC examination structure. The latter provides teachers with specific feedback regarding student performance on a bounded content area, and gives school and district staff detailed information to help them adjust instruction to meet state standards. Florida's curriculum frameworks, curricular planning tools, and course descriptions incorporate grade-by-grade state standards. California has high school standards that focus on grade clusters (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>), but more specific teacher guides to assist in preparation for the state high school exit exam. The latter generates subject-area scale scores and subscores on the skills and content of that test. By contrast to these states, the guidance offered by Michigan and Pennsylvania is much less specific. For example, both states' standards documents and curriculum frameworks were only for benchmark grades, not for each high school course or grade level.

## **Knowledge of State Accountability and Its Perceived Value**

The preceding discussion reveals just how complex and multifaceted some state accountability systems can be. Nevertheless, a majority of high school teachers across the states could paint at least a broad portrait of state accountability. Most had a clear

understanding of the potential consequences (or lack of consequences) in the system, and the elements for which they were directly responsible, such as student testing or documentation of curriculum alignment. Misconceptions or confusions about accountability were more common among educators in Michigan and Pennsylvania, where the accountability policies were in flux. For instance, Pennsylvania teachers were confused about the status of diploma seals, which the state had rescinded after a year, and did not understand the sanctions and rewards. Notably, Pennsylvania, unlike other states, applied accountability consequences primarily to districts rather than schools.

Predictably, staff roles and responsibilities mattered in terms of the specificity and depth of their knowledge about accountability design. Principals, school improvement team members, and in some cases department chairs had a more complete and detailed picture of the system. District officials understood its complexities well. Of course, school and district administrators are usually responsible for submitting accountability data and reports to the state, and must answer to local school boards about schools' progress, so it is not surprising that they have more intimate knowledge of accountability.

As noted earlier, we were also interested in our educators' opinions about their state accountability system, anticipating that these views would shape the extent to which they responded. In what follows, we discuss their views of each different component of accountability.

## Standards

Educators' views about their state content standards differed across the states. In California, North Carolina, and

Pennsylvania, at least,<sup>1</sup> content standards appeared more highly regarded than the states' testing or accountability programs. For example, the majority of North Carolina teachers believed that state standards accurately reflected what students should know and be able to do.<sup>2</sup> Many said that the state's Standard Course of Study was the foundation for their teaching, and one referred to it as her "Bible." Teachers even in nontested subjects used the state's Standard Courses of Study as a guide for their instruction.

In addition, teachers argued that content standards produced a more coherent curriculum and more consistent expectations. Said one California teacher:

*No, I really don't, I really don't think it's [standards are] a negative. I can look at the standards and I can say, yeah, kids should know that. And we just can't go through education with a hit-and-miss thing, where one kid gets into a particular teacher's class and learns a lot, [inaudible] another class and learns nothing except for what that teacher did over the weekend. And it's got to be more, if we're going to experience gains, it has to be more than just a hit-and-miss thing. (Teacher, San Antonio High School, CA)*

At least rhetorically, standards were often viewed as more legitimate goals for teaching than tests. One New York department chair, echoing a common sentiment in the school, stated emphatically that "lessons should be standards based. We're not teaching to the test.

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<sup>1</sup> Educators in the other states did not express much opinion one way or another about their state standards.

<sup>2</sup> There was one exception to this sentiment; Maple High School teachers did not think the standards were not adequate.

We're teaching to the standards" (English Department Chair, Nelson High School).

Interestingly, however, this school did conduct quite a lot of test prep activities. We found this schism between rhetoric about testing's value and action elsewhere, across schools with relatively weak and strong performance under their accountability systems.

State standards did not go without critique, of course. In Michigan, state standards for benchmarked grades were seen as too vague to provide useful guidance. (Indeed, the state, regional Intermediate School Districts, and school districts themselves were making an effort to articulate and specify the standards for classroom teachers.) Criticism of content standards was common in Pennsylvania, even though standards fared better than other components of the state accountability system. Pennsylvania has arguably had a more difficult political history of standards development than other states in this sample. For example, when the state first introduced standards in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the name Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), it galvanized opposition from all ends of the political spectrum. The Christian right community rallied against values statements. They were joined in opposition by more liberal groups who were concerned about the state asserting authority over curriculum, and bitter debates ensued. So, for example, staff in Orthodox High School and its district administrators thought the standards tainted by politics, and preferred national content standards. Support for standards across Pennsylvania schools is best characterized as moderate.

Consequently, relatively few Pennsylvania respondents identified meeting standards in their goal statements, or in what they felt accountable for. Such results stand

in sharp contrast to California, where teachers in six of the eight schools felt accountable for covering state standards. Indeed, in most other states, teachers typically said they felt accountable for meeting academic goals and/or aligning their curriculum to state standards, along with creating a love of learning and helping students to achieve their full potential. While improving student motivation, student behavior, and persistence in school were mentioned, they were not as prominent as the academic goals.

It is interesting to recall that when contemporary standards were introduced 10 or more years ago, they often met with extreme resistance even in states with a well-established history of curricular guidance. For example, there was a firestorm in response to New York's social studies standards in the late 1980s (see Massell, 2000). In other states like Colorado, educators and the public were quite wary about the extension of state control into the curricular prerogatives of local districts and schools. But while the road to state leadership in curriculum has sometimes been tumultuous, standards have become an accepted and legitimate feature of state policy in all of our states, with Pennsylvania as a slight exception.

## Testing

State assessments garnered a substantial amount of comment, both positive and negative. Some educators believed that testing set clear goals for students, and provided them with a useful way to calibrate their expectations of student performance and evaluate the success of their own teaching (e.g., Southern High School, NC) or of their departments as a whole (Upstate High School, NY). Said one New York teacher:

*I think it [the Regents exam] really puts an end to social promotion. You know and this is no knock against any teacher but you know sometimes we might be inclined to pass students who have been working real hard and really don't understand the material. And now it's basically saying you can't move on unless you show proficiency on an exam. (Teacher, Nelson High School, NY)*

While she believed the Regents exam compelled teachers to hold back failing students (buttressing the argument that standards set high expectations), another teacher admitted he was more likely to pass a student failing his coursework if the student had an acceptable Regents score. In either case, teachers do seem to agree that standards build greater consistency from teacher to teacher and school to school, as standards reformers have argued (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

But while educators acknowledged positive aspects of state testing, more often than not they challenged the quality of the tests or their impact on the school's curriculum. Teachers and administrators across the sample states questioned the accuracy of state tests as a measure of student achievement, either because the reliability and validity of the tests were flawed, or because they thought that once-a-year tests did not adequately capture what students knew. The largest area of concern was the impact of testing on the content of the high school curriculum.

New York teachers and administrators were extremely negative about the Regents examinations, particularly in mathematics. They argued that the validity of these exams had declined and that the assessments had become more of an obstacle to be overcome than a measure of true learning (e.g., River City High School). One argued that the math exam was so heavily dependent upon reading that even brilliant math students could perform

poorly (Teacher, Nelson High School). Others complained that the Regents format was mysterious and continuously changing, with sections weighted differently from year to year. Indeed, just after data collection, the state pulled the easier of the two math exams (Math A) because only 37% of students passed. The state subsequently allowed students to graduate and receive local diplomas if their teachers attested that they had met state standards.

Some math educators in North Carolina also challenged the validity of some state tests, but in this case they thought student scores on the state EOC examinations were higher than they should be.

*Those tests aren't real indicative of what kids can do. If I have a student that's getting Fs and Ds in my class, and they can come out with a B on that exam, I have a problem with the validity of that test—I'm not sure how they score them, you know? And I have had that happen lots—kids who have gotten Ds and Fs because they do absolutely nothing, and I can see them getting a D on the end of course exam, but then come up with a B. I've even had kids come up with an A on it. (Teacher, Lincoln High School, NC)*

Pennsylvania teachers thought that neither very low nor high end students were well-served by PSSA. Some Michigan educators observed that their scores had fluctuated widely from year to year. They thought these shifts were due to unreliable scoring and scaling practices rather than changes in their instruction or their student population. They and others noted that state tests were administered too infrequently, with results returned too late, to be of much use for improving classroom practice, countering the oft-stated policy expectation that test data would be a critical lever for instructional improvement.

Many high school educators across the states thought that state assessments had a negative impact on the content of their

curriculum, and observed a variety of narrowing effects. Nontested subjects, such as foreign languages, reportedly received fewer resources under the new accountability regime. Teachers in tested subjects argued that they had had to reduce their curriculum to topics covered by the state test; some felt that the state tests forced them to cover too much, too quickly, at the expense of diminished student learning and dampened instructional creativity. Another kind of narrowing was experienced by students in some of our Florida and California schools; these students were reportedly required to take the same or similar courses over and over until they passed state tests. An assistant superintendent in one of our Pennsylvania districts captured the spirit of these concerns when he said that the state's focus on testing led to a "teach-to-the-test-at-the exclusion-of-the-meat-of-learning program" (Orthodox High School, PA).

## Accountability

Of course, state tests were the primary performance indicators used in state accountability programs, so some of the positive and negative comments about the tests had close parallels with educators' views of the accountability measures and consequences tied to the tests. Administrators and teachers expressed the sentiment that the *idea* of holding high schools accountable for test results was a legitimate expectation and could be useful in motivating them to reflect upon the effectiveness of their practices for student learning. For instance, one Florida principal said:

*But we have to start someplace, and not to start would be more detrimental. So I feel for some of the schools who are really having a difficult time with this test area, the grading and all that. But I also feel like we have to have something in place to make*

*sure that we provide what's best for the kids.*  
(Principal, Harbor High School, FL)

Similarly, a Michigan principal said his staff would become complacent without accountability or their regional accreditation process (Principal, Smith High School, MI). Said one California school administrator:

*Are they progressing? Are they progressing fast enough? Are you presenting a rigorous curriculum? I mean, that's another word that we were using a lot last year, and I like it. And, sure, you could be a real nice teacher and very nurturing, but are you rigorous enough? Are you having them write too much in journals, in their personal...you know, I think journal writing is good, but are you have them write expository essays? Are you providing enough challenging reading material? Are you as a department, and then are you as an individual making sure that you're teaching as much as you can, as quickly as you can, and as deeply as you can? It's always that thing of coverage or depth, you know.* (Assistant Principal, Urban High School, CA)

But despite this recognition of positive potential, educators more often expressed concerns about unintended, ancillary impacts on students, teachers, and schools. They were especially concerned about the effects of accountability on student and staff motivation and their mission, as well as the technical details or fairness of existing or proposed accountability designs.

Maintaining high school students' motivation to learn and remain in school was the number one challenge mentioned by staff in a majority of our high schools. Teachers in a few schools thought state tests' rewards or sanctions could improve students' motivation to achieve. In Michigan, the scholarship dollars attached to the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade MEAP were said to have helped some students take the exam more seriously, but most thought this was a

sweetener for those already capable of pursuing postsecondary options but lacking the financial resources. One Pennsylvania teacher observed that test pressures had raised the importance and value of the high school diploma for many of her students. Test pressure had served as a bit of a “wake-up call” and had given her “more backing as a teacher” because now it was not just her saying students need to master the material but also “the state” (Teacher, Lakewood High School, PA).

But educators in states that attached strong sanctions for students to the tests, such as promotion and graduation, worried that they had harmed the morale of the lowest achieving students, and possibly spurred more to drop out. In one North Carolina school, for example, the assistant principal was deeply concerned about the “lie about dropouts”—the fact that the rate of 7–8% is reported to the press, but in actuality they regularly lose half of their freshmen class. He thought the EOC tests contributed to a downward spiral of failure. The assistant principal explained the scenario:

*These kids come in, and they have to pass this test to get through the course. They get a little behind and a little further behind, and they look, and they say, “I’m never going to pass this test,” and they drop out. (Assistant Principal, Lincoln High School, NC)*

Similarly, a math teacher at Grant High School in North Carolina, who generally thought that the EOC strategy helped students to maintain their grades also said:

*[But] I’m not a hundred percent supportive of all the students being held accountable, and say they’ve got to pass Algebra 1 to graduate from high school. Some of them can’t do it. Do we lose that kid to dropout just because he’s frustrated with the requirement, or do we teach him a trade that he can be productive in society?*

Michigan educators thought that testing geometry was too much to ask of all students, particularly the non-college-bound. Similarly, teachers from River City High School in New York thought that high-stakes testing aggravated student apathy because it forced a diet of irrelevant curricula:

*The new mandates coming down from the state make me crazy. On the one hand, we’re supposed to give kids authentic learning experiences, but more and more we’re forced to teach to a test. They don’t translate to anything real meaningful in their lives. (Teacher, River City High School, NY)*

Counter to policy intent, Florida educators felt that students did not care how they did on the exams required for graduation because they were permitted to retake the tests so often. Policy churn could also lower teacher and student motivation.

California educators anticipated that the state would postpone or cancel the use of CASHEE as an exit exam,<sup>3</sup> leading teachers in Urban High School to dismiss the exam. In addition, some California teachers perceived that students did not care much about the state Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) test either:

*But it’s definitely true that I’ve had classes where we’ve passed out the STAR test and we’ve had kids bubbling C all the way down and put their head down for the rest of the class, and multiple times. (Teacher, Arnold High School, CA)*

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, after we were in the field, the State Board of Education postponed the effective date of using the CASHEE as an exit exam from 2004 to 2006, to ensure that students had an adequate opportunity to learn to the standards.

Teachers suspected that the large number of California state tests lowered students' motivation to do a good job on them.

The State Board of Education in North Carolina had many discussions about appropriately balancing pressures on schools and teachers versus students. Their decision to make the EOC tests one quarter of the final grade was an attempt to respect teacher judgment but also to give students an incentive to take the EOC seriously.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, educators in one struggling North Carolina school (Lexington High School) said that students did not care enough about the EOC tests<sup>5</sup> because they could still pass their courses without doing well on the test. But since the public relies on the EOC results to make judgments about the school, Lexington teachers felt considerable stress. The principal suggested that good teachers had quit as a result of the pressure, and staff morale was perceived to be low in other North Carolina schools. The morale problem is compounded in low-performing schools that lack a cohesive professional community. For instance, in Urban High School in California, where teachers did not regularly communicate about instruction and dialogue was infrequent, the accountability system seemed to reinforce low staff morale:

*Well, there's always, it always puts pressure on you. . . . The public's putting pressure on you, and saying you're not good enough. . . . In a lot of cases, it has a deleterious effect on how people teach . . . it's demoralizing. You're doing everything you can, you're working as hard as you can with the students you have sitting in front of you, recognizing where they are and trying to pull them along as fast as you can to where*

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<sup>4</sup> Correspondence from Charles Thompson, Professor of Education at East Carolina University (personal communication, October 18, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Note that we did not interview teachers responsible for the eighth-grade basic skills test, which is required for graduation.

*you'd like them to be. The implication that nobody had any standards before they came up with these things is insulting. (Teacher, Urban High School, CA)*

As with testing, many perceived that the design of state accountability had narrowed their traditional missions. While state accountability programs include student dropout rates and other measures, testing is given the largest weight in determining schools' progress. Educators in our schools thought that the measurement of their success in these terms had damaged their traditional vocational missions, special emphases on the performing arts, or other goals. For instance, the principal in Roberts High School in Michigan implied that the devaluation of their vocational mission had harmed their strong suit as a school, as well as students' employability after graduation.

Finally, educators from many schools viewed their accountability measures, particularly the heavy reliance on subject matter tests, as an unfair and illegitimate way to judge the success of their school. Sample schools reported that many of their freshmen entered with very low reading abilities and with many other academic and social problems. Said one Florida math teacher:

*It's really not fair to compare the school with other schools, if you know what I mean. If they switched—like, what they call A schools, if they switched out the faculty here with the Fs, with the D-school faculty, I know they wouldn't bring it up to an A and we wouldn't bring them down to a D. You just have different clientele, you understand? (Math Teacher, Oceanside High School, FL)*

They felt that students were so far behind in skills that the state tests were not a good measure of the progress they had made with

those students (e.g., Nelson High School, NY). For some schools, simply getting students to attend class was an important success, one not accounted for by their state's emphasis on testing. Finally, administrators and teachers also expressed concerns over the fairness and accuracy of comparing their results to those of other schools, particularly when funding disparities between schools remained, or since schools served students with very different socioeconomic backgrounds.

## **Salience of State Standards, Testing, and Accountability**

We anticipated that educators' perceptions about the value of the state system would give impetus to—or, if negative, depress—the pressure they felt from and/or the extent to which they responded to their state accountability system. While this held true in some specific instances, we found major disconnects between educators' views on the merits of the state system and its salience in high schools.

For example, while state content standards had long been a fixture of the policy environment in California and were perceived as highly legitimate, one of the California schools in our sample was only just beginning to align its curriculum to standards. A number of California schools did not have any processes in place to secure alignment to standards, and implementation was reportedly mixed. We found a similar situation in some of our Florida schools. At Atlantic High School, the principal—an advocate of standards—thought veteran teachers were resisting the integration of standards into the school's curriculum, and had to wait for retirement to build a staff more willing to buy into standards. As this suggests, leadership was crucial. For instance, district leadership greatly enhanced

the prominence of standards in Lakewood and Mountain View High Schools in Pennsylvania.

In North Carolina, the design of the accountability system gave standards substantial clout. There, course-based standards and course-based tests provided educators with strong guidance and motivation to use that guidance. This “seamless system” also fit nicely into the organizational structure of high schools, because it did not require as much work for high school teachers to determine who would teach what knowledge and skills as in states that had benchmarked standards without more specific guidance documents.

In contrast to standards, and despite a high volume of criticism and concern, state tests were most likely to generate pressure and high levels of activity. Test-related initiatives ranged from more ancillary test preparation activities to the adoption of whole courses specifically designed to address skills and content on state tests. The response in New York best illustrates the point that negative views about testing did not necessarily depress school level action. New York educators expressed angry challenges to the design and impact of their state testing and accountability programs; indeed the amount of criticism there was notably higher than in other states. Nevertheless, schools undertook a significant amount of action to address measured performance, above and beyond such state mandates as remediation. Educators in Nelson High School, for example, thought the Regents exams were not good measures of students' content knowledge. But even though the school was listed as “satisfactory” on the state accountability index, test-related action was abundant: the English and mathematics departments consistently included Regents questions in classes, conducted test preparation and remedial activities, used state test data, and aligned their textbooks as well as summer reading lists to state standards and tests. Teachers also reported raising student course grades if students passed the Regents exams.

In Michigan, schools with the highest volume of criticism were the most responsive in their state context. For example, Roberts High School staff argued that MEAP and standards were not well aligned, did not map well onto students' abilities and development, and had sharply devalued their vocational mission. Nevertheless, they systematically planned changes in instruction to respond to MEAP, including research paper assignments for MEAP, test-taking skills seminars, practice tests, MEAP skills in student planners, and curriculum alignment. Interestingly, compared to several other Michigan schools, the staff we interviewed met and talked frequently to one another about professional matters. Teachers also expressed a high level of trust for their school administrators. This apparently strong professional culture may explain the unusually high level of response here and in another Michigan school.

Many administrators and teachers talked about using state and other test data to make changes in their curriculum, consider student placement, and the like, although use appeared to vary widely from school to school, and state to state. Some teachers and even principals in the weakly responsive Michigan schools admitted that they had never seen MEAP results, or had only read about them in the newspapers. By contrast, the majority of the teachers we interviewed in North Carolina looked at and used the results of their students' EOC exams to target areas where they as individuals needed to improve. For example, one math teacher in Grant High School noted:

*One of the first strategies that I use is from year to year, I take that testing data, which ...breaks down those objectives into specific objectives. And I can look at my class's achievement for those individual objectives, and I can pinpoint areas that I need to improve. I take my lowest objectives and those are the ones I make modifications in the structure. One year it was radicals. And*

*so the next semester I did a lot more with explanation of radicals.*

The mathematics department in that same school used the results of the EOCs to realign their curricula, particularly in Algebra 1A and 1B, and to require that students earn a grade of C before taking the next level of mathematics. The gulf in data use between a state like Michigan and North Carolina is explained by the fact that in Michigan, state test results are released once a year, but only for (primarily) 11<sup>th</sup>-grade students, and until recently the state provided no item skills analysis. Some Michigan educators thought the MEAP data were not trustworthy or useful for diagnostic purposes. In North Carolina, the data were course-specific and timely, and were often used by individual teachers.

While high-stakes environments did generate more press in general, we found that even there the vast majority of high school teachers did not experience any direct consequences for success or failure, and most did not think that administrators really knew what was going on in their classrooms. Administrators or department chairs in many schools collected lesson plans and required teachers to document curriculum alignment to standards; in some cases, districts or states (e.g., Michigan) mandated these activities. However, more often than not, teachers did not receive feedback on these lesson plans, and teachers' instruction was rarely monitored or evaluated outside formal tenure and evaluation requirements. Department chairs did not have the power or authority to observe teachers, remove teachers, or mandate instructional change, and those who did foray into changing their colleagues' instructional practice did so delicately, trying to mask their efforts. As a result, even in high-stakes environments like Florida, teachers did not feel as though anyone was holding them accountable for the performance of their students or their school. Teachers' work remained largely uncoupled

from the system of sanctions and rewards. Said one California teacher:

*No one's ever come in here and said, your test scores are too low, what are you doing about it? If you don't improve, you're going to lose your position here . . . we're working in a really difficult neighborhood with a difficult student population, but when, hmm, but when it comes down to it, honestly, there . . . I don't feel threatened that I'm going to lose my job if enough of my students don't pass the high school exit exam when they get to be a senior.* (Teacher, Arnold High School)

Nevertheless, teachers in both weak and strong accountability states articulated feelings of responsibility for their students' test scores, as well as other academic outcomes—getting their students ready for the next course level in their subjects, and postsecondary futures (i.e., college or work). Teachers' feelings of responsibility about test results tended to come from their own sense of professional obligation, concern for student success, responsibility to their colleagues or community, and/or the articulated concerns of their principals about school test results. For the most part, principals reported much higher levels of stress about testing results than their teachers, and communicated these concerns to their staff but did not actively manage incentives or day-to-day instruction to meet these goals.

In addition to the pressures of student achievement outcomes, principals in some of our high schools questioned staff about course failures. Attendance and student dropouts were acknowledged concerns in these buildings; in one Michigan school (Jones High School), for example, the principal noted freshman failure rates of 50%. Some teachers said their principals took them to task on these numbers, and felt that they had to justify these grades, or alternatively to find ways to help these students pass. One teacher complained

that students in her “so-called” required senior course were allowed to substitute other credits to graduate. This illustrates the dual and sometimes competing goals of accountability, which measures school success both on achievement and attainment measures. In educational practice, these goals often conflict and pose a tough challenge to high school teachers and administrators.

We expected that we would find more consistent levels of response in high-stakes accountability environments, but this was not borne out. Instead, we found considerable variation in the salience of the system even in those strong accountability states, regardless of schools' relative location on the accountability index. So, for instance, while our lowest performing schools were more responsive to external accountability than some research would have predicted given their circumstances (see Elmore, 2003; O'Day, 2004), we also encountered some very low-performing schools where addressing state accountability was a distant concern. For example, teachers in two of the three priority schools in our North Carolina sample reported feeling less press to address accountability than teachers in the third school.

The evidence about the salience of the accountability system leads us to five main points:

1. Examples of the disjuncture between acceptance of the components of accountability and levels of action in high schools suggests that *the press of the system was getting through, despite significant doubts and concerns about the impact on teaching and learning*. Response without conviction runs contrary to the conclusions of a body of implementation literature which states that action occurs after “street-level bureaucrats” become

- committed to and engaged with the reform agenda (Lipsky, 1980; McLaughlin, 1990).
2. While the consequences of accountability failures or successes on two actors in the schools—principals and students—were usually clear and direct, *the consequences for teachers were not well articulated*. (See also Goertz, 2001.)
  3. Nevertheless, teachers did focus on academic outcomes out of a sense of professional responsibilities that may have been accompanied by perceptions of more informal pressures from their administrators, colleagues, or the community.
  4. We found substantial differences in the extent to which state testing was salient to schools in the strong accountability systems of CA, FL, NC, and NY compared to schools in the weaker systems of MI and PA. While schools in the latter two states did address tested performance, their accountability systems were simply not as salient or pressing. This occurred even though the public reporting of MEAP scores had been part of the policy scene for many years—pointing out that often, public reporting is not enough to focus attention (for contrasting findings on the effects of public reporting, see Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2004). Certainly states with higher stakes had a legal obligation to students to provide more test-related opportunities and services. But again, these legal obligations did not explain all the types of responses occurring in these high schools.

5. Despite this general pattern of higher salience in the high-stakes environments, it is extremely important to point out that the level of response within states was not consistent. In fact, *we found as much variation in strong accountability states as weak ones*. It is to this issue that we turn in the next section of the chapter.

## Explanations for Variation in Schools' Response to External Accountability: The Pull From Below

Several factors seem to account for the wide variation in high schools' response to external accountability. District-level leadership was critical, as were other local contextual factors such as community press, perceptions that ultimate consequences were a realistic possibility for the school, the school's professional culture, teachers' feelings of efficacy, and the school's capacity to respond to accountability challenges.

Active district leadership supporting accountability was associated with greater high school response inside all the strong accountability states, and even in Pennsylvania, with its weak and less stable system.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when the Renaissance City School District was placed on the state warning list for poor performance, the long-time superintendent decided that his earlier approach of delegating

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<sup>6</sup> With rare exceptions (Hampton City and to a modest degree Foggy Mountain City), the districts in our Michigan sample were not very active vis-à-vis intervening in their high schools. During our fieldwork, public reporting of MEAP results was the only consequence in place for high schools or districts.

school improvement initiatives to the schools had failed. He started to recentralize control over the schools, and held them accountable for raising PSSA scores. He said, “The new number one job of administrators is improving student performance in reading and math.” The Lakewood High School principal in turn made the PSSA his primary focus and held his staff accountable for test scores. He met with teachers to discuss PSSA performance both at the whole school and department levels. In addition, he required teachers to use targeted PSSA workbooks. An English teacher said:

*I can also feel the pressure that is on [the principal]. Because when pressure is on him from the superintendent, which is an incredible pressure, I can hear it through what he says. You know, not directly, but I can hear that pressure. And so it really keeps me alert and on my toes that, you know, you really need to be doing what you can to help him, which ultimately helps the scores. (Teacher, Lakewood High School, PA)*

Even low-capacity districts could stimulate higher levels of focus. For instance, one small North Carolina district with few central office staff used test score data to monitor school progress and signal the importance of student performance. The district also directed resources where needed, particularly to the lowest performing schools.

District leadership could stimulate school action even when schools were relatively high-performing. For example, because its district was highly focused on test results and accountability, staff in relatively well-performing Southern High School (NC) expressed great fear about slipping into a lower rating. They discussed a variety of ways they used the EOC exams to drive their practice, including using test data to identify conceptual gaps and target students for extra help.

Geography and policy design, along with district size, could influence district intervention on behalf of accountability. In Florida, for instance, districts focused on low-performing schools more than those in higher accountability categories, in part because state law required them to provide special assistance to these schools. But Florida district staff were stretched thin by the large number of schools in their jurisdiction. County administrators in two of our sample districts had 30 and 38 high schools, respectively. Even the smaller rural Florida counties managed five to six high schools—the same number of schools as our largest district in Michigan. The confluence of these factors led educators in our middle-performing Florida schools to respond less actively to state accountability.

But district press was not in and of itself a sufficient factor in schools’ engagement with external accountability; we visited several schools that resisted their districts’ leadership in this area. One of our California districts targeted three schools performing poorly on state measures. In addition to a stronger press for improvement, the district provided more professional development and support to these high schools. But this pressure and support did not seem to erase the view in one of the target schools, Arnold High School, that no consequences were really likely to befall them or their students. They did not feel much pressure from their poor performance. Staff at Urban High School also expressed this sentiment:

*The adults say a lot of things that never really happen, like you’re not going to pass, you’re not going to graduate unless you take this test . . . but somehow these kids wiggle and worm and it all sort of falls into place . . . there’s going to be whatever it is going to come along and sabotage that exit exam. (Teacher, Urban High School, CA)*

For Arnold High School, the lack of responsiveness to their district's press on external accountability was an issue of staff's knowledge and feelings of efficacy. The principal reported that while he did not know how to meet the goal that all students could succeed at high levels, his strategy was to emphasize this belief and ask his staff what they needed to make it happen. Yet he was turning to a staff of young and inexperienced teachers: Only 66% were certified, and many were teaching on emergency credentials. The school's Academic Performance Index (API) statewide score had not been above a 2 (toward the bottom of the accountability spectrum) since 1999, and staff had come to believe that they would never be able to change these dismal results.

On the other hand, perceptions of efficacy at the school level could also produce resistance to district leadership. For example, Medal County, North Carolina, focused heavily on data and the EOC exams. Although their initiatives influenced practice in Lincoln High School (teachers reported the exams' strong impact on their instruction, goals, efforts to search for improvement strategies, and course assignments), it did not have much effect in neighboring Maple High School. In this school, only the math department reported using the EOC scores to place students in classes. Such differences appeared to be due to the fact that Maple performed well on the state system, and had a relatively new, forceful principal who sought to buffer the school from the external pressures exerted by the district. He felt the school was doing well and did need not make substantial change. Further, staff thought that district efforts to measure and spur student achievement—like the state's—were *not* good indicators of student learning, and in fact had led to lower standards for both teaching and learning.

Community expectations about academic performance—or more precisely schools' perceptions of their community and its

expectations—appeared to be another important ingredient influencing the responsiveness to external accountability of some schools, like Redwood High School in California. Although this school had a high position on the API—especially compared to schools serving similar populations—its staff pressed extremely hard to improve their results. The school was located in a wealthy community with high expectations for its schools. In addition, it had committed school leadership, ample fiscal resources, and a strong collegial atmosphere, all of which contributed to a strong sense of internal accountability (see Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003). Similarly, in Striver and Mountain View high schools in Pennsylvania, staff concerns about community perceptions' clearly drove their desire to improve performance on the PSSA.

## Conclusions and Research Implications

High school teachers and administrators were aware—often keenly aware—of the challenges posed by external accountability, and spoke of the unintended consequences that such systems could create for their teaching and curriculum or for student motivation and persistence in school. Many were deeply mistrustful of state tests or other technical aspects of the accountability design, and had serious doubts about whether testing and accountability, in operation, were working to improve their educational practice. Nevertheless, even the most skeptical acted to address the demands of their testing and accountability programs—indeed, sometimes these schools were the most responsive. On the other hand, though standards were well accepted in most states, they did not always lead to much focused action. While in part this has to do with the fact that some schools and districts had already addressed standards

reforms in prior years, others had never done so.

These findings challenge the longstanding notion that implementers' belief is a necessary prerequisite to action. Part of the explanation may lie in the fact that while educators questioned the immediate effects of testing and accountability, they also recognized its potential value to ultimately improve various aspects of schooling. In future research, simplistic notions that "belief follows action" should be replaced with more discriminating models of the relationship between these two domains.

Certain features of accountability designs raised the likelihood of action: Stronger consequences for students and schools did, in general, yield greater press and response, particularly when the system was stable. But there was a notable exception to this rule. Even though accountability consequences rarely had direct effects on teachers' employment, their professional identity, care and concern for students, feelings of efficacy about their ability to address the challenges posed by accountability, and concerns for their administrators and community coupled them to the goals of external accountability.

Furthermore, while we found confirming evidence that strong and stable accountability stimulated higher levels of press and action to improve on accountability measures, we also found that schools were not consistently responsive in any state system, be it weak or strong. Nor were schools consistently responsive if they were in a particular performance level in the system. We did learn that high schools tended to be more active when their district leaders were focused on accountability. The early RAND studies in the 1970s also identified districts as crucial players in school-level implementation, but this lesson was oft-forgotten in the policy world of the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, state and district education agencies were seen as anathema to improvement; popular reforms, such as site-

based decision making, were designed to bypass districts and give schools greater autonomy from their bureaucracies. The wisdom of harnessing districts to the reform agenda has been lately rediscovered, but it is a lesson worth reiterating in the name of improving the efficacy of accountability. Understanding why some districts press for high schools to address accountability while others do not—and how they can do so more effectively in high schools—is an important question for researchers and policymakers to continue to pursue.

Finally, educators were strongly concerned about the narrowing of the traditional mission of high schools, as well as various kinds of curricular and instructional narrowing that they perceived. To be sure, a central goal of the standards reform movement has been, in fact, to rein in the extremely diverse high school curriculum and to pare down nonacademic courses. The comprehensive high school curriculum began to emerge in the early part of the twentieth century when Progressive educators decided to go beyond the classics to prepare the greater majority of students for their certain futures: marriage and motherhood for girls and work in the new factories for boys. Curricular differentiation in high school expanded during the 1960s, when educators tried to make the curricula more socially relevant and engaging, leading to the much-criticized "shopping mall" curriculum (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Efforts to bring a more academic focus to the high school curriculum began in the early 1980s, with the landmark *A Nation at Risk* report, and extended to standards-based reforms accompanied by performance accountability. It is clear, however, that these efforts push against some deeply held values about the role of high school. As Leslie Siskin once wrote:

*High schools . . . are being asked to take on a new task—something they were not*

*designed to do—to prepare students for a defined minimum academic standard, and to get all students to graduate by achieving that standard. We have certainly not organized high schools so that all students would take the same content, or meet the same standards to graduate. In fact, comprehensive high schools were historically designed to do precisely the opposite . . . their design imperative has been to serve democratic purposes and accommodate diverse student populations by creating a wide range of programs, and a differentiated curriculum. (Siskin, 2003, pp. 176–177).*

Our educators' concerns about this more restrained academic focus reflect a deep disagreement or at least consternation about whether it can engage and better educate all students. Their comments also indicate that narrowing occurs in a variety of ways—some in the spirit of reform ideals, some not. The Florida school that eliminated special projects to allow more time for academic courses seems to meet reform goals. But when students retake the same courses over and over until they pass state tests, the academic purpose seems to be lost. Researchers should make a closer study of just what kind of narrowing is occurring, and how it may be influencing students' persistence in school.

**Table 1. Key Characteristics of State Accountability Policies for High Schools, 2002–2003: Six Study States**

	Target of accountability	Assessment	Accountability Measure	Consequences	Stability	Strength of overall system <sup>a</sup>
CA	Student	CAHSEE: grade 10	Students must score 60% in ELA and 55% in math.	Graduation: class of 2006; scholarship money.	Unstable	Strong (4)
	School	CA Standards Test (CST), CAHSEE, CAT/6	Academic Performance Index (API): based on performance and growth.	Monetary rewards for growth. Sanctions for low performers: TA, outside intervention, and possible takeover.	Stable/Emerging	
FL	Student	FCAT: grade 10	Passing score is middle of Basic (Level 2 of 5).	Graduation: class of 2003; Certificate of Achievement for higher score.	Stable/Mature	Strong (5)
	School	FCAT: grade 10	A+ Plan: based on performance, growth overall, and gains of lowest performing students.	Monetary rewards for high performance and/or growth. Sanctions for low performers: TA, student choice, and reconstitution.		
MI	Student	MEAP: grade 11	Performance level is Basic.	Diploma endorsement.	Stable	Weak (1)
			Performance level is Proficient.	Scholarship money.		
	School	MEAP: grade 11	None.	None (rewards?).	Unstable	
NY	Student	Regents Comprehensive Exams (RCEs)	Passing score of 65 (Proficiency) or higher for students entering ninth grade in 2001–2002; local option to set score at 55 (Basic Proficiency) for prior classes.	Graduation: class of 2000.	Stable/Emerging	Strong (5)
	School	RCEs	Performance Index (sum of percentage of students scoring above Basic Proficiency and percentage above Proficient).	Rewards for high performance and/or growth (?). Sanctions for low-performers: TA, additional funds, and loss of accreditation.		
	District	RCEs		May be designated Below Standards; develop improvement plan.		

	Target of accountability	Assessment	Accountability Measure	Consequences	Stability	Strength of overall system <sup>a</sup>
NC	Student	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade End-of-Grade (EOG) Exam	Passing score: achieving on grade level.	Graduation.	Stable/Mature	Strong (5)
		End-of-Course (EOC) Exams	Passing score.	25% of course grade.		
	School	EOC; 10 <sup>th</sup> -grade Comprehensive Test	Percentage of students passing EOCs; expected growth on EOCs, between 8 <sup>th</sup> - and 10 <sup>th</sup> -grade competency tests.	Monetary rewards for higher performance and/or growth. Sanction: state assistance team, removal of principal.		
	District		Half of schools are in low-performing category.	SDE can replace superintendent or other administrators; LEA can lose accreditation.		
PA	Student	PSSA: grade 11 or Local Assessment	Proficiency on PSSA or local assessment as determined by LEA.	Graduation.	Unstable	Weak (1)
	School	PSSA: grade 11	Increase PSSA scores by at least 50 points, increase attendance.	Monetary rewards.	Stable/Emerging	
	District	PSSA	50% or more of students at Below Basic performance.	Monetary rewards for improving performance of ELL, disabled, poor students. Sanctions for low performance: DIP, TA, additional funds, state takeover.		

A Rating of “Weak” to “Strong” determined by authors on the basis of target of accountability and strength of consequences. Numeric rating ( ) assigned by Carnoy and Loeb (2004). States assigned a rating of 1 have state assessments but no school or student sanctions. States assigned a rating of 5 test students in multiple grades, strongly sanction and reward schools, and require students to pass a high school graduation test. States with strong school sanctions but no high school exit exam are assigned a rating of 4.

**Table 2. Characteristics of State Assessment Systems for High Schools, 2002–2003: Six Study States**

CA	<p><i>CAHSEE (Grade 10)</i> in ELA and mathematics. ELA aligned to 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-grade standards; mathematics aligned to sixth- to eighth-grade standards, including Algebra 1. Multiple choice format (two writing items). Students are tested in March or May. Students who fail have up to three retakes. New test implemented in 2000–2001.</p> <p>State funds summer school for students in grades 7–12 in danger of failing the exam. LEAs must provide remediation and supplemental instruction to students who fail.</p>
	<p><i>California Standards Tests (CSTs)</i> in English, mathematics, and science in grades 9–11 and in history/social science in grades 10–11. Aligned to state standards.</p>
	<p><i>CAT/6</i> in reading/language skills, math and science in grades 9–11. Norm-referenced test (NRT). Becoming smaller component of state assessment system.</p>
FL	<p><i>FCAT (Grade 10)</i> in ELA and mathematics. Standards-based and norm-referenced items. Standards-based mathematics items cover algebra and geometry and are aligned to Sunshine State Standards. NRT mathematics topics include algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and precalculus. Mixed item format. Test is given in March. Students may retake exam five times in grades 11 and 12. Replaced High School Competency Test in 1998.</p> <p>LEAs must provide remediation for students who fail exam. State provides Supplemental Academic Instruction (SAI) funds.</p>
MI	<p><i>MEAP (Grade 11)</i> in ELA, mathematics, social studies, and science. Criterion-referenced tests. ELA has writing, reading and listening component. Mathematics covers algebra and some geometry. Test is given in January. Students may take in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and retake in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Revised in 2001–2002 (math) and ELA (2002–2003) to align with 1996 Curriculum Frameworks. Replaced High School Competency Test.</p> <p>Remediation is district/school option.</p>
NY	<p><i>Regents Comprehensive Exams (RCE)</i> in English, Mathematics A for class of 2001. Subsequent classes must take two additional tests in social studies and one in either science or a foreign language. Students take at completion of course. Are aligned to state Learning Standards and to grade 9–12 courses of study. Students may take component retests for sections they failed.</p> <p>Schools must provide Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to students at risk of not passing exams; LEAs design programs.</p>
NC	<p><i>8<sup>th</sup> Grade End-of-Grade (EOG) Exams</i> in reading comprehension and mathematics. Aligned to state’s eighth-grade Standard Course of Study. Replaced Minimum Competency Test as graduation requirement in 1994. Students may retake exam through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.</p> <p>Schools must provide remediation to students who fail eighth-grade EOG exams. Remediation for EOCs is local option and participation is voluntary on part of student.</p>

	<p><i>End-of-Course (EOC) Exams</i> in 11 high school courses ranging across 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades, including Algebra I; Algebra II; Biology; Chemistry; Economic, Legal, and Political Systems; English I; English II; Geometry; U.S. History; Physical Science; and Physics. Aligned to state's course specific Standard Course of Study. Students take at completion of course. In place since mid-1980s. Became part of state accountability system in 1997–1998.</p>
	<p><i>10<sup>th</sup> Grade High School Comprehensive Test</i> in reading comprehension and mathematics designed to measure growth from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Multiple choice format. No student consequences.</p>
PA	<p><i>PSSA (Grade 11)</i> in mathematics, reading, and writing. Writing also tested in ninth grade. Aligned to state standards. Mathematics coverage can go through calculus. Mixed item format. Students are tested in late March and can retake PSSA in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Remediation is local option.</p>

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# **Chapter 3**

## **Got You Under My Spell?**

### **How Accountability Policy Is Changing and Not Changing Decision Making in High Schools**

Betheny Gross, Michael Kirst, Dana Holland, and Tom Luschei

## **Introduction**

The success of the current accountability movement, unlike many policies in the past that have mandated the use of specific materials, distribution of resources, or specific programs for improvement, relies almost entirely on the policy's ability to prompt a response from schools and school's ability to generate an effective response. Given the limitations on capacity building at the state level, states are relying heavily on the knowledge, skills, resources, and initiative of local agents for the desired improvement. State accountability policy will necessarily fail if local agents such as teachers and administrators are not compelled to acknowledge the state's performance targets. The policy will also fail if local agents do not select and effectively implement strategies to improve student performance in both the short and long term. Given this reality for the state accountability policy, the process of decision making in schools characterized by the goals and problems around which individuals in schools focus their improvement efforts, the information they use in addressing these problems, and the nature of the strategies that they ultimately select are of critical importance to the extent of and nature of improvement schools will see in student performance.

In this chapter we feature two goals (a) to reveal the influence states are having in the decision-making process of high schools through their accountability policies and (b) to give a general sense of the range of strategies selected by high schools under accountability. We pursue these goals with interview data collected from teachers in 48 schools across six states; California, Florida, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. These six states reflect variation in their accountability policies across the country before the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As raised in the introduction, this study focused on high schools because little work to date has been devoted to reform in high schools and because the era of accountability and standards calls for a significant departure for this institution, which has historically been noted for resisting change. The attention to decision making in this chapter, however, offers yet one more reason to examine high schools. Unlike elementary and middle school leaders, for whose institutions countless reform models have been designed and subsequently employed in efforts to meet accountability demands, high school leaders have relatively few models or school designs to which they can turn for guidance. High school leaders are very much left to their own experiences, knowledge, and resources to change organizations that have struggled with change. Given this limited guidance, this question about how accountability

policies focus attention and motivate change is all the more interesting in the high school context. Can accountability policy move people when resistance has been the history and guidance is limited?

We begin the discussion of accountability and decision making in high schools with a theoretical discussion of the decision-making process, which we define as consisting of the five components introduced by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). These components include (a) the decision situation, (b) participants in decision making, (c) the decision maker's goals and the problems addressed, (d) the information used in decision making, and (e) the solutions selected by schools. We follow this theoretical overview with an analysis of the data from our sample of 48 schools. This analysis is broken into two parts: (a) an examination of the context of decision making in high schools and (b) a look at the extent to which the decision process of schools seemed to introduce strategies that moved schools away from their traditional mode of operation toward approaches that could potentially change the educational experience of students in the school. For the latter discussion we turn to models of information, search, and selection found in organizational literature to learn what strategies might be predicted relative to what high schools seem to be doing.

In our discussion of the decision process and the nature of solutions we show how the states we visited seemed to be playing a relatively important role in the schools we visited, particularly in creating a focus on goals. With only a few exceptions, the states have managed to influence the goals and sense of accountability felt by teachers and administrators. Schools also seem to be responding to their state's pressure with a battery of improvement strategies that focus on reaching the performance targets. Despite this clear push

toward the state's goals and active response by schools, we found that schools by and large did not engage in reforms that represented the coordinated efforts of their staff, take advantage of common organizational structures such as departments and planning teams, or encourage extensive use of external assistance (even when external assistance was required by the state). We also found that the search for solutions in schools remained largely local, with the vast majority of information applied to decision-making efforts coming from within the school and most strategies offering very little challenge to the fundamental curriculum or practice of the schools. While our data revealed that local information and strategies dominated the decision-making scene in schools, our data also showed a handful of relatively effective avenues through which new ideas entered the schools and through which external change agents—particularly districts—may attempt to access schools. In addition, we found some situations in which these avenues of new information, particularly through districts, generated increasingly deep challenges to the traditional practices and curriculum in some schools, suggesting that high schools may not be as intransigent as commonly thought.

## **Theoretical Framework of Decision Making**

The elements of decision making listed above—decision situations, participants, problems, and information—break down into two primary phases of decision making. The first phase in decision making sets the stage for the decision making and includes descriptions of the decision situations,

participants, and problems. These elements reveal how the process will engage, who will be involved, and what they will address. The second stage, which involves the search and selection of solutions, features the information used in decision making and the solutions that result. Here the decision maker seeks and scans information about possible solutions and selects a strategy expected to address the problem or problems identified. Examinations of decision making in organizations have illuminated a number of issues that decision makers both confront and create in these phases of decision making. This section offers a brief description and theoretical considerations of the decision-making components, which we have organized into the phases of setting the scene and search and selection. Instead of offering a complete review of this extensive literature, the sections that follow discuss a framework that has a specific focus on schools.

## Elements That Set the Scene for Decision Making

### ***Decision Situations***<sup>7</sup>

Decision situations are the time and place for decision makers to engage in the process of finding a solution. Organizations reveal a relatively constant flow of opportunities for decisions to be made by the organizations, groups within

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) use the term “choice opportunity” to identify the forum in which decision makers are expected to produce some solution for a specified problem. However, the term “choice opportunity” suggests that the decision makers will most likely select a solution among alternatives, a process that is not always apparent. We have chosen to use the term “decision opportunity” to emphasize the decision being made over the process of weighing alternatives and making a choice.

organizations, or individuals. Some of the decision opportunities recur at regular intervals, such as annual school plans, while other opportunities occur as a response to current circumstances. Decision opportunities need not involve a committee at all but, instead, may be informal as would be the case when an individual confronts an issue and finds a solution independently.

### ***Participants***

Participants or participant groups include standing committees and ad hoc committees as well as informal groups or individuals with authority over some aspect of the organization. A number of conditions determine who will participate in decisions. Certainly the amount of nonteaching time available to teachers limits their participation in decision situations. The physical proximity of teachers to each other during their occasional free time along with the personal relationships teachers share determines which teachers cluster for impromptu and informal decision situations. Policy mandates that require participation of teachers, community members, or administration purposely select participants for decision situations. There are likely dozens of conditions unique to each school that shape the participant list in any decision situation. However, organizational structures related to the organization of teachers, the distribution of power implied by hierarchy, and norms of teacher autonomy are worth noting specifically because of their commonality across schools.

*Subject departmentalization* is one of the most common organizational features of American high schools and gives rise to the image of high schools as collections of intellectual “silos.” Teacher specialization and structural organization by departments proves useful for creating subcommunities with common focus, which has been found

in organizational science to be an effective organizational strategy for organizations that are comprised of groups with specialized knowledge (Bolman, 1997). However, this partitioning of teachers has led to organizations in which teachers have few opportunities to participate in decisions related to other departments in their school or coordinate schoolwide decisions. While the schools in our sample occasionally supplemented the traditional structure with cross-department teams or within-department subteams, only one school organized teachers into interdepartmental teams, and only one school that disbanded departments to discourage the balkanization of teachers deviated from the traditional department structure.

The *hierarchy of educational institutions* offers a second structure that determines the participants in decision situations. The educational bureaucracy that exists today dates back to the professionalization of education in the early 1900s (Tyack, 1974). This movement established a hierarchy of schools nested within districts and districts nested within state departments of education as well as the hierarchy of administrators governing over teachers. Due to the ties districts have to schools, district officials can and do participate in decisions by sending representatives to decision situations or simply operating through the influence their authority grants them. While it is rare for state department officials to sit on local committees through a decision process, the power states exert through the provision of funding and directives makes the state's policies and preferences strong players in decisions at the local level.

At the school level the *power structure* of administrators over teachers, coupled with the well-documented *norm of teachers' professional autonomy*, creates a situation in which administrative staff assume

considerable authority over schoolwide decisions while teachers enjoy relative freedom to make choices concerning their classroom and instructional practice. While efforts to standardize curriculum and guide curriculum goals through testing have limited some of the authority teachers held over their course content, and teachers in many cases reported their loss of influence, the teachers in our sample still reported control over some aspects of their instructional practice and approaches.

## **Problems**

Problems are the issues and challenges that become the focus of the decision situations and represent the point in the decision process at which states aim with accountability policies. Problems are constructed by members of the organization and are a function of the organization's goals, the goals of those in the organization, external expectations, and the local conditions that are perceived as impeding progress toward these goals (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). States' main objective with accountability policies is to directly influence schools' goals and the prioritization of their goals. Each of the states had established both assessment targets and content standards that the states accompanied with a battery of rewards and sanctions. States expected schools to incorporate these targets and sanctions into their articulated goals and thus shape the problems they attempted to address.

It is important to note the complexity of goals in organizations created because the many and varied school-level decision makers operate with somewhat different or even conflicting goals. The variability and incongruity of goals and identified problems often lead to fragmented and inconsistent strategies in organizations (Locke & Latham, 1990). While we recognize the

complexity of goals and problem identification as important to an analysis of solutions, we, unfortunately, could not explore the consequences of this complexity with much depth in this broad look at decision making.

## **Searching and Selecting Solutions: The Use of Information<sup>8</sup> in Decision Making**

The heart of decision making occurs when decision makers bring information to bear on problems and select solutions. Information, the search for information, and the range of information used in the decision process reveal the potential for change. Because we are particularly interested in change and the potential for change, we focus on the source of information, the potential for new ideas to enter the school and introduce variation (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000), and the extent to which the solutions impact the dominant structure and practice in the school, referred to in this chapter as the core technology of the school. Fortunately, literature on decision making offers useful guidance in considering the nature of information sought by and brought to decision makers as well as the relationships between the solutions that result from the search of information and current practice.

Authors of decision-making theory explain that information exists within

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) use the term “solutions” to refer to the ideas that potentially address the issues considered in a decision situation. We have changed the term “information” to create a distinction between the ideas that are possible. In addition, because I refer to information rather than solutions, this discussion can include information that is used to evaluate and assess a problem and possible solutions.

organizations and enters the organization through a variety of sources (Brown, 1993; Huber, 1996; March, 1994). The members of an organization collect a great deal of information through professional development opportunities, their experiences, and their history of conversations with those in and outside the organization. As a result, organizations typically hold a vast array of information that rests latent in the organization and, therefore, hold the potential to assess or resolve problems. Information that is not held within the organization can be actively sought by looking outside the organization, soliciting information from external agents, passively receiving information from active information providers, or discovering information through research and development (March, 1994).

Models of decision making take what is known about the sources of information and offer a picture of the process through which decision makers put information to use and select strategies. The model of decision making we find particularly relevant given the context of schools and the context of accountability is a model described as a bounded rationality model (March, 1994; Simon, 1986). This model, unlike traditional models of decision making, assumes that decision makers face significant limitations in (a) their opportunity to access or acquire information, particularly the wealth of information outside the organization, and (b) the extent to which reliable strategies exist and can be identified by the decision maker.

Authors in the tradition of bounded rationality argue that information is not as easy to obtain as often thought. Information can be very expensive to obtain or difficult to locate. Information also takes time to locate, recognize, and process. Seeking information may simply take more time than decision makers have or allocate to the decision process. The conditions of resource

limitations constraining access reflect common situations in schools where access to information often requires that staff and substitutes be paid to give teachers and administrators leave to attend conferences or professional training. Many rural educators describe the lack of regional resources. In addition, the rapid nature of decision making in schools, a point that will be discussed in more detail later, leaves little time to explore the landscape of potential solutions.

Constraints, however, are not only imposed by resource limitations. Decision makers can intentionally or unintentionally put up their own barriers to information. Teachers can actively resist or mistrust a certain set of ideas, particularly external ideas, and therefore not seek ideas outside the organization, block efforts to bring ideas into the school, or simply deny their use in their classrooms. Larry Cuban (Cuban, 1993), in a study of teachers' practice from 1880 to 1990, argues that teachers, particularly high school teachers, appear very selective in their adoption of new strategies, selecting only a small set of the reforms proposed over the years. This selectivity has led to a relatively constant form of instruction in schools over this period, with norms of practice set firmly around traditional practice. Although Cuban does not argue that teachers staunchly defend their current practice and organization of their work, this scenario seems plausible given the resiliency of traditional practice. In more resistant contexts there is little incentive for school leaders to seek ideas outside the school or consider new ideas that approach or even enter the school. In addition to this intended resistance, teachers or administrators may not be "tuned into" ideas outside the school and, therefore, never realize that such an effort can be made. Each of these examples shows that (because of a variety of barriers internal and external to the school) access to

information can be, and often is, very constrained.

In addition to constraints on the access of available information, there is also the question of whether information on potential strategies even exists. The process of teaching and learning is commonly thought to be what organizational theorists refer to as "complex technology" with unclear and unreliable strategies as hallmarks of complex technologies. For example, several teachers we spoke with challenged the notion that we know how to effectively teach adolescents how to read. Educators, perhaps partly in response to inconsistent evidence from research, are often skeptical that good strategies exist or that strategies used elsewhere can work in their unique context. In research by Corcoran (Corcoran, 2003) on the use of research-based practices in schools, he found that district-level decision makers, who ostensibly have more opportunity and time to seek strategies than the typical high school teacher or principal, expressed frustration with the level and quality of research done on the issues that pressed their schools the most. Furthermore, the research that was available to these district officials often confused the issue with conflicting results. Perceptions that little information exists to be found may very well reduce the likelihood that information will be sought and that new strategies will be found.

Given the constraints on access and the perception that only a few or no reliable strategies can be sought, proponents of bounded rationality argue that it simply makes no sense for decision makers to engage in a wide search of all, or most, possible strategies then select the best among them.<sup>9</sup> These authors instead suggest

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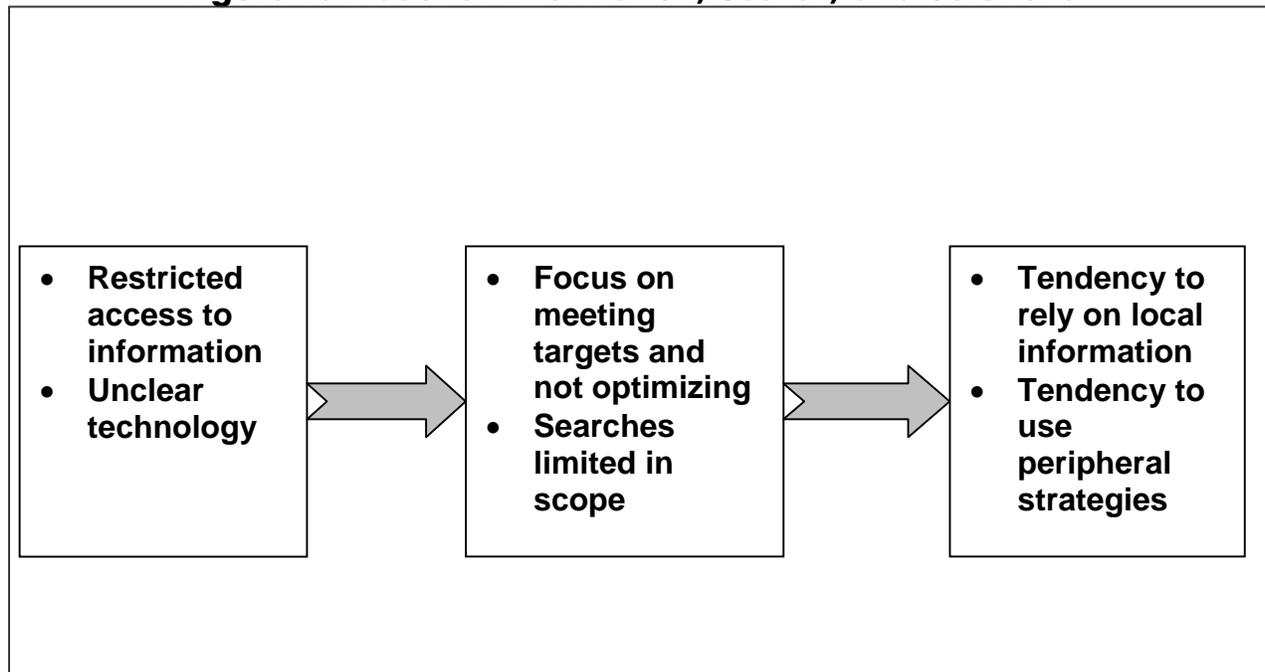
<sup>9</sup> Scanning all possible strategies and then selecting the best among the possibilities is known as optimizing, the decision rule found in rational theories of decision making (March, 1994).

that decision makers under these contexts identify a target and seek only to meet the target with searches that are relatively limited in scope (March, 1994; Simon, 1986), a condition often referred to as *geographically local search* (Rosenkopf & Almeida, 2003). The limited searches serve to save resources and reflect the constraints on access due the many reasons stated above. In addition, this limited search reflects the reality that unreliable technology leads decision makers to privilege strategies already used in the organization, use the existing structure of the organization, and leave the work of the organization intact, a well-documented condition referred to as *technologically local search* in studies of the private sector (Rosenkopf & Almeida,

2003). Consequently, decision makers who focus on targets and limit their range of search tend to rely heavily on local information and select strategies that maintain the core technology of the organization. This model of search and selection is reflected in Figure 1.

While this model of information, search, and selection is common across organizations and seems relevant for the school setting, some researchers have shown that organizations will reach beyond their borders and pull in strategies that change the fundamental practices and structure of the organization. In the rest of this chapter, we explore the extent to which schools' responses seem to parallel this model or deviate from this model.

**Figure 1. Model of Information, Search, and Solutions**



# Setting the Scene for Decision Making: The Context of Decisions in Schools

We begin our discussion of decision making in high schools with the elements of decision making that set the stage for decisions. Even though all three of the components—decision situations, participants, and problems—are important to understanding the context of decision making, we found accountability’s influence most clearly in the respondent’s identification of problems. We, therefore, begin this section with an extensive discussion of the goals and problems identified by individuals in the schools. In this discussion we show that in many ways people in schools are responding to their state accountability systems. However, as our discussion of decision situations and participants explains, we found that the dependence on ad hoc, individual, and uncoordinated decision situations suggests that schools in large part have not generated a truly organizational response to their state accountability systems. This relatively informal and independent nature of most decisions being made in high schools continues, despite the growing interest in schoolwide reforms that attempt to coordinate decision making and state efforts to require lower performing schools to work with teams or partners to coordinate school planning.

## Problems

While a great many experiences and context conditions influence the construction of problems in organizations, goals theoretically play a central role in

determining when and how problems are identified (Scott, 1998). These goals help organizations target their attention by clarifying what should be accomplished and highlighting the issues that impede progress toward the goals (March, 1994; Simon, 1986) and signaling when the organization needs to make changes. Thus, goals help determine *when* problems need to be addressed and help to clarify *what* those problems must be. It is precisely at this point in the decision-making process that states exert their most direct influence with accountability policies. Although states seemed to modestly influence the mechanics of decision making by requiring decision situations and participants in low-performing schools and indirectly influencing district involvement in schools, goal setting, backed by incentives, is the central means through which states attempt to influence the decision-making process in schools.

During our visits, we engaged respondents in two sets of questions related to goals. First, we asked respondents to give us their goals, the goals for their departments. Second, we asked for what and to whom they feel accountable. Together these questions revealed the goals they most immediately identified with and those goals they felt responsible for meeting. The teachers’ and administrators’ aims revealed that school-level respondents consider a variety of goals. Among the most common goals across the schools we visited were goals for student attainment (high school diplomas and postsecondary education), advancement in learning, and social and intellectual development of students. Of particular importance to this study, however, is the extent to which the state’s goals—set by performance targets and sanctions— influenced teachers’ construction of goals and accountability.

To a large extent states seemed to be effective at capturing schools’ attention and focusing teachers and administrators on their performance goals. Respondents in most schools in our sample incorporated state goals into their goals and sense of accountability, but these goals did not push out all of the traditional goals typically offered by teachers or based on teachers’ own work and experiences. Across all six states, at least some teachers in 35 of the 48 schools in our sample described goals or accountability responsibilities in terms of their state’s standards and/or assessment (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, respondents in 15 of the 16 schools in our sample from the two of the highest accountability states, North Carolina and Florida, mentioned their state standards or assessment when articulating their goals and accountability. Interestingly, however, stakes are not everything in determining the influence of the state’s policy. Despite very low stakes in Pennsylvania and Michigan, district or school leadership in six of eight schools in the former state and six of nine schools in

the latter state pushed their schools to focus on the state’s goals and standards, which teachers and administrators in some schools indicated was a response to public reporting and the competitiveness with regional schools. This overall influence of states in shaping school goals and potentially influencing the work of schools is particularly interesting considering that state departments of education have historically failed to influence the instructional program of schools due to their weak position relative to local agents and their role as administrators of federal policy and funding (Timar, 1997).

Although we found that the states’ standards and assessment targets contributed significantly to the goals articulated by respondents in the schools, as stated earlier, respondents also discussed other objectives including the advancement of students’ social and emotional health, higher graduation rates and college attendance rates, and mastery of course content and skills both covered and not covered by the state’s assessments.

**Table 1. Number of Schools in the Sample That Incorporated State Standard and/or Assessment Targets in Their Local Goals**

<i>State</i>	<i>Number of schools that incorporated state standards or assessment targets in goals</i>	<i>State stakes</i>
California	5 of 8	High
Florida	7 of 8	High
Michigan	6 <sup>a</sup> of 9	Low
New York	5 of 7	High
North Carolina	8 of 8	High
Pennsylvania	6 of 8	Low
Total	37 of 48	—

<sup>a</sup>In three of these six schools, the state accountability goals were only incorporated into the math or the English department, not both departments. In all other cases, respondents reported on the role of state accountability standards and assessments across both the math and English departments.

Accordingly, the challenges and problems addressed by school respondents not only refer to issues that interfere with the school's ability to improve student performance in mastering standards and with scoring better on state assessments, but challenges to broader academic development, student attainment, and student social and emotional development also appeared in our collection of responses.

The challenges described by our respondents fell into two main categories: (a) problems embedded within the school and (b) problems embedded within students. The problems embedded within the school are those that are most within the control of the teachers and/or administrators. The problems embedded within students are those that from the perspective of teachers and administrators are carried into the school by the students and, therefore, problems that high school teachers and administrators can only ameliorate rather than prevent. The discussions we had in our sample schools revealed that by setting performance targets linked to a specific set of curriculum standards, accountability has highlighted problems (some new and some old) they are now compelled to address. Most of these new concerns appear among the problems embedded in schools. However, it can be argued that these policies have also highlighted and created a greater sense of urgency around some of the challenges that have been persistent in high schools over time and not directly linked to new requirements of the state policy. In the following discussion we describe the challenges teachers and administrators raised in our interviews. This description reveals not only the range of challenges teachers feel they contend with but also how the policy's success in focusing attention on performance targets and state curriculum standards has influenced the matters that surfaced most frequently for our respondents.

## **Problems Embedded Within the School**

We begin our discussion with problems embedded within schools because these were the issues that seemed most strongly influenced by the state policy. Issues related to curriculum and instruction as well as many of the concerns over school organization relate to the testing and curriculum requirements written into the state policies. In addition, several of the concerns related to teachers' skill and commitment specifically refer to the new standards and expectations.

### ***Issues of Curriculum and Instruction***

As observers of accountability policies predicted, many schools found that the new standards and assessments required significant changes to what they taught and how they taught. Both administrators and teachers remarked on the weaknesses in their curriculum and teachers' ability to teach the new curriculum. Respondents in 11 schools described impediments related to curriculum and instruction and often drew the connection between these weaknesses and their state's standards or assessments. Five of those 11 schools specifically indicated that some part of their curriculum or their entire curriculum did not align with the standards set by their state. Others attributed poor test performance by a subgroup of students or in a specific subject area to inadequate programs or programs that matched poorly with the assessments. The only curriculum-related concern raised by our respondents that did not directly relate to the state accountability system was an interest in providing a more rigorous curriculum schoolwide.

**Table 2. Schools Reporting Curriculum and Instruction Problems**

State	Number of schools with curriculum concerns related to standards and assessment	Number of schools with curriculum concerns related to overall academic rigor	Level of stakes	Level of specificity of standards	First full school year of standards implementation after legislative act or major policy revision
California	1	0	High	High	1999–2000 <sup>b</sup>
Florida	0	2	High	High	1998–1999 <sup>c</sup>
Michigan	3	1 <sup>a</sup>	Low	Low	unclear <sup>d</sup>
New York	2	0	High	High	1999–2000 <sup>e</sup>
North Carolina	0	0	High	High	1996–1997 <sup>f</sup>
Pennsylvania	3	0	Low	Low	1999–2000 <sup>g</sup>

<sup>a</sup>This school is also one of the three Michigan schools that reported concerns related to standards and assessment.

<sup>b</sup>As reported by the California Department of Education Web site.

<sup>c</sup>As reported by members of the Florida Department of Education.

<sup>d</sup>Due to several revisions in the state standards, the time at which the most significant change took place is unclear.

<sup>e</sup>As reported by the New York State Education Department.

<sup>f</sup>As reported by the Public Schools of North Carolina Web site.

<sup>g</sup>As reported by Goertz and Duffy (2000).

While it was notable that most curriculum issues raised by our school respondents could be linked to their state accountability systems, it is also interesting to note where curriculum issues *did not* arise. The combination of stability, maturity, and specificity of the state accountability policy seems to predict the extent to which schools continue to wrestle with curriculum. North Carolina was the only state in which the teachers and administrators *did not* discuss any challenges related to curriculum. Only two schools in Florida raised curriculum related issues, neither of which referred to their accountability system. Instead, both schools discussed the challenge of providing a rigorous academic program. Table 2 shows that of the six states in our study, North Carolina’s standards and

assessment program has been in place the longest and ranks among the highest in the specificity of its standards and overall stability. Florida’s system, despite starting a few years after North Carolina’s, is also a relatively mature and stable policy with very specific standards. In contrast, schools in both Michigan and Pennsylvania with weak systems and low standards specificity seem to be still working out the curricular alignment and change expected under these accountability systems.

### **School Organizational Issues**

Teachers raised a variety of issues related to the structure or operation of the school organization. The range of issues mentioned by teachers and administrators include the following:

- inadequate resources,
- not enough time to cover the required curriculum,
- excessive time requirements of standardized testing,
- no time for teachers to meet or poor teacher collaboration,
- school safety and discipline,
- correctly categorizing English language learner (ELL) students,
- large class size,
- organization of school day that is not adequate—a block schedule is needed, and
- rapid growth in student population.

Of the various organizational issues, respondents most often identified resources as a challenge to improving students' performance. In all, respondents in 22 schools identified resource needs. The second most common issue related to the organization was related to time allocation. Issues related to time also dominated the organizational challenges. Teachers in seven schools found it difficult to deliver the required curriculum in the time allocated for their courses. Finally, teachers and administrators in nine schools raised issues of safety and discipline. All other organizational challenges listed in Table 3 represent issues specific to only one school in our study.

Teachers rarely drew the connection between organizational problems and the specific goals affected by these problems. These identified challenges most likely

related to the tacit goal of operating a well-functioning organization characterized by a safe and orderly environment, by resources to provide teachers and students with adequate instructional materials and instructional time, and by competency in the important services provided by schools.

### ***Issues Related to Teachers***

The issues related to teachers fall into two constructs: (a) weaknesses in teachers' skills and (b) unhelpful attitudinal positions such as resistance to change, low expectations, or overall weak commitment to their work or students. The range of concerns related to teachers' skills include these:

- teachers' skills in general,
- teachers' ability to teach ELL students,
- teachers' ability to teach reading and writing,
- teachers' ability to teach in the block schedule,
- new or out-of-field teachers,
- limited opportunity to improve skills and perfect courses, and
- ensuring that teachers teach what they report in lesson plans.

The range of concerns related to teachers' attitudes include these:

- teachers' resistance to change in curriculum,

- teachers' resistance to change in practice,
- teachers' resistance to professional development (especially among veteran teachers),
- teachers' resistance to reading initiatives,
- resistance of vocational teachers on academic performance,
- teacher resistance to technology,
- low teacher expectations for students' success, and
- teacher commitment.

The identification of teacher-related challenges occurred in all states, with no state notably reporting more or fewer challenges in this area than the other states. Respondents in 17 of 48 schools identified weaknesses in teachers' skills. Respondents that included a mix of teachers and administrators in 15 schools indicated that teachers in their school displayed resistance, lack of commitment, or low expectations, with teacher resistance to curricular changes and standards accounting for the concerns in 10 of these 15 schools. This list made it clear that the requirement to change curriculum to match standards has in many places hit a sensitive spot with teachers. The instances of teacher resistance discussed in schools show teachers' resistance to adopting the changes and training necessary to meet the demands of the state accountability curriculum as understood by people in the schools.

## **Problems Embedded in the Students**

### ***Lack of Student Motivation***

Concern over poor student motivation ranks as the most widely cited problem across respondents and schools in our sample and is not an uncommon issue among high school teachers (Siskin, 2003). Respondents in 41 of the 48 schools we visited explicitly remarked on the difficulty of working with students who lacked sufficient motivation to participate effectively in their education. In addition to general disinterest in class, respondents indicated that the lack of student motivation was manifested by poor attendance, poor preparation for class, or lack of effort on state assessments. This timeless issue should not be considered trivial, as many recognize that the sanctions and rewards often directed at adults in schools depend on the performance of students. Teachers directly mentioned the impact of students' attitudes on their school's performance outcomes and often viewed the students' lack of interest in classroom work, test preparation, and the test itself as having direct consequences on their professional experiences.

### ***Weaknesses in Student Background***

Student background, which was linked to student motivation, represents another concern respondents felt affected them greatly but over which they felt only limited control. Respondents in 23 of the 48 schools remarked, in vague terms, that the students' economic background, lack of parental support for education, or value structures that did not prioritize education impeded their efforts with students. In addition to comments on the students' economic

background, respondents also raised the issue of students' language background. Respondents in 10 schools indicated that students' language proficiency was a serious issue with which they regularly contended. This issue posed a somewhat different challenge qualitatively than the background issues described above in that teachers recognized their own lack of training and skills to work with ELL students.

### ***Deficits in Students' Skills***

Responses from the teachers and administrators in our sample made the point that high school teachers faced an uphill battle to get their students to proficient levels in time for the state assessments or simply to perform high-school-level work. Respondents in 41 schools described the difficulty they faced in offering a high school curriculum to students who displayed significant deficits in fundamental skills or with classrooms of students who exhibited a broad range of skills. Our high school respondents also did not shy away from attributing these deficits to their feeder school programs. Teachers in 30 schools explicitly commented on the poor preparation of students entering the school or the failed efforts to teach students fundamental reading and math skills in elementary and middle school. Interestingly, the schools expressing concern over the preparation of students spread over all of the states and, therefore, did not appear to be associated with level of stakes or the structure of testing (end-of-course exams versus one general assessment).

Of the skills identified specifically, respondents most often cited their students' deficits in the components of literacy—reading and writing. Teachers in 20 schools specifically discussed their students' challenges with literacy. While the emphasis

on literacy may have been an artifact of our interview strategy, which focused on the English and math departments, it may also reflect some important tensions between what high school teachers are “supposed to do” and what they are now expected to do. Teachers in several high schools we visited felt ill-equipped to teach adolescents reading, but four of the six states in our study assessed their high school students with a general reading comprehension exam.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that teachers across all six states in our sample described the challenge of weak literacy skills in students. Although concern over deficits in math preparation did not receive the schoolwide attention of reading or writing skills, math teachers also raised the issue of student preparation. This issue was of particular concern in the districts and states that required all students to pass Algebra I.

### **Summarizing Challenges**

Data on the reported challenges and impediments revealed that, for the most part, schools across all six of these states faced very similar issues and identified a broad range of challenges. (See Table 3 for a summary of the challenges raised by school respondents.) The most direct link between the accountability requirements and the challenges articulated by schools can be seen in the concerns over schools' curriculum. However, it can be argued that the state policies have led to instances of teacher resistance as schools change their curriculum to match standards and meet the assessment expectations and that the state policies have intensified schools' concern

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<sup>10</sup> Pennsylvania, Florida, California, and Michigan assessed high school students with a test of reading comprehension and/or writing. New York and North Carolina required students to take assessments related to specific courses. They did not assess reading comprehension explicitly.

**Table 3. Summary of Challenges**

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Share of schools in sample identifying the challenge</b>
<b>Problems embedded within students</b>	
Student skill deficits	85%
Low student motivation	85%
Student background	48%
<b>Problems embedded within the school</b>	
Weaknesses in curriculum	27%
Problematic teacher attitudes	31%
Weaknesses in teachers' skill	35%
Problems with school organization	71%

over student skill deficits and motivation. It is important to remember that accountability must compel action as well as concern. Not all of the problems and challenges identified actually make it to the table. What ends up in decision situations is the topic of the next section

### **Linking Solutions to Problems in Recent School Decisions**

The question of what problems were acted upon in decision situations completes the story of how accountability shaped the process of decision making. To what extent did accountability policy seem to influence an improvement response from schools, and to what extent did the policy shape what schools focused on in their improvement efforts? In this section we look at the new policies and programs described in the schools we visited in order to give the reader a sense of the issues that people in schools carried into decision situations. As we stated in the discussion of participants in decision making, individual teachers by themselves made a substantial share of the

improvements targeting student performance in their daily efforts to confront challenges in their classrooms. They addressed these problems with the tools they controlled, including materials, instructional practices, the content of lessons, and their own time. Individual teacher decisions are critical to the schools we visited; however, the scope of an individual teacher's influence is constrained. Policies and programs with the most substantial scope, attention, and resources are those made at higher levels of the organization such as the department or school level. Therefore, we only focus on the larger policies and programs adopted at the department and school level in this section.

To get a full sense of the programs pursued by the schools, we concluded our interviews by asking for a comprehensive list of strategies employed by the school to address matters of student achievement. In an effort to get a sense of the academic and instructional problems that were addressed (by means other than individual teachers' classroom efforts) we matched the strategies discussed by respondents at the school with the challenges identified by respondents in the school. For example, we matched a

school’s initiative to promote face-to-face conferences with parents programs with their articulated challenge of low parent involvement and challenges with student background. We matched a program to provide incentives for student test taking to the articulated challenge of low student motivation. Note that the matching reflects *our evaluation* of the strategy discussed and the challenges identified. The individuals at the school may not necessarily have matched the strategies with the challenges as we did, but nonetheless we feel that this is a reasonable approach to seeing what issues schools addressed.

Overall, we found that schools tended to focus most significantly on issues related to student skills and curriculum, two challenges with relatively clear linkages to the state accountability system. Table 4 shows that 85% of schools that identified student deficits as a problem described some program to address student deficits.

Similarly, 69% of schools that identified curriculum weaknesses as a problem described their efforts to address the curriculum issues. Certainly, it may be argued that it is simple to add a remedial program like after-school tutoring in an attempt to address skill deficits and that is why such a high share of schools showed programs to address skill deficits. However, our data suggest that schools did not always take the easy way out in designing remedial programs, a point that will be addressed with more detail in the following sections. Furthermore, easy ways to address a problem would not necessarily account for the high share of schools addressing curriculum weaknesses. Not only does standards alignment take time and energy on the part of teachers, we also learned that several administrations and other school leaders faced significant challenges to the process of standards alignment from members of their staff.

**Table 4. The Challenges Identified and the Challenges Addressed**

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Share of schools in sample identifying the challenge</b>	<b>Share of those schools that identified the challenge that also had a program to address the challenge</b>
<b>Problems embedded within students</b>		
Student skill deficits	85%	85%
Low student motivation	85%	59%
Student background	48%	17%
<b>Problems embedded within the school</b>		
Weaknesses in curriculum	27%	69%
Weaknesses in teacher skill and commitment	58%	36%
Problems with school structure	71%	24%

While it was interesting to see the response to skill and curriculum weaknesses in the high schools, it is also interesting to take note of those problems that schools address the least. We might expect that those problems positioned outside the school would be considered the most difficult for schools to confront and, therefore, least often addressed. As we can see from Table 4, schools that identified students' backgrounds as a problem rarely implemented programs to confront this problem. However, a surprising share of schools seemed to take on the issue of student motivation, with more than half of the schools that identified motivation as a problem implementing some program to engage students. Although the skills and commitment of teachers seem like problems within the control of those in the school, only 10 of the 28 schools in which respondents articulated problems with teachers' skills or commitment described any schoolwide or departmental effort to address their concerns. Importantly, only one of the schools in which respondents discussed the problem of teacher resistance had any effort to address this issue. In this one school the principal was pursuing a "reconstitution by attrition" in which she welcomed retirements and unhappy transfers as an opportunity to recruit like-minded teachers.

Through this analysis, we learned that schools overall addressed a wide range of strategies, but not surprisingly, they did not address all the problems identified by the respondents. The fact that schools did not address all the problems they identified for us likely reflects the fact that the schools could not address everything at once. However, this result also reflects the fact that our interviews sought information on efforts to improve student performance. We simply did not pursue at much length schools' efforts to deal with some of the

more procedural or administrative problems discussed by respondents. In addition, schools appeared to select strategies that did not necessarily correspond with the problems identified by the respondents. A variety of explanations possibly explain why schools might be implementing strategies for unarticulated problems. Some problems such as low student scores may be so fundamental to the school and its goals that teachers did not specifically articulate them. In addition, agents external to the school such as districts, external partners, or state departments of education may require programs that may or may not correspond with the problems identified by local teachers.

## **Decision Situations and Their Participants**

The nature of decision situations gives some indication of the formality of the decision process used to address the problems outlined above, while the range of participants illustrates the different levels of decision makers at work in schools. Although the success of the policy relies on good decision making by local schools, the states offer little guidance or support to schools that would encourage or facilitate formal or coordinated schoolwide needs assessment and decision-making processes. Only two of the states we visited, California and North Carolina, included a system for supporting school improvement decision making in the body of the policy. Both of these states introduce external participants in the decision-making scene. North Carolina required its lowest performing schools to work with a state-designated team for school improvement, and California required schools participating in the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) to engage with an external partner to evaluate the school's need.

Because these states only offered this support to its lowest performing schools, these efforts were not widely represented in our sample, and we see no evidence that the support offered to the states' lowest performing schools served as a model for other schools attempting improvement.

The picture of decision situations related to improving student achievement<sup>11</sup> and their participants in the 48 schools showed a blend of formal and informal decision situations with informal and ad hoc efforts by individual teachers, administrators, or other groups in the school occurring most often. As might be expected with informal decision making, the decision process did not always flow, as logic would predict, with the identification of need preceding the selection of strategies for improvement, and the participants in decision making were often not organized in accordance with the organizational structure of the school. Decision situations in the schools we visited seemed to arise from three scenarios: (a) a problem was recognized, (b) a solution was identified, or (c) a cycle required a decision. We found several decision situations that formed because individuals or groups of individuals identified a problem in the school that they wanted to address. For example, a math department in a school had been struggling with inappropriate placement of students in classes. They decided to use their department meeting time to discuss and resolve this issue. These types of decision situations took advantage of existing structures such as departmental meetings or planning team meetings but also led to

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<sup>11</sup> While we tried to focus discussion on decisions intended to improve student achievement, our queries into the most recent departmental decisions or recent schoolwide decisions often yielded information on decisions that seemed unrelated to improving student achievement. For example, members of one department described a recent decision to move the refrigerator in the faculty lounge.

decision situations using less formal or ad hoc arrangements of people.

While the practice of identifying a need then creating an opportunity to resolve the need appeals to logic, we learned about a number of decisions in which the identified need seemed to follow the identification of a solution. In these cases a solution seemed to catch someone's attention and this solution was later matched to a problem, common practice that appears in Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) description of "garbage can decision making." These authors explain that this practice often occurs when decision makers have unclear preferences, unclear technology, and continuously changing participants in the decision situation, however, the cases we observed are more aptly described as decision makers with unclear needs. In most cases where solutions led decision situations, the individuals in the decision situation had never made a thorough evaluation of their needs or the types of strategies that may ameliorate this need. In one illustrative case, an assistant principal learned about the "middle school" model, which offers a school design that addresses the developmental needs of students in the middle school years. He thought this model would be appropriate in his school, which housed grades six through twelve. He raised the idea with his principal, and together they decided that this program would help their younger students to transition to the high school. From our interviews with the principal and assistant principal it was clear that they had not discussed a problem with the younger grades prior to this proposition, but nonetheless they identified some problems that matched the identified strategy. In this case and with similar cases in other schools, the desire to implement these specific solutions drove the entire decision process.

Respondents in a handful of schools mentioned their engagement in cyclical or

required decision situations. Of the three decision-making prompts discussed in this section, these events made most consistent use of formal organizational forms and appeared the most structured. Interestingly, few schools mentioned the regular development of school improvement plans, one of the most common recurrent decision situations in schools because districts and states often require the annual development of plans (O'Day, 1999). State accreditation and evaluation processes, which recurred on regular intervals, required four of those schools (three in Michigan and one in Pennsylvania) to convene a team and develop a school plan. Two schools discussed their district's curriculum renewal cycle in which each subject area, in its own turn, engaged in evaluation, revision, and implementation phases. Finally, three schools in our California sample participated in the II/USP program and were required to develop an assessment and improvement plan with the help of an external consultant. This requirement led to decision situations related to the development of a school action plan. Interestingly, these were the only decision situations that directly resulted from the state accountability policy. The role of II/USP and work of external consultants in California's schools will be discussed in more detail in later sections.

Given the both formal and ad hoc decision events in the schools we visited, it should not be surprising to learn that the participants in the decision situations ranged widely. The decision-making groups included formally specified departments and planning teams. However, consistent with the large share of informal decision situations, but perhaps inconsistent with prior research on the importance of departments in high schools, we found a relatively weak effort to exploit these organizational structures. Instead, we found that individuals and self-formed groups—

groups not designated by an organizational structure—were the most common participants and participant groups in decision making. As per the fundamental principle of limited mandates inherent in outcomes accountability, states took little direct role in determining participants in decision situations. States generally did not require that schools demonstrate schoolwide participation in decisions and did not require schools to involve their districts in decisions. As stated above, only California's and North Carolina's policies required certain participants be brought to the table, but this was only required of their lowest performing schools. Our data, however, show that state accountability may have indirectly influenced the participants in school decisions by prompting more involvement from their districts. While most of our schools had multiple types of decision makers and decision-making groups working with different issues, certain groups clearly dominated the scene in some of the schools we visited. Overall, we found a surprisingly strong role by districts and a relatively weak effort to exploit organizational structures such as departments and schoolwide planning teams.

Although the state accountability policy does not attempt to play a strong role in decision making, it is important to understand the range of decision makers in schools and the prevalence of each for decisions. Different types of decision makers have different levels of authority and influence in schools, and the scope of issues addressed in schools depends greatly on the types of participants attending to decision situations. For example, individual teachers, though they have significant impact on students, have only limited scope of influence. If one teacher changes her materials, only her classroom will be affected. However, if the department collectively makes a decision to change

materials, all students taking courses in the department will be affected. Below we outline the different participants in decision making including *individuals*, *groups*, and *external agents* in decision making in the high schools we visited.

### ***Independent/Individual Decision Makers***

Individual teachers and administrators making decisions independently represent the most consistent decision makers across the high schools we visited. The norm of teacher autonomy, described in the theoretic section above, was evident in the regularity with which teachers took independent initiative to make adjustments in their practice, curriculum, or materials. In every school we visited, we heard testimonials of teachers seeking solutions to daily concerns about students or lessons as well as broad concerns regarding practice, assessment, curricular approaches, and student academic performance. However, the domain of a teacher's decisions only extended to the teacher's classroom and, at times, only affected individual students. His or her individual initiative, while significant and at times constituting the major improvement efforts being made in a school, does not imply a school reform effort.

Principals in our sample described making decisions regarding schoolwide improvement strategies independently of the faculty or even other administrative staff. Unlike teachers, principals' independent decisions reflected school-level decisions and they generally affected many individuals across the organization and touched the instructional work of teachers. In our sample, principals took this centralized approach because this approach aligned with the historical role of administrators in the school or in order to wrest control of a school with substantial

needs. The authority vested in principals was particularly clear in our sample, where teachers in 13 of 48 schools described significant instructional improvement decisions in which the principal did not involve the staff in the decision-making process.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Decision-Making Groups***

***Departmental decision makers.*** The department structure, which is one of the most widespread organizational forms in high schools, offers a logical decision-making body for schools. Members of subject-based departments share common academic expertise, participate in common courses or a sequence of courses, share many instructional practices, and, importantly, share students (a commonality even in interdepartmental teams). During our field study, we focused heavily on the role of English and math departments in the school improvement process because previous research on high schools has emphasized the importance of departments in teachers' professional lives. In each of the schools we visited, we specifically queried teachers on the decision-making role of subject-based departments and other teacher groups that exist in the school. All but two of the schools we visited recognized subject-based departments. Of the two schools that did not recognize subject based departments, one recognized interdepartmental teacher teams, and the other recognized no teacher teams.<sup>13</sup> Schools supported departmental and team structures by formally recognizing

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the centralized decision making was not necessarily contested by teachers in these schools. Most of the teachers who commented on the centralization of decision making seemed to accept this arrangement as the role of the principal and the norm for the school.

<sup>13</sup> Despite having no formal departments, these teachers continued to identify professionally and informally with their subject-level colleagues.

the groups with designated leaders (department chairs/team leaders), responsibilities, requirements to meet as a group, and, in many cases, supply budgets. Departments or teams held meetings in nearly every school we visited. However, the frequency and regularity of those meetings varied significantly across schools. Teachers in most departments described meeting infrequently (once a month or less) or meeting on an “as needed” basis, while some met as frequently as once a week. Overall, the departments in this study did not come across as strong decision-making units.

Looking across our sample, we rarely discerned a specific role expected of the departments. Informational interaction dominated as the style of interaction for department members. Administrations rarely distributed decision-making authority to their departments, and teachers did not describe their departments as key decision makers in their schools. On the whole, departments served as a central decision-making authority in their schools most frequently in California ( $n = 4$ ) and New York ( $n = 3$ ). In Florida and especially North Carolina, among the strongest accountability states in our sample, teachers in only 1 of the sixteen schools identified departments as key decision-making units in the school. Instead, teachers indicated that the principals and/or central offices wielded substantial authority, and any distributed authority resided at the teacher level. In addition, teachers in 30 of the 48 schools did not report on any significant school improvement strategies selected, in part or entirely, by either their English or math department. Among the 18 schools where teachers reported that departments made at least some important decisions, we found considerable variation in the types of decisions and the regularity with which the departments were brought into the decision

process. While we cannot conclude that accountability policies or the level of stakes impeded the use of organizational structures such as departments for decision making, it is clear that the press of these policies did not compel schools to take advantage of these forms to help decision making.

The conclusion that departments played a relatively limited role in decision making, however, seems to contradict a substantial body of work demonstrating the importance of departments in schools. McLaughlin and Talbert (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and Siskin (Siskin, 2003) described departments as the center of professional life for teachers and an important source of intellectual, professional, and social development for teachers. We do not deny that the departments in most of the schools we visited played a vital role in the social and professional lives of teachers. As McLaughlin & Talbert and Siskin have reported, the departments provided teachers with informed colleagues who dealt with similar topics and student issues to which they could turn for ideas. However, department meetings typically provided a forum for conversation from which individual teachers would acquire information for their independent decision situations or learn about administrative issues such as new or proposed school and district policies or time and dates for professional development opportunities. We saw only rare cases in which administrations or districts mobilized their departments to make decisions about school improvement. By and large, the departments served as salient social and professional units for teachers but they did not serve as important units for organizational decision making.

***Schoolwide committees or faculty senates.*** Policy designers often tout the advantages of schoolwide committees in decision making, citing the benefits of using the broader base of knowledge and

promoting teacher buy-in for the strategies selected. In the schools we visited, requirements to produce school improvement plans as well as state accreditation and evaluation procedures prompted schools to create schoolwide committees for needs analysis and planning. In other cases, standing committees, such as committees of department chairs or occasional committees convened to deal with specific issues, served as forums for discussing and selecting programs or addressing concerns. Despite the purported advantages of schoolwide committees, only 13 of the 48 schools we visited discussed using schoolwide teams as decision-making bodies, and teachers in one of these schools explicitly stated that the team did not do much for the school.

### ***Participants External to the School***

Countless educational providers including districts, universities, and private educational consultants stand at the ready to assist high schools in their improvement efforts. Several schools in our sample drew from districts, schoolwide model providers, and hired evaluators or school planning specialists in making instructional improvement decisions.

***Districts.*** The district (represented by curriculum coordinators, directors of school improvement, and directors of secondary education) were, by far, the most influential external agents in the schools we visited. Teachers and administrators in 18 of the schools we visited reported that their district selected significant strategies that the school was either required or strongly encouraged to use. In four more schools, members of the district central office worked collaboratively with administrators, leadership teams, or, in one district, departments to help strategies for improvement. Literature on decision making and the application of information in

organizations recognizes that power structures play important roles in determining the outcomes of decision situations (Brown, 1993). The districts in our sample enjoyed the benefit of authority they received as knowledgeable, trusted, and respected information providers as well as the benefit of power bestowed by the hierarchical nature of the educational institution. With this authority districts selected and implemented improvement strategies in the schools we visited. Although we saw several instances in which schools appreciated the suggestions and support of their districts, we also saw instances in which schools grudgingly implemented the district's programs or even resisted, intentionally failed to implement, or weakly implemented the district's strategy.

As stated earlier, a link between district involvement and the design of accountability policies seems likely but is still unclear from these data. Only Pennsylvania's accountability system made districts their primary target for sanctions,<sup>14</sup> but even Pennsylvania exercised its authority to sanction districts in relatively few cases.<sup>15</sup> Though the state has exercised its authority sparingly, the superintendent from one district in our sample indicated that he feared the sanctions that other districts in the state had received. Though no other district administrators directly stated that their intervention was a result of the

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<sup>14</sup> California and Michigan had each taken over districts in their states, but these takeovers were in response to extreme cases or were a result of fiscal crisis in districts and not linked to the state's current accountability policy.

<sup>15</sup> At the time of data collection, Pennsylvania had listed 10 districts on its "empowerment list," which makes the district eligible for state intervention. The state had only identified two districts as "empowerment districts," which indicates that the state could exercise even more authority than with the schools on the list.

state's accountability pressure, six of the eight schools in our Pennsylvania sample reported a strong district role. In the rest of our data, however, the involvement of the district did not seem to be related to the strength of the state's accountability system. Five of the eight schools we visited in North Carolina, a high-accountability state, reported strong district roles, while no more than three schools in New York and California, the other two strong accountability states, reported the district making important programmatic decisions for the school. This result suggested that the level of district involvement did not depend on the level of stakes created by the accountability system but on other factors at the district and school level.<sup>16</sup>

Status in the state's accountability system seemed to play a role in determining which schools received special attention from the districts, but even this link is not perfect. Florida, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania each had one school in which the district took a strong role because the school had been classified as low-performing by the state or was among the districts' lowest performing schools. However, a school's accountability status did not *necessarily* imply strong district intervention. Our sample also included a handful of schools that were among their districts' lowest performing or had received low marks in their states' accountability system and that did not receive strong intervention.

The role of districts in California showed the most direct link between district intervention and accountability. Districts in our sample actually seemed to co-opt the state's policy mechanisms to intervene with their own low-performing schools. Our sample included three schools from two

different districts that had been identified as in need of improvement and participated in the state's II/USP and, therefore, were required by the state to hire an external evaluator. In each case, the districts selected their schools' external evaluators. Clearly, these schools received support from the district because they had been identified as low-performing and received support that was prescribed by the accountability policy. (More details on II/USP follow.)

***External providers and state policy: The case of California's II/USP.*** The structure of the accountability system and a school's experience with accountability, however, seemed to play a part in the extent to which schools accessed nondistrict forms of external assistance in making school plans and selecting strategies. Five schools described involvement of external assistors in their search for strategies. The most prominent use of external assistance across the states we visited was in California, where three schools in our sample participated in the state's II/USP. The California case provides the most direct link between decision making and the state's accountability policy and, therefore, merits a detailed discussion in this chapter. California identified each of these three schools as in need of improvement and, therefore, eligible for participation in the II/USP, which is voluntary. As participants in the program, schools were required by the state to hire an external evaluator from a state-approved list of assistors to plan the school's improvement strategies, for which the state provides funding for 2 years. The intended impact of this program on decision making is to force schools to include evaluators and an assistance team in the decision-making process and to increase the quantity and quality of information used in the decision-making process.

Although II/USP nominally identifies schools as the locus of decision making and

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<sup>16</sup> Weinbaum (in this publication) explores in more detail the conditions that may be leading to district involvement.

change, the selection of external evaluators becomes yet another point at which districts often exploit the power vested in them by the hierarchy of educational institutions. Districts often take the lead in identifying external evaluators and matching them with schools. As cases in point, both of the California districts with II/USP schools in our sample selected the participating schools and chose the external evaluators to work with those schools. Each district selected a single external evaluator to work with all of its II/USP high schools. Our sample included two schools in each district, but only one of the high schools in the first district participated in II/USP. In the second district, both of our sample schools participated in II/USP.

Our sample revealed that the interaction between external evaluators and schools varied across schools. Although the state must approve the external evaluator, it was clear from comments made by our respondents that these providers offer different types of services to the schools that hire them. Just as local context and acts of resistance constrained districts' efforts in schools, local conditions affected the impact of external evaluators. The school with the most successful II/USP experience demonstrated a collaborative arrangement with its external evaluator. While the school had already begun to search for solutions to the many problems of an urban high school with a large immigrant student population, assistance by the external evaluator appeared to direct the search toward a coherent set of solutions. Two factors seemed important in this successful II/USP experience: (a) the school's strong leadership and communal culture and (b) the school's strong commitment to the ongoing implementation and improvement of the action plan developed during the II/USP process, a condition also found in a recent comprehensive examination of II/USP by

the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (O'Day & Bitter, 2003).

*Other external providers.* Two additional schools, one in North Carolina and one in Florida, received external assistance in their search for improvement. However, the assistance received by each of these schools was very different. The school in North Carolina received attention from a local university that "adopted" the school. The university did not require any payment from the school or the district for their assistance. They collaborated with the district and school to locate resources and plan an improvement strategy for the school. The school in Florida, by adopting a schoolwide model, purchased a plan for school improvement. The school model included a prescribed program for curriculum and school organization. Although research on external partners suggests that schools maintain some control over the plan to be implemented (Finnigan, O'Day, & Wakelyn, 2002), the model essentially made a number of decisions about school change and what it would look like in this school. Interestingly, both of the schools using these external providers hailed from high-accountability states and had earned the lowest or next to lowest ranking in their respective accountability systems.<sup>17</sup> While the use of external assistance in only two schools certainly cannot confirm that high stakes compels schools to seek external assistance in planning school improvement, this may be an interesting question to pursue in larger samples.

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<sup>17</sup> The two schools referred to in this statement came from Florida and North Carolina. The school from Florida was labeled a D school (the second to lowest ranking) by the state. The school from North Carolina was identified as a priority school.

# Making the Decisions: Information and Solutions

The discussion to this point has focused on the ways in which the states, through their application of goals and sanctions, have influenced the process of decision making in schools. However, both advocates and critics of accountability say that focusing goals and improvement efforts is not enough to ensure the success of the policy. These policies, which require that schools teach *all* students to the *same* standards in a growing number of academic subjects, represents a substantial shift in the purpose of high schools (Siskin, 2003), and, therefore, high schools must select and carry out strategies that produce a shift in instructional programs and practices that will match the shift inherent to this policy. Furthermore, critics of accountability argue that the changes in programs' curriculum and practice must do more than strategically target students, narrow curriculum, and focus on test preparation skills, activities some researchers argue have happened under accountability conditions (McNeil, 2000). In the discussion that follows we explore to what extent schools seek out and select strategies to represent the shift in practice Siskin (2003) argues may be necessary and avoid the strategic but only surface strategies of which McNeil warns.

In this section, we take a look at the information that is used to select strategies for reform and a range of solutions chosen by high schools in their efforts to improve students' performance. We frame this discussion around the model of search and selection proposed in the literature on bounded rationality, a model we earlier argued relates to the conditions of educational organizations in the context of

accountability. Bounded rationality predicts (a) that schools will turn most frequently to ideas that are already held within the school or are very close to the school and (b) that schools will favor strategies that maintain their current practice by adding onto the core program or targeting students within the core program. This model, therefore, predicts what many accountability critics argue is the policy's weakness—the incentive to engage in short-sighted strategies that are peripheral to the core technology of schools.

Our examination of schools' search and strategy selection confirmed this prediction in many ways. Schools by and large relied on local information and adopted strategies that "tweaked" their current program or dealt with issues by having splinter programs that did not disrupt the traditional program. However, we also found ways in which barriers to new information were overcome and situations in which schools pursued strategies that changed their core technology. We found that districts provided a dominant force leading to the use of new information and strategies. The sections that follow describe the ways in which schools revealed the predictions of bounded rationality. However, in these sections, we also provide an extensive discussion of how schools *did not* conform to the model's predictions in an effort to illustrate for district leaders and policymakers the role districts can play in providing schools with new ideas and supporting reform.

## The Conditions for Finding New Ideas: The Search for Information in Schools

Our data offer additional support to the existing literature supporting the basic premise of the bounded rationality theory. Teachers in some rural areas described their

professional development options as limited. Teachers across our sample often described their professional development opportunities as too general to be put to use. Several teachers discussed the impact their tight schedules had on their ability to go outside the school for information; meanwhile, few schools described coherent efforts to bring new ideas or information on curriculum or instructional practice to teachers. Principals also described their own time constraints and the budget constraints that restricted the opportunities that could be made available to teachers. Contributing to the constraints imposed by time and resources were the circumstances under which most decisions in the schools we visited were made. Recall from the sections on decision situations and participants that most of the decisions described for us were made by individuals or ad hoc groups that had no formal recognition by the school's organizational structure. These individuals or groups rarely had resources backing their decision-making efforts. Furthermore, many of the decisions, even in the relatively rare cases in which departments were making decisions, were carrying out relatively informal and quick searches on an "as needed" basis. In many of these cases, decision makers attempted to address the problems relatively quickly with one or two meetings.

Resources were not the only culprits in limiting access; our research team found that in several cases teachers and administrators showed a "benign neglect" of ideas outside the school. Teachers and administrators often showed almost no awareness that they could or should look beyond their experience or their colleagues for information on new strategies, and they showed little knowledge of how to do so. While this failure to consider outside information was not explicitly mentioned by the originators of bounded rationality, this behavior seems a logical consequence of

working in contexts with what is perceived to be unclear, inconsistent, or unreliable information. While teachers' perception that strategies were not available to be found was less obvious in our data than the constraints on access to information, teachers in one school commented explicitly on the lack of good programs on adolescent literacy.

Given the constraints described above and as predicted by the model, teachers' and administrators' reliance on information, knowledge, and skills that teachers and administrators already possessed appeared overwhelming in our initial impressions of the schools we visited. Much as with Huberman's (1983) conclusion that teachers generally view valid information as information received from local colleagues, we found that teachers seemed most confident with the resources they had at hand in their schools. Researchers visiting schools often remarked on the lack of search anywhere outside the school. Reports by researchers from the field on each school were filled with descriptions of teachers' efforts to learn from their colleagues and to resolve issues by calling on their own experience or the experience of their colleagues, typically departmental colleagues. At the departmental level, respondents reported that they often arrived at decisions by pooling the information of the department members and drawing from the collective knowledge and experience of the departmental members. Teachers described their departments' decision making as a process that could be characterized as "putting heads together" to come up with a strategy or running with an idea one member brought to the table. Schoolwide teams described efforts much like the departmental efforts to draw on the collective knowledge and skills of the team members. Finally, principals described using their own experiences to select strategies or programs for the school.

Organizations, however, rarely represent just one style of search and selection, and our sample of schools was no exception. While the vast majority of decision making in schools relied on internal information when making decisions at every level of the organization, the schools in our sample challenged the model's predictions and revealed a variety of avenues through which information from outside the school entered the organization. Schools in our sample benefited from instances when information was actively brought to the schools as well as instances in which individuals inside the school sought out information.

Interestingly, districts in our sample appeared to provide the most common avenue along which information about strategies or approaches reached into schools. This is possibly one of the most significant findings in this examination of the decision and search process of high schools. Respondents in more than half (26) of the schools in our sample explicitly commented that they learned about one or more of the improvement strategies they used in the school when their district either suggested or required the strategy. Districts in our sample introduced a wide variety of strategies to their schools, including new curriculum programs, new assessment tools, new remedial classes and/or curriculum, and new school schedules or organization. As explained in the earlier discussion of participants in decision making, the districts played an active and valuable role in the work of schools. With authority and resources behind them, districts used a variety of approaches to bring new ideas into schools. At times the district introduced a strategy by requiring all schools or schools in a subgroup such as low-performing schools to implement a specific strategy. For example, one district in our study required all of its schools to implement a package of

grade and course make-up programs, a strategy that had not been used in the district's high schools. When districts required all of their schools to implement a strategy, they typically had little discussion with school administrators or teachers about the design of the specific strategy. Districts also offered unsolicited suggestions of what schools could do. For example, several schools in Florida described developing an intensive reading course that targeted ninth-grade students who performed poorly on the eighth-grade assessment. Teachers and administrators in these schools explained that the idea of an intensive reading course came from their districts and was presented as a possibility for their school and others that struggled with weak readers.

In several cases, schools actually solicited information from their districts and turned to their district administrators for help in resolving issues in their school or worked collaboratively with schools. An example of this collaboration was seen in a Florida district that assembled a team of content area specialists to work with each of the schools that the district identified as its greatest need schools. This team met regularly with the administration and members of the departments with which the members shared a specialty, and together they developed a plan for improvement and decided on strategies to address the school's needs. Teachers and administrators in this school explained that the district's team members often presented them with ideas that they would consider and often implement.

Our sample also showed a situation in which the district planted administrative and consultant personnel into a school and charged these individuals with carrying out a specific school improvement plan designed by the district and based on new curriculum standards. In fact, at this school the principal admitted that he was brought into the school

because he was trusted by the district to implement the district's plan, and because he planned to retire he had no need to make friends with the staff. He only aimed to implement the plan. While not common in our sample, this method of "grafting" (Huber, 1995, p 136) individuals with specific skills or ideas often appears in literature on organizational learning.

Professional development by teachers represents one more means through which districts, as regular providers of professional development, brought information into schools, but it also represents an important means through which information from a variety of sources spanned the boundaries of the organization. This chapter emphasizes the importance of teachers' daily decisions for understanding the scope of the efforts being made in schools. The discussion just above reported that teachers based the vast majority of their decisions on their own knowledge and skills or that of their colleagues. Many teachers, however, are continually updating their repertoire of knowledge and skills through regular participation in professional development on a variety of topics. Although teachers who have taken a professional development course on integrating writing in their classes may not immediately introduce new writing assignments, they may do so as the demand to improving reading and writing increases. Professional development serves as an important means through which teachers become exposed to new practices and curriculum.

Teachers in this study described a wide range of professional development topics, with some of the most common including classroom management, test preparation, coping with weak readers, writing across the curriculum, understanding and adopting standards, and curriculum alignment. While professional development on classroom management has been a part of professional

development, topics such as standards alignment as well as reading and writing across curriculum areas represent topics receiving new emphasis in light of state assessments on reading and writing. The one-shot or short series workshop format dominated the type of professional development described by the teachers in our study. However, teachers also described professional learning through communication with teachers outside of their school, independent research, or accessing the Internet.<sup>18</sup> Teachers' own professional development and, because teachers drew heavily from each other, the professional development of their colleagues introduced variation into the existing knowledge and skills of the teaching staff. Although teachers rarely mentioned situations in which they sought professional development in response to a specific immediate concern, they mentioned that they had, at times, drawn from the information they received at prior professional development sessions and, no doubt, received the benefit of their colleagues' professional growth when turning to their colleagues for assistance.

Teacher professional development as pursued in most schools, however, is not the most efficient way to get information into schools, because teacher selectively obtained and retained the information they received through their professional development experiences. The professional development of teachers in our sample was largely teacher-driven and almost completely dependent on the initiative of the teachers. Consequently, the information introduced to teachers was highly

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the Internet was mentioned enough that it may be worth an independent investigation that examines what teachers search for on the Internet, the quality of the materials they receive from the Internet, and how communities of teachers on the Web might influence how we think about teachers' professional community.

unsystematic and varied widely with on the teachers' own initiative, interests, assessment of their professional learning needs, and professional requirements. In addition, because teachers fulfilled an interest or a requirement with their professional development without necessarily identifying a need to update or change their instructional practice, what teachers retained was also highly unreliable. If the teacher finds the content of the workshop compelling enough, she might retain the information but a considerable amount of information is simply lost because the teacher has not found the workshop compelling, or the ideas conveyed are not met with support or follow-up after the workshop.

Another significant means through which information entered the decision-making arena from outside the organization was through the principal. That is, the principal served as the boundary spanner for the organization. Thirteen principals in our sample described their efforts to attend conferences, attend workshops, read trade journals, and/or engage in principal networks intending to learn about new strategies or approaches that could be used in the school. Like the teacher professional development, this form of search had limitations. Principals generally engaged in these activities independently or shared the experiences with only closely situated assistant administrators. This information typically reached teachers only when the principal acted on this information to create school policy. Interestingly, most of the principals who described these independent search efforts were also principals who played dominant decision-making roles according to their schools' respondents.

Other sources of external information entered through external agents working with the school or educational vendors. External assistants worked with schools

through highly formalized relationships with comprehensive school reform agents by one school in Florida or with educational evaluation teams by II/USP schools in California. Schools also worked with external agents informally. Schools in Michigan described receiving information from less formalized relationships with their regional education centers, and one school in California learned about a strategy when a vendor approached the school directly.

When we typically think about individuals searching for solutions, we think about individuals engaging in research efforts, attending trade conferences, or talking with people who are doing different things. However, decision makers bring information into decision situations from sources both close and far. In this discussion we have differentiated between information within the school and outside the school because information from outside the organization has the potential to bring variation to the ideas discussed inside the school. We have explained how information gathered from within the organization might possibly offer variation when these ideas remain latent. While ideas from outside the organization offer great potential for introducing variation, it should be noted that those seeking information are often drawn to familiar and comfortable ideas (Rosenkopf & Almeida, 2003). For example, principals may be drawn to literature or conferences on after-school programs to remediate students instead of new remedial curriculum because they are already familiar with or have already implemented some form of tutoring program in the school. Therefore, external information does not always imply novel information.

This discussion shows that, despite the continued reliance on local information for decisions being made in schools, the bounded rationality model is not purely playing out in the high schools we visited.

The constraints in accessing information are being overcome by active districts and, at times, the initiative of people inside schools. Since the model for search and selection suggests that constrained access to reliable information is a primary reason organizations focus on locally known strategies, the fact that many of the schools in our sample acknowledged a need to meet the state's goals and showed channels of information coming into the schools suggests that they might also be willing at times to select strategies that deviate from the model's second prediction and challenge the technological core of their school. We might expect that the avenues to new ideas would introduce strategies that offered a departure from the technical core of the school and that these ideas would occasionally be incorporated into their change effort.

## **The Selection of Strategies: A Range of Possibilities**

The extent to which strategies deviate from the school's traditional practice shows the potential the reform has to significantly change the educational experience of students in the school. While change is not necessarily good, it is probably fair to suggest that improvement in low-performing schools will be limited unless these schools change the way they work with students. In this chapter we cannot evaluate the impact of changes on student achievement, but we can comment on the extent to which we saw schools making changes to improve student performance. In the discussion above we suggested that the new information may introduce strategies that would change the work of the school. It is important to remember, however, that the model of bounded rationality does not account for the fact that in many schools new information that was used to make decisions was highly

unsystematic, hurried, unfocused, and often pursued by individuals or small groups in the school. These issues, no doubt, lessened the impact information might have in the organization by limiting the scope of individuals processing the new ideas, hindering a clear direction for the information, and relying heavily on the fortunate coincidence of ideas and decision instead of more deliberate efforts to identify a need and seek a solution. These limitations notwithstanding, we found instances in which schools stepped away from the peripheral changes that dominated the reform efforts we saw in our sample. These cases, though not common, are significant in that they show the reform possibilities that can be realized in supported high schools with a motivated staff. In this section, we focus on the extent to which the strategies described by our respondents hold some potential to change the core technology of the school. Because this chapter focuses on instructional change, we define the core technology of the school as the curriculum (what is taught), instructional practice (how curriculum is taught), and organizational structure. In this section we intend to provide a sense of the range seen across schools and within schools. To do so, we focus on four strategy types that together reflect the vast majority of strategies described by respondents in our study: (a) remedial strategies, (b) curriculum strategies, (c) instructional practice, and (d) organizational strategies. Our discussion does not provide a complete breakdown of the strategies used in the schools we visited. A more thorough analysis of the specific approaches used in our sample schools can be found in Harris, Prosky, Bach, Heilig, and Hussar (in this publication). The most important point to take away from this discussion is that, despite theory that suggests that targets drive decision makers to select strategies that aim just to meet the

target, schools across all of our accountability contexts showed a range of responses that go from the “quick fix” or minimal-impact approach, which we call peripheral, to strategies that in modest ways change the educational experience of some students, which we call moderate changes, to more fundamental change in the educational program brought to students, which we consider significant changes to the core.

### ***Remedial Strategies***

The many add-on programs used in schools to remediate students operate on the periphery of the school’s core technology, anchor one end of the continuum of impact on the schools’ core technology, and represent more than half of all the remedial approaches pursued by the schools in our sample. For the most part, these programs did not interrupt the curriculum used by teachers or affect the instructional practice of teachers. These programs include before- or after-school tutoring programs or teachers’ efforts to meet students outside of the regular school day. While these programs generally offered students the opportunity to receive additional instruction from teachers (few schools used outside tutors or peer volunteers), schools usually did not or could not require students to participate in the programs.

Schools also used remedial strategies that involved a new curriculum for the schools’ lowest performing students, and these efforts represent approximately 40% of the remedial strategies in our sample. In these cases, schools created remedial classes for their weakest students. Schools often created these courses for their 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, but in some cases these classes included students through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Schools typically assigned students to these programs on the basis of their test

performance, but some schools used traditional student tracking mechanisms such as teacher evaluation. Schools intended most of the remedial courses recently introduced to provide an additional class for students to take before beginning the high school curriculum. While their impact on the school’s core technology overall was very limited, in these courses students experienced a specialized curriculum. In contrast with the add-on classes, one school in our sample rewrote the regular curriculum for its lowest level 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English class to include a new chronology of information and new information. While still targeting only a set of students, this effort shows an even deeper impact on the core technology for these students. Only three schools in our sample went so far as to completely rethink the educational program they offered to their lower level students.

### ***Curriculum Strategies***

Peripheral strategies predominated the activities described for us, but unlike the remedial approach where we saw few instances of schools moving beyond moderately deep strategies, the focus on standards and standards alignment in the policy seems to have prompted several efforts to create deeper change in the curriculum. Well over half of the curriculum strategies were very peripheral or only moderate changes, which included the many ways teachers added test prep activities to their lessons individually or as part of department and schoolwide efforts, programs that added new advanced courses to the school’s curriculum, and efforts to introduce or expand advanced placement programs. However, almost a third of the strategies related to curriculum provided deeper curriculum change that involved efforts to rewrite curriculum and align the school’s curriculum to the state’s standards.

In some cases, the curriculum revision, initiated at both the school and district levels, resulted in significant changes to the timing and coverage of courses.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the most substantial effort to alter the core technology of a school was one school's decision to adopt an entirely new math curriculum for grades 9–12 based on principles of integrated math, previously not a the central approach used by the school's math department. This change came with not only a new philosophy of teaching math but also new materials, intensive and long-term professional development for teachers, and a battery of benchmark assessments. Students in this school after the implementation of the new curriculum experienced courses that were radically different from their predecessors.

### ***Instructional Practice***

The range of efforts to change instructional practice had individual self-initiated professional development by teachers, which accounted for two thirds of the instructional strategies in our sample, at one end of the spectrum, with schoolwide efforts to educate the entire staff in a specific instructional style on the other end. In between these examples of very peripheral and very substantial change efforts, popular efforts included attempts to provide professional development on teaching to standards as well as incorporating reading strategies and writing

activities schoolwide. Both of these efforts, if enacted, challenge traditional norms of teacher autonomy and norms of differentiation in content, goals, and practices for different subjects. In addition, schools showed concerted efforts to introduce teachers to technology they can use in the classroom as well new approaches to engaging students. To varying degrees we found that these efforts did impact teachers' practice. For example, teachers described changes they made in presenting material to students based on training from a district-sponsored consultant, teachers discussed instruction with literacy coaches, and teachers worked in clusters to jointly plan curriculum and lessons.

### ***Organizational Changes***

Organizational changes that affected the instructional program represent another class of strategies adopted across the schools we visited, though they were by far the least discussed by our respondents. Most of the attempted strategies included schedule changes or minor changes to the school day. The most peripheral changes to organization we found included efforts to build in 15 minutes for silent reading or test prep. Changes to the school day, typically to the block schedule, represented change that had the *potential* to significantly change the way teachers present the curriculum to students. That potential is more likely to be realized if teachers received training for such change and were willing to make the change. As it turned out, the impact of this policy on the core tended to be limited. The institution of a ninth-grade academy represented another popular organizational change made in the schools we visited. The ninth-grade academy shows some effort to change the educational experience for students, but this effort was limited in the total number of students impacted and had relatively modest

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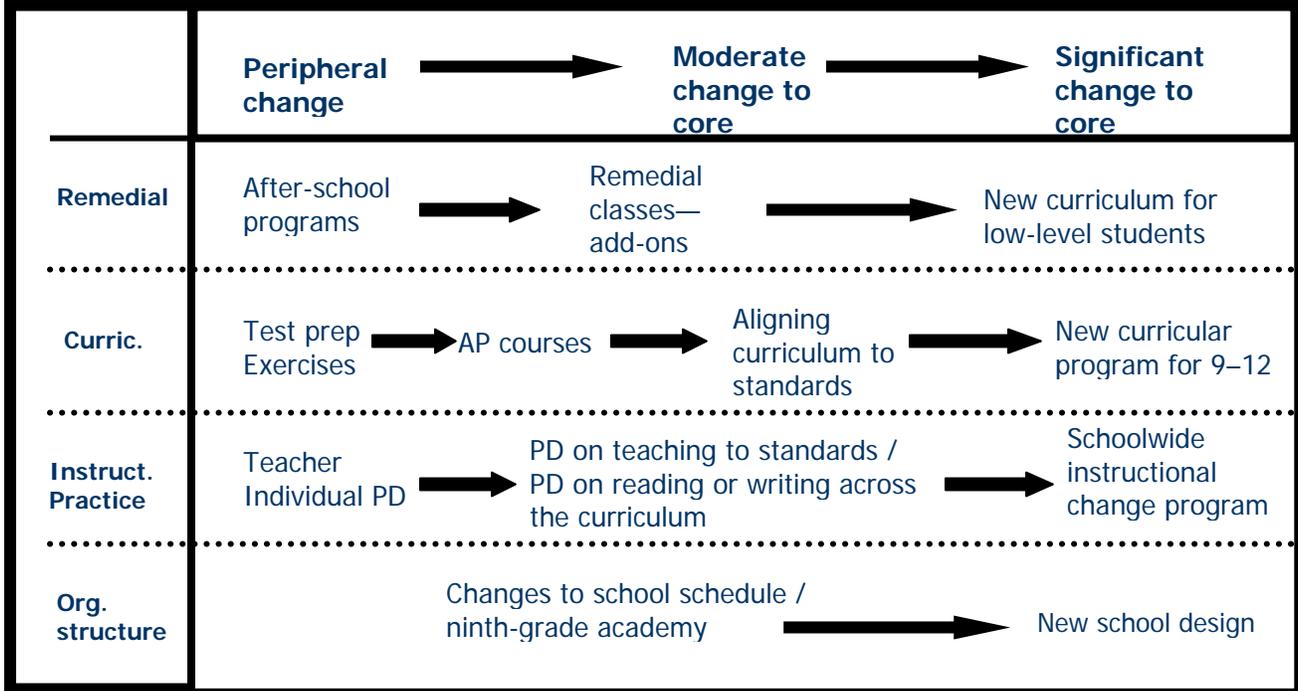
<sup>19</sup> The efforts to rewrite curriculum show one way in which accountability may well have mitigated some of the information constraints faced by schools. Many respondents indicated that the standards to which they aligned their curriculum helped reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding what they should teach. In doing so, standards to some extent reduced the uncertainty associated with teaching and the educational process, which is one of the factors leading to a satisficing response, a response in which the decision making only aims to satisfy the targets.

implications for the instructional program. We did, however, visit a school that used a new organizational structure to support an instructional approach and thus offered an example of an organizational change that challenged the core technology of the school. This school, which had previously operated as a technical high school and had recently become a comprehensive high school with traditional academic disciplines, adopted a schoolwide model that complemented the vocational tracks with a restructuring of the academic program into interdepartmental teams. In addition, the school design introduced a curricular package intended to operate with the interdepartmental and the vocational orientation of the school. Although the design is still being implemented and will likely face some challenges as it rolls out, in many ways this school looked and acted very differently than the traditional high school.

Looking across the schools we see a range of activities that show the need for immediate gains, possibly as a response to the press of accountability, as well as deeper efforts to improve the instructional program for their students. It is interesting to note that we saw this variation within schools as well, indicating that schools realize that they must show gains immediately to avoid the consequences of public reporting and possible sanctions but also realize the need for long-term improvement. Even sites that engaged in the most substantial change efforts described activities expected to achieve immediate gains by targeting low-scoring students with additional assistance and providing all students with test preparation activities while they simultaneously pursued curriculum alignment, writing across the curriculum, new instructional approaches or new organizational structures. A school in Florida provided an example of this blended

approach to meet immediate testing needs by implementing programs to tutor low-performing students after school and new courses for ninth-grade students who scored below grade level in reading and math while simultaneously pursuing longer term improvement with a schoolwide effort to vertically align curriculum to ensure less overlap in course content and establish a track through which more students can reach honors-level courses. Although few schools ventured to the far right of the continuum shown in Figure 2, most of the schools in our sample showed blending of very peripheral strategies with strategies that made moderate changes to the core technology.

**Figure 2. A Continuum of Change**



## Conclusions

The goal of state accountability policy is to capture schools' attention, direct schools' focus, and motivate action. To a large extent our visits to 48 schools shows that the states have, in fact, succeeded in these goals and in so doing have an important presence in the decision making of schools. Though we saw exceptions in each state, teachers and administrators have incorporated the state's goals into their own articulation of goals or sense of accountability. The problems and challenges identified by our respondents clearly reflect their concern over the state's performance goals, and a high share of the problems highlighted by the states accountability reporting and sanctions were addressed in some way by the schools. While we do not have the longitudinal view that would allow us to say whether schools are engaged in more improvement than prior to the

implementation of accountability, teachers and administrators in many of the schools we visited were engaged in efforts to improve student achievement.

The success of these policies, however, also relies on the ability of schools to seek and select appropriate strategies for their schools. Accountability policies, by design, leave most of the decision making regarding reform initiatives to agents in the local schools and districts, who presumably have unique knowledge of their schools' needs and strengths. States, by consequence, had little direct influence over who was making decisions in schools, over how schools organized to select strategies for improvement, or over the information used to make decisions. In the two states that did play a direct role, this support was reserved for a small number of the state's lowest performing schools. As it turns out, in most of our schools the press generated by the state accountability systems seemed to do little to prompt schools toward more

coordinated or systematic decision-making efforts. Few schools engaged in deep needs analysis, few schools described thorough efforts to analyze current or potential programs, and schools did not consistently seek information on strategies or use research-based evidence in support of their decisions, a continuing hope in the Department of Education. In addition, schools only rarely made use of already existing structures to coordinate the search and selection of strategies. Only a few schools discussed the use of schoolwide planning teams for decision making. Departments, despite their importance in organizing teachers, provided the forum for significant decision-making efforts in only a few occasions. By and large, the departmental structure offered individual teachers a professional group within which they engaged in social and professional conversation, but the departmental structure did not represent an organizational form in which information was collected, discussed, and then decided upon. Schools often overcame the burden of seeking strategies by relying heavily on information already known in the school from prior professional development or professional experience and often selected strategies that did not radically change the way they had always worked.

Given this final assumption, it was not surprising to learn that cases showing a high level of sophistication and coordination of the decision process also seemed to be places that had a history of such efforts, described as a “legacy” in one school we visited. We found that districts succeeded in introducing new ideas to schools and helping to facilitate more coordinated and deeper reforms in schools. While the instances in which the districts’ support led to comprehensive change that challenged the technical core of schools were in the minority of cases in our sample, the impact

of districts in these instances was very promising, suggesting that the district may be the most effective support provider to schools that states may want to facilitate. We suggest that states think seriously about how to mobilize districts and facilitate district efforts to assist their schools.

It is important, however, to remember that not all school districts have the resources to be active support providers. Many of the nation’s smallest districts have little more than a superintendent and administrative assistant occupying the district office. In these cases the most logical support structure to assist the schools are the regional educational centers which existed in some form in each of the six states we visited. These centers with pooled resources can serve as clearinghouses for information on new approaches, can coordinate evaluation efforts, and can house coaches and reform facilitators that serve several regional schools. Unfortunately, not all states use these organizations in the effort of schools reform. In a few states these organizations had unclear mandates regarding their role in supporting school reform, and in others the funding for these organizations had been so drastically cut that centers that districts did not financially support had been closed. Therefore, we suggest that states consider these regional centers as potential support structures for school reform in regions with small districts. We suggest that the state reconsider the mission of these centers to focus their resources around school and instructional reform and provide resources to these centers to effectively provide this support.

In this chapter we described the ways in which state accountability policies shaped or did not shape the schools decision making with regard to improving student performance. We learned that that accountability policy has to a large extent shaped the focus of decision making but

“leaving the specifics to the locals” is not ideal when local conditions such as the quantity and quality of information about new strategies and the degree of communication and coordination in schools do not lead to effective decision making. This work certainly identifies weaknesses at the local level that hinder efforts to adopt and implement improvement strategies. However, this work also shows that high schools will make changes to their academic program and practice when the information about strategies is brought to them and they are supported through the change. Accompanying accountability policies with policies to improve information availability as well as mobilizing support structures such as districts or regional centers offers the chance to improve decisions and implementation in schools while remaining faithful to the spirit of outcomes accountability.

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# Chapter 4

## Overview of Actions Taken by High Schools to Improve Instruction

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### Introduction

#### Purpose

Over the course of our fieldwork in 48 high schools, researchers learned about a variety of different strategies utilized with the goal of improving instruction. The objective of this piece is to provide a descriptive overview highlighting actions that high schools were undertaking, framed by the issue of accountability. As stated in chapters 1 and 2, state-level (and in some cases district-level) accountability policies played a major role in the course of actions taken by high schools in their attempts to improve achievement.<sup>20</sup>

This chapter examines strategies for improvement around three key components of accountability systems: (a) standards and content requirements, (b) minimum requirements, and (c) data and assessment. To this end, we have directed the following discussion around three broad categories of strategies: (a) curriculum and instructional strategies to meet standards and content requirements, (b) remedial efforts to meet minimum requirements, and (c) efforts to make use of data and assessments. In each of these sections, we have examined the strategies used, and where available, the major supporters and avenues of support.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The field visits took place during the 2002–2003 school year; therefore, schools were only beginning to feel the pressures of NCLB.

<sup>21</sup> The discussion focuses on the initiatives that were most often cited by school staff in each of the

We also recognize that high schools take on other responsibilities besides fulfilling accountability requirements. To this end, we have also included efforts around college and career preparation, college outreach, and parental involvement. These categories of strategies were commonly mentioned across the schools in our sample.

#### Data Analysis

The analysis for this paper relied on the case studies written by the research teams that visited each school. Researchers wrote detailed summaries based on interview transcripts and school documents for each of the schools and districts in the sample. The authors used the 48 high school case studies to create an Excel database of high school actions. This database contained qualitative information about the activities in which schools were engaged. We then assigned codes to each action to categorize the nature of activities that took place.<sup>22</sup> The discussion here describes actions as reported by school-level staff but does not evaluate the quality of implementation or their effect on student achievement.

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categories. For a more complete list, see the tables at the end.

<sup>22</sup> The following list of codes was applied: curriculum and instruction, remediation, professional development, organizational/structural changes, support, assessment and data, and other. These groups were then integrated for the purpose of this paper.

# **Actions as They Relate to Accountability**

## **Curriculum and Instructional Strategies to Meet Standards and Content Requirements**

Schools were engaged in a variety of actions to help students meet the standards and content requirements of their work. Initially, we tried examining curriculum and instruction as separate categories. However, given the degree of overlap between the two, we decided to combine the areas. This section looks at initiatives in two major subcategories: classroom-based strategies and collaborative efforts among teachers.

### ***Classroom-Based Strategies***

This category is defined as actions employed by school staff members that could potentially change or impact instruction in the classroom. The most prominent strategy that we found across the 48 high schools was the use of the block scheduling. At least a third of the schools in our sample had either a full block schedule in place, a modified block, had gotten rid of the approach, or were in the process of considering its implementation. Block schedules were often used as a way to get students to spend more time on tested subject areas, and used as a component of various reform measures. In some cases, we learned that professional development had been provided to teachers in schools that were adapting this approach.

Another popular category of approaches used by high schools revolved around the use of test preparation. At least four buildings used “writing across the

curriculum” as a way to improve their students’ composition skills in different subject areas for standardized tests. An additional intent of this initiative was to help broaden the responsibility among school faculty for improved student writing, rather than simply letting it rest with the English department. Some high schools made use of online sources for test preparation in math and English skills. Students at one Pennsylvania high school reported using My Access, an online writing tutorial that provided students with immediate feedback on their work, while those at a New York school used practice questions from a program called School Island, which cut across subject areas. One California high school even instituted a zero period test prep class, which was required of all freshmen. Finally, there were various motivational strategies used by schools to help improve test performance. Among these, an urban California high school held schoolwide assemblies to stress the importance of testing, while the principal of Pinewood, a similarly situated school initiated a campaign to improve the building’s Academic Performance Index (API) score. As part of this effort, students designed and posted motivational posters around the school to encourage their classmates to do well on the upcoming tests.

Across the 48 schools, we saw a few examples of whole school reforms. These included America’s Choice, Comer School Development, and High Schools That Work. The introduction of these programs was made possible through the efforts of the buildings’ respective school districts. The approach that we saw most fully implemented was the America’s Choice model at Tech High School in Florida. Curriculum and instructional components of the program included: Ramp Up, a reading program geared toward 9<sup>th</sup>- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students who were 1 to 2 years behind in

reading, the Foundations of Advanced Literacy ELA curriculum, and Foundations of Advanced Mathematics. Organizationally, America's Choice incorporated block scheduling as well as an interdisciplinary team to break up the status quo departmental structure. Although High Schools That Work was designed to be a whole school reform, for one urban Michigan school, this was only one of a slew of initiatives taking place in the building. In practice, this approach existed as a single interdisciplinary team encompassing a handful of teachers, and was introduced to help raise student test scores. Finally, one North Carolina high school was in the beginning stages of implementing the Comer School Development Model, which represented a switch from High Schools That Work. At the time of our data collection, we learned that the school had secured funds for teachers to receive professional development around this program.

Teachers and administrators mentioned various opportunities for professional development that were connected to instructional improvement. Some discussed attending conferences that were offered by the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the College Board. There were also district-sponsored workshops covering topics including Kagan Cooperative Learning and manipulatives in math. One of the most deeply implemented district-supported curricular programs was Core Plus at a suburban high school in Pennsylvania. This program, intended to help increase student achievement in math, involved professional development that was both intensive and embedded.

Researchers asked teachers and administrators about mentoring and

classroom observations as part of the visit protocol. Respondents across all six states reported some type of mentoring for new teachers; however, these did not appear to be particularly consequential. For example, some schools would assign a veteran teacher to mentor a new colleague (sometimes in a different department), and this relationship would involve administrative tasks, rather than meaningful conversations about instruction. There was also little in the way of classroom observations among colleagues taking place, aside from formal evaluations by administrators.

### ***Collaborative Efforts to Improve Curriculum and Instruction***

In addition to the previously described strategies, we found a variety of collaborative efforts to improve curriculum and instruction in high school. These processes, normally undertaken by groups of teachers, were used to coordinate goals and objectives across departments and schools.

School improvement planning was the most prominent collaborative strategy mentioned for improving curriculum and instruction. These planning meetings provided a forum for staff members to formulate goals, such as raising test scores, improving school climate, and collecting data. In Florida, this process was a state requirement for all schools. In other states, this was supported by districts and often used in conjunction with other activities, such as the North Central Association Accreditation Process in Michigan. Although a commonly mentioned approach by school staff, it often seemed to be merely an exercise in paperwork because of lack of collective follow-up.

At least seven of the schools in the study reported that some type of curriculum alignment took place. This was a process by which teachers incorporated the state and,

where applicable, district standards into the curriculum. The degree to which this work took place varied among our sites. Teachers based at high schools in Michigan had access to the online program MI CLiMB (**Clarifying Language in Michigan Benchmarks**). This state-designed program was designed to help teachers align curricular topics to the state benchmarks and link their data to the state curriculum. The two high schools that we visited in Hampton City, an urban Michigan district, used pacing guides, which the district had instituted as part of its curriculum realignment. The purpose of these guides was to ensure that teachers were covering essential areas. An example of curriculum alignment occurring on the school level took place at California's Pinewood High School. At this site, departments devoted much of their collaboration time to revising and aligning their curriculum to state and district standards. Similar to alignment, schools reported engaging in curriculum mapping, whereby teachers worked together in outlining what was going to be taught in each class. This tended to occur in math departments, among teachers who were teaching the same course. At Mission High School, located in an urban Florida district, clusters of math teachers of the same course collaborated on scope and sequence, creating common exams and selecting textbooks. Respondents at a California school reported that a district math consultant visited the math teachers approximately every other month to help map their curriculum. This was a young department which was viewed as having needed the outside assistance.

Other reported collaborative efforts around curriculum and instruction, which helped support accountability systems, were mentioned by respondents in fewer buildings. One of these was actions to establish periodic curriculum cycles in math

and English. One Pennsylvania school district, for example, established a 3-year revision cycle. As part of this initiative, students were given twice-a-semester milestone tests that corresponded to content coverage by quarter. At the time of the field visit, these were being given in the math department and were set to begin for English. Another effort mentioned by some teachers was the existence of district-wide curriculum councils. In a California district, for example, all of the buildings, including the high school, provided representation to their curriculum council. The council served as one of several bodies that provided recommendations to the school board for final approval.

## **Remedial Efforts**

Remediation was a major strategy employed by high schools to bring their students up to the minimum state accountability requirements. The chief methods of remediation we found were through a modified curriculum in regular classes, separate remedial classes, and tutoring.

### ***Modified Curriculum in Regular Classes***

One of the major findings in this study was the focus on reading in high schools. To this end, we learned about several software packages that were used as part of the regular classroom setting to help remediate low-performing students. Two high schools in Pennsylvania, both located in the same urban district, targeted the Academy of Reading program for use with ninth-grade students who needed the extra assistance. The goals of this program included improving students' technical reading and reading comprehension. A district literacy coach was responsible for implementing the

use of this software program throughout the district. Training and technical support for the program was provided by the company Point Click Learn. Another reading program, called Accelerated Reader, was used at Pinewood High School and a building in North Carolina. Through this program, students took a series of tests, using different texts. The results were then used to determine when the student was ready for the next level.

To help support literacy efforts in the classroom, a number of schools brought in literacy coaches to work with teachers and students. Two urban California schools, both located in the same district, had a district-sponsored outside consultant help teachers with reading across content areas. Another California building reportedly formed a reading department to serve this same purpose. Florida's Mission High School and Harbor High School, also located in the same district, received assistance from the district reading coordinator. This individual visited the buildings once a week to meet with teachers, to assist them with use of **CRISS (CR**eating **I**ndependence **T**hrough **S**tudent-**O**wned **S**trategies) strategies and, as needed, to model lessons.

We also learned about a few computerized remedial programs being used in the area of math. By far, the most commonly cited one was Cognitive Tutor, developed by Carnegie Learning. This program provided help to students who had difficulties in traditional math classes, including Algebra I and geometry. The schools utilizing this program were concentrated in New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Where this information was known, it was the district that had brought this program to the schools. Other remedial math programs mentioned by schools included Accelerated Math and I Can Learn.

## ***Separate Remedial Classes***

To help bring students up to the minimal standards, high schools made available a number of remedial options to bring their students up to speed. These included classes in math and reading, plus broader opportunities that targeted low-performing students.

The major concern regarding high school math was the focus on getting students to pass Algebra I. All of the states in the study included algebra as part of their standardized assessments. The most common approach to dealing with this issue was by stretching out a semester's worth of algebra over the course of a school year. Algebra IA and Algebra IB would be completed in 2 years, instead of the traditional single year. At least four of the visited high schools in North Carolina utilized this extended course of study to help students fulfill the state graduation requirement in algebra. In Michigan, the math department at one high school instituted a second-semester repeat algebra class. This appeared to be mandatory for students who had failed the first semester. A final example of changing Algebra I was seen at Oceanside High School in Florida. In this case, the school offered a double-period Algebra IA/IB "combo" class, which targeted at-risk ninth-grade students.

We learned about separate remedial reading classes in high schools, most of which were concentrated in North Carolina. In at least four schools (three of which do not overlap with the schools mentioned in the previous paragraph), targeted students took reading as an elective course in addition to their regular English class. Students were identified for this class on the basis of failing to meet proficiency on the eighth-grade state reading test.

Florida's Oceanside High School was a school that stood out due to the sheer

number of reading classes offered in the building. A total of 60 classes, ranging from the third-grade reading level through 1 year below grade level, were made available for students. Because of the state accountability grade received from Florida, this school received significant assistance from the district office. Apparently, the district applied for a comprehensive school reform (CSR) grant, and had the funds directed to this particular building. Through a collaborative approach with school leadership, it was determined that remedial reading classes should be instituted as a way of alleviating this recognized challenge.

Other schools made use of additional approaches to assist at-risk students. An urban high school, for example, had a program designed for overage ninth graders to receive instructional support on the campus of North Carolina A&T. Students in this programs took classes including Success 101, English, math, history, and science. A Florida building had a program called Leap Forward to help students who had fallen behind make progress toward graduation at an accelerated rate. The school arranged a course schedule that allowed students to make up significant deficiencies in credit requirements. This program allowed students to develop alternative schedules to attend school part-time or earn credits in off-campus courses.

## **Tutoring**

Respondents from just about every school in the study mentioned tutoring as a way of providing extra help for students. This was usually offered to individual students on a voluntary basis after school. In a few cases, students received tutoring from college students at nearby universities, and in other cases, tutoring was made available on Saturdays.

## **Making Use of Data and Assessments**

A final category of actions examined relating to accountability was around the use of data and assessments. We saw few examples of high schools collecting and otherwise employing their data. When asked about this, most teachers and administrators would mention discussing the results of the state assessment at a school or department meeting, but little follow-up beyond that. This section discusses the handful of instances where there seemed to be additional efforts to collect and utilize data to inform instruction. Actions in this category include the use of diagnostic tests, progress assessments, a comprehensive database, an outside vendor program, and on-site personnel.

After years of frustration of having students misplaced in classes (e.g. students receiving credit for Algebra I in middle school without having learned the material), the math department at Mission High School decided to create a diagnostic test. This test targeted all incoming students to ensure that they were appropriately placed. Other schools used diagnostic tests in conjunction with progress assessments to track student achievement. A California high school, for example, used Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) assessments in math, reading, and writing. These were administered to students three times a year (beginning, mid-year, and year-end) to help place students and measure their growth. Another school, located in the same state, administered the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test. Like the NWREL assessments, this one was also given three times a year to gauge student progress. This test targeted incoming ninth-grade students to help place them into appropriate classes.

Faculty at two Michigan high schools, both located in the Hampton City School

District, mentioned the district-created quarterly assessments. These assessments corresponded to the district's pacing guides and were instituted as part of the effort to realign the curriculum across all grade levels. Although the use of the quarterly assessments was mandated by the district, it was up to school-level administrators and department heads to monitor their use. Some teachers did resist using this tool, because they were not sure how these data were going to be used.

An urban Florida district created a comprehensive database containing demographic and student assessment records for all students. Although the goal was to have teachers use these data to make informed decisions about their instruction, teachers at the district's Oceanside High School reported making very minimal use of this information.

There was one suburban California site in the study that discussed using an external vendor for using data. At the urging of the principal and central office, the school used the web-based assessment platform available from Edusoft. This program was used for tracking student performance on the California state standards for three kinds of tests: state exams, district benchmarks, and in-class teacher tests. This was used to help inform instruction and chart students' academic progress.

Some schools had personnel based on-site for the purpose of supporting data use. For example, at a rural California school, one of the educational planning specialists was charged with analyzing data. Florida's Harbor High School had an in-house "test chairperson" who managed and interpreted district and school data. It is noteworthy that for staff working with data, this was only one of many responsibilities on their agenda.

## **Actions Beyond Accountability**

Although we found that most of the actions used by high schools were in response to accountability, it should be stated that schools strived to fulfill additional goals. These included the provision of challenging programs to prepare students for higher education, preparing students for employment after high school graduation, and increasing parental involvement.

## **Magnet Programs**

A few sites we visited had magnet programs located within the high school building. Part of the purpose in devising these programs was to attract high-achieving students from around the school district, with an application process required for entrance. At Mission High School, students could choose from among academies focusing on business and technology, the arts, and liberal arts and sciences. One Michigan high school housed a well-regarded performing arts academy. Finally, Oceanside High had an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which had been in place for several years. We were told that when the program was first introduced, Oceanside was the only school in the district to have it. Over time, however, other schools brought it in, which led to some competition across the district for high-performing students. Some staff members admitted that these students were helping the school to avoid the label for Florida's lowest grade in the state accountability system.

## **Advanced Classes**

Most schools across the six states provided high-achieving students with opportunities to take advanced-level classes. For example, students could dual enroll in courses at local institutions of higher education. There were also Advanced Placement (AP) courses at many sites. Some teachers reported attending AP conferences, which provided information about teaching at this level. Our data collection did not provide detailed information about which subject areas these classes covered or how many students took advantage of them.

## **College Outreach**

We learned about different measures that schools were taking to help direct students, particularly minorities, towards college. An urban New York school ran an initiative called Gateway to Higher Education, which was intended to help prepare high-achieving minority students for college and careers in the sciences. Mission High School held a forum so that students could learn more about college from the alumni of the school. Harbor High School, located in the same Florida district, partnered with several area organizations as part of the ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education) program, a partnership was to increase the number of Latino students graduating from high school and college. Areas of focus included tutoring, test preparation, and mentoring.

## **Career Preparation**

Although they were not a direct focus of our field research, we did learn about some programs that schools had in place for preparing students for future employment. High schools in both Michigan and Florida

allowed students to job shadow professionals in their area of interest. Other schools had variety of vocational education options available to students. At a New York school, for example, students could take classes in areas including architecture, communications, and culinary arts. A North Carolina school had a technology trade program in which students could dual enroll at the local community college while taking technology classes at the high school.

## **Parental Outreach**

A final area that schools discussed beyond accountability was parental outreach. High school tends to be the grade level where parents are the least involved, and schools were trying out different ways to combat this. Two rural North Carolina schools, both located in the same district, had an initiative called Face to Face to encourage communication between teachers and parents. Parents had the opportunity to meet with their children's teachers four times during the academic year. Twice a year, students led these conferences and shared their portfolios with their parents. A California high school initiated a parent institute, which we were told included 300 participating parents during the year prior to the field visit. This 10-week program (parents came once a week for 10 weeks in the morning or the evenings) provided parents with information about different aspects of the high school and the services available for their children. This program was especially relevant for parents from different cultural backgrounds, who may not have been familiar with the United States school system. Another high school in the state had a parent technology training program. This initiative, which reportedly involved over 50 parents, encouraged the use of technology and English language acquisition in the home.

**Table 1. Curriculum and Instructional Strategies to Meet Standards and Content Requirements**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description/Purpose</b>	<b>Web Site</b>
America's Choice	Prepare students for state and local assessments, and for college.	<a href="http://www.ncee.org/acsd/program/high.jsp">http://www.ncee.org/acsd/program/high.jsp</a>
Block Scheduling	Spend more time on tested subject areas for students to learn concepts, minimize disruptions.	
Comer School Development	Connect child development with academic success.	<a href="http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/">http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/</a>
Core Plus Math Curriculum	Curriculum to help students master math standards.	<a href="http://www.wmich.edu/cpmp/">http://www.wmich.edu/cpmp/</a> <a href="http://www.glencoe.com/sec/math/cpmp">http://www.glencoe.com/sec/math/cpmp</a>
CRISS Strategies (CReating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies)	Help teachers develop strategies for improving student learning.	<a href="http://www.projectcriss.com">http://www.projectcriss.com</a>
Curriculum Alignment, Curriculum Mapping	Incorporate standards into the curriculum. Includes class clusters and use of pacing guides.	
Curriculum Cycle	Periodically update the curriculum.	
Department Chair Off-Periods	Develop curriculum and share with the department.	
District-Wide Curriculum Council	Give teachers a voice in shaping the curriculum, working with colleagues in other schools.	
Freshman Academy	Give ninth graders a separate space in the school, more personalized attention.	
High Schools That Work	Increase expectations, prepare students for college and work.	<a href="http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/hstwindex.asp">http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/hstwindex.asp</a>
Literature Circles	Prepare students for state tests by having them read in small groups.	
Math Journal	Help students understand concepts, rather than engage in rote memorization.	
MI CLiMB (Clarifying Language in Michigan Benchmarks)	Help Michigan teachers align curricular topics to state benchmarks.	<a href="http://www.miclimb.net/">http://www.miclimb.net/</a>

**Table 1 (continued). Curriculum and Instructional Strategies to Meet Standards and Content Requirements**

Strategy	Description/Purpose	Web Site
My Access	Writing tutorial that provides immediate feedback to students.	<a href="http://www.vantagelearning.com/">http://www.vantagelearning.com/</a>
National Board of Professional Teaching Standards	Strengthen teaching standards.	<a href="http://www.nbpts.org/">http://www.nbpts.org/</a>
North Central Association Accreditation Process	Help schools meet higher standards.	<a href="http://www.ncacasi.org">http://www.ncacasi.org</a>
School Island	Provide practice test preparation in math, English, science, and social studies.	<a href="http://www.schoolisland.com/review/login.asp">http://www.schoolisland.com/review/login.asp</a>
School Improvement Planning	Give school the opportunity to formulate goals, including raising test scores and improving climate.	
Teaming	Improve teacher collaboration.	
Thinking Maps	Help students answer different kinds of questions, and track their thought process in reading and writing instruction.	<a href="http://www.thinkingmaps.com/">http://www.thinkingmaps.com/</a>
UC-Irvine Collaborative Writing Project	Help teachers improve their writing instruction.	<a href="http://www.gse.uci.edu/uciwp/">http://www.gse.uci.edu/uciwp/</a>
Validated Instructional Practice (VIP)	Program with multiple components, including having teachers follow certain practices in every class and administration of mini-tests.	
Visual, Equation, Solution, Answer the Question (VESA)	Rubric for helping students improve their math skills—along the same lines as writing across the curriculum.	
Writing Across the Curriculum	Improve writing across subject areas.	

**Table 2. Remedial Efforts**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description/Purpose</b>	<b>Web Site</b>
Academy of Reading	Software program to improve reading skills.	<a href="http://www.autoskill.com/products/reading/index.php">http://www.autoskill.com/products/reading/index.php</a>
Academy Programs	Provide extra attention to at-risk ninth-grade students.	
Accelerated Math	Software with individualized lessons to improve math skills.	<a href="http://www.renlearn.com/am/">http://www.renlearn.com/am/</a>
Accelerated Reader	Software to help teachers monitor reading progress.	<a href="http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/default.htm">http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/default.htm</a>
Carnegie Math/Cognitive Tutor	Software with individualized lessons to improve math skills.	<a href="http://www.carnegielearning.com/start.cfm?startpage=products/">http://www.carnegielearning.com/start.cfm?startpage=products/</a>
Compass Learning Software	Software programs providing extra assistance across various subject areas.	<a href="http://www.compasslearning.com/">http://www.compasslearning.com/</a>
Grade Recovery Course	Prevent student dropout by allowing students who failed a marking period to improve their grade to a C by attending after school sessions.	
I CAN Learn (Interactive Computer Aided Natural Learning)	Computer-based program to help students with algebra skills.	<a href="http://www.icanlearn.com/">http://www.icanlearn.com/</a>
Leap Forward Program	Help students who have fallen behind to make progress toward graduation at an accelerated rate.	
Literacy Coaches	Work with teachers and students to bring reading strategies into the classroom.	
Modified Algebra Classes	Includes expanding one semester of algebra into two, double-period algebra, and the use of Integrated Math.	
NCE English	Bring students up to standard in English.	
NovaNET	Courseware to assist struggling students in meeting the standards.	<a href="http://www.pearsondigital.com/novanet/">http://www.pearsondigital.com/novanet/</a>
Read 180	Software to help improve reading skills.	<a href="http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/read180/">http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/read180/</a>
Reading Classes	Stand-alone classes to improve students' reading skills.	
Tutoring	Assist students with their work, normally on a voluntary basis.	

**Table 3. Data and Assessment Actions**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description/Purpose</b>	<b>Web Site</b>
Diagnostic Tests	Help place students in appropriate classes. Examples included the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory assessments, Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test.	<a href="http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/">http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/</a>
Database of Student Information	District-designed system to give teachers access to student background data.	
Edusoft	Web-based platform to help schools track assessment performance.	<a href="http://www.edusoft.com/login.jsp">http://www.edusoft.com/login.jsp</a>
Quarterly Assessments	Track student progress over the course of the school year, make sure teachers are following curriculum.	
School-Based Personnel	Coordinate, analyze, and manage data at the school.	

**Table 4. Actions Beyond Accountability**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description/Purpose</b>	<b>Web Site</b>
African American Student Outreach	Invite African American leaders to encourage students to enroll in more demanding classes.	
AP Classes	Rigorous course for college prep.	<a href="http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/">http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/</a>
College Forum	Alumni visit school to discuss their college experiences with students.	
Dads and Donuts	Increase male parental outreach.	
Dual Enrollment	Provide more options for students.	
ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education) Program	Increase graduation rates among Latino students.	<a href="http://www.wkcf.org/Programming/Overview.aspx?CID=16">http://www.wkcf.org/Programming/Overview.aspx?CID=16</a>
Face to Face	Increase parental involvement through conferences.	
Gateway to Higher Education Program	Prepare high-achieving minority students for science careers.	
Job Shadowing	Allow students to see professionals in their field of interest.	
Magnet Programs	Attract high-achieving students. Programs include academies and the IB program.	<a href="http://www.ibo.org/ibo/index.cfm">http://www.ibo.org/ibo/index.cfm</a>
Parent Connect	Provide parents with greater access to their child's information.	
Parent Institute	Ten-week program for parents to inform them about the high school.	
Parent Technology Training Program	Program to increase parents' computer skills.	
STRIVE Program	Partnership with outside organizations to provide mentoring for students.	
Test Nights	Present parents with information about the state test and encourage them to provide home preparation.	
Vocational Education Opportunities	Give students options to pursue coursework linked to career opportunities.	



# Chapter 5

## Stuck in the Middle With You: District Response to State Accountability

Elliot H. Weinbaum

### Introduction

State-mandated, performance-based accountability systems depend largely on theories of motivation that argue that schools will alter their practices in order to meet carefully defined outcomes that merit reward and recognition. At the very least, proponents argue, schools will aspire to demonstrate achievement in order to avoid increased state intervention, negative publicity, and a loss of professional autonomy. Such accountability systems became extremely popular over the last decade, and while they have undergone some significant changes in terms of the particular aspects of the systems, the overall theory and structure have remained unchanged. Although only a handful of states were using such performance-based systems in the mid-1990s, currently all 50 states have adopted policies that follow the model just described (Goertz, Duffy, & Carlson-LeFloch, 2000).

Analysis of performance data resulting from state assessment systems shows that while many elementary schools have seen significant strides in educational performance over the last decade, high schools continue to lag behind. A combination of increased focus on early education research and resources, smaller gaps to address at those early stages, and the more unified and uniform nature of elementary schools has allowed educators in the early grades to amass gains in

achievement. Some argue that a portion of these gains can be attributed to state accountability systems that have set standards, focused attention, and created incentives for improved performance (Carnoy & Loeb, 2004; Grissmer & Flanagan, 1998). High schools have not experienced the same positive effects. External indicators such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) regularly point to a system that loses ground as students progress in their educational careers. In part, this may be due to the relatively minimal attention that high schools have received until recently from state departments of education and state accountability systems. While there is undoubtedly some merit in postponing accountability for high schools until better-prepared elementary students advance to the high school level, the lack of attention to instruction and outcomes in high schools has stifled improvement.

Regardless of the levels of attention that schools receive or the amount of accountability pressure that they feel, the strides that schools at all levels are able to make are heavily dependent on the resources for improvement that are available to them. School districts, also referred to as local education agencies (LEAs), are frequently cited as the most logical venue for providing assistance to significant numbers of schools. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) seeks to increase the role that districts play in providing assistance and

monitoring performance. However, state accountability policies and the research on those policies have traditionally overlooked the role of school districts. Little research is available about the ways in which districts respond to accountability pressure or, until recently, the strategies that they might use for improvement. Much of the research that does examine the district role in school improvement or reform has focused on the elementary school level. High schools, with their distinct and somewhat autonomous departments, present districts with very different challenges.

Because of the limited investigation that has been done, and the urgent need for high school improvement, I have chosen to focus on the state–district–*high school* relationship. Through case study analyses, I have documented how districts devise different strategies, based in part on the accountability policies in their respective states, to help high schools to meet the challenges posed by state policy. This chapter argues that the district has a vital role to play in building capacity in all schools under accountability pressure. However, the extent to which districts fulfill that role is dependent upon a combination of variables both within the state policy and within the local district context.

In this chapter, I briefly review previous research on districts' function and their role in school improvement. I then describe my research to assess district role in a variety of contexts. I describe particular principles for assessing the quality of district initiatives. My research in 12 districts in two states found that districts could generally be divided into two "types," which I have labeled A and B. Each of these types demonstrates certain behavioral traits that are more likely to lead to improved performance in the state assessment system. Finally, on the basis of this research, I provide policy recommendations to enhance

the role of districts and improve their response to state policy pressures.

Local district context can often be as much a factor in district activity and decision making as the state policy to which local actors are ostensibly responding. It has become common to state that "context matters" (Fuhrman, Clune, & Elmore, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991) to the way in which schools and districts implement policies and practices. The particular elements that comprise the "context" of LEAs are not always particularly clear. In conducting this research, I sought to specify elements of district context that are important in local implementation of state policy. Marsh (2000) has conducted a review of research on district–state relations. On the basis of this review, she identified six contextual factors of districts that may help to explain district response to state policy. The contextual characteristics that she identified are capacity, size, understanding, leadership, organization and governance, and political culture and reform history. Borrowing from Marsh, I use demographics, leadership, organization, and culture and history as contextual variables. Building on Marsh's work and drawing on research by Elmore (2003), I define capacity (one of Marsh's characteristics) to include the knowledge, skills, and resources that exist within the district. Additionally, on the basis of previous research about response to state accountability policy (Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003), I add the history of test performance as an essential element of district context that will impact whether and how a district responds to state policy in general and accountability policies in particular. In the following section, I define each of the characteristics as they were used and analyzed in this research.

## District Characteristics

- *Demographics* (including district size). Community and student demographics have frequently been found to impact the ability and willingness of schools and school districts to engage in ambitious reform (Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 1998; Thernstrom, 1991). Similarly, research has found demographic issues to influence student performance (Fetler, 1989; Howley & Bickel, 2000; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). This becomes particularly important when discussing accountability systems, because the extent of state–district interaction that occurs within the framework of the state system is frequently based on school and district performance. Additionally, one of the demographic features that have a bearing on the district’s ability to respond to the pressure it faces is the size of a district, both the number and size of schools as well as the number of central office staff. While most agree that size impacts district function, researchers differ on whether bigger or smaller districts are better for schools.
- *Leadership*. Leadership that is focused on well-defined, instruction-related issues over an extended period of time is most likely to succeed with implementation of policy and improvement in the district. Research describes the way in which school leaders who take the “opportunity” that accountability pressure can provide and use it to restructure existing leadership norms can demonstrate significant success in changing system behavior in instructionally effective ways (Lemons, Luschei, & Siskin, 2003). While educational research has recently taken a more favorable view of “distributed leadership” in which power, authority,

and responsibility do not reside in a single individual but are encouraged at a number of levels of the organization (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), this chapter does not regard distributed leadership as an empirical benefit but assesses the style of leadership and its match with district activities.

- *Organization*. The organization of the district needs to support both the model of leadership and the goals being pursued. Frequently, a lack of communication between units of the district is responsible for incoherent improvement efforts. Occasionally because of historical causes, cultural habits, or resource constraints, within-district segmentation is a challenge for central offices engaged in system-wide improvement.
- *Culture and history*. This characteristic attempts to capture the turmoil of local politics and historical divisions at the district level. Historical events that can impact district culture and approaches to reform include previous experiences with change, the alignment between the demands of state policy and the stance of the local district with regard to those demands, and the culture of the local community.
- *Knowledge, skills, and resources*. As described previously, accountability response depends heavily on the marshalling and manipulation of knowledge, skills, and resources by agents to accomplish the tasks required of them. This means that an essential characteristic impacting district response is the degree to which knowledge, skills, and resources that can support that task exist in a district. In their discussion of

human, social, and physical capacity, Spillane and Thompson (1997) describe the ways in which the knowledge and skills of individuals within the system and the resources devoted to materials, personnel, and facilities play a key role in determining the ability of districts to respond to policy demands.

- *Performance.* In an accountability system, school and district performance determines state action, which influences districts' incentives to respond. As a result, it is extremely important to understand a district's previous performance history in order to have an understanding of particular aspects of state policy with which the district may be engaged or have some experience.

Districts or central offices are very much caught between the demands of state policy and the constraints and/or supports of local context. Districts with struggling high schools must respond in some way to the state policy in order to avoid sanction. However, districts are only willing or able to do so given the characteristics (as defined in the preceding) of the districts themselves. Assessing the simultaneous impacts of both policy and context is a challenge. The research community has relatively little understanding of the ways in which state-level, performance-based accountability systems and local school districts interact given various contexts. In no small part, this is due to the fact that many of the state accountability systems focus on schools and students rather than districts. As a result, much of the research has looked at the school level, and not investigated the ways in which such policies influence districts. In addition, the task of analyzing the broad contexts of districts, as opposed to a single school, is daunting.

## Research Questions

With these relevant challenges in mind, I have developed several research questions to guide my study of these issues. The research questions I sought to answer are the following: Is there evidence that state accountability policies lead districts to engage in practices that are likely to result in instructional improvement at the high school level? If so, how? Do the type of state accountability policy and/or the particular characteristics of the districts significantly influence the district role in instructional improvement in high schools? These questions seek to assess whether districts are responding to state pressure in ways that are targeted at and likely to improve high school instruction and student performance. If such a response exists at the district level, I am interested in learning which levers at the state level and context variables at the local level combine to produce such a response. Additionally, I am studying whether the particular policy design choices that states make are likely to have a significant impact on the role of the central office.

The literature that informed my thinking about these issues and the design of this study is composed of three parts: research on accountability, district role, and high school response. The general theory of action that supports the "new" educational accountability identifies student achievement as the primary goal of schooling and the focus of measurement and oversight. Achievement is measured by standardized assessments, and performance data is provided to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the community. Stakes are attached to performance on these assessments, and the combination of information and stakes is used to motivate agents. The theory posits that agents in the system (most frequently teachers and students) will then work harder

(or smarter) in the areas the state has designated as important. Staff will either put previously acquired skills to better use or will seek to acquire the knowledge and skills that they feel will allow them to achieve the designated goals (Fuhrman, 2004). This means that the goals, standards, assessment mechanisms, data sources, stakes, and potential support all play a vital role in the ways in which this theory of action is enacted in the ongoing work of schools and school districts.

Using this understanding of the current educational accountability models, I based my analysis of two state accountability systems on the work of Adams and Kirst (1999). The framework they offer describes performance-based accountability systems in terms of principal-agent theory. It asks questions about six elements of accountability policies: Who is identified as the agent? How is action authorized? How is agents' productivity managed? How are accounts defined? How is compliance promoted? And how does the principal (the state in this case) ensure causal responsibility? This framework permitted me to examine the allocation of authority, standards at the high school level, assessments being used in the states, targets that schools and districts have to reach, incentives used to encourage actors to meet those targets, and the provision of resources by the state in order to help schools and districts reach their targets. Accountability policies that follow this design are rooted in the ideas of standards-based reform and systemic school reform as described by Smith and O'Day (1991). They are meant to align standards and assessments to focus students, teachers, schools, and districts on particular contents and competencies that, at least in this case, are of particular concern to state policymakers.

The question of what role the district generally plays in moderating the influence

of state policies at the school level is somewhat open for debate. Some researchers have claimed that districts are barriers to the type of school improvement that accountability advocates envision, arguing that districts' incentive and organizational structures impede such sustained and meaningful reform (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Finn (1991) has argued that state-level accountability policies which possess the elements that Adams and Kirst (1999) identify obviate the need for school districts. That is, once the state sets standards and assessments (and perhaps provides resources for schools to get assistance), districts become an unnecessary governmental entity, not necessarily obstructionist, but certainly not possessing any significant utility. This proposition assumes that state policy is a "zero-sum" game in which the growing state role takes over the district role. In fact, this image is repudiated by research that shows that districts have played a significant role in a variety of state reform efforts (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). District roles in the face of increasingly active state policymaking have ranged from emphasizing particular pieces of state policies in order to further local goals (Firestone, 1989) to building on to the policy to increase its significance at the local level (Goertz, Massell, & Chun, 1998). Spillane (1996) has discussed how policy from a higher level of government frequently creates more policy at lower levels. This chapter sheds light on the extent to which the increase in local policy and activity is true in a variety of districts.

Given the potentially broad range of district action that is possible in light of previous research, it is necessary to more clearly identify what I mean by "district response" to state accountability policy. In this area, my thinking was informed by research on districts that has regularly identified four particular areas related to

instructional improvement in which districts have tended to be active (Massell, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Those four areas are curriculum and instruction, professional development, data use, and resource allocation. As a result, my research focused on district strategies that related directly to any or all of these four functions. These four areas comprise the core functions that are theorized to lead to improvement of instruction and student performance. Key to their potential is the extent to which these functions are aligned and focused on a particular goal or set of goals. While later in this chapter I describe particular principles for assessing the quality of district initiatives in these areas, included among these principles is the degree to which functions in each area have the potential to support activities in the other areas.

It is my hope that this research will contribute to our understanding of districts and their functions in several ways. First of all, much of the research on districts has studied districts that are, for some reason, “outliers.” Many recent studies of school districts have focused on those districts that are deemed to be particularly successful or engaged in unique and innovative practices. Researchers have based their identification of such districts on unexpectedly high student performance outcomes, or on the reputation of districts among researchers and practitioners (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). In either case, these “outlier” districts do not represent the bulk of school districts that are struggling with student performance and do not catch the eye or interest of well-known researchers and practitioners. This research attempts to rectify this knowledge gap by focusing on districts that have at least one high school that is performing below average on the state assessment, that have not, at the district

level, demonstrated any dramatic performance gains (or losses) in the recent past, and that would be expected to be among those districts for which accountability pressure would be a particularly salient feature of their functional environment because of the presence of one or more low-performing high schools. The districts and individual high schools included in this study have been relatively flat in terms of performance on the standardized state exams.

This research is also different from much of the previous research on school districts because it limits its focus to the work that central offices are doing with high schools. Much of the research that has been done on school districts, including much of that being built upon here, has examined how central offices interact with elementary schools. Until recently, that is where much of the districts’, and researchers’, attention has been focused. The limited attention that most districts have given to high school improvement, the significant difficulties of demonstrating improvement, and the increased pressure related to high school improvement make them a particularly rich area on which to focus district research. High schools have not demonstrated the achievement growth that has been seen at the lower levels of the K–12 system (Haycock & Huang, 2001; Olson, 2001). In part, this is due to the emphasis of lower grades within many accountability systems. Siskin (2003) has identified seven potential reasons why high schools pose more challenging contexts for change and improvement than do lower grades. Among the reasons Siskin cites is the fact that high schools are being asked to do something entirely new—have all students study and master a common set of standards in order to graduate. Additionally, she points out that high schools vary tremendously in terms of size, organization, performance, and

capacity. These differences, frequently within a single district, make designing improvement strategies particularly difficult. Such challenges were considered in studying the strategies that districts were using to stimulate high school improvement. Additionally, by limiting research about the effects of state accountability policies to the high school level, particular differences between state systems may become more stark. While all states are testing regularly in the elementary schools, the range of approaches to high school standards, assessments, and stakes is significantly broader.

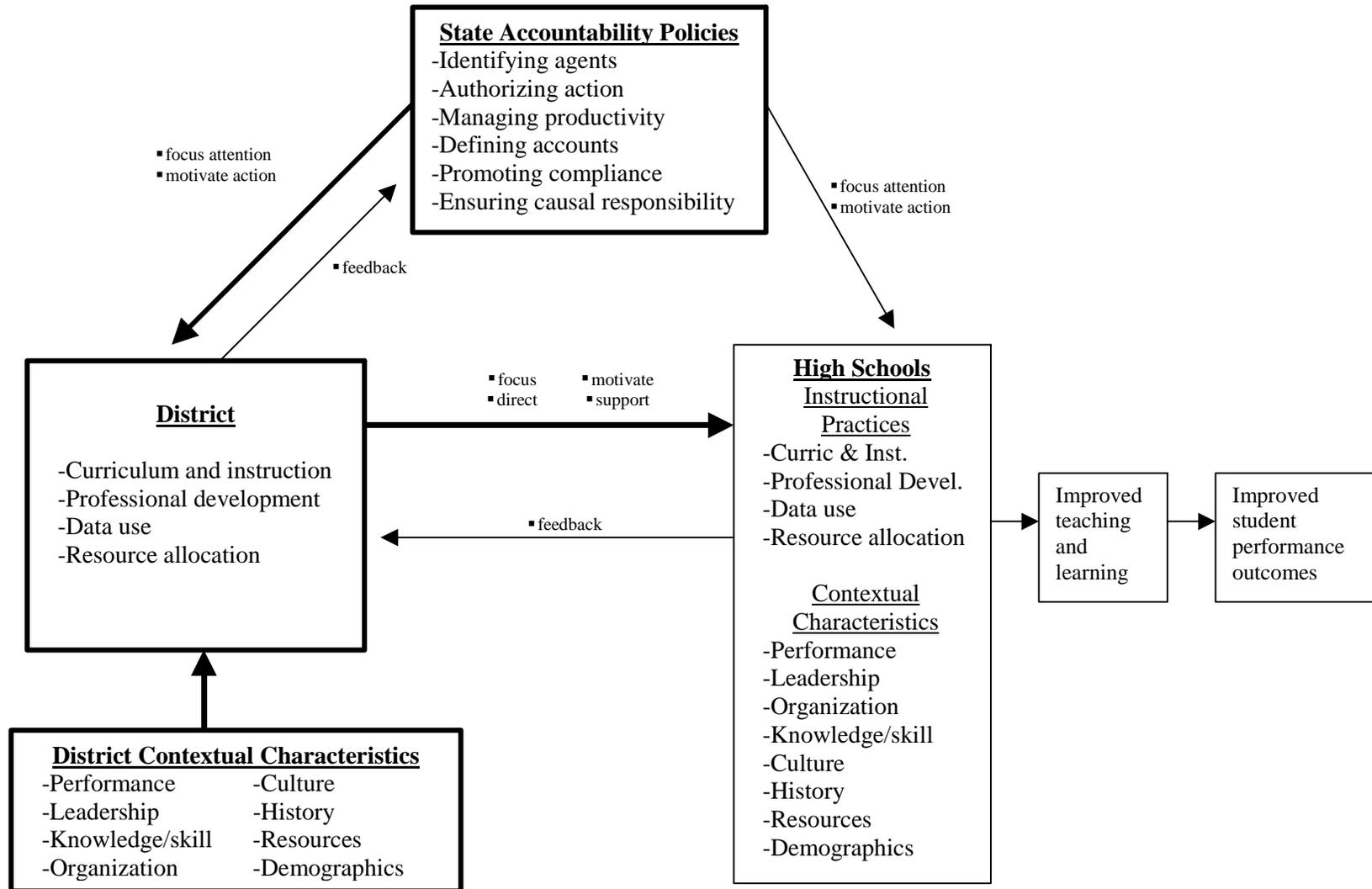
Additionally, much of the research on districts has examined *one* district function. Such studies include examinations of curriculum implementation, or professional development strategies, or data use. The research presented in this chapter looks across all four functions, with the conviction that the four functions are highly interrelated. A comprehensive study of districts' strategies and responses requires an examination of the ways in which various strategies are aligned with one another and support a common goal. Finally, that research that does look at district behavior rarely considers in a detailed way the demands and impact of state policy. This study is focusing on those policies and the impact that they have on school district function.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In considering the issues that I have mentioned and the previous research on district function, I have designed a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) which takes the state accountability policy as its starting point. Using the elements identified by Adams and Kirst (1999) to analyze state policy, I assess the mechanisms of influence that the policy uses to focus district

attention. Additionally, I discuss district contextual characteristics and the ways in which they may serve to constrain or support district improvement. Both visually and metaphorically speaking, the district is “stuck in the middle” between these two sets of potentially competing, potentially complementary, legal and environmental demands and conditions. The ways in which districts deal with these messages from both sides and how the stimuli impact the practices that the districts select in carrying out improvement through the four functions identified earlier (curriculum and instruction, professional development, data use, and resource allocation) compose the bulk of this research. How are the district strategies serving to focus and motivate and build capacity for improvement at the high school level given their “middle” position? This map and my areas of focus attempt to capture the design of the state policy, the impact of that design on district practice, the meaning of district context for district behavior, and the overall approach that districts use in working with high schools to produce improved performance.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Map**



## Research Design

Because this research takes the state policy as its primary point of comparison, I began my research with two states—North Carolina and Pennsylvania—that have accountability policies that contrast on a number of levels. (These were two of the six states included in the larger CPRE study, the data from which are reviewed in this publication.) Typically, North Carolina and Pennsylvania are generally thought to be “strong” and “weak” accountability states respectively. They lie at opposite ends of an accountability scale developed by Carnoy and Loeb (2004) that assesses the presence of particular elements such as school sanctions and rewards, high school level assessments, and high school exit exams. However, these states also differ in many of the ways in which they address the elements of the state accountability system identified by Adams and Kirst (1999).

The two states identify different agents, the entities that are ultimately responsible for the changes that the state policy demands. North Carolina has identified schools as the level for change. As agents, *schools* receive sanctions and rewards as the agents. Pennsylvania has chosen to place responsibility for curriculum coverage, alignment, and improvement with *districts*, and sanctions *districts* for underperformance. Though data in Pennsylvania are publicly reported at the individual school level, and receives considerable attention from school and community, the state is holding the district responsible for improvement and has intervened in a number of school districts where more than half of the students are performing at a “Below Basic” level (the lowest of the state’s four performance categories).

There is also a great difference in the ways in which the states authorize action

and define accounts. North Carolina has standard courses of study for 11 courses at the high school level as well as end-of-course (EOC) exams to assess performance in each of these courses. Pennsylvania has one set of standards for high school students, to be met by the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and tests at that point to assess student mastery of these standards. (At the time of data collection for this research, standards had only been disseminated in math and language arts. Since then, additional curricular areas have been addressed.) These different standards and assessment strategies provide schools and districts with very different amounts and kinds of data. North Carolina’s data become available much more quickly following the end of a large number of courses, while Pennsylvania’s single high school assessment provides data (about high school students) that are generally not received by schools until the tested students are at the start of their 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the states.

In spite of the differences discussed earlier, there are similarities between the two state systems that are nearly universal in the United States. Both of the state systems are performance-based. They use changes in student performance on standardized measures as evidence of improved practice at the school level. These state systems are not seeking to monitor teacher practice or build capacity on any wide scale. They are focused entirely on outcomes. Related to this, both of these state systems, like most others, have been largely negligent in the area of ensuring causal responsibility.

**Table 1. Contrasting State Accountability Systems**

	North Carolina	Pennsylvania
<b>Identifying agents</b>	Schools	Districts
<b>Authorizing action</b>	Course-level goals	One set of high-school-level standards
<b>Managing agents' productivity</b>	Performance-based	Performance-based
<b>Defining accounts</b>	Detailed, frequent	General, one-time only in high school
<b>Promoting compliance</b>	School-level sanctions and rewards	District-level sanctions, school-level rewards
<b>Ensuring causal responsibility</b>	Minimal	Minimal

It is perhaps a conscious decision on the part of states to make clear the limited state involvement and to assure that districts and schools are responsible for increased achievement. However, there is little reason to assume that all schools or districts possess the capacity to engender the improvement in instruction that will be necessary to achieve the required targets. According to the theoretical functioning of these systems, such an assurance should be required before holding individuals or organizations accountable for their performance. Yet no state has developed the ability and resources to ensure such capacity at the local level. This is particularly true at the high school level, where continued debates about standards, the subject-specific nature of teacher expertise, and the lack of basic research about effective practices at the high school level make effective improvement strategies complex.

To look at the range of district responses resulting from the policy choices of these two states, I used interview and document analysis. The data and analysis used in this chapter are a bit deeper than in some other chapters in this publication. By

limiting my focus to only two states (out of six in the larger study), I was able to collect additional data during an iterative interview process and to engage in several rounds of analysis. Because accountability policy aims at eliciting individual responses, qualitative research is an appropriate method to assess those individualized situations and to look at practices that might be most appropriate in particular contexts. Analysis of this type of data can help to explain why appropriate or desired changes are, or are not, taking place. The data sources that were used for this research include interviews at the district and school level. Interviews were conducted during the 2002–2003 school year. One interview was done in each district prior to a site visit, and a complete set of interviews was done during a site visit using set protocols. The individual respondents that I selected at the central offices and the high schools were teachers and administrators in charge of the four functions that are at the heart of this work – curriculum and instruction, professional development, data use, and resource allocation. In addition to the staff members at the central office, I spoke to a sample of math and English

teachers and department chairs in each high school. Table 2 summarizes my sampling choices.

Less formal follow-up interviews with particular district and school staff members were conducted where needed during the process of data analysis. I also collected and analyzed a set of documents, including state legislation about the policy, public information, surveys and self-studies conducted by the districts, and local and state reports related to achievement, demographics, and funding.

Six districts in each of the two states were included in this study. After a preliminary analysis of data from all 12 districts, I selected four districts (two in each state) to study in depth. My selection was based on the districts' large size, providing at least the potential for regular interaction and intervention with the high school. I also sought demographic variation. In each state, one of the districts is wealthier, whiter, and more suburban, while the other is more urban, more heavily composed of students of color, and less wealthy. My sample was also purposive. It was selected after a preliminary review of data from six districts in each of the two states. I sought to represent the wide range of variation in response as we saw it within each state. In each of the districts, I collected data at the lowest performing high schools (where the district had more than one high school). This

was done under the theory that if the state accountability pressure were causing the districts to respond by creating or implementing high school improvement strategies, district leaders would most likely target assistance toward the schools that are having the greatest difficulty demonstrating achievement within the state assessment system. Collection of data at the school level also provided a way to corroborate or triangulate data provided by central office respondents. Findings, however, are based on all 12 districts. From these, I chose exemplar cases to make the evidence most clear.

I analyzed interview data using ATLAS.ti qualitative research software. Interviews were fully transcribed and the software allowed me to go through at least three rounds of coding for analysis. I relied on at least three types of coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Beginning with open coding, I was able to begin to label various phenomena in each of the districts. While I focused on the district functions and contexts that I had previously identified on the basis of research, this open coding does not preclude the identification and labeling of previously unconsidered action. For me, open codes consisted of broad categories like "professional development," "data use," "history," and "policy knowledge."

**Table 2. Sampling Choices**

<b>Districts</b> (4 in-depth, 12 total)	<b>High Schools</b> (5 in-depth, 12 total)	<b>Individuals (63)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• large size</li> <li>• demographic variation</li> <li>• representative variation in response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lowest performing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• administrators, math and ELA teachers</li> <li>• central offices (25)</li> <li>• high schools (38)</li> </ul>

During this process, I simultaneously began to consider patterns that exist and to look for commonalities and differences within and between the cases. Axial coding, which involved not only the district and school interviews but the state and district documents as well, helped me to identify potential interactions. It was through the use of axial coding that theory began to emerge about the particular interactions occurring between states and districts. Axial coding included both potential causative relationships like “response to state” or “superintendent goal,” as well as assessments of action like “targeted,” “high quality,” and “passive.” Finally, using selective coding, I produced the narrative account that allowed me to generate case studies of each district as well as to begin to understand the influence that state accountability policies are having on school districts in both states. This final stage of coding was done by identifying particularly important relationships and quotations that could provide evidence supporting my findings.

Once case studies were generated for each of the four districts, I looked across the four areas of district function and attempted to describe and assess the manner in which district functions are being introduced, shared, and supported. I have created five continua to capture this approach. Within each range, the first descriptor represents behavior more likely to result in improvements in performance at the high school level that are aligned with the demands of the state accountability system. The latter descriptor represents a less strategic approach by the districts to high school improvement. These continua are based on a theory of systemic reform that demands a coordinated and active response to shifts in the policy environment (Smith & O’Day, 1991).

- *Interventionist to noninterventionist.* Interventionist central offices staff are a regular presence in the high schools in the districts. They are very “hands-on” with regard to the operation of high schools, using school staff to support centrally defined programs and goals. A noninterventionist central office may possess expertise equal to its interventionist counterpart but may function much more as a support provider, offering assistance only when requested by school personnel.
- *Active to passive.* Central offices classified as active are regularly attempting to identify both challenges and solutions for their high schools. They are engaged in meaningful searches in advance of school requests. An active district is not necessarily interventionist. For example, a district that is active in a particular area may offer a host of carefully selected professional development programs, though it may not require anyone in particular to attend. In this way, the district can be actively working to help high schools but noninterventionist in its approach. Districts may be active or passive in one particular functional area, or all four.
- *Differentiated to uniform/generic assistance.* The approach that a district takes with regard to a high school may be extremely individualized in seeking to meet the unique needs of a particular school. This implies that the central office has developed a unique understanding of each school and has developed a plan to improve the school. In contrast, a district may have a more uniform approach to school improvement and will seek to meet needs that the central office has

identified as being universal. In an optimal case where central office assistance is differentiated, it may be differentiated by high school performance level or by grade level. It may be differentiated within a particular function (for example, the district may provide professional development in each school though the various approaches may be very different) or across functions (meaning that the functions in which the district is active with regard to each school may be very different).

- *Prescriptive to nonprescriptive.* Within any of the functions identified earlier, the district may be extremely prescriptive in the changes or initiatives that schools are to undertake, meaning that they determine the improvement approach for the schools. On the other end, the district may determine the need for improvement in an area, but may then offer schools a range of options or allow them to seek out their own remedies. While I have placed the prescriptive identifier at the improved end of the continuum, there is considerable debate about the appropriate locus of decision making. However, because I have targeted schools with some history of low performance in this research, it is likely that school leaders do not possess the capacity needed to improve performance (if they did, their schools would not be low-performing). For this reason, the

locus of decision making should, at least temporarily, be removed from the school itself.

- *Coherent to unaligned.* This continuum cuts across the areas of district function to describe how well the set of improvement efforts in a district is arranged with regard to a coordinated focus for teachers. It refers to the ways in which the district-initiated improvement efforts in the four areas work together to create a coherent system that is arranged around a clear set of goals and priorities.

Describing district approaches along these dimensions will serve to paint a fuller picture of the role the district is playing. I created this system of research-based qualities in order to describe and analyze the approach to high school improvement that districts are pursuing. In order to categorize districts efficiently in subsequent discussion, I refer to those districts with behaviors that represent the improved end of the spectra described (that is, interventionist, active, differentiated, prescriptive, and coherent) as “Type A” districts. Those districts whose behaviors are closer to the unimproved end of the spectra (noninterventionist, passive, uniform, nonprescriptive, unaligned) are labeled “Type B” districts. It was the case that districts tended to fall into one category or the other, as shown in Table 3. For example, districts were unlikely to be on one end of certain spectra while on other end of other spectra.

**Table 3. District Types and Descriptors**

Type A School District	Type B School District
Interventionist	Noninterventionist
Active	Passive
Differentiated	Generic
Prescriptive	Nonprescriptive
Coherent	Unaligned

However, it is theoretically possible that Type A districts were prescribing and supporting high school interventions that were not likely to lead to improvements in student performance. Optimally, districts would engage in high-quality initiatives in each of the four functional areas while selecting and supporting them in ways represented by the improved ends of the continua.

In order to assess the quality of the initiatives (as opposed to the general approaches described by Type A or B) of the districts' actions, I compared the particular content of the districts' responses to "best practice" in each of these areas as they have been widely endorsed by prominent scholars. Relying on a range of research in the areas of professional development, data use, and resource allocation, I was able to make judgments about the quality of the practices that districts were using or encouraging their high schools to use. I did not develop a continuum on the fourth function studied, curriculum and instruction, because it lacks professional consistency on what qualifies as improved practice. The debates about the merits of direct instruction versus constructivist or discovery learning approaches are just one example of the diversity of professional opinions that exist. Such an inconclusive environment prevents me from evaluating the curriculum and instruction choices made by a school

district. Table 4 provides an example of the quality measures that were used and the ratings given to two sample districts, one of each "type." (The ratings of the sample districts here were based on an analysis of the programs in place in each of the districts.)

**Table 4. Qualities of District Response**

Principles of successful professional development <sup>a</sup>	Type A	Type B
Content focuses on what students are to learn and on addressing different challenges students may have	Moderate	Weak
Based on analyses of differences between performance and goals	Strong	Weak
Involves teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and the development of learning experiences	Moderate	Moderate
Primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching	Moderate	Weak
Organized around collaborative problem solving	Weak	Weak
Continuous and ongoing, involving follow-up support and external sources	Strong	Weak
Incorporates evaluation of multiple outcome measures	Strong	Weak
Includes an opportunity to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the skills	Weak	Weak
Connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improving student learning	Strong	Weak

Principles of effective data use <sup>b</sup>	Type A	Type B
Focus attention on performance indicators directly relevant to teaching and learning	Strong	Moderate
Motivate staff to attend to relevant data	Moderate	Moderate
Develop knowledge of school staff about how to use data to take action	Moderate	Weak
Use data in order to make decisions about resource allocation	Strong	Weak
Use individual level student data to better meet student needs	Strong	Moderate
Generate additional data as needed to improve program and practices	Moderate	Moderate

Principles of effective resource allocation <sup>c</sup>	Type A	Type B
Reduction of specialized programs	Moderate	Weak
More flexible student grouping	Moderate	Moderate
Structures to support more personal relationships	Moderate	Weak
Longer and more varied blocks of instructional time	Moderate	Moderate
More common planning time	Moderate	Weak
Increased support for curriculum review and improvement	Strong	Weak
Support for high-quality professional development opportunities	Strong	Weak
Resources for improved data analysis and use	Strong	Weak

<sup>a</sup>These principles are drawn from the work of the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (2002). <sup>b</sup>These principles are a combination of concepts described in an article written by Jennifer O’Day (2002) and ideas emerging from the data. <sup>c</sup>These principles were identified on the basis of the work of Miles & Darling-Hammond (1997).

## Findings

As is evident from Table 4, Type A districts tended to employ practices that were supported by research, while Type B districts were much less invested in research-based practice. In many ways, this is encouraging news. Districts that were more highly involved in their high schools were promoting good practice, while those that were more passive had a less well-designed set of improvement strategies.

Among the six districts in North Carolina, there was an even split between Type A and Type B districts. In Pennsylvania, there were four Type A districts and two Type B districts. Though districts had been selected because of the presence of a low-performing high school, district behaviors or potential for improvement were not factors in the original selection. With such a small sample size, it is not appropriate to make universal judgments about the proportion of districts

of each type in each of the states. However, two points should be made. First, despite Pennsylvania's less well-developed accountability system, there was a greater number of Type A districts in that state than in North Carolina. For reasons that will be discussed, while the numbers of districts of each type in each state were similar, the patterns in district response were much more clear in North Carolina than in Pennsylvania, where district response tended to be less predictable and more idiosyncratic. Second, this study included only those districts with high schools that are struggling. It is quite possible that if the sample were more random, and included districts with more well-performing high schools, the proportion of Type A districts might in fact be significantly greater.

## **Type A Districts**

One of the most salient characteristics of Type A districts was that respondents described making a change in district practice in response to state pressure. There was evidence that the district had changed as a result of state policy initiatives. Though I was dependent upon the retrospective view of respondents for measurement of change over time, there were some very telling statements by district leaders that gave insight into the question of whether districts had changed their approaches since the introduction of state accountability systems for high schools. One central office administrator said in a North Carolina Type A district said:

*I guess a lot of my role has changed from just when I first got the job it was, OK, does everybody have that they need? And we'll provide some staff development every year too. I've had to be the change agent to push them to get things going. I've had principals that frankly have been*

*in position so long that everything status quo is fine with these folks, I've had to drag them along.*

It is evident that there has been change in the district and that much of it is emanating from the central office. Similarly, when asked how practices in his district had changed since the introduction of the latest version of the state accountability system, a superintendent in one of the Type A districts in Pennsylvania said:

*I'm much more autocratic. I did all the site-based and all the team and we all hugged each other and everybody was happy and the scores were going down, literally through the basement. . . . Now, I will entertain any idea if they've done a review of literature, come with a proposal, show me the accountability, show me the benchmarks. So from that sense I think I've become less tolerant.*

Type A district leaders clearly had approaches that had been affected by state policy.

In Type A districts, central office staff is very *interventionist*. It is clear from the previous quotation that district staff is involved in the selection of strategies at the school sites. Staff from Type A districts are out in the schools, working in a very hands-on way with schools, not waiting for school staff to come to them with questions or problems. They are actively looking to identify problems in schools, as well as actively looking for solutions. District administrators in Type A districts were frequently visiting classrooms and actively engaged in examining performance data in order to help teachers and administrators in their high schools to identify challenges and select resources. The searches that they led often represented the more in-depth and successful strategies as represented by

Gross, Kirst, Holland, & Luschei (in this publication).

These districts also have a *differentiated* approach to their work with high schools. They are getting to know each individual high school (where there is more than one) well enough to be able to assess strengths and weaknesses. The districts select strategies needed for improvement in particular schools. For example, in one Type A district in North Carolina, the central office had done an assessment and identified the challenge in one of its high schools as being an issue of teacher skill. In another high school in that same district, teachers demonstrated sufficient teaching skill on the individual level but the school lacked any sense of community or collaboration, in part because of a lack of leadership at the building level. These two “diagnoses” required and received very different remedies, ranging from professional development in the former to a change of leadership in the latter. While districts maintain a differentiated approach to working with high schools, it is not a site-based approach to differentiation.

Once Type A districts have done an assessment and diagnosed a problem, they tend to be rather *prescriptive*. They direct their high schools to implement certain practices, and monitor the implementation of those practices. In some cases, the high school staffs felt that they had made the selection of a certain practice. In conversation with district leaders however, it became evident that high schools were in fact presented with some very limited choices, all of which the central office had already approved.

Finally, Type A districts possess a *coherent* strategy for improvement of student performance. They are aligning their practices and goals around a target. Most commonly that target is improved student performance on the state assessment. The

districts have adopted that as their goal, occasionally going beyond the state target, and are working to align a range of practices that they believe will lead to improvement. These behaviors differed in the two states in accordance with the design of the state assessment system. However, regardless of the state, Type A districts are doing assessments of instruction, measurements of learning and improvement, and making decisions about what is working and what is not. In Type B districts, much of this responsibility stays at the high school level.

## **Type B Districts**

Type B districts represent a very different approach. These central offices are much more *passive*. They view themselves as one of a variety of external resources available to schools. They wait for schools to ask for help, and then are available as a resource. In contrast to the Type A districts, they have not changed practice as a result of the demands of state accountability. The superintendent in one North Carolina Type B district said, “When I look back at the big picture of what we do and how we do it, I think we operate somewhat similar to the way we have been operating for the last 10 years.” Given the fact that the North Carolina state accountability systems at the high school level only began 6 years prior to my data collection, it is clear that there has been a minimum of improvement-oriented response in this district and those like them. In Pennsylvania, where the state accountability policy for high schools has been in place for a shorter time than in North Carolina, a superintendent in a Type B district said that he could not point to any changes that had been made in district practice in the last 3 to 5 years. Given that the current state accountability system had only been in place for 3 years at the time of data collection, it became clear that this

district had continued to function relatively unchanged in spite of the change to state policy. Neither district was alone in their respective states in terms of their static practice.

When Type B districts do act, they tend to adopt programs without clear matches to school needs and rarely follow up to see that the programs are being implemented as planned. They frequently do not have a clear goal around which they are aligning efforts. While Type A districts most frequently cited improvement in test performance as their central goal, Type B districts cited everything from character development to technology enhancement to improvement in state test performance. This wide range of goals caused effort to be refracted in a number of directions.

Districts in both North Carolina and Pennsylvania tended to fall into the typologies represented here by Type A and Type B. Their overall approaches to high school improvement, and the quality of the strategies that they were using tended to be very similar, in accordance with the group into which they fell (Type A or B). However, districts in the two states tended to focus on slightly different areas of activity. In Pennsylvania, Type A districts were frequently focusing on things like creating explicit grade and course level standards. They were just beginning to think about grade-level articulation and pacing guides to help teachers move through the district curriculum at a speed that would allow coverage of all of the standards. Pennsylvania Type A districts were heavily focused on introducing teachers to the state standards and reinforcing the connections between standards, curriculum, and assessments. In North Carolina, this was not necessary, as state-defined course level standards and pacing guides are an accepted part of teaching in most school districts. Instead, districts in North Carolina were

analyzing the more frequent, detailed, and course-specific data that the state system there provides and were trying to take action related to that data. So, while districts broadly fell into the Type A and B categories, the particular improvement strategies that they were using varied widely.

## Analysis

While the district types in both states were similar, across the six districts in each state it was much easier in North Carolina than in Pennsylvania to predict from district characteristics which districts would behave in a Type A or B fashion. In North Carolina, the determination could be made from the confluence of three factors: previous performance, central office size, and leadership. Those districts that had particularly low-performing high schools were more likely to behave in a Type A manner. This makes sense given that the lowest performing schools are most in danger of state intervention. However, in order to respond in the way described previously, central offices had to have sufficient numbers of staff to work with high schools on an ongoing basis. In a district that did have one very low-performing high school, the small size of the central office made it impossible for staff to work with the high schools on a regular and interventionist basis. In North Carolina, Type A districts tended to have an average of more than twice as many professional staff leaders at the district level in comparison with Type B districts (29 in Type A districts versus 13 in Type B districts). Finally, in each of the Type A districts there were one to three key leaders who strongly believed that it is the role of the central office to direct schools and not simply to serve as an additional resource. This team of leaders had a very clear and uniform approach and set of

strategies that they were pushing high schools to use. It is perhaps somewhat counterintuitive that districts with the lowest performing high schools had the most promising practices. The fact is that in most cases, the overall district approaches and particular strategies in the Type A districts were relatively recent innovations. We do not yet have sufficient time to measure the impact of their instructional improvement efforts on student performance.

In Pennsylvania, it was not possible to predict from a particular set of district characteristics which districts were likely to be behaving in a Type A or B fashion. As in North Carolina, issues of staff size, previous performance, and district leadership were certainly important. However, they were not as determinant in Pennsylvania as they were in North Carolina. While in North Carolina all of the Type A districts had certain contextual characteristics in common, this was not the case in Pennsylvania. Type A districts in Pennsylvania were both large and small and had high schools that ranged widely in terms of achievement. Response in Pennsylvania districts, it seems, depended to a much greater extent on the individual entrepreneurship of local actors. In Pennsylvania districts, the primary determinant was the presence of what has been called a “dominant coalition” (Firestone, 1989). In Type A districts in Pennsylvania, changes were dependent on a group of individuals (most frequently district and high school administrators) who decided to make use of the state system in order to push forward an improvement agenda that would support both the state system as well as their own goals.

The differences between district response patterns raise the question of why response in North Carolina was so much more predictable on the basis of certain contextual characteristics, than was response in Pennsylvania. In North Carolina, it

appears that those districts that contained a high school that was a potential target of sanction under the state accountability system were very likely to respond, provided they possessed the staff capacity to do so in an effective manner. In Pennsylvania, even those districts with high schools that were performing at very low levels did not necessarily feel the same pressure to devise a strong response or improvement plan pegged to the state system. Later, I will discuss some reasons why districts reacted or failed to react.

Analysis of the data made clear five policy factors that differ under these two systems and help to explain the different response patterns in the two states. In addition to the conscious policy choices described by the Adams and Kirst (1999) framework, the reasons for the contrast between the states cut across the six elements of accountability policies described earlier (identifying agents, managing productivity, defining accounts, etc.). These policy features affect the way in which the overall message as well as particular pieces of information impact districts. These characteristics of state policy design and implementation that impact district response patterns are what I label the “Five C’s.” While the stakes associated with the state accountability systems were considered in the sampling frame for the overall study, the characteristics identified in the following are independent of the level of stakes, but rather describe policy design using a different frame.

## **Five C’s**

### ***Consistency***

North Carolina’s system is internally consistent. Schools are treated as agents throughout. They are subject to all of the requirements, rewards, and sanctions that

the state has to offer. They are also the targets of change. The state wants the learning process in the schools to change in order to align with state standards. In this system, all of the mechanisms in the system are focused on the unit that is expected to change. In Pennsylvania, districts are agents for setting local standards, accounting for performance, and being sanctioned. But schools are agents when it comes to receiving rewards and are the most frequent subjects of public performance reports. The state has designated districts as the primary agents but is also looking for change at the school level. Thus, it has designed a system that presses for action at one level in the hopes that it will influence practice at another level. The state accounts for performance not at the level of the primary agent, but at a subordinate level. There is an inconsistency in the logic of the system. It is not surprising then, that a more consistent system, like the one in North Carolina, would have more consistent responses at all levels of the system.

### **Credibility**

North Carolina has accrued a much greater degree of credibility for its goals and standards than has Pennsylvania. The vast majority of people with whom we spoke in North Carolina felt that the standard courses of study included information that students completing a particular course should master. The goal of proficiency in a course, as demonstrated by the EOC exams, seemed to matter to all staff. In Pennsylvania, it was much more common to hear school and district staffs question both the origins and importance of particular state standards as well as the reliability and validity of the test being used to measure mastery of those standards. The system used to both authorize action and define accounts lacked legitimacy in the eyes of many respondents.

Additionally, respondents in North Carolina were more likely to agree that the required assessments were reasonable for all high school students. In Pennsylvania, some respondents questioned the need for all students to meet certain standards. This was particularly true in math, where the necessity of high levels of math skills was questioned. As a result of this, school staffs were more amenable in North Carolina to learning from their districts about how to help students to excel on state exams. In this situation, performance becomes a (nearly) universally valued outcome, making it easier for intermediary organizations to assist with its attainment. In Pennsylvania, school and district staffs were less likely to embrace the state standards and testing, adding another layer of resistance to change.

### **Chronology**

It is very likely that part of North Carolina's credibility has been achieved simply with the passage of time. In North Carolina, the state accountability system had been in place without any obvious significant changes for 6 years at the time of my visits. In Pennsylvania, the state policy had been in place for just 2 years, and during that 2-year period had seen changes regarding the highly visible question of placing endorsements based on test performance on student diplomas. District leaders in North Carolina expressed familiarity with the state accountability system and confidence that it would not be eliminated. In contrast, many teachers and leaders in Pennsylvania did not feel certain that the state accountability system would last through the new governor's administration. The different impact that these two attitudes have on organizational behavior at the district level cannot be underestimated. Though there is no real way for the state to address this at the outset, it

does speak to the need for states to commit to a system over the long term, rather than continuously making changes that may undermine agent confidence.

### ***Comprehensiveness***

An accountability system that provides a full set of standards at the high school level as well as data in sufficient depth and detail to assess the attainment of those standards is much more likely to have a systematic effect on districts than is a system that is weak in both of these areas. Data about performance is the essential tool of the accountability system. It must be tightly linked to, and aid in the instruction of, clear standards. Without rich standards and data from the state, districts in Pennsylvania that want to focus high schools on making instructional change must first set the standards and create the measures. The process of clarifying standards and creating (or choosing) appropriate assessments is a lengthy one that not only consumes significant time and resources, but further confuses the role of district as principal or agent within the system. The variation that occurs when the content and progression of courses is left at the local level makes it more difficult for groups of districts to collaborate with each other and with outside entities on improving both instruction and data analysis. Leaders in Type A districts in North Carolina were much more likely to report collaborating with other districts, regional consortia, or even the state, because all units of the system shares clear, statewide goals. Accountability is all about setting clear goals and having a clear idea about how the agents are progressing toward these goals. Without such clarity, there is more “noise” in the system that can allow districts to become distracted and consumed with actions that will not necessarily lead toward mastery of state goals.

Consider the Type A districts discussed in this chapter. One in North Carolina is much more focused on getting all students to proficient levels on the EOC exams. It is the guiding mission for the district and provides their activities with a coherence they might otherwise lack. Another in Pennsylvania, while also Type A and working to improve high schools, is creating particular course sequences for each of its high schools, manipulating programs to attract certain groups of students, and preparing teachers with good instructional practice. They are just beginning to consider making curriculum consistent across the district and linking it to standards. The comprehensive nature of the system in North Carolina means that those districts that are predisposed to intervene in high schools (due to their size and capacity, risk of being sanctioned, and leadership) will be more likely to act in a way that is directly aligned with the state system. In Pennsylvania, districts that may possess similar characteristics may act in a variety of ways that may or may not be aligned with the state system.

### ***Comprehensibility***

This characteristic attempts to describe how well district (and to a lesser extent, school) staffs understand all of the aspects of the state system that may impact them. Respondents in North Carolina had clearer understanding of the state’s accountability system than did respondents in Pennsylvania. While respondents in both states were not entirely clear on how certain algorithms related to annual growth are calculated, North Carolinians overall were much more aware of the categories that their high schools fell in and what would be required to receive a performance bonus. They were also more familiar with the consequences of failure, namely the

presence of state assistance teams. Pennsylvanians expressed confusion about how performance bonuses were decided, shared a wealth of rumors about how state standards were set, and did not seem clear on what state intervention might mean should it occur. This confusion extended to student-level stakes as well. Several staff members told me that they were not certain what role the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) played in high school graduation.

Because the theory of accountability is at its heart an effort to motivate agents to comply with the demands of principals, it is extremely important that agents understand both the demands as well as the consequences of success or failure in meeting those demands. One of the reasons for greater predictability about the impact of the policy on school districts in North Carolina is the more uniform level of

understanding about the policy among district and school staffs across the state. In Pennsylvania, where the understanding of the system was much more variable, and poorer overall, it is more difficult to predict how districts must react. One Pennsylvania district, for example, has had what might be considered a “North-Carolina-like” response to the state policy. It also has a superintendent with an administrative connection to the state board of education and has a very rich understanding of state policy. He has shared that information with a set of colleagues with whom he has worked for a number of years. Without such a complete picture, we may not have seen the same response. Another Pennsylvania district, with larger percentages of students in the lowest performing category on the PSSA, has not demonstrated such a coherent or interventionist approach.

**Table 5. Review of Distinguishing Policy Features**

	North Carolina	Pennsylvania
<b>Consistency</b>	Schools get sanctions and rewards	Districts get sanctions, schools get rewards
<b>Credibility</b>	Standards and assessments are reasonable	Tainted by politics, of questionable validity and utility for all
<b>Chronology</b>	In place since 1996, stable	In place since 2000, with changes
<b>Comprehensiveness</b>	11 course standards and assessments	One set of standards, one assessment
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	Provides growth and status categories	Provides only overall averages

## Discussion

I want to be clear that all districts, in both states, were responding to the state accountability system to some degree. They were aware of the state standards and were making some effort, be it ever so modest in some cases, to align curriculum with standards and to provide at least some professional development related to the standards. However, as discussed previously, in Type A districts, response was generally aligned with professional opinion about instructional improvement. These districts were using approaches that were closer to what scholars indicate is “best practice.” Type B districts, in addition to being less active and interventionist, were employing practices that were less supportable with existing scholarship. It became clear that the match between state policy and district context was particularly salient in making a district Type A or Type B. State policies only “spoke to” or were being “heard by” certain subsets of districts, generally those that I have classified as Type A. Some districts were not able to respond (e.g., too small or lacking leadership), while others did not feel that the policy affected them (e.g., performing close to average).

For Type A districts, the theory of action that supports performance-based accountability was working. The policy spoke to districts and the districts had the ability to act in ways that would lead to improvement in areas that the state was measuring. It is perhaps more important to ask why some districts were *not* responding to the state accountability system, despite the presence of at least one high school that was performing below the state average. There are two possible explanations for this. It is possible that there was something lacking in the policy design that did not consider local contextual factors. For example, if the low-performing high schools

in a district were closer to the state average, the district was less likely to be proactively engaging its high schools in improvement efforts. Or if districts were very small, they frequently did not possess the capacity to engage in the sorts of high school capacity building that larger districts were able to do. Alternatively, the policy design did not convey to these districts the press or direction that designers may have hoped. The reasons for this had to do with the Five C’s. Features of policy design and implementation combined to send mixed or unclear messages to actors at the district level.

It appears that where state accountability policy does meet the five criteria discussed previously, it is possible for policy to influence a distinct and predictable subset of districts. On the basis of the sample of six districts examined in this study, this is the case in North Carolina. Given particular district contextual factors (size, performance, leadership), it is relatively easy to predict whether a district will be Type A or Type B. Where the policy is not clear, response is much more dependent on local factors. Such a situation creates the kind of unpredictable and idiosyncratic variation that we saw in Pennsylvania. However, as we saw, this did not lead to an absence of supportive and proactive districts. In fact, in this small sample, Pennsylvania had a slightly higher proportion of such districts than did North Carolina. However, the focus of this research is the consistency with which districts can be moved to Type A behavior. There is no doubt that the policy in North Carolina moves districts in a more predictable and systematic way than does the policy in Pennsylvania.

The challenge that this research poses for policymakers who wish to create successful *and* predictable patterns of response is at least twofold. First, policy

created with attention to the Five C's will be more likely to send a clear message to a distinct group of local actors and to elicit a response. However, as we saw in North Carolina, even a well-constructed policy does not provoke action by all of the school districts that need improvement. This raises the issue of whether one can construct a policy that is both clear enough and broad enough to turn Type B districts into Type A districts. Such a policy would need to address both motivation issues—in order to get the attention of more districts, rather than be ignored as it was in many Type B districts—as well as local context and capacity issues. Some districts could not respond to state policy because they lacked sufficient staff or leaders who knew about appropriate improvement strategies. Without outside assistance, these districts cannot become Type A's regardless of the how much they might want to, on the basis of the motivation the state policy provides. Accountability policies may not be sufficient to address all of the needs of a Type B district, but other state programs should consider these issues if the state is seeking to maximize the benefit to be gained from local school districts.

them from doing so. These are the context issues at the district level that will need policy attention and support if districts are to be a viable resource in encouraging and helping high schools to improve.

## **Future Research**

This research was based on a relatively small sample of districts, six in each of two states. It found relatively similar proportions of Type A and Type B districts in each state. It would be worth expanding the sample sizes to see if the proportions remain similar. Also as part of this expansion, it would be possible to see if the predicting factors in North Carolina remain the same and whether any patterns in district response in Pennsylvania become apparent. This work would help to elucidate some of the key contextual factors that are either allowing districts to become Type A or are preventing

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# CHAPTER 6

## Summary

Margaret E. Goertz and Diane Massell

### Introduction

American public education faces increasing pressure to carry out its mission of preparing youths with the skills to compete in today's global economy and to participate constructively in a democratic society. As part of this pressure, policymakers have developed increasingly sophisticated accountability and support systems in efforts to steer schools towards improved performance. These "new accountability" approaches emphasize student performance over system inputs, focus on schools rather than school districts as units of improvement, and use public reporting of student outcomes and rewards and sanctions as ways to motivate schools to alter their curriculum and instructional practices (Fuhrman, 1999). These strategies embody two key assumptions: (a) that accountability systems can be made powerful enough to influence the behavior of schools and (b) that schools have or will develop the capacity to identify, select, and implement policies and practices that will improve their performance.

State and national assessment results show that many elementary schools have grown in educational performance over the last decade. Some researchers have argued that a portion of these gains can be attributed to state accountability systems that have set standards, focused attention, and created

incentives for improved performance (Carnoy & Loeb, 2004; Grissmer & Flanagan, 1998; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; Hanushek & Raymond, 2002). High schools, however, have not experienced the same positive effects, and we know little about how high schools respond to external accountability pressures. The preceding chapters provided insight into how teachers and administrators in American public high schools are influenced by and attempt to address the problems posed by the new accountability. Our analysis of 48 high schools in six states builds upon earlier studies with smaller and less representative samples of secondary schools, sometimes agreeing with and sometimes challenging their conclusions about accountability. In this final chapter, we review several of our key points, and discuss their implications for policymakers.

### Accountability—A Stimulus for Action

This first phase of our study confirmed the point made by others that state accountability systems can focus educators on reform, and motivate them to address content standards and measured student performance. State accountability policies clearly shaped the goals and many of the challenges that high school staff identified, and influenced the actions that they undertook. To be sure, educators had

goals and initiatives not related to accountability. For instance, teachers and administrators were concerned about keeping students in school through graduation, student success in postsecondary education, student motivation and social/emotional needs, and academics beyond those measured by state tests. But schools, departments, or individual teachers also adopted a plethora of accountability-related initiatives, from voluntary tutoring sessions or test preparation activities to more comprehensive overhauls of curriculum and instruction.

In general, we found greater levels of response in California, Florida, New York, and North Carolina, states whose strong accountability systems had major consequences for both students and high schools. Intriguingly, however, we also found substantial responses from many high schools in Pennsylvania and some in Michigan, although these states had no sanctions for poorly performing students or schools at the time of our study. Indeed, state accountability drew attention even when educators were not held directly responsible for student performance. For instance, although high school teachers did not think their job was at risk if students earned poor test results, professional pride and concern about their students, their administrators, and/or the reputation of their school motivated many to address aspects of accountability.

Furthermore, we were also surprised to discover high levels of response even when educators expressed strong criticisms of their state accountability systems, a finding which in some ways contradicts previous implementation literatures. Educators in many of our schools questioned the operational and technical aspects of their state's testing

and accountability programs, such as the infrequency of test results, late reporting, the way progress was measured, whether expectations for students were reasonable, and the like. They also worried about negative impacts of the system on students' motivation to stay in school, staff morale, and the high school curriculum. For instance, a number of educators feared that the focus on state accountability had narrowed the curricula that they could offer, and poorly served students whose interests were traditionally accommodated by high school programs that helped keep them interested in school. In addition to concerns that vocational, arts, and other kinds of coursework were being squeezed by the new accountability programs, some educators worried that tests had narrowed the content of English and mathematics courses, rigidified instructional routines, and reduced the academic experiences for low-performing students. A recent article about a persistently failing high school in California observed that low-performing students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade were placed in intensive basic skills classes, leaving them little time to pursue other academic subjects like science or social studies. This strategy, prescribed by a state intervention team, is similar to that being implemented in about two dozen other California high schools that have failed to meet achievement goals (Munzo, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite these fears and problems, the pressures thrust upon high schools by the accountability system generated concerted action. Staff in two of the Michigan schools that expressed the most criticism of testing and accountability were, in fact, more active than staff in the other schools we studied there. Part of the explanation lies in our

parallel finding that educators across the states had come to accept the fundamental premise of standards, and saw the aim of common, strong academic goals as compatible with good educational practice. They also had come to accept the idea of performance-based accountability. We heard praise for common measures to calibrate teachers' expectations, and educators agreed that the public should hold students and educators to account for meeting certain outcomes. In addition, many believed that, at least in one form or another, these public policy objectives were here to stay. In the end, pressure and acceptance of the intent of reform contributed to a substantial amount of response across the six states in our study.

Yet while we found a substantial amount of accountability-related action across the states, it is also crucial to recognize marked variations in both the *level* and the *nature* of schools' responses within any particular state.

## Level of Response

While we found a generally higher level of response in high-stakes systems, consequences were not sufficient in and of themselves to motivate action consistently across districts or schools. Even the lowest performing schools in these states sometimes felt little press, and reacted only minimally. We also encountered both strong and weak responses among high schools with different performance records in the low-stakes accountability systems of Pennsylvania and Michigan. Our analysis found that an extremely important factor in whether or not high schools were active was whether they were located in a district that took a

strong stand on accountability, mandating or in other ways encouraging their schools to act on its behalf. While a few schools still resisted these pressures, district advocacy was crucial across all of our sample states.

## Nature of Response

Level of response does not reveal anything about the nature or quality of the actions that high schools selected, or whether the efforts were likely to have significant effects on teaching and learning. While we did not observe instruction or attempt to evaluate implementation in any way, we analyzed whether the adopted initiatives intended to change teaching and curriculum, and whether they were designed to reach a broad or narrow group of students, under the assumption that efforts targeted on teaching and curriculum for broader groups of students would hold greater potential for improvement.

A majority of the accountability-related actions undertaken in these high schools, in fact, did target changes in curriculum and instruction, such as aligning the curriculum to state standards or adding new basic skills and advanced academic courses. Efforts to improve students' ability to read appeared across the majority of our schools. Of course, reading is prerequisite for high school academic courses, and reading problems are highlighted by state tests, even in fields like mathematics. Action in this realm ranged from special reading courses or remedial reading programs to the creation of a reading department in one California high school. Another major area of activity was remediation efforts like tutoring and test preparation. Finally, schools adopted many

organizational changes, such as block scheduling and daily, sustained silent reading time.

However, the reported actions ranged from “quick fixes” that were marginal to classroom practice and of limited impact, to more fundamental efforts to improve the core technology of what is taught in schools and how for a broad group of students. For example, before- or after-school tutoring programs did not challenge regular instructional practice, and typically were not required for students. The ubiquitous test preparation activities usually did not make major changes in curriculum or instruction; test prep was often portrayed as an insert into regular lessons. Teachers typically selected their own professional development activities, driven by their own particular interests or perceptions of need rather than by any common, schoolwide goals or vision of instruction. Similarly, organizational changes like sustained silent reading time were peripheral to regular instruction. Some schools adopted block scheduling in an effort to change teachers’ instructional practices, but others used it to find time for additional services, like counseling.

These kinds of incremental or marginal efforts stand in stark contrast to the more comprehensive initiatives we found in some high schools. For example, one school rewrote the regular curriculum for its lowest level 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English class. Deeper curriculum changes could also be seen in some efforts to rewrite and align curricula to state standards, and to alter the pacing and coverage of courses. One school adopted an entirely new integrated math curriculum for grades 9–12. In the organizational realm, one of our schools adopted a comprehensive school reform

model with organizational changes intended to complement new instructional strategies. Ninth-grade academies or teams were introduced in some schools in an effort to improve the academic and social experiences for this segment of the high school population. Unfortunately, however, we found that these more far-reaching change initiatives were rare occurrences; incremental and marginal efforts dominated how high schools addressed the problems they faced.

So, if accountability design alone is not sufficient to drive consistent, comprehensive action across high schools, we must ask: What is the mix of factors that leads them to respond with more promising actions? A partial answer lies in how schools did or did not organize themselves to search for improvement ideas.

## Searching for Solutions

We found that the search and decision-making process in a majority of our sample of high schools was often haphazard and left up to individual teachers acting on their own initiative—in other words, not well organized. This finding ran contrary to our expectations; the literature on high schools engaged in reform suggests that departments play a major role in the school improvement process (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Little, 1995). This was clearly not the case in most of our high schools. While departments sometimes played a vital role in the social and professional lives of teachers, administrators rarely distributed decision-making authority to their departments, and teachers rarely

described their departments as the locus of power in their schools. Teachers in many schools reported meeting infrequently or on an “as needed” basis. Rather than providing a forum for collective decision making about instruction and instructional change, most department meetings focused on administrative matters and the distribution of information about school and district policies and professional development opportunities. Similarly, while many of the schools in our study created schoolwide committees to develop state-mandated school improvement plans or to conduct needs analysis and planning as part of the accreditation process, these committees rarely played a major role in school decision-making and improvement processes.

By and large, teachers in these high schools decided independently whether to make changes in their practice, curriculum, and materials. When teachers acted on their own, however, they tended to meet accountability demands with basic test prep strategies. In a few cases, groups of teachers, such as those who taught Algebra 1 or ninth-grade English, worked together to align their materials and instruction with state standards and assessments and/or with each other. But most often, a teacher’s actions impacted only her classroom and, at times, only individual students. These individual decisions, while significant and at times constituting the major improvement efforts being made in a school, did not add up to a schoolwide reform effort.

In addition to the individualistic nature of decision making, questions arose about whether teachers had the capacity to develop an effective response to the external demands of

accountability, and whether schools addressed these issues. For example, teachers and administrators in 28 of our schools identified teacher skill or commitment as problem. High school teachers’ ability to develop students’ reading skills was of particular concern, given that many students entered the ninth grade with an elementary-level reading ability and were expected to perform at high levels on state exams. High school teachers typically are not trained to teach basic reading skills, and this may explain why several high schools created separate remedial reading classes for students.

But while a majority of our schools recognized these problems, only 10 described any schoolwide or departmental effort to address them. For instance, in many schools, administrators’ management of instruction was quite distant. While some instructional concerns received a lot of attention, such as student course failure rates in schools with severe dropout problems, veteran teachers said that administrators rarely interacted with them about their practice. In addition, most department chairs felt powerless to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, or were uncomfortable critiquing their peers and trying to exert an influence. Classroom teachers did share ideas with their colleagues, activities that were often facilitated by physical proximity in the school building or by a common lunch period (rather than department meetings). But it was extremely rare to find high school teachers visiting each other’s classrooms or modeling instruction.

Accountability policies theorize that once schools have identified their needs, they will organize themselves to search for new strategies to improve student

performance. Since current accountability expectations challenge the traditional missions of the comprehensive high school and their expectations for students (Siskin, 2004), we anticipated that staff would seek information from outsiders who could share new strategies for meeting these targets. We found, however, that while the press from state accountability focused schools on student achievement, it did not lead them to look beyond schoolhouse doors for information. Rather, teachers drew heavily on their own experience or the experience of their colleagues to solve a problem. Schools and teachers faced both external and internal barriers to access information. Teachers in rural areas did not have physical access to professional development opportunities outside their district. Teachers and principals reported that time constraints and tight budgets limited their ability to attend conferences and workshops. And many teachers and administrators did not seem aware that they should, or could, look beyond themselves or their colleagues for help. In some cases, educators did not know other ways to search for new information.

Another premise of the new accountability, that schools would use data to guide change, often did not materialize. We found some consistent use of data, particularly in North Carolina, where the assessments directly linked to high school course content and results were returned to teachers in a very timely fashion. But in other states, like Michigan, some teachers had never even seen their students' test results. The lack of data use we found in many states stemmed in part from the infrequency of tests at the high school level—state tests were administered once per year, and

often only once in the high school years. The lack of teacher training in the use of test data to analyze and address weaknesses in individual student performance is also a frequently missing link in transforming the theory of data use in standards-based reform into practice.

In the end, few schools described coherent efforts to bring new ideas or information on curriculum and instruction to their teachers. Those that did seemed to have a history of such efforts, appearing to confirm earlier research that it takes capacity to build capacity in high schools (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003; Hatch, 2002).

## **External Information and Support**

While the vast majority of actions in our high schools were based on internally generated decision making, our study did reveal a few avenues through which outside information entered into the process. Of course, teachers brought information to the table from their professional development experiences, as did principals who attended workshops and conferences. It is likely that these experiences informed the choices they made during internal discussions.

Some schools did work more directly with outside assistance providers. For example, a few states like California and North Carolina created external support structures directed at their lowest performing schools. North Carolina hired, trained, and assigned school support teams composed of veteran administrators and subject matter specialists to work with low-performing

high schools for an academic year. California gave struggling high schools grants to hire external evaluators to help develop and implement the schools' improvement plans, under a program known as the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). A few of our study schools developed relationships with local universities, regional education centers, comprehensive school reform providers, or other vendors.

School districts, however, were the most prominent as well as influential external agents in our study sites. They not only stimulated high schools to act on behalf of accountability, but also guided the kinds of actions schools took. Teachers and administrators in more than half of our high schools reported that districts either suggested or required the use of one or more of the improvement strategies in place in their schools. Some districts mandated the use of programs, instructional strategies, or curriculum by all, or by low-performing, high schools, or they offered unsolicited suggestions of what schools could do. Other times, schools requested help from their central office staff, who drew from their knowledge base or sought out new ideas to help the schools.

Active districts tended to be more prescriptive, directing high schools to adopt specific strategies and monitoring the implementation of these practices. Active districts also focused their actions on the goal of higher student performance, generally on the state assessment. Central offices developed curriculum and pacing guides to align school-level instruction to state standards. A few districts initiated quarterly benchmark examinations to provide feedback on student performance on the standards. Some

assigned instructional coaches or content area specialists to develop strategies to address their schools' needs.

However, many districts in our study were not proactive on behalf of accountability for high schools. For some, elementary and middle schools took priority, and high schools were left to operate quite autonomously. Other districts viewed themselves as one of a variety of external resources available whenever schools requested help. But since these districts responded to what schools perceived as their own needs, district programs addressed a wide range of goals, of which student performance was only one. Just as with schools, we encountered active and more passive districts within high and low stakes environments. Little academic research has explored what motivates and helps district organizations intervene on behalf of state accountability goals, particularly at the high school level. Our study sheds some light on this question.

## **Active District Intervention**

Three factors appear to be related to whether districts pressed their high schools to adopt actions on behalf of accountability. One was the prior performance of the high school. Those districts that had particularly low-performing high schools as measured by their state accountability system were more likely to take action with those schools, especially in states that had sanctions for low-performing high schools or students.

However, a second factor interacted with school performance to influence district response: the size of the district central office. (See also, for example,

Hannaway & Kimball, 2001.) Did the district have sufficient human resources to work with its high schools on an ongoing basis? For example, in one study district with a low-performing school, the small size of the central office made it difficult for staff to provide the school with a high level of support. The few staff members were consumed with providing schools with the basics of school operation— personnel, finance, materials, and information—and with responding to the testing and data requirements of the state accountability system. Yet even large districts did not always have sufficient resources to work with all of their schools. In Florida, for example, county districts with large staffs but also large numbers of high schools targeted their assistance to their lowest performing ones, those that received state accountability grades of D and F, because they were subject to state sanctions. Middle-performing high schools received limited support, although they may soon be designated as in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

A third factor, district leadership was also critical, particularly the existence of a few key administrators who established school improvement as a goal, identified a set of improvement strategies, and saw the district’s role as one of directing schools to embrace these strategies. Districts with leaders that were actively supportive of their state accountability system, regardless of the strength of that system, the size of the district office, or the relative performance of their high schools, often stimulated more active responses in their schools as well. Renaissance City, a small district in Pennsylvania, illustrates the point. When it was placed on the

state warning list for poor performance, the long-time superintendent there decided that his earlier approach of delegating school improvement initiatives to the schools had failed. He started to recentralize control over the schools, and held them accountable for raising scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). This led the high school principal to do the same and to implement strategies and discussions centered around improving student achievement on PSSA. Similarly, a small district in North Carolina set high expectations for its schools, used test score data to focus teachers and schools on student performance, and directed its limited resources to areas with the greatest need. Another district in that same state pushed even its highest performing schools to raise the percentage of students meeting state standards. Superintendents in these small districts use their “bully pulpit” to focus attention on issues.

## **School Resistance**

A high level of district activity was not in and of itself sufficient to trigger change initiatives in high schools. Some study schools grudgingly adopted district improvement efforts, while others resisted them outright. Some schools at the higher ends of the accountability spectrum in our sample felt they could afford to ignore the press of external accountability. For example, Medal County, North Carolina, undertook a series of actions to improve high school instruction. One school was very responsive to district initiatives, but staff in the second high school felt that since they had performed well on state exams, they could afford to ignore these efforts.

They also thought that they held higher goals and standards than the state, and had a forceful principal who enabled them to operate more independently. At the other end of the spectrum, two low-performing California schools did little to respond to district pressure and support in part because of low staff morale, a cynical view of state policy expectations, and the feeling that consequences would never really befall their students or themselves.

## Conclusions

One can draw several conclusions from our research in these 48 underperforming high schools. One is that accountability can be a powerful force for change in high schools, despite the conventional image of high schools as recalcitrant organizations. But the potential of high schools' response to external accountability depends in part on their ability and willingness to bring in fresh ideas to the challenges posed by policies that ask them to educate *all* students to high levels of academic achievement. As one scholar wrote:

*High schools . . . are being asked to take on a new task—something they were not designed to do—to prepare students for a defined minimum academic standard, and to get all students to graduate by achieving that standard. We have certainly not organized high schools so that all students would take the same content, or meet the same standards to graduate. In fact, comprehensive high schools were historically designed to do precisely the opposite; since highly influential midcentury Conant report, their design imperative has been to serve democratic purposes*

*and accommodate diverse student populations by creating a wide range of programs, and a differentiated curriculum. (Siskin, 2003, pp. 176–177)*

This agenda poses new challenges for high schools, and demands new solutions that reach outside of teachers' and administrators' current capacities, such as in teaching basic reading skills.

Further, although research on well-functioning high schools shows, as indicated previously, that departments can play an important role in change processes, the high schools in our study, performing below expectations, did not have strong departments or many other formal mechanisms for discussing or intervening in instructional practice. Finding ways to build organizational authority and structures, and/or a culture of communication around instructional issues, needs priority. Just as landscape architects will follow trampled grass by public buildings to determine where to install sidewalks, developing capacity in these kinds of schools may require mapping and using more informal channels of communication while more formal mechanisms are strengthened.

Districts, certainly, were the most important external organization influencing these high schools. While in recent years questions have arisen about the efficacy of district administration, our work on this sample of below-average high schools concluded that parent districts were vital in whether or not state policy goals were transmitted into school-level action. Moreover, districts were the main source of guidance and support for high schools, far outdistancing third-party providers in helping high schools search for solutions. While third-party providers

are extremely common at the elementary and middle school level, we found this “supply” of support was surprisingly thin across our sample of schools. Who can these schools turn to for new ideas and support to handle the challenges they face?

While one reasonable solution may be expanding the numbers of third-party providers, districts are already ubiquitous, and have significant institutional power and authority over schools. Building district capacity, and finding effective incentives for their intervention in high schools, is critical to school improvement. In addition to its focus on schools, NCLB holds districts accountable for the performance of their students and responsible for assisting schools that do not meet state standards. Districts must provide ongoing technical assistance as schools develop and implement school improvement plans. They are to help schools analyze student achievement data, implement professional development, and put in place a new curriculum or instructional practices that have shown evidence of effectiveness. Districts that do not themselves meet performance expectations can be subject to state intervention.

But will these mandates and incentives be sufficient to stimulate more, and more effective, district guidance to high schools? Our research here suggests, at least, that stakes alone will be insufficient to spur consistent action across districts (or schools, for that matter); activism is more than a matter of mandate—it is deeply intertwined with the capabilities of people and their organizations to respond, their knowledge, their resources, and their motivation. Motivation to respond is influenced in

part by how districts and schools perceive where they “fit” in the accountability ratings and by whether accountability is viewed as too demanding or sufficiently demanding or not demanding enough. Response is also influenced by capacity. Districts need strong and stable leadership, accompanied by staff who are knowledgeable about high schools and improvement strategies in those particular institutions. Leadership turnover is one problem, particularly in big cities. For instance, Michigan recently reported that in 2003–2004, the rate of retirement of superintendents was double that of the previous year. Fewer people are applying for these positions, citing in part the pressures under NCLB (MacDonald, 2004). Accountability policies often ignore or give minimal attention to these district issues, and NCLB is no exception. States must attend to the capacity of school districts, just as they expect districts to attend to the capacity of their low-performing schools.

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