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ABSTRACT

The evolution of California's school accountability program, its current status, and some future directions are discussed. Public recognition of the need for school improvement resulted in California's Hughes Hart Education Reform Act (SB 813) of 1983, leading to the development of the California accountability program. Program components include: (1) an annual statewide performance report on the status of uniform educational quality indicators; (2) annual individual school progress reports; (3) suggested goals for improvement in performance; (4) school self-reports on local quality indicators; and (5) an active program of school recognition. School performance reports are considered public information and are used in screening schools for the California School Recognition Program to reward achievement. New directions for the accountability program include: the preparation and distribution of school accountability report cards each year; the development of strategies for identifying and improving at-risk schools; and the development of a state plan for program improvement to encompass accountability standards for school programs under the federal reauthorization of Chapter 1 (Public Law 100-297, 1988). California's schools are presently undergoing enormous changes. However, despite these changes, accountability has proven to be a continuing theme in California's educational policy discussions. Accountability, conceived as the measurement of performance and the setting of goals, is providing for the effective and fair use of school resources. (SLD)

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Assessing Educational Performance:

California's School Quality Indicator System

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School accountability continues to interest lawmakers, educators and the public. For example, the U. S. Department of Education (1988, p. iii) opines that "citizens want to know in concrete terms what they are receiving in return for their hard earned tax dollars invested in public education." The Council of Chief State School Officers (1987) documented 45 states with integrated accountability programs which collect and report performance information, either about student achievement, course taking, school resources, processes, or background data on students and communities. A survey of the National Conference of State Legislatures found that accountability was identified as a top priority by education committee chairmen in 31 states. (Mirga, 1989) The reasons for this interest in accountability appear to be associated both with school finance and in a concern for disadvantaged students. With the growth in states' education budgets has come a greater demand for improved school performance. At the same time there is sensitivity that the needs of at risk students are not being sufficiently met by the schools.

California first implemented an integrated accountability program in 1983 with uniform definitions of quality indicators, annual publication of school performance reports, timelines for meeting improvement targets, and programs to recognize schools. (Fetler, 1986) The objectives of this paper are to describe the evolution of California's accountability program, to summarize its current status, and to discuss some possible future

directions, including initiatives for working with disadvantaged students and low performing schools.

Evolution and Current Status. During the early 1980s public recognition of the need for school improvement resulted in California's Hughes Hart Education Reform Act (SB 813) of 1983. This legislation encouraged higher graduation standards and better student discipline, and provided incentives for student, teacher and school performance, and for increased instructional time. At the same time that these costly incentive programs were being implemented, there were also a number of fiscal concerns. A 1987 study by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) described California's school finance at this time as "unstable and uncertain." Tax reform had severely limited the ability of school districts to generate revenues locally, and a 1979 constitutional expenditure limitation initiative threatened to hold down spending in the years ahead. A program to hold schools accountable would address the perceived need to raise academic standards and would provide additional justification for school funding. The stated purposes of California's accountability program are "to allow educators to determine the success of their own school programs, sustain support for the reform movement by demonstrating such success, recognize schools for their progress and achievements, and discover how to use the resources available for education in the most effective manner possible." (California State Department of Education, 1988)

The components of the accountability program include an annual statewide performance report on the status of uniform educational quality

indicators, annual individual school reports of progress, suggested goals for improvement, school self reports on local quality indicators, and an active program of school recognition. The indicators are intended to be important "bottom line" measures of performance, to be used by school officials in setting priorities and making decisions. Timelines are set for the attainment of state and local goals for each indicator. Judgement about school performance are made on the basis of comparisons of the school with itself over time (trends), of the school with all other schools statewide, and of the school with other demographically similar schools. The performance report and its accompaniments were implemented at the initiative of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bill Honig, and were not rooted in legislation.

The school performance report provides for comparisons of the school with itself over time (trends), of the school with all other schools statewide (undifferentiated norms), and of the school with demographically similar schools (differentiated norms). The principle underlying differentiated norms is the subdivision of the population of schools to allow comparisons of schools with reference groups of similar characteristics. This process requires the construction of a composite SES index from information describing the school's demographics, including percent of families receiving AFDC, parent education or occupation, percent of limited English speaking students, and student mobility. Schools are ranked on the basis of the composite SES index. The comparison group for any particular school consists of the ten percent of schools with immediately higher or lower SES indexes. Each school is at the median of its group in terms of the SES index, but its academic performance may be

relatively nigh or low. After identifying the comparison group, a percentile rank is computed by the usual procedure. A more detailed description of comparison group ranks can be found in Fetler (1989).

Currently every public school receives an annual performance report. This is a booklet containing a discussion of the accountability program, an explanation of the performance indicators, statewide results and goals, a display of the indicators for that particular school, and a discussion of the concept of locally produced reports. Reports for high schools contain information on academic course enrollments, California Assessment Program (CAP) achievement scores, attendance, dropouts, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the American College Testing program, and enrollments at public postsecondary institutions. Much of the information is presented by sex, ethnic category, and overall. Reports for elementary and intermediate schools contain CAP achievement and attendance information. The school performance reports are considered to be public information. Two copies of each school's report are sent to the district office. One of these copies is passed on to the school. County offices receive copies for all schools under their jurisdiction. The local districts have about two weeks to examine the reports before they are released to the media.

One use of the school performance reports is in the screening of schools for the California School Recognition Program (1985). The recognition accorded under this program is ceremonial and is intended to reward achievement, to motivate other schools to strive for excellence, to increase local awareness of school efforts, and to provide models of successful practices. Distinguished schools are selected annually and

represent the best all around schools in the state. An initial quantitative screening identifies schools that perform well relative to other comparable schools, or show unusual improvement on the various quality indicators. Those who survive the screening are invited to fill out applications which address curriculum, instructional practices, improvement efforts, school culture and student outcomes. These applications are scored by trained reviewers and site visits for the best applicants are conducted. A final comprehensive review of all available information precedes the selection of the winners. The selection is marked during an annual awards ceremony. The ceremony for high schools and middle schools is scheduled for even numbered years and for elementary schools on odd numbered years. Roughly ten percent of schools are recognized each year.

New Directions. Public concern about school performance and improvement resulted in three accountability efforts mandated in 1988. Proposition 98, the school funding initiative constitutional amendment, which provided for stable growth in funding, also requires school districts to prepare and distribute school accountability report cards each year. Assembly Bill 9 (Chapter 832, Statutes of 1988) required the development of criteria for identifying and strategies for improving at risk schools. The federal reauthorization of Chapter 1 (Public Law 100-297, 1988) required development of a state plan for program improvement which encompassed accountability standards for school programs.

Proposition 98 established a task force on instructional improvement to make recommendations for a model school accountability report card.

With a majority of practicing classroom teachers, the task force also included school administrators, board members, classified employees, research specialists, and parents. The Superintendent of Public Instruction appointed and consulted with the task force to develop model report card, which was presented to the State Board of Education for adoption.

The language of Proposition 98 requires that the report card include assessments of: student achievement, reduction in dropout rates, estimated expenditures per student and types of services funded, reduction of class size and teaching loads, assignment of teachers outside their areas of competence, quality of textbooks, availability of qualified counselors, availability of qualified substitute teachers, school safety and cleanliness, adequacy of teacher evaluation and opportunities for professional improvement, classroom discipline and climate, teacher and staff training and curriculum improvement, and quality of school instruction and leadership. The initiative states that the governing board of each school district must implement by September 30, 1989 for each school an accountability report card, triennially compare its accountability report card with the State's model, annually issue a report card for each school in the district, publicize such reports, and notify parents that copies are available on request.

Assembly Bill 9 established an advisory task force on at-risk schools in order to develop criteria for identifying at risk schools and strategies for improving them. The task force was comprised of 13 members: seven appointed by the Governor, two by the Speaker of the Assembly, two by

the Senate Rules committee, and two appointed by the ... rintendent of Public Instruction.

The task force report (California, 1989a) discussed a number of issues relating to the identification of at-risk schools. In order to provide for accurate and fair identification it was considered desirable to use as much high quality information as possible. However, the amount of information to be used is limited by various practical considerations including the local burden of providing data and the quality of existing data. After examing a large list of potential identification indicators the task force recommended for secondary schools using achievement results from the California Assessment Program, rate of actual attendance, rate of completion of the University of California academic course sequence required for admission, and the dropout rate for grades 10 - 12. The recommendation for elementary schools included achievement results and the rate of actual attendance. Other indicators could be used when they are available and of sufficient quality, including incidents of violence at the school, reclassification of limited English proficient students, and dropout rates for grades 7 - 9.

The task force recommended that the identification process should begin with an evaluation of the status of each of the indicators. An indicator is considered to be at-risk if it falls below a threshold which defines the bottom five percent of all schools two years prior to enactment of legislation. If the indicator is below this threshold for at least two of the last three years, it is considered to be at-risk. If the indicator is in the bottom 25 percent of schools ranked statewide and in the bottom

25 percent relative to demographically similar schools, and it does not meet specific growth targets used in California's accountability program, it also is considered to be at-risk.

The at-risk status of a school depends on the results for the various indicators. A school is identified if it was at-risk on CAP, regardless of the other criteria. Additionally, those elementary schools which are at-risk on attendance and were in the bottom ten percent statewide on CAP are identified. Those secondary schools which are at-risk on at least two of the three other indicators (dropout, attendance, academic courses) and were in the bottom ten percent on CAP statewide are also identified.

The task force recommended an intervention process which progresses through three stages of increasing assistance, monitoring, and control. The first stage consists of a two year period in which the identified school develops and implements its own plan for improvement with help from the district, the state and various independent organizations. The second phase begins when the school has not improved its performance over a two year period. Activities in the second phase include the appointment of an external support team, development of recommendations for changes in the school's improvement plan, the availability of matching grants for training and other improvements, and the continuation of assistance from the first stage. The lack of improvement for two further years triggers the last stage which involves the appointment by the state Superintendent of a trustee with broad legislatively defined powers to transfer personnel, cancel contracts, to revise budgets, and to stay or rescind actions of the local board.

The reauthorization of Chapter 1 called for greater accountability for the improvement of educational opportunities of educationally deprived children in order to assure their success in regular school programs, the attainment of grade level proficiency, and improved achievement in basic and more advanced skills. The mechanism for implementing accountability is the State Plan for Program Improvement which is developed with the assistance of a committee of practitioners. Criteria included in the plan are used to evaluate Chapter 1 and State Compensatory Education schools to determine which sites are not providing an adequate program.

The state plan (California, 1989b) includes objective measures and standards to assess student performance, the process for the joint Department and local development of improvement plans to attain satisfactory student progress, a timetable for developing and implementing improvement plans, and program of assistance to be provided to identified schools. Performance measures which are available on a uniform and statewide basis include both California Assessment Program achievement results in grades 3, 6 and 8 and locally administered norm referenced test results from the Chapter 1 evaluation system. Because the California Assessment Program tests are built around the state's curriculum frameworks, these test results should provide information on success in the regular program. Districts annually identify schools with insufficient improvement or declining achievement, using the criteria set forth in the State Plan, and provide the resources to facilitate improvement. If the identified schools do not improve according to the State Plan's timeline, the district works with the school to develop a plan of action. If the

planned program proves ineffective, the Department and the district work together until the expected academic progress is attained.

A summary report of CAP and norm referenced test results was compiled by the Department and sent to local districts in order to implement the identification process. The summary report is considered to be non-binding advice to local districts for identifying school programs. The state defines the statewide targets for improvement of three scaled score points per year on CAP, established in the School Performance Reports for each grade and subject area, as the standard for making substantial progress toward meeting desired outcomes. CAP data are provided for the subgroup of students receiving Chapter 1 services for two consecutive years. If the average performance across grades and subjects of this subgroupis less than three scaled score points the school is identified as not meeting the standard established in the state plan. The state plan also defines a positive change in measured achievement from the pretest to the posttest as meeting the standard that students should achieve more than would be expected without the compensatory education program. Schools annually submit norm referenced test (NRT) data for students in compensatory education programs. These test data are converted to normal curve equivalent scores (NCE) and the gain from the pre- to the posttest is computed. If the gain is is more than one standard error less than zero, the school is identified as not meeting the state's standard for the NRT results.

Selected Issues for Identifying Low Performing Schools. Language in California's Proposition 98, Assembly Bill 9 and in the federal

reauthorization of Chapter 1 reflects a perceived need to quantify and judge school performance. At the same time, it is difficult to devise practical criteria to classify schools. (Oakes, 1986; Murnane, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1988) The information which is available for evaluating school performance is rarely perfect and its quality can be affected by the burdens of data collection on providers, incentives for biased reporting, and the use of less than exact models of the educational process. Even so, policy makers are sometimes compelled to make the best of the data that are available. Selected issues of criteria development which have arisen in California are discussed below, including, the need to go beyond achievement test results, the types of comparisons that can be made, the tension between state needs and local autonomy, the use of key versus supplemental indicators, the amount of information available for high schools versus elementary schools, and the difficulty of making judgement about small schools.

Exclusive reliance on test scores can cause problems. Criticisms of existing tests include the inability to measure directly the full range of achievement, particularly higher order or performance skills, the disparities between the content of tests and the content in widely used textbooks, the possible narrowing of the curriculum to reflect merely the content of tests, and confusion over the interpretation of results. Information on aspects of performance in addition to achievement may help to identify low performing schools. Other possibly useful indicators could for example include student dropout rates and attendance, the numbers of students enrolled in certain courses and student attitudes and aspirations.

Taking account of student demographics would seem to be a fair way of comparing schools. Yet it is important to avoid the suggestion that low performance is acceptable for certain groups of students. The comparison group ranks used in the Performance Reports are a way of recognizing that some schools have greater obstacles to overcome in teaching disadvantaged students than others. Using the comparison group rank a school can judge its performance in relation to other schools with similar student populations. Unfortunately, it is possible for a school to compare well with others in its group, and yet have very low results. These ranks are not intended to excuse low performance and should be interpreted in the context of unadorned statewide comparisons and score trends.

Local and state educators have different needs. At the state level there is need to see that allocated tax dollars are well spent in all schools, to encourage equality of opportunity for a good education statewide, and to institute remedies where inequalities exist. Comparable information provides a more equitable basis for judging the educational opportunities of students statewide. Existing inequalities can be located and remedies instituted. Information is more reliable when that information has been obtained under standardized and controlled conditions. The quality and credibility of the process for identifying at risk schools is reduced to the extent that differences across schools or districts in definitions or procedures for obtaining information influence the measurement of performance. On the other hand, information needed locally may be too unique for statewide comparability. Local interest in and ownership of information is probably related to the quality of that information. Local educators may also be concerned that the public release

of comparable information will lead to invidious comparisons and unproductive debate.

Testing programs, for example, tend to reflect either state or local needs. Different kinds of tests measure the attainment of different objectives and can result in different judgments of performance. For example, minimum competency or proficiency tests often assess only the skills required for basic literacy. By contrast, commercially available standard tests go beyond basic literacy to reflect the content of textbooks commonly used nationwide. These commercially available tests are often used to provide student diagnostic information and for making decisions about services, e.g., placement in compensatory education or gifted and talented programs. More academically oriented tests, such as the Advanced Placement examinations of the College Board are oriented towards the content of first year college courses. Recently developed CAP tests are constructed around California's curriculum frameworks. The CAP tests are meant to encourage districts to implement the frameworks.

It may be possible to measure the major aspects of school performance with a few key indicators, e.g., achievement, enroliment in academic subjects, attendance, and dropout rates. Although other supplemental indicators could certainly be used, they may not lead to a different judgement of overall performance. More detailed information, e.g., results for various student subgroups or finer breakouts of test scores, can provide more background for study and planning. Decisions about key versus supplemental indicators should take into account costs and benefits. Although it may be technically possible to collect and process large

amounts of information, the burden of reporting for schools and the need for timely and accurate processing will limit its practical usefulness.

To the extent that the use of performance information affects those people who are measured, there can be unintended consequences. High stakes are involved in the public identification of high or low performance, and the selection of a school for intervention. Rewards or sanctions can affect behavior. The use of a commercially available standardized test to measure student achievement might result in the narrowing of curriculum to cover just the material in the test. Would increased funding for at risk schools provide practical means for improvement, or would it function more as an incentive to remain at risk? Do higher standards motivate students, or will they increase the risk of dropping out? Other possible problems, although in the past these have been highly infrequent, include inappropriate preparations for the test (e.g., practicing on the test), irregularities in test administration (e.g, coaching, selective testing), and altering of student responses.

When information about a school is based on the responses of a large number of students, the influence of any particular individual on the result tends to be washed out. The resulting information can be interpreted in terms of the school and its general surroundings. By contrast, information about the performance of small schools is based on relatively few students. The characteristics of particular individuals can weigh more heavily at a small school. Therefore school performance across time tends to fluctuate more widely at a small school than at a larger school. One strategy to overcome this difficulty is to examine the

performance of small schools over a number of years using a moving average. Although a moving average is less susceptible to the influence of individual students, it does mean that more time is required to judge the progress.

Conclusions

California's schools are presently undergoing enormous changes. School enrollments are predicted to increase by at least 140,000 students per year. Ethnic students now comprise a majority of the population and increasing numbers of students do not speak English or have limited English proficiency. Local agencies have lost effective control of funding, with more than two thirds of the money for education now coming from the state.

Despite these changes accountability has proven to be a continuing theme in California's educational policy discussions. Proposition 98, the school funding initiative, provides schools with a stable source of funding, but requires that the public receive a report card on each school's performance. Concern with the inequality of educational opportunity at low performing schools produced Assembly Bill 9, which may stimulate additional legislation and action. The shift in emphasis of Chapter 1 programs, away from basic skills, towards a commitment to success in the regular program, and the identification of low performing programs, hints at a national impatience with the attainments of compensatory education programs thus far.

One can speculate that educators, in working to provide all students with a quality education, know that they are working for a good cause. Yet this should not divert attention from the need to direct and expend educational resources effectively and fairly. Accountability, conceived as the measurement of performance and the setting of goals, is one way to promote the effective and fair use of resources.

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