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ABSTRACT

This paper presents selected findings from a three-year research investigation of general and special education reform initiatives implemented in five local school districts across the United States (including a large urban, predominately minority system; two suburban districts; a small independent city district; a large county-wide system; two rural school districts; and an independent town.) Case studies were conducted in each of the districts to document and describe educational reforms in the following areas: standards, assessment, accountability, teacher policy, finance, and governance. Of particular interest were the interactions between special and general education reforms and their impact on classroom practices. Results indicate that: (1) special educators were almost uniformly focused on how to create more inclusive classrooms and these efforts were generally separate from the overall reform agenda; (2) state level initiatives to reduce numbers of students eligible for special education led to changes in special education programs and services in two of the districts; (3) there was little discussion on how general and special education collaboration related to larger issues of inclusion of students with disabilities in curriculum and assessment; (4) there was great variation among special education directors in their level of knowledge of standards, assessment, and other district reform initiatives; and (5) special education's endorsement of or opposition to a specific initiative appeared to have little influence on the direction that a reform might take. (Contains 21 references.) (CR)

Running Head: Reform for All?

Reform for All? General and Special Education Reforms in Five Local School Districts.

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This paper presents selected findings from a three-year research investigation of general and special education reform initiatives implemented in five local school districts across the United States. Case studies were conducted in each of the districts to document and describe educational reforms in the following areas: standards; assessment; accountability, teacher policy; finance, and governance. In addition, local district efforts to restructure special education programs were examined and compared to the general reforms. Of particular interest were the interactions between special and general education reforms and their impacts on classroom practices. This paper will present the cross-case analyses in the areas of standards and assessment, accountability, and governance.

The Importance of Understanding General Education Reforms

The educational reforms that have been evolving over the past decade are changing the context of classrooms and the expectations for teachers and students. These reforms have generally been focused on six major policy areas: standards, assessment, accountability, governance, teachers, and finance (Goertz & Friedman, March, 1996). During this same time period special education programs have been changing in response to efforts to promote inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, to decrease inappropriate identification of students as disabled, particularly cultural or language minority students, and to improve the educational results for these students receiving special education services.

As these general and special education reform initiatives come together in schools and classrooms, they must be defined, negotiated, and adapted to fit existing policies and practices.

Understanding the features of the general education reforms is essential for several reasons. Special education programs operate within the context of the larger educational system and special education policies and resources cannot help but be influenced by larger system priorities. Furthermore, students with disabilities are receiving more and more of their instruction in general education classrooms. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1996), 43 percent of the students with disabilities receive the majority of their educational program in those environments. Ensuring that these students have meaningful access to the curriculum and instruction provided in general education classrooms requires a sound knowledge of how educational reforms are impacting a general education practice. In addition, efforts to reduce costs associated with special education are leading to increased scrutiny of programs and their relative benefits for students with disabilities. Perhaps the most compelling reason for wanting knowledge about general education reform is to provide students with disabilities access to a broad and balanced curriculum and specialized instruction that reflects high expectations, challenging standards, and individually tailored educational goals.

The three-year qualitative study of local education reform is part of a larger national study conducted by the Center for

Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform. The Center has been investigating state and local general educational reform policies with a particular focus on how these policies are interpreted by or interact with special education practices. The Center 's research includes tracking reforms in 12 states, case studies of 4 states, and the 5 local district case studies. Corollary studies have been conducted related to charter schools, state policies, and the implementation of assessment accommodations. Findings presented in this paper were derived from the five local district case studies.

Methodology

The five local districts were selected on the basis of the prominence of their reform agendas within their respective states, as well as their geographic and demographic characteristics. The districts include a large urban system with a predominately minority student population, (district B); two suburban districts, a small independent city district (district W), and a large county-wide system (district D); and two rural school districts, an independent town (district M), and a county-wide system (district H).

The qualitative research was conducted using traditional case study methodology (Yin, 1994). Data were obtained during week-long site visits to each of the districts. The primary researcher and three assistants collected data through in-depth interviews, focus groups and on-site observations.

In district B, interviews were conducted with 15 central office administrators, 8 building principals, 6 special education supervisors, and 45 teachers and other personnel in 9 schools. Of the total 180 schools in the district, 3 middle, and 7 elementary schools were site visited. During two visits to district W, 28 interviews were conducted with a total of 47 participants, including 3 central office administrators, 6 building administrators, 4 parents, and a variety of teachers and other school support personnel. The research team visited a total of 6 of the 13 district schools including 4 elementary schools, the middle school and the high school. Twenty-eight persons were interviewed during the single site visit to district D. Twelve district administrators and instructional supervisors 8 school principals, 3 parents and 5 teachers were interviewed. Of the 35 schools, observations were made in 1 high school, 1 middle school, 3 elementary schools and 2 charter schools. The researchers conducted 18 interviews in district M. These included 3 central office, 4 building-level administrators, 11 teachers, and 3 parents. Site visits were made to 4 of 13 district schools consisting of 2 elementary schools, 1 middle school and the high school.

Thirty-three interviews were conducted with 44 participants in district H. Five building principals, 7 district-level administrators and program coordinators, 20 teachers, and 6 parents were interviewed. The remaining interviews involved other school personnel, such as special education related

services providers and the director of a Youth Services Center. Researchers visited 5 of the district's 17 schools: the high school, the vocational school, 1 junior high, and 2 elementary schools.

The interviews were conducted using protocols modified to address the individual characteristics of each district. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were then analyzed and sections coded for topical content. The computer program Ethnograph 4.0 was used to assist with analysis of the coded interview data. Common themes across interviews were identified. Secondary document reviews were conducted to triangulate and validate site visit findings. Emphasis was placed upon the review of documents pertaining to district demographics, funding, development of new standards and assessment instruments, special education programs, governance, and other reform initiatives specific to each of the five local districts. Examples of these documents include community newspapers and other information items, state education reform legislation, specific state standards, district mission and goal statements, district special education rules and procedures, curricular documents, individual school plans, and staff development and promotion requirements.

Information gathered from the various sources was used to construct five individual case studies. Each school district contact person was provided a draft copy of he case study and encouraged to share the draft and comment on the content. A few

minor areas of disagreement were identified and resolved by a reexamination of the transcript data and/or documents.

Findings

Each case study describes and documents individual district reform initiatives. A cross-case analyses was conducted of findings obtained in the areas of standards, assessment and accountability, and governance. These categories represent a subset of the total information obtained from the interviews and described in the case studies. These areas were selected because they were the most prominent school reforms being implemented within the 5 districts. Each category is discussed separately, however, the design and implementation of the initiatives overlap and interact. In addition, these were not the only initiatives underway within the districts. For example, standards were being implemented within the context of other curricular or instructional changes, such as multi-age classrooms, alternative calendars, and within changing governance structures, such as site-based management.

Standard Setting

The most prominent reform initiative being implemented across the states is the implementation of new content and performance standards. As defined in the federal Goals 2000: Educate America Act (PL 103-227), content standards are "broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire in a particular subject area" (Sec. 3(4)). Performance standards are defined as "concrete examples and explicit definitions of

what students have to know and be able to do to demonstrate that [they] are proficient in the skills and knowledge framed by the content standards" (Sec 3(9)). According to a 1996 survey conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996), 41 states and federal jurisdictions have standards in one or more of the following subject matter areas ready for implementation: math, science, English/language arts, history, and social studies. Several states have additional standards under development. Thirty-five states indicated that their content standards will apply to students with disabilities. An additional four states indicated that their standards will apply to these students, but local discretion is allowed (Rhim & McLaughlin, In press). Of the 35 states, 18 allow for some type of exemption from the standards for students with disabilities, via student Individual Education Program (IEP). A recent report of the National Academy of Education (McLaughlin & Sheppard, 1995) noted the tremendous variability among states with respect to the conception of curriculum evidenced in the standards as well as how the standards would be applied. State-level studies conducted by the Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform (Goertz & Friedman, 1996) also indicated substantial differences in how states are choosing to implement the standards. For example, Maryland and Kentucky both have established state standards and have mandated state assessments administered in specific benchmark years that provide information on student progress toward meeting the state

standards. Results are reported on school report cards and schools can be sanctioned or rewarded based on student scores. Colorado has state-level standards but requires local districts to develop and adopt standards that meet or exceed the state standards. The state is developing assessments in core areas that will be administered to a sample of students at specific grade levels. The state of Washington has released content standards and is currently in the process of piloting new assessments. California, Georgia, and Nebraska are creating voluntary standards articulated through curricular frameworks that may be used by local districts to guide curriculum development as well as assessments. This variation in design was evident among the five local districts.

Local Context

Districts B and H were implementing state standards linked to high stakes state assessments; district M was in the process of integrating their state standards into its curriculum and was piloting new companion state assessments in a few subject areas; districts D and W were both developing and implementing local standards and assessments, however, district D must ensure its standards meet or exceed the state standards that will be assessed.

The content standards in these districts are referred to as "learning outcomes", "essential academic leanings", "valued academic expectations", and "exit outcomes". They also differ in terms of content addressed. For example, district W has

specified 9 exit outcomes students are required to demonstrate prior to graduation. These outcomes include: problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making; communication and group interaction; verbal, quantitative, scientific and technological literacy; thinking and expressing themselves creatively and responding to the creative works of others; understanding the heritage of the United States and participating in a democratic society; living successfully in a multicultural, global society; enhancing and sustaining self-esteem through personal honesty, adequate knowledge of self, dedication to the work ethic, and in maintenance of mental and physical health; self improvement through lifelong learning; and the personal and social skills necessary to function successfully in school and in life. The exit outcomes are integrated into specific courses, and are demonstrated through completion of specific course requirements and performance demonstrations. An example of a performance requirement in technology is: "2 authentic demonstrations of word processing ability."

District B is implementing standards in the subject matter areas of math, science, reading, writing, and social studies, while district H's curriculum is guided by 6 state goals and 75 specific student academic expectations developed in December 1991. District M has state-developed "essential academic leanings" in reading, writing, communication, mathematics, arts, health and fitness, science, and social studies. The standards incorporate specific skills students are supposed to acquire in

school and are broken down into benchmarks for grades 4, 7, and 10.

The differences among the district standards are related in part to their purpose as well as the level at which they have been developed. For example, the state standards that district B is implementing were designed to provide only the core goals for local district curriculum. Local districts are encouraged to expand on the standards. Further, they are not designed to be specific enough to form the basis of instruction. Standards in districts W and D are intended to define the full scope of the K-12 curriculum, with the possible exception of vocational skill standards. They are also more detailed and provide strong pedagogical guidance.

The standards do have several similarities. For example, each district's standards emphasize processes, application of specific facts or knowledge, and subject-matter integration. Standards frequently require that students "demonstrate", "interpret", or "apply" knowledge or concepts. In addition, communication skills, particularly writing, are emphasized across all of the content areas. A common example is communicating, through written explanation, the reasoning underlying math problem solving.

Perceived impact on classroom practices

General and special education teachers were asked if their classroom instruction had changed during the past 5 years. In addition, they were asked whether the state or local standards

were influencing what and how they are teaching. Responses to the first question were almost uniformly affirmative. Classroom teachers at almost all levels have been implementing curricular changes during the past decade. Most notably, primary level teachers remarked that they now stress the writing process and have shifted toward teaching reading through "whole-language" approaches. Middle and high school math and science teachers reported greater emphasis on application of knowledge through projects or other "hands on" experiences and greater integration of math and science content. Not all of these changes are attributed to newly developed state or local standards. However, the standards are impacting on classrooms.

Teachers on one seventh grade team in district H discussed how the standards and related portfolio assessments have changed methods for teaching math. One math teacher commented, "We do a lot more group work...we're doing a lot more writing in math, which you used to never hear of because you just did facts, basic math... Now, it's rewriting the process into questions. So [the standards have] definitely changed the way we teach math a lot."

Knowledge of what standards require was most consistent in the two districts with state standards and state-mandated assessments. Teachers at all levels in these districts were clearly aware of what students would be expected to know and be able to do on the state assessments. In the remaining three districts, teacher knowledge about standards varied. Teachers in schools or at grade levels that were involved with development of

standards or curriculum alignment knew about the standards, others did not.

Administrators were generally positive about the potential for the standards to increase student learning but teachers reactions were mixed. Most teachers acknowledged that the standards were requiring them to teach more content and to stress application or "experiential or hands-on stuff". Also, demands to integrate subject matter were requiring teachers to collaborate and to break down departmentalization most notably at the middle and high school levels.

Teachers in district W reported that implementation of their new outcomes based education initiative is providing a specific integrated focus to the curriculum and fostering collaboration among the school faculty. Outcomes have reportedly encouraged teachers to work with teachers outside their subject area and to view the curriculum in a more integrated fashion. In district M, teachers reported that they perceive the new standards as very positive because they will force the district to be more accountable.

A few teachers across all districts perceived that the standards might actually lower the rigor of their courses. A particular concern expressed by a few middle school teachers in two districts was that standards are forcing them to cover more content in their classes so they cannot teach as deeply or as thoroughly as before. Finding time to teach all of the new content was a big concern to many teachers.

Middle school teachers in district H were struggling with the need to incorporate writing instruction across the curriculum, in preparation for the state-mandated writing portfolios administered in seventh grade. They believed that other content matter was being short changed. "We've had to drop a lot of science content to fill in for other things," stated one teacher. A second agreed, "It's the same thing in math. Basically I feel like it takes me a lot longer to cover the subject matter because we're trying to do so many different things. You know you do this and spend a week writing about it. So that slows you down and you don't get to cover as much content." The content standards and coupled new instructional approaches may exacerbate this "breadth, not depth" impact on their instruction. Elementary teachers in district H commented that they are encouraged to use multi-disciplinary thematic units to integrate subject matter. In the opinion of one teacher, the thematic units "are fine for some things. But, as we're looking at the science content scores and the social studies content scores, they're not getting the concept. So they don't understand the democratic principal as much as a third grader should. Or they're not understanding change or interactions with science. Because they're learning through a thematic unit, which is not stressing one particular thing."

Teachers in district W expressed uncertainty about how to apply the new standards to increasingly diverse classrooms. They were particularly concerned about the applicability of all of the

new outcomes to every student and questioned the utility of mandating that all students achieve the same outcomes when their long term goals are so diverse. Some of the teachers in district M expressed concerns about the longevity of the new standards-based reforms. One administrator characterized some teachers as "leery,...is this something that is going to be here for three years... or is somebody going to say, 'Oh, you can't afford that, or, we're going to change'."

These findings are corroborated by two recent studies that have explored teachers opinions of standards. Surveys of teachers and administrators conducted in Kentucky and Maryland indicate that respondents believe that the state standards and assessments have had positive effects on instruction. Examples of reported change include more instructional time devoted to writing for a variety of purposes, greater emphasis on problem solving, data analyses, and communicating mathematical ideas, and less attention to computation or basic operations (Koretz, Mitchell, Barron, & Keith, 1996a; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Stecher, 1996b). The observations regarding curricular depth vs. breadth are also consistent with findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study which examined eighth grade mathematics curricula in the US. Findings concluded that US curricula, textbooks, and teaching emphasize familiarity with many topics rather than concentrated attention on a few leading to superficial knowledge as opposed to mastery of concepts (U.S. National Research Center, 1996).

Development and Implementation of Standards

The five local districts were at very different places with respect to implementing standards. Nonetheless, wherever the process is occurring it becomes a central focus for schools. Administrators and teachers reported spending extensive time and other professional development resources to achieving "buy-in". For example, district M is supporting the adoption of the newly developed state standards by providing teachers release time to work together on reviewing and modifying their curriculum to match the new standards. The two school districts (districts D and W) developing their own standards had each engaged in an extensive period of public dialogue and discussion to create ownership and support for the standards among their community as well as staff. An administrator in district W commented: "We're very methodical, work with our communities, go to the elementary community clubs, PTA's,... work with parents saying there's a new (initiative) coming... and this is what we're all about. We're not dumbing down, expectations are going to be higher."

In the 3 districts implementing state standards, the attention to community engagement was not as apparent. While the development of state standards was subject to significant public scrutiny from various stakeholders across the state, there was little focus on adoption of the standards at the local school or community levels. Building support for standards within a school is reported to be most important because the process of aligning

curriculum with standards requires that teachers give up some of what they do and ultimately requires dialogue and consensus. Issues related to ownership of the curriculum appeared to be most acute at the high school level. In the 2 districts that had state-mandated assessments (districts B & H), teachers and principals spoke of aligning content and instruction with the standards, but in at least one of the districts this meant alignment with the assessment, not necessarily with the standards. For example, practice performance tasks were occasionally "dropped into" the daily instruction which was predominantly text-book driven, and students engaged in intensive blocks of "mock" testing prior to the administration of state assessments.

Central office and building leadership appears to be critical to keep the implementation process going. Central office administrators struggle to keep the momentum going and get all schools moving toward the same goals. They report a fine line between demanding the implementation of specific curricular or instructional approaches and respecting site-based governance. Central office administrators recognize that much will depend on the knowledge and skill of building principals, particularly in the area of curriculum. Administrators in three of the districts see the standards as a unifying force for their districts because they will narrow the curriculum and help schools focus their site-based planning. One junior high school principal in district D commented on the importance of curricular coordination

between elementary, middle and high schools, "We're starting to align to curriculum with the standards. I was with our seventh grade math department the other day and they were saying, 'You know, we really need to look at those six grade standards.' And I was saying, 'Yes, we do. Let's talk about it.'" Administrators believe that focusing the curricula will be desirable because as a superintendent said, "We have so many pilot projects going out there that we don't know what we have."

The issue of centrally imposed standards and site-based decision making was articulated by several teachers in district M who expressed frustration that site-based management has really pushed individual schools in their district to function independently. Now standards are forcing teachers to "relearn... centralize what is going on as it related to essential leanings and what it does to the curriculum across K-12. " One teacher faulted site-based management for creating a "disjointed" curriculum that the new standards will help to resolve.

Standards and Students with Disabilities

Opinions about how students with disabilities will fare under the new standards were most often voiced by special education teachers who were actually involved in implementing the new standards and by curriculum administrators. In general, curriculum directors are expecting that most students with disabilities will participate in and be assessed on new content standards. There were few concerns expressed about low incidence students because "they will likely require a set of

individualized standards". Most of administrators' concerns centered on students with high incidence disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and behavior disorders. Administrators wondered what resources will be required to move beyond rhetoric and ensure that these and other low achieving students will meet the new standards. Curriculum administrators in two districts already see problems surfacing at the secondary level because academic demands are greater and the curriculum is less flexible.

In the districts with state-mandated assessments, general education teachers at all grade levels also expressed significant concerns about how to apply standards to students with disabilities. Generally, these teachers view the standards as absolute criteria that students must master as opposed to generic goals that students must work toward. General education teachers consistently questioned how one set of standards could apply to all learners, particularly those experiencing difficulties learning.

Some special educators voiced optimism about how standards would push all students to realize their potential. Special education administrators in district W stated that the new outcomes and accountability measures helped diverse learners because it pushed the students toward their potential and beyond the expectations outlined in their IEP's. Special education teachers liked the idea of organizing their instruction around the standards because it gave them a focus and a clear framework

for their own instruction. One high school special education teacher commented, "I think we're hopeful because (the standards) give us some real concrete direction to work towards with the kids. And anything that is more clear and more precise than just covering the content in American history... will help us."

The emphasis on experiential learning evident in the standards was also generally endorsed by special and general education teachers because they felt that it provided more opportunities for low achieving students to learn important content. In district H, a general education primary grade teacher reported that the standards-based reforms had made teachers change and modify the curriculum, with a focus on individualization. For example, use of manipulatives had benefitted all students, particularly students at risk who may require tactile activities.

Despite many positive comments, special educators generally expressed a "wait and see" attitude. A prevalent caution was how to incorporate individualized educational goals within a standards framework. Given a finite amount of instructional time, special educators were concerned about how to fit in more functional skills or skills in other non-academic domains. As one special education administrator noted, "The reason that we have done so poorly with learning disabled students over the years is because we've never had a curriculum. We are now going to have a curriculum. [But] I think that we're going to have to be real careful that we don't still bypass their needs because we are so

focused." The concerns about competing priorities was also expressed by parents of students with disabilities. A teacher in district W commented on the challenges and importance of including students with disabilities in the new standards and assessments. "So you'll have an identified student that can't meet [the standard]. So what are you going to do? So that means that we don't have [the standard] then? What are we going to do to help that student reach their level, the highest level they can?" A secondary special education teacher in district D raised concerns about the need to modify standards for individual learning needs: "One of the things we've been thinking about is how the decision whether to modify a standard, or to accommodate a standard, is going to be made. Because those are pretty subjective opinions...who needs a modification, who needs an accommodation. And if so, what kind and how much?"

Special educators in one high school also speculated about the impact standards would have on inclusion. In their experiences team teaching with content area teachers, they found groups of students who needed to be "recycled" through instruction because they were not meeting the standards. This reteaching resulted in splitting the class into several ability groups. The special education teachers did not believe that this was inclusive and believed that this problem is likely to be exacerbated when the standards are even more rigorous and academic. Staff in one school in this same district reported that they had "an increased number" of parents who have requested

referrals for special education assessment or who were seeking Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act accommodation plans because, "They took one look at the standards and said, 'There s no way my kid will meet those.' They want [the child] placed right away."

An administrator from District M reported that there is currently "loud discussion about the impact of standards on diplomas" for students with disabilities. Parents are concerned about new assessments and want accommodations to protect their child from failing. Special educators in district M admitted being "in the dark" regarding the content of new standards and assessments. However, an administrator explained that the state is committed to including "all students" in the new standards. In his state, the focus is on addressing the needs of 80% of the student population, but he believes the state is committed to addressing the remaining 20% after initial implementation.

Overall, the tone of most comments was positive. Special educators were willing to engage in the process because they liked the conceptions of higher expectations and a broader curriculum. They remain skeptical however, about how students with disabilities will attain the same performance levels as other typically-achieving students.

Assessments and Accountability

Assessment and increased accountability for student achievement are among the most visible and controversial reform initiatives. According to recent data from the National Center

on Educational Outcomes (Elliott, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996), 43 states are developing new assessments as part of their overall assessment program. Seventeen of these states have policies linking assessment to graduation. Increasing the participation of students with disabilities in state and local assessments and insuring that the results of these students are held to public accountability are major goals of special education policymakers. Yet, several studies have documented that participation rates for these students vary significantly from state to state, ranging from 0 to 100 percent (Erickson, Thurlow, Thor, & Seyfarth, 1996). In an effort to increase participation, states have been developing guidelines for how decisions should be made and the types of assessment accommodations available to students with disabilities. Recent state surveys conducted by the National Center on Educational Outcomes revealed that 43 states have written guidelines about the participation of students with disabilities in state assessments (Erickson, Thurlow, & Ysseldyke, 1996). Most of the guidelines rely on the IEP team to make the decision and only about half of the states require that the decision be documented. In 1995, 39 states had written policies specifying which accommodations (e.g., most commonly changes in setting, presentation, response mode, or timing) would be permitted in statewide assessments (Thurlow, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1995). Developing and implementing new assessments and accountability systems were major issues within the 5 local case study districts.

Local Context

Districts B and H are in "high reform" states that implemented new performance-based assessments in the late 1980s. Results of these state-mandated assessments are reported annually on school report cards. Low performing schools are subject to a variety of state sanctions and there is significant pressure on principals to get better results. Individual student accountability is not a major feature in these districts, although district B's state requires a minimum competency criterion-referenced test for the high school diploma and has developed new high school standards and is developing a set of high school end-of-course assessments.

District W has developed a very comprehensive and complex assessment program that includes three nationally norm-referenced assessments administered at different grade levels, criterion-referenced assessments in math and reading administered in fifth grade, a criterion-referenced writing assessment administered in grades 4-6, 8, 11, and 12; and cumulative K-12 portfolios (currently only in place for grades 9-12). The district has continued to develop new assessments to align with their 9 new "outcomes." The goal is to have an assessment "toolbox" to give teachers options and flexibility. Graduating seniors are responsible for demonstrating successful completion of the nine outcomes via basic course requirements and performance demonstrations which are interdisciplinary projects developed with classroom teachers.

Increased student accountability is an important component of district W's assessment plan. There will be two types of diplomas: a standard diploma requiring 210 credit hours, and a diploma with commendation that will require 224 credit hours. In addition to greater course requirements, students seeking a diploma with commendation are required to complete additional performance demonstrations. There are no state assessments planned.

District D is in the process of developing a system for assessing student attainment of their content standards. Goals for the district's assessment system include: to provide annual data on student performance as required by the state; to provide individual student achievement data for instructional program improvement; to provide feedback to students and parents; and to present evidence that individual students have met matriculation and graduation requirements. Two sources of data will be used in the system including both secured assessments and "bodies of evidence". Secured assessments will be district administered norm-referenced and criterion-referenced performance assessments. Local schools will also administer "secured" performance assessments. A "body of evidence" will be collected for each student that documents student progress toward meeting certain benchmarks. The evidence will include such things as essays, teacher "tests", personal communication, observations, performance events, etc. A body of evidence for a particular benchmark may vary among teachers but the collection process and

scoring rubrics will be consistent across the district. Teachers will score their evidence and the judgments will be aggregated across the district and reported annually in terms of percentage of students attaining each of the benchmarks. The state will begin this year administering the first of several state proficiency tests to a sample of fourth, eighth, and tenth grade students. Beyond public reporting of scores, there will be no consequences attached to the assessments.

District M is currently in the process of developing local assessments and integrating state developed assessments in conjunction with the standards. The local assessments are being developed as "interim" assessments geared towards making staff "assessment literate" and in preparation for the state assessments that are currently being piloted by subject area. At this time, the district has not developed any specific attrition or retention policies based upon satisfactory completion of the standards or the new performance assessments.

Perceived Impacts.

As might be expected, conversations in districts B and H that were implementing state-mandated assessments and high-stakes school accountability were almost exclusively focused on how to increase scores. Principals interviewed in these districts clearly understood the consequences of the assessments and talked about the need to raise scores and focus their school improvement efforts on raising scores. However, principals' understanding of what it will take to raise scores varied. Principals in these

districts recognized that improved assessment results would require changes in content and pedagogy and that student performance reflected a cumulative acquisition of knowledge and skills. Accordingly, middle school principals in each of the two districts had initiated efforts in their feeder schools to improve curriculum opportunities. In one school, the principal was using his Title I funded teacher to help 5th and 6th grade teachers in his feeder schools implement a new science curriculum. (Science was the area in most need of improvement according to his 8th grade assessments.)

Some principals in other schools in both districts B and H appeared less clear about how to improve test scores. Several principals talked about the need to increase cooperative learning (some of the state assessments are administered to groups) or parent involvement. Increasing time spent on writing was a common comment made by several principals in these districts. However, the understanding that deep changes would be required in curriculum and instruction was not evident across the all school interviews.

Teachers in districts B and H also varied in terms of their enthusiasm for the assessments. While many teachers in district H understood and supported the adoption of state standards and assessments, they also commented on teacher anxiety caused by such high stakes reforms. One high school teacher noted, "I think most of the anxiety came over the fact that we were going to be measured as a school. Not that the students would not

(improve), or that we wouldn't figure out a way to move the students towards what needs to be done, but could we do it fast enough? Could we boost enough of them out of [the lowest] category into [higher performance levels] to keep the school out of trouble?"

Teachers at the specific grade levels where the state assessments are administered expressed particular stress. These teachers felt that assessment results reflected on them and their teaching. A number of teachers and principals in district B and H spoke of the low level of interest or commitment to changing practice on the part of teachers in K-2 because none of the assessments were administered in the lower grades. District H had K-3 multi-age classroom and fourth-grade teachers voiced a great deal of concern about how "unprepared" their students were for the state assessment administered at grade 4.

Districts D and W, with locally developed assessments, had a much more flexible and less threatening approach. Also, because the programs were not fully implemented at the time of this study, there was less anxiety about student performance and more willingness to reflect on the merits of the system. There were teacher and administrator concerns about how to manage the paper associated with cumulative portfolios and other collections of student work. Teachers were extremely concerned about the time required to develop and score some of the new assessments. A district D administrator referred to this as reform fatigue and the district is now rethinking its assessment approach. A

process that was supposed to be totally teacher-driven is now being reconsidered and reassigned to central office staff.

District W teachers generally supported the standards and accompanying high school assessments. They liked the accountability. "It 's really nice to have some outlines so the students who come to us have the same experiences and so we have some accountability about what they 're supposed to leave us knowing." This district offers a great deal of flexibility and support for students. They are permitted to take the tests as often as they want and have numerous special "remedial" classes. One administrator shared a story about permitting a student to take one competency exam on the afternoon of graduation day to give her one last chance to graduate (she passed).

State and local assessments are currently being developed and piloted in district M so it is premature to assess their impact. However, teachers and administrators expressed some reservations about the proposed new assessments and accountability. One administrator in this district expressed concern about the possible future use of school report cards that may not necessarily reflect the population of students in the school. In addition, teachers were concerned that new standards and assessments aim to push all students to the same level without apparent sensitivity to student differences. Finally, administrators expressed concern that high stakes testing will cause teachers to limit what they teach and really narrow the curriculum to what is on the test. There was a great deal of

confusion or lack of understanding about how the assessment results might be used and a general wariness about increasing accountability. However, there appeared to be general acceptance that standards and assessments were necessary to increase student learning and accountability.

Across all five districts, strategies for changing instruction and improving scores were being actively explored. For example, some principals spoke of how they had moved grade by grade to get teachers to examine current curriculum and classroom practice. Schools in each of the districts used professional development funds to permit teachers to work through the summer with consultants to help align their curriculum. The state allowed district H to reduce the number of student instructional days by four to increase staff development days so teachers could work on curriculum alignments, portfolio development, and other assessments. However, the use of professional development days is largely determined by individual schools and not all schools have used the days for these purposes.

Assessment and Accountability and Students with Disabilities

General and special education teachers and administrators expressed concern about assessing students with disabilities and being held accountable for their progress. Most teachers appreciated the curricular structure provided by content standards, but the assessments set the performance expectations and teachers generally had doubts about how students with cognitive and/or physical disabilities will meet them. In

district H all students with disabilities are required to be included in statewide assessments and accountability. District B has recently been under increased pressure from the state education agency to include more students with disabilities in the state assessments. Numbers of exemptions from state assessments are now published on the school report cards.

Teachers in district H were generally supportive of the inclusion of students with disabilities in the assessments. Many saw the positive impact assessments had on instruction, but they were also cognizant of the modifications necessary for success of students with special needs. One general education middle school teacher mused, "It's amazing how much knowledge (special education students) do have, and it really wouldn't have been reflected if they had not had the help [to participate in the assessment]."

District M teachers were not overly concerned with either assessments or accountability at this time. However, conversations with district administrators reveal that as the assessments are piloted and become operational, serious discussion about accommodations, and the implications of including of students with disabilities are starting to bubble up in the community. In addition, the SEA recently released a preliminary list and timeline for developing acceptable accommodations for the states assessments being piloted currently.

District W is very informal about the inclusion of students

with disabilities in their assessments. Although a few concerns were expressed by general educators. One administrator noted that, "When you bring that accountability piece into inclusive classes [teachers] all say, 'Accountable to what degree? ". Increasing accountability while increasing the diversity of classrooms was problematic to teachers. A teacher in District W questioned "how to include to enhance accountability yet keep the assessment appropriate for the long term development of the student."

The general philosophy of most general and special education teachers and administrators in district W is to evaluate these students on their improvement or progress as opposed to against a set performance criteria. A parent and several central office administrators supported increased accountability because it pushed teachers and students with disabilities. During the school year prior to the site visit to district W only 18 students with disabilities had been exempted from the high school assessments, and all of these students were participating in the 18-21 year-old community-based transition program.

District D is just beginning to develop its assessments and accountability plan. Staff had few specific concerns about how students with disabilities will participate. Central office administrators indicated that they expect 90% of students with disabilities to fully participate in the assessments. The district has deliberately been very low key and non-threatening about how assessments will be used. They want principals to

become focused on using student performance data for decision making as opposed to becoming fixated on raising scores. However, as the district has become more data-driven, there is evidence that some principals are attempting to "walk away" an expression used by one administrator) from accountability by pointing to students ' socio-economic status or disability as influencing scores. One principal complained to a central office administrator that when a new elementary school was built it captured some of the principal's original attendance area. The redistricting left the principal with an area of "starter homes" and presumably, students with lower SES and lower achievement.

Impact of Increased Accountability

Districts B and H have access to state supported professional networks to develop classroom-based performance assessments. These professional development activities are reportedly promoting greater collaboration between special and general education teachers. Nonetheless, including the students with disabilities in accountability reporting is perceived by most of the interviewees to be the main impetus for increased instructional collaboration. Yet, the characteristics of this collaboration can take many forms. For instance, a special education teacher in an upper elementary cross-categorical classroom for students with high incidence disabilities reported, "We used to teach to the IEP, but this fall [the principal] came in and told me that she wanted me to teach the [language arts

standards.] So, I went down to the primary grades and got their texts and that's what I use."

In contrast, special and general education teachers in district W collaborated around teaching to specific standards. One social studies performance standard required children to prepare a report on a specific aspect of the Middle Ages. The two teachers worked together to help one fifth grader with a serious learning disability in reading and writing a research report on knighthood using CD-roms and other materials. That child prepared his report using multi-media software. The teachers expressed amazement at facts and concepts the student had mastered.

Assessment Accommodations

All five districts permitted students with disabilities to receive assessment accommodations. Four of the districts (districts B,D,H,M) were in states that provided comprehensive state guidelines for accommodation. District W has no guidelines. Regardless of the specificity of state guidelines, individual assessment accommodation decisions are made at the school level through the IEP process or by a building team. Two of the districts require that accommodations be noted on the IEPs, one district "flags" assessment results when certain accommodations are considered to change the nature of the test. For example, large print assessments would not be flagged but extended time would be.

There is no evidence that decisions to provide an assessment

accommodation are scrutinized nor are individuals or teams held accountable for the decisions. Several teachers noted that accommodation decisions were unsystematic and varied widely among students with similar disabilities and functional abilities. However, all teachers generally believed that accommodations were critical to "even the playing field" and "help" the child. Their concerns appear to be centered more around the welfare of the child than raising scores. Nonetheless, the overriding goal of assessment accommodations was to include more students with disabilities in the assessments. In fact, inclusion in assessments appeared to be an end as opposed to the means to achieve greater accountability for student learning. In other words, it was good to test all of the students, but maybe not as good to report the scores or be held accountable for them. Issues related to the impact of accommodations on assessment validity were rarely mentioned by assessment directors.

Given the variability across districts in the implementation of new assessments and accountability mechanisms, it is difficult to identify prevalent themes. However, one message is that what is measured gets taught and that assessments are a powerful tool for implementing the standards and focusing the resources of a school and district.

Changing Governance Structures

Four of the five case study sites had instituted site-based management (SBM) models in their schools. This reflects a national trend toward decentralization of school management and

the devolution of fiscal and programmatic decision making to individual school sites. Site-based management is among the most widely adopted school improvement strategies. While not new, SBM greatly expanded during the mid-1980s such that over a third of the nation's schools, including the 10 largest, had implemented these new governance models by 1990 (Cawelti, 1994). In addition to the 33 percent of surveyed schools that were using site-based management regularly, another 33 percent had partially implemented the structure.

Typically, SBM transfers authority to local school sites and requires that principals, teachers, parents, community members, and occasionally students make critical decisions about budgets, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and professional development. Yet, schools and school districts differ widely in terms of how much authority is divested to schools and how able and willing local buildings are to assume more control over important decisions.

Malen and her colleagues (Malen, 1994; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990) identified three predominant theories concerning how SBM contributes to school improvement. Governance theory contends that SBM permits teachers and building administrators to have substantial influence over defining and shaping policies thus reducing the barriers between policy and practice. Organizational renewal theories support SBM for the effects on staff morale and motivation which should promote greater innovation and risk taking. The effective schools theory assumes

that increasing school autonomy will increase the probability that building leadership will be enhanced and effective practices implemented. The extensive research on the outcomes of SBM is mixed. For example, some studies have found greater innovation in school practices (GAO, 1994). Other research, however, concluded SBM has limited effect on changing control and authority at the school level (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

Research related to the impacts of SBM and special education is very limited (see Raab, 1993; Schofield, 1996. These programs and the students with disabilities who are served by them have largely been ignored in the evaluations and discussions of SBM. Several reasons for this inattention have been suggested including the highly regulated nature of special education programs and the traditional separation between special and general education programs.

Local Context

Among the four local districts that were formally implementing SBM, only district B had begun the process in the last several years. The other three districts, D, M, and H, had begun the process between 5 and 10 years ago. District W, while not formally implementing SBM, is small and has always had participatory management and strong community involvement. Principals and teachers in that district agree that they are "empowered" and are included in various strategic planning activities and committees at the district and school levels and do not need formal site-based management procedures. Districts

M and H both had former superintendents who had instituted SBM almost a decade ago. Administrators and staff in both districts believed that the primary reason that their district had become known throughout the state as reform-oriented is because of the their early involvement with SBM. District H now has a state-mandate that requires site-based decisionmaking in every school and specifies who must participate as well as the boundaries of decision making. District D has both a local and state-required site-based team within each school, though some schools have merged these teams. The district administration encourages wide community involvement in all decisions, including day-to-day operational decisions. The district also has a very flat central office organization. Key central administrators include the superintendent and three assistant superintendents. Each of the latter is also the director of one of the 3 administrative areas. They support and supervise principals in their respective areas and collaboration and shared decision making occur naturally.

Impacts of Site-Based Decisionmaking

Consistent with other SBM research, there was wide variation across schools in how site-based governance was being implemented and its perceived impacts. District H had the most comprehensive set of guidelines as well as the clearest mandate regarding which decisions belonged totally to school teams. District B had a set of procedures regarding when teams must meet and how members are selected. Decision-making authority was unclear and many of the

principals and teachers interviewed had conflicting opinions about what the teams should and could do. District D defined which decisions were central and which belonged to individual schools and granted them significant latitude in determining composition of site councils, election proceedings, terms, and service requirements. However, District D expected broad community involvement and stressed consensus over voting. District M implemented site-based decision making more than 7 years ago. It has evolved over the years to what the district currently characterized as "shared decision making", however, there is little or no community or parent input. One teacher explained the evolution:

> It got to the point where we really had to start sifting out what was important for the - what were teacher decisions and what were principal decisions. And it almost went to the side where teachers had to make every decision and all the meetings were long and they were drawn out. And then we started thinking....Why are we making all these decisions? We had to start deciding, okay, what's important to hand back over to the principal? What should be teacher? What should go out to committees?

One administrator noted the school level impact of shared decision making: "So every school that you go to in this district has its own flavor. And [the school] kind of developed in its own way according to what it saw as its needs."

In general, all schools within these districts had broad

decision making powers in areas related to the organization of curriculum and instruction, staffing, and professional development. All four SBM districts had a district curriculum and/or standards that guided what knowledge and skills students were expected to attain, but schools could decide how they wanted to implement that curriculum. This included how classrooms were organized, which texts and materials to use, etc. Hiring and other staffing decisions also could be made by local schools; however, all districts had some level of central office control over determining eligibility for a position and/or making the final offer. Budget and staffing decisions were also left to local schools, with some restrictions, as were professional development issues.

Individual school site councils differed in terms of their structure and how much control they wanted to assume. A common complaint from administrators and teachers was the amount of time and energy spent on making decisions and the inability to keep teachers engaged in the whole SBM process. In one case, teachers were not interested in participating in certain aspects of school governance. District M principals found that "after two years of (budgeting) the staff decided that we needed a budget committee. They would do the budget, and the staff and I would review it. And that's where we are now. We didn't have anybody sign up for the budget committee (this year)."

Another major issue identified by a number of teachers was the lack of leadership or "over-control" on the part of the

building principal. Some principals were reluctant participants, believing that they could make decisions, particularly budgetary, quicker and with the same results as the site council. Some teachers in schools in almost every district were particularly angry and frustrated by instances of having reached a decision only to see no follow through on the part of the administrator.

Only district D had invested in extensive training for its school councils. This district provided six days of site counsel training for all of its teams and stressed teams and consensus building. District H had a state mandate that site council members participate in a total of six hours of training. Other districts reportedly offered training, but it was not mandated nor did teams routinely participate. In these districts, teams were introduced to SBM through the policy or procedures manuals that typically describe composition and selection of council members and decision authority. Councils had relatively little orientation to budget or staff issues and virtually no awareness of special education policies.

Deciding which professional development activities to support was one decision that all school councils seemed to welcome. Developing professional development goals and agendas were among the more common decisions reportedly made by site councils. Teachers reportedly feel more ownership for the professional development activities when they have a say in choosing them, and principals appeared generally positive about these responsibilities.

Where local schools control their professional development agendas and resources, central office staff become brokers and facilitators who help create opportunities for professional development such as organizing workshops or seminars or helping to identify consultants. However, these activities are offered as part of a menu and not a mandate. This sometimes frustrates central office administrators who say that they have few opportunities to get all of the teachers or principals together so "they can all hear the same information." Individual school councils do appear to respond to larger district goals when they develop professional development agendas. This is most evident in districts that are implementing standards and assessments. Many principals spoke of how they were focusing their total professional development resources on aligning the various grade level or subject matter curriculum with standards. In districts that were just beginning the standards implementation process, there appeared to be more variability among schools in terms of professional development goals. Some focused solely on special projects or other seemingly isolated initiatives.

Students with Disabilities and Site-Based Management

As noted above, site councils had no formal training in the area of special education policy or current practices. Some site councils had a special education teacher as a member; few had parents of students with disabilities. Decisions relating to special education are rarely made by site councils primarily for four reasons: special education is not a priority for councils

which often are responding to more pressing issues such as curriculum decisions, staffing, or budgets; SBM council members lack knowledge and confidence in their decision making in this area; the council is not clear about who has responsibility for making which special education decisions (e.g., central office or school site); and site councils lack of special education advocates.

There were instances in two districts of school site councils deciding how special education inclusion would be implemented. In one instance, the council made the decision to cluster all special education students in specific classrooms so that the special education teachers would be able to co-teach with the general educators for extended blocks of time. This decision was not supported by the local special education director who felt that students with disabilities might be better served if distributed across all general education classes. The lack of control over the professional development agenda and programs were common concerns voice by some special education directors. The directors fear that the specialized professional development needs of special educators will be secondary to those of the other classroom teachers in a school building. Although it does appear that special educators participate fully in a school's professional development program, they may apparently "opt out" if they do not consider the topic relevant to "their" students.

In district M, special education decisions made by the

informal school site councils are "monitored" by the central administration which strives to maintain what it characterized as a "consultant" type relationship. According to one special education administrator, "We went out and we said, `Hey, we're not going to tell you what to do, but these are some of the parameters you have to operate within." The parameters were primarily driven by state and federal regulations for students with disabilities. Teachers in district M perceive that building level control of special education decisions had a positive effect upon teachers and administrators. One teacher commented: " What that got for our children with disabilities was ownership of those students and their programs."

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has presented selected findings obtained from case studies of educational reforms implemented in 5 local school districts. The reform areas selected for review are among the more prominent initiatives being implemented within the local districts. However, they are not the only school-improvement efforts underway. For example, special educators within each of the districts were almost uniformly focused on how to create more inclusive classrooms. These special education efforts were generally separated from the overall reform agenda and were concentrated on placement of students with disabilities. In addition, state level initiatives to reduce numbers of students being identified as eligible for special education have also led to changes in special education programs and services in

districts M and W.

During the site visits the researchers were directed to inclusive classrooms and received a great deal of information about various general and special education collaboration models that were being implemented. Yet, there was little discussion about how this collaboration related to larger issues of inclusion of students with disabilities in curriculum and assessments. In only one district had special education personnel begun to critically examine the IEP processes and forms to determine how to align these with new standards and assessments.

There was great variability among special education directors in terms of their level of knowledge of standards, assessments, and other district reform initiatives. Special education administrators appeared to be consumed with a number of issues specific to students with disabilities that may or may not relate to larger system reforms. Further, it was not clear whether or to what degree some special education directors wanted to be involved in implementing the larger system reforms.

Moreover, special education 's endorsement or opposition to a specific initiative appeared to have little influence on the direction that a reform might take. Larger political and professional forces are shaping what standards look like and how assessments will be used to insure greater school accountability. The attention to students with disabilities in this decisionmaking process varied across the five states and local districts. Four of the five sites had specific guidelines or

statements regarding how a student with a disability would be expected to participate. However, the implementation of the guidelines, such as when a student is exempted from an assessment, or given an assessment accommodation, or when a standard is modified, is very much under the control of special education teachers in local school buildings who are operating with little or no accountability for their decisions.

The reforms have also been implemented within the districts at different times for different reasons. As noted earlier, two districts had implemented site-based management during the 1980's under previous superintendents. Local school autonomy in these districts had resulted in extreme variability among schools in curricular focus, texts, and materials. With the arrival of state standards and assessments, central office administrators were struggling with how to reassert their roles as curriculum directors to insure that individual schools were aligning their instruction and textbooks with the standards. Some schools were moving quickly to change curriculum, textbooks, and provide opportunities for teachers to learn how to teach to the new standards while other schools continued "business as usual" with minimal and/or isolated changes (e.g., encouraging teachers to use cooperative learning strategies) in their instructional programs. Depending on individual schools to determine how they would incorporate the standards into their instructional practices appears to exacerbate inequities across schools.

The lack of authority over individual schools appeared even

more trying for special education directors who wanted to maintain consistency across schools in the types of programs and procedures and also wanted to insure that their staff was not ignored in the site-based governance process. The directors in several districts expressed frustration at having no influence over the decisions of the site-based councils. While no single director specifically addressed this issue in relation to standards, assessment, or accountability, it does cause one to question how effective various state or district guidelines and policies concerning participation of students with disabilities in standards-based reform will be. Without accountability for key decisions such as those discussed above, it is unlikely that teachers or IEP teams will implement the policies consistently.

A major question raised by these case studies is whether or not standards-based reform "works" for students with disabilities. Obviously, there is no definitive answer. Much depends on how the reforms are defined and implemented: what are the standards; how will student performance be measured; and who will be held accountable for meeting them? These decisions are made even more difficult by the extreme heterogeneity among the population of students with disabilities who are eligible to receive special education and related services or are entitled to certain reasonable accommodations in their educational programs. Evidence derived from these case studies does point to some issues that should be considered in the decisionmaking process, such as who should make decisions to include or modify and how

the decisions can be applied more systematically. Current policies or proclamations regarding full participation of students with disabilities need to be examined and interpreted for building staff and parents to ensure that individuals know how to prioritize individual educational goals and allocate scarce instructional time as well as other resources. However, even with the numerous implementation issues, the overall tone of teacher and administrator comments related to standards, assessments, and accountability was positive.

This study has begun to identify key questions and issues for general and special education policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents regarding how to implement the concept of challenging standards and increased public accountability for all students. Many of the issues addressed in this paper likely have implications for a number of other students who may have unique or more intensive instructional needs. While the cases studies do not specifically address those populations of students, a number of times individuals would comment on how an issue raised during an interview was equally if not more critical for other students experiencing learning problems. In order for educational reforms such as those described in this paper to address the needs of all students, their effects on student achievement as well as school processes need to be closely examined and revised as needed.

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