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ABSTRACT

Based on an April 1998 conference, this EdSource report focuses on what several prominent education experts and school district superintendents perceive as the primary challenges and opportunities faced by California's school accountability movement. Gerald Hayward, a policy analyst, believes that any proposed accountability system should be based on clear, rigorous standards, aligned with teacher preparation and curriculum materials, and be accompanied by positive and negative consequences. Michael Kirst, professor and policy analyst, is wary of top-down systems imposed on teachers and sees internal accountability and capacity building as essential elements. Elaine Johnson, a teacher expert, fears accountability's use as a club to beat up teachers and believes society also must be held accountable for creating an inhospitable atmosphere for public education. Improved professional development would be more effective than a behaviorist, carrot-and-stick approach. Scot Hill, a standards expert, emphasizes the importance of establishing world-class academic standards and developing a well-thought-out assessment system like STAR, California's new Standardized Testing and Reporting Program. Three superintendents, frustrated with state education policies, want better staff development and more resources for California's schools. Consensus is still needed on many difficult questions. (MLH)

REPORT

June 1998

ED 421 792

EdSource

Clarifying Complex Education Issues

Shifting the Focus to Learning: California's Accountability Debates

State Experts Discuss How Accountability Can Improve Student Achievement

The views presented here belong to the speakers at the April 1998 EdSource Conference, "Shifting the Focus to Learning: California's Accountability Debates." They do not necessarily reflect the perspective of EdSource, its board, or its funders.

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Shifting the Focus to Learning: California's Accountability Debates

State Experts Discuss How Accountability Can Improve Student Achievement

The notion that schools should be held directly responsible for improving student achievement — and should be rewarded or sanctioned for their ability or lack of ability to do so — is taking both California and the nation by storm.

Much of the recent statewide interest, and controversy, regarding school accountability issues has been generated by the fall 1997 release of the report "Steering by Results," authored by the California Rewards and Interventions Committee. The report contains a number of "high stakes" accountability proposals aimed at improving the effectiveness of public education in California.

The Committee's proposals — and the state's accountability movement in general — are intended to drive the improvement of California's public schools. This is in part a reaction to growing concern over the performance of California schools, exemplified by low test scores, student apathy, and poor national rankings. Of course, as state education experts point out, attempts to improve schools with both incentives and sanctions are decades old. But past efforts tended to focus on compliance with laws and institutional policies: schools, for instance, have to offer certain programs and ensure that students receive a specified minimum number of instructional minutes.

The current school accountability effort differs in that it is concerned not with inputs, but with outputs. In theory, schools, teachers, and students would be assessed not on courses taught and taken, but on demonstrable results in terms of student academic performance. This performance would be evaluated, if the Committee's recommendations were to be enacted, by the scores students achieve on a test based on California's new academic standards.

This EdSource report focuses on what several prominent education experts and school district superintendents perceive as the primary challenges and opportunities faced by the current school accountability movement in California. The discussion, as summarized below, took place at the April 1998 EdSource conference entitled "Shifting the Focus to Learning: California's Accountability Debates."

An Overview of a Proposed Accountability System for California

***Gerald Hayward** is the Co-Director of Policy Analysis for California Education, and was a member of the California Rewards and Interventions Committee. A long-time participant in California's education policy debates, Hayward here provides background on the development of "Steering by Results" as well as some caveats regarding the ability of accountability systems to improve academic achievement.*

Accountability Is "Extraordinarily Complex"

"Accountability is a hot topic these days," Hayward asserted, noting that all but a handful of states have developed or are in the process of developing school accountability systems. In California, the subject has been generating intense debate. "The governor and all of the gubernatorial candidates have accountability high on their list of reforms that they think need

to happen in California, and there is a kind of growing impatience in the Legislature about getting on with this accountability effort."

But Hayward cautioned the audience that the subject of school accountability is "extraordinarily complex." Educators and policymakers need to press forward, but they also need to realize that any accountability system is bound to have imperfections and require ongoing adjustments. And they are going to have to grapple with the fact that implementing an effective accountability system would take a lot of time and money — perhaps as long as ten years and hundreds of millions of dollars — and hence would demand "a level of understanding and depth of commitment that is rare in California." Hayward hoped that California, which he termed the "quick fix state," could muster the patience to work through complex accountability issues.

Accountability Basics

Hayward outlined a few key issues that any proposed accountability system would have to address. First of all, it requires that clear and rigorous academic standards be put in place so that teachers clearly understand the knowledge and skills they must teach and students must learn. Then follows the arduous business of aligning teacher preparation, curriculum materials, and assessments with the standards — a task Hayward described as "a bit like flying and building an airplane at the same time, because all of these things are in different stages of progress." Once these are done, consequences — both positive and negative — must be established for students and schools in regard to their performance on standards-based assessments.

As if all of this were not challenging enough, Hayward added that there "needs to be a way to adjust the system as we go along." Flexibility is essential, because it is impossible to say for certain just what aspects of the system would work and which would need repair.

The Committee's Recommendations

Hayward summarized the recommendations of the Rewards and Interventions Committee, which are currently before the California Legislature. The central recommendation urges that schools be evaluated by a single-number performance index based on the results of a new statewide assessment aligned with the standards. High-performing schools, as well as those demonstrating progress toward meeting the standards, would be eligible for a number of rewards, including cash bonuses. Low-performing schools would face interventions designed to "assist schools in need of improvement." Schools failing to improve, even after receiving additional resources and expert assistance, could be subject to a state takeover or even school closure.

The Committee recommends that a school be considered to have met performance goals

CALIFORNIA'S CURRENT TESTING SYSTEM

From 1995 to 1997 about half of California's school districts participated in voluntary basic skills testing by choosing and administering one of over 60 State Board of Education-approved tests. The tests provided individual student scores, but the variety of different tests made statewide comparisons impossible. In an attempt to rectify this situation, the governor signed into law a new student testing program called STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting Program) which requires all California school districts to administer the Stanford 9 basic skills test to all students in Grades 2-11. The test was first taken by students in the spring of 1998; results will be released June 30 to school districts, the news media, and posted on the Internet. School districts must provide individual student score reports to each family within 20 working days of receiving them.

STAR will enable parents to get an idea of how their children's grasp of basic skills compares with that of students in other states and other California school districts. However, STAR has its limits, too. The Stanford 9 is necessarily narrow in scope in that it is a minimal competency test of basic knowledge and skills. Some teachers have complained that there is no clear relationship between the Stanford 9 test and what they actually teach. Other observers voice concern about the fact that the test does not reflect California's new academic standards.

when 90% of its students reach or exceed grade-level standards. But that, Hayward emphasized, "will be a long-term goal for schools in California." Schools will also be evaluated on their ability to meet short-term growth targets in academic achievement.

Any accountability system, regardless of how well-thought-out it may be, would likely encounter a major hurdle, Hayward said. Students as well as schools need to be held accountable for student performance, and the logical way to do that is with a test. But the best test for determining how schools are doing is a comprehensive matrix sample test based on California's new K-12 academic standards. Individual student scores would not be available from this type of test. Yet a student-centered test, which provides individual scores, would not be able to capture the more comprehensive scope of standards-based tests. "This is one of the dilemmas that has to be worked out," Hayward concluded.

The Travails of Putting an Effective Accountability System in Place

Michael Kirst, a professor at Stanford University, is also Co-Director of Policy Analysis for California Education. Kirst, who has studied school accountability systems across the country, explains that even the most well-conceived system will fail unless it achieves "buy-in" from those at the school site.

Past Attempts in California

"If school accountability is such a good idea and if we can make it work so easily," asked Kirst as he began his presentation, "why don't we have more accountability now than we did 35 years ago, 70 years ago, or 100 years ago?"

It is not, he pointed out, as if the idea of making schools and students more accountable has never been tried before. Californians have seen come and go an array of attempts at accountability, including California's "Cash for CAPs" program of the 1980s and the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) of the early '90s. "California has been a living laboratory [of attempts at accountability]. We pick up accountability devices, discard them, pick them up again, discard them, and occasionally when we have memory lapses we recycle the old ones and bring them back to be new ones."

Too Many Accountability Systems Are Top-level Down

So why do even the most well-intended accountability systems tend to misfire? Kirst mentioned a plethora of reasons, including a "Babel" of unaligned standards, the lack of good assessment instruments, and a failure to build the capacity of the teachers and school leaders charged with implementing the system. But perhaps the biggest obstacle of all is the tendency of accountability systems to function "from the top level down, without a sufficient buy-in from the bottom level."

Elaborating further, Kirst said that accountability systems have typically been "imposed" on teachers, who are unlikely to be committed to a system that they had no role in creating. The creators of such systems — usually policymakers far removed from classrooms — perceive teachers as having the motivations of "piecework insurance salesmen who are out there selling on commission, hoping to get a kind of reward from either the district or state."

Kirst sees this as a radical misread of most teachers' real motivations, which focus not on external rewards but on "their own satisfaction at seeing their students succeed." An accountability system that ignores this intrinsic motivation is likely in turn to be ignored by teachers who will remain in the classrooms doing "their own thing."

The Importance of Internal Accountability

Consequently, if an accountability system really has a chance of working it must "build internal accountability that will match external accountability." Kirst believes that a system of rewards and sanctions means

little if it does not address issues for which teachers feel personally responsible, or "internally accountable."

To exemplify this point, he mentioned the Stanford 9 test — the basic skills test being administered this year to all California public school students in Grades 2-11 as part of the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) program. (See box, page 2.) "If this test were to work really well, if teachers were to think it really important, the internal teacher would say, 'This is really what I want to gear my instruction for. This is what I'm here for in part, and I really want to do this.'"

Unfortunately, teachers are rarely able to "internalize" a test or accountability system in this kind of committed manner. Kirst again used the Stanford 9 test as an example, under which teachers are asked to sign a form attesting that they can be trusted not to breach security. "Teachers are calling up saying, 'What's this security thing? That we won't divulge results and tamper with it?' Is this the way you get internal buy-in? This troubles me."

TEXAS-SIZED ACHIEVEMENTS IN ACCOUNTABILITY

The centerpiece of the Texas school accountability system is TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), a minimum competency test first administered in 1993 to all public school systems in grades 3 through 8 and 10. In 1994, 55% of Texas students passed TAAS; in 1997 that rate jumped to 74%. Minority student gains have been even more dramatic. In that three-year span, passing rates of African-American and Hispanic students have increased by over 20 percentage points. Texas students have also made dramatic gains on the respected NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) exams, suggesting that TAAS gains reflect genuine academic progress and not just test-taking familiarity.

TAAS is a "high-stakes" test. The test scores are combined with dropout rates and attendance data to rate most of the state's 6,875 schools and 1,060 districts on a one to four scale. High achieving, or "exemplary" schools, are eligible for cash rewards. "Low-performing" schools not meeting minimum state expectations are assigned academic coaches; if they do not demonstrate improvement they are subject to possible state takeover.

A recent article in Education Week reports that 34 districts and 267 schools in Texas were described as "low performing" in 1995; only four districts and 67 schools were labeled as such last year. The article also describes students as so concerned about TAAS that student-athletes "swap" their test scores the way they do their race times.

Building Capacity

"Most accountability systems," Kirst asserted, "have come in and said, 'We're going to hold you accountable and here are the results you need to achieve.' They assume that the people working in the school systems already have the capacity to perform to the level of the accountability system they're putting in place."

Kirst believes this to be a mistake. He said that California's new academic standards, for which schools and students would be accountable, are currently beyond the reach of many teachers. A workable accountability system based on the standards would require that teachers acquire a much deeper knowledge of subject matter and how to teach it.

This in turn would demand a much different and more comprehensive idea of staff development. "Right now staff development is often eight scattered days, not very much in depth, with very little coaching and follow-up. And so the theory is that school people can already do this; they just have to be nudged, 'incentivized,' and kicked in the rear to get there. There's little realization of the need for a commensurate increase in staff building."

Pointed Concerns

For all of the less than startling successes of past accountability systems, Kirst said that developing and putting one in place is an important and achievable goal. After all, states such as Kentucky and Texas have done just that, and Texas approaches California in terms of size and complexity. The teachers in these states, Kirst claimed, have managed to "internalize" the standards and assessments — they think them important measures of student achievement. That is what needs to happen in California. "Texas is leaving us in the dust in terms of results on any kind of student assessment you want to mention."

Kirst expressed pointed concerns about some of the recommendations of the Rewards and Interventions Committee. He wondered, for instance, if teachers would be able to internalize the academic index, based on a single number, that would be used to drive the proposed system. He worried about there being "sufficient capacity building" for teachers to be able to master the

content and skills contained in the rigorous standards that have been proposed in California.

Finally, Kirst pointed to the age-old problem of students and teachers simply becoming better at taking any particular test over time. "The first time students see it they don't do well, but when you give them the test again and again the teachers learn to teach more to it, so that the results go up. So how much of the progress is kids really learning, and how much of it is teaching to the test? This is one of many difficult, complex issues."

Teachers' Concerns about the Accountability Movement

Elaine Johnson is Past-President of the California Council on the Education of Teachers and Assistant to the President for the California Federation of Teachers. There is an enormous gap, Johnson says, between how policymakers and those most directly responsible for students conceive of accountability. Here Johnson, a former teacher and expert in teacher education issues, talks about the nature of that gap and how it must be bridged.

Accepting Responsibility

Several teachers have expressed their belief to Johnson that "accountability is used as a club to beat up teachers." Somewhat taken aback by the intensity of their feelings, she asked for clarification and learned that what really bothered them was the "COUNT" part of the word, "ac-COUNT-ability." Teachers feared that policymakers were focusing solely upon the quantitative aspects of schooling, as if education were a business with test scores functioning as a kind of profit-and-loss statement.

"My dictionary tells me that the word 'accountability' comes from the Latin meaning 'to compute,'" Johnson said, "but the first synonym given is 'responsible.' I much prefer this word. Teachers have certain responsibilities and want to fulfill them. These responsibilities go far beyond any arid tallying of test scores, especially when so many California students can't read in the language of the test."

Society Must Be Held Accountable Too

It was not that teachers should not be held accountable for improving student achievement, Johnson emphasized. Of course they should. But she felt it unfair to hold teachers responsible for so many of public education's failings when society — particularly in California — had created an inhospitable atmosphere for public education.

Johnson pointed to the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 which, along with changing demographics, resulted in inadequate funding for the state's public schools. "Money doesn't solve every problem. But insufficient money, which has been the real-life context for California education for the past 20 years, creates and perpetuates many problems."

Furthermore, Californians need to understand that "accountability is contextual" — student achievement is not always within a teacher's control, especially in areas where gangs and crime are an everyday fact of life. In some schools, "It's a measure of something if the students keep coming to school in one piece."

Teachers Are Accountable for Much More than Academic Achievement

"The primary responsibility of any teacher involves the curriculum," Johnson asserted. But she added, to the applause of an approving audience, that teachers are also accountable for "the affective or psychological part" of a child and his or her education.

Johnson referred to the recent movie "Good Will Hunting," in which the main character is a confused genius who must overcome emotional afflictions before he can succeed. "If a student, no matter how brilliant, has severe psychological barriers to learning, he can't perform. At the risk of sounding like a touchy-feely Marin dweller, I submit that teachers' professional preparation, induction, and development must acknowledge the importance of emo-

tional development. We have to rethink the place of emotion in all aspects of learning, and add psychological awareness to the list of things for which we hold teachers responsible."

Rather than trying to make teachers more accountable with a bluntly behaviorist carrot-and-stick approach, it would be far more effective to provide teachers with more and better professional development and support.

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS FOR THE TEACHING PROFESSION

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has adopted professional standards that will guide teacher preparation programs and new teacher assessments. These standards are organized around six interrelated categories of teaching practice:

- Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning
- Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning
- Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter for Student Learning
- Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students
- Assessing Student Learning
- Developing as a Professional Educator

The fact of the matter is that teachers are responsible for all kinds of things besides student academic achievement, including responsibility to colleagues, to their school communities, and to subject matter departments. Johnson's list did not include basic skills tests, which she deemed inadequate both for assessing students and judging a teacher's performance. "The complexity of teaching and learning cannot come through in a single snapshot of mastery over a narrow slice of subject matter. A teacher would understandably feel demeaned by such a judgment, especially if the test given made no effort to connect what the test measured to what the school taught." This, she concluded, is exactly the problem with the state's STAR testing program — it features a multiple-choice basic skills test that does not necessarily connect with what teachers actually teach.

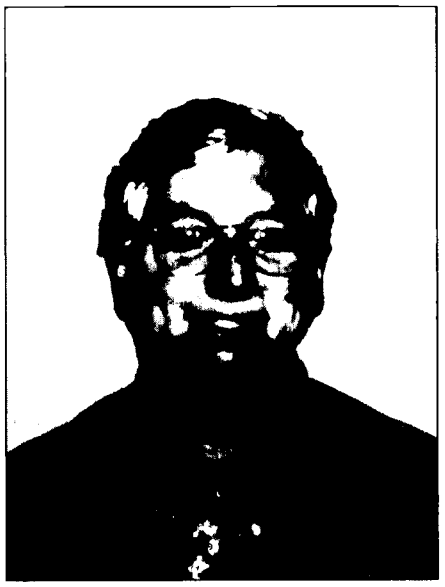
The Right Way to Make Teachers More Accountable

Rather than trying to make teachers more accountable with a bluntly behaviorist carrot-and-stick approach, it would be far more effective to provide teachers with more and better professional development and support. After all, Johnson said, "No one wakes up in the morning and says, 'Ah, I think I'll go to school and just do a terrible job of teaching today.'"

Like Kirst, Johnson emphasized the capacity building aspects of accountability — teachers must have intensive preparation both in subject matter and in how to teach it. Unfortunately, this is not happening except in a few pockets here and there. "One of our problems arises from our attitude that everyone can become a teacher, that if a person wants to, that person should be able to teach. And so we have the present laws which allow people to enter the classroom with a waiver or emergency credential. Until we say, 'We're not going to let this happen' we're going to have serious problems of teachers going into classrooms who can't know what they're doing because they haven't had adequate preparation."

Johnson does see some hopeful signs on the horizon in terms of helping teachers define, develop, and refine their craft. She mentioned the development and widespread endorsement of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, formulated by the California Department of Education, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and several other interested groups and individuals. These standards reflect "increasing agreement about what an effective teacher knows and can do." The peer review system in the Poway District near San Diego encourages experienced teachers to serve as consultants, helping others improve their practice. And recommendations proposed by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing would, among other things, provide new forms of mentoring and support for beginning teachers.

Standards: The Foundation Upon which Accountability Is Built



Scott Hill is Executive Director of the Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards. Hill believes that California's new K-12 academic standards, which the Commission developed, are as rigorous as any state's. But meeting them, he argues, will require a concerted effort by policymakers and educators to align standards, curriculum, assessment, and teacher preparation.

California Progresses

All of the speakers agreed that no effective accountability system could be established until academic standards were put in place. Hill updated the audience on the substantial progress that is being made on this front. The math and English/language arts standards were approved by the State Board of Education in December, and first drafts of the history and science standards have just been completed. Nevertheless, Hill emphasized that it would probably take five to ten years to fully implement the standards so that both classroom instruction and assessments are aligned with them.

Developing Rigorous, World Class Standards Is the Goal

The crucial question in regard to developing standards is, "Where do you set the bar in terms of expectations for all students?" Hill answered by saying that the Commission was bound by legislation (AB 265) demanding that high expectations be set for all kids. "We must assume that if the kids of our international competitors can do it [meet high standards], if students in Texas and Virginia can do it, then our kids can do it, too."

Hill provided several specific examples of what the new standards contain in the major content areas. In the 4th grade, for instance, students would begin studying fundamental aspects of geometry using two-dimensional coordinate grids; in history, students would describe the basic principles of American democracy. All of this, "is pretty heady stuff for a fourth grader."

Standards Are only the Beginning

Enthusiastic as Hill is about the new standards, he readily acknowledged that "standards alone are not going to change the system. While they set forth an absolute body of skills and knowledge for all students to learn, they

EXAMPLES FROM CALIFORNIA'S NEW STANDARDS

Mathematics — Measurement and Geometry

1st Grade: Students identify common geometric figures, classify them by common attributes, and describe their relative position/or their location in space.

5th Grade: Students identify, describe, draw, and classify properties of, and relationships between, plane and solid geometric figures.

Geometry (high school): Students provide and solve problems regarding relationships among chords, secants, tangents, inscribed angles, and inscribed and circumscribed polygons of circles.

Language Arts — Reading Comprehension

1st Grade: Students draw upon a variety of comprehension strategies as needed, including generating and responding to essential questions, making predictions, and comparing information from several sources.

5th Grade: Students discern main ideas and concepts presented in texts, identifying and assessing evidence that supports these ideas.

8th Grade: Students compare original text to a summary for accuracy of the main ideas, inclusion of critical details, and the extent to which it conveys the underlying meaning of the original text.

11th/12th Grade: Students analyze how clarity is affected by the patterns of organization, hierarchical structures, repetition of key ideas, syntax, and word choice in text.

Adopted by the State Board of Education, December 1998

say nothing about the capacity and willingness of parents, students, teachers, and schools to meet the standards."

"Standards are very dispassionate about teacher preparation," Hill said. "Standards are very dispassionate about school finance. And standards are very dispassionate about whether you already have enough textbooks in your classroom. It doesn't matter to a standard what follows it; getting the standard down is only the first step.

"The critical next step must be to develop a well-thought-out assessment system based on the standards, a process sure to be long and complex. This year we've got STAR, next year we're going to have STAR PLUS which will include additional questions based on the new standards. The year after that we may have a matrix test for a sample of students in language arts and math . . . . And then my guess is that we're going to keep going down the road of doing more and more complex evaluations."

"Assessment is an absolute mess in this state. The fact of the matter is that our assessment system is going to look different every year for the next ten years, and that's going to set a lot of people up for significant problems."

Hill's overall message echoed Hayward's: it will take a great deal of forbearance over a period of many years to bring about a coherent and complete system of standards and assessments in California.

How Can Students Be Held Accountable for the Standards?

Once standards and assessments tied to them are firmly established, a couple of very difficult questions would yet remain. Should students, teachers, and schools be evaluated on their ability to meet the standards? Or should they be evaluated on the progress they make towards meeting the standards?

A show of hands from the audience suggested that most of them felt progress towards meeting the standards is more important than meeting them in absolute terms. Hill agreed in the sense that teachers and schools should be accountable for students making progress toward the standards. But he also made it clear that he believes students must be held absolutely accountable for meeting some reasonable level of proficiency with the standards at some point in time.

But regardless of what position someone takes on this issue, Hill averred, accountability has to mean holding teachers, students, and schools responsible for the results. "I would submit to every one of you, what good is an accountability system if you're not going to hold somebody accountable? If you're not willing to say, 'You know what? I'm going to be hard-nosed on this stuff,' then when are we going to do it? That becomes the critical issue."

Figuring out just how to hold students responsible for meeting the standards is guaranteed to generate intense debate. Already, Hill said, legislators were formulating different positions with very different implications. For instance, a bill proposed by Assemblywoman Lynne Leach (Assembly Bill 2540) would require that no students be promoted from grades one, two, three, four, seven, or ten until the student has achieved a passing score on an assessment based on the state standards. On the other hand, a bill proposed by Senator Leroy Greene (Senate Bill 1490) would prohibit using the results from such assessments as the sole measure of whether students should be passed on to the next grade.

Such contrasting approaches to accountability raise thorny questions. Is it fair to base an accountability system upon a single test? What other factors might an accountability system incorporate? How much say should teachers have in determining the quality of a student's performance? "The number of policy consequences you must immerse yourself in," Hill concluded, "is really quite staggering."

School Superintendents Speak Out on the School Accountability Movement

CARL COHN

Superintendent

Long Beach Unified

Enrollment, 1996-97	83,038
LEP, 1996-97	30,387
%Free/Reduced Lunch AFDC	36.7%
Ethnicity	
Amer. Ind./Alaskan Native	0.4%
Asian	14.7%
Pacific Islander	2.0%
Filipina	3.3%
Hispanic	39.0%
Black	20.7%
White	19.9%
Base Revenue Limit	$3,759
Total Funds per Student	$5,080

MARCIA PLUMLEIGH

Superintendent

Campbell Union Elementary

Enrollment, 1996-97	7,738
LEP, 1996-97	1,541
%Free/Reduced Lunch AFDC	14.3%
Ethnicity	
Amer. Ind./Alaskan Native	0.3%
Asian	10.1%
Pacific Islander	0.7%
Filipina	1.3%
Hispanic	27.1%
Black	6.7%
White	53.8%
Base Revenue Limit	$3,569
Total Funds per Student	$4,553

RON HOCKWALT

Superintendent

Walnut Valley Unified

Enrollment, 1996-97	14,114
LEP, 1996-97	1,054
%Free/Reduced Lunch AFDC	2.9%
Ethnicity	
Amer. Ind./Alaskan Native	0.0%
Asian	40.1%
Pacific Islander	0.9%
Filipina	5.1%
Hispanic	18.2%
Black	5.8%
White	29.8%
Base Revenue Limit	$3,761
Total Funds per Student	$4,410

While these three superintendents' school districts vary in terms of size and student demographics, they are similar in that all have realized recent gains in student achievement. Furthermore, the superintendents expressed mostly compatible views on issues pertaining to school accountability. All three had made significant strides in putting school accountability systems into place in their own districts, yet they all expressed strong doubts about accountability initiatives brewing at the state level. Carl Cohn summed up their collective attitude when he said, "Give us back the pre-Prop. 13 local control, when Long Beach was a high-wealth school district, and we can do the job."

The Importance of Staff Development

Ron Hockwalt said his Walnut Valley district, located east of Los Angeles, had put standards and assessments in place for all the academic areas, along with grade level expectancies. Specifically, he mentioned careful assessment of reading in Grades 1-3 and a revamped K-8 science program featuring performance-based assessment.

The first two years of the new science program, Hockwalt said, were spent "teaching teachers about science." It was essential that teachers become thoroughly familiar with the subject if they were to improve their teaching in it. Teacher evaluation had to be improved, too, and so several years ago a new system was put in place — a system created largely by the teachers themselves. "Teachers have a lot of options as to how they can be assessed, whether it's doing curriculum projects or working with other teachers collaboratively."

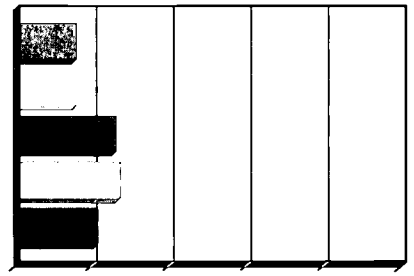
Marcia Plumleigh's Campbell Union Elementary School District, located in the heart of Silicon Valley, had over time seen a changing student profile, with a decline in

MIXED OPINIONS REGARDING ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES: AN EDSOURCE SURVEY

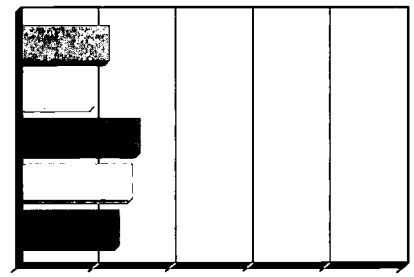
Teachers
Administrator/Board
Parents
Community
EVERYONE

Before the speakers began, a survey of the 461 attendees at EdSource's Northern and Southern California conferences was taken. It revealed that they share a general skepticism regarding some of the key accountability strategies proposed by the Rewards and Interventions Advisory Committee.

FINANCIAL REWARDS TO SCHOOLS

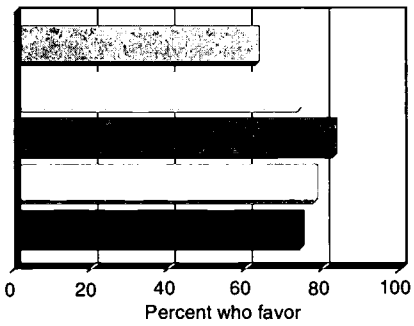


SCHOOL REORGANIZATION OR TAKEOVER

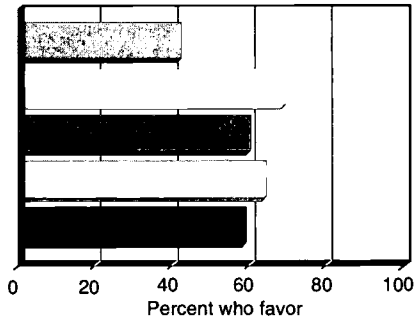


Only 20% think it will be an effective motivator to provide financial rewards to schools for high or improved student performance. And only 25% favor school reorganization or takeover of the poorest performing schools.

HIGH MANDATED ACADEMIC STANDARDS



STATEWIDE STUDENT ASSESSMENT BASED UPON STANDARDS



On the other hand, the survey suggested strong (75%) support among teachers, administrators, parents, and community members for high, mandated academic standards for Grades K-12. And excluding teachers, a strong majority (61%) of conference participants support a statewide student assessment based upon the standards.

Data: EdSource

EdSource 6/98

the proportion of affluent families. As demographics shifted, test scores began to slip, leading to the development over a ten-year period of what eventually became "a full-blown district assessment system." It features a series of performance-based measures of student achievement. Students are assessed on portfolio work, and in 8th grade every student prepares an "exhibition" project which is required for graduation.

Plumleigh agreed with Hockwalt that teachers need extensive staff development if they are going to be accountable for helping children achieve at higher levels. But in the beginning her district tried to cover far too much ground. "We asked ourselves, 'What business are we in?' and we said that we wanted to make sure our students achieve academically. Then we narrowed our focus to literacy for the primary grades, reading for our middle schools, and mathematics."

Interventions in Long Beach

Carl Cohn asserted, "We have very little confidence that the state can really guide this process in a way that makes sense." So his Long Beach district, the third largest in the state, independently developed its own standards, assessments, and professional staff development center. In addition, the district has gained statewide notice with a series of intensive interventions aimed at helping poor-achieving students meet academic benchmarks.

For instance, third graders who are not reading up to grade level must attend a mandatory summer tutorial. Last summer, Cohn said, 60% of 2,000 youngsters in the summer tutorial moved on to 4th grade, reading at grade level. Another intervention will occur in the fall of 1999, when 5th graders who do not meet exit standards in literacy and math will be required to take an intensive reading program or a literacy/math development program.

Perhaps the most dramatic intervention occurs at the end of 8th grade, when students who have received two or more Fs must attend a

year of what the district calls "Long Beach Prep Academy" before going on to high school. "Let me tell you," Cohn commented, "this is the hardest work that we've ever done as a school system, trying to work with youngsters who are used to failing, putting them together in one academic setting, and trying to build a culture of success around that."

Frustration with State Education Politics

The three superintendents are disturbed by a widening gap between educators and politicians in terms of what they think schools need to focus on in order to improve student achievement. Ron Hockwalt pointed out that the talk coming out of Sacramento is often about financial rewards and school takeovers, things that educators think would have little efficacy. Cohn seconded this point of view, referring to a state takeover of the Compton School District that has, in his opinion, so far accomplished little.

"I really believe that if the state is serious about improving schools," Cohn said, "the state would talk about a serious effort at a significant return to local control, to stop all of the 'gotcha' mentality, the sound-bite mentality. The other thing is that voters have to stop electing people who pander to popular prejudice. As long as that goes on, I'm not confident that the state will get it right."

Marcia Plumleigh supported the idea of statewide academic standards and assessments, but was concerned about what would happen in the ten-year period Scott Hill said it could take to fully implement such a system. "My fear is that we're going to have a heck of a lot of kid casualties littering the playing field. And I'm very concerned about the state not looking at what we're doing at the school level so that we can work through that ten-year process with them instead of having consequences laid on us immediately."

More Resources for California Schools Are Essential

The superintendents claimed that it was an injustice for the state to demand more accountability from the schools without providing them with the resources they need to fully address student achievement. "If anybody tells you that money doesn't make a difference, they don't know what they're talking about," Plumleigh said. "We're not talking about massive amounts of money, but just enough to get the system moving and to sustain it."

Plumleigh and Hockwalt saw it as paradoxical that an accountability system, if it truly had a chance of working, would require extensive staff development for which there may be no funding. "Bringing the teachers along as collaborative partners in this process has been absolutely essential to the success of these [accountability] systems," Hockwalt said. "Yet it doesn't appear as if the state is going to provide the resources to support that."

Plumleigh also complained that whatever funds come from the state arrive with "massive strings attached." As an example, she mentioned money the state allotted districts specifically for instructional materials, when instructional materials was one of the few things her district had plenty of.

Keeping the Faith

"Here we are, at the end of the millennium, and we're still talking about weeding out all the incompetents in public education," Carl Cohn said with a hint of disdain. "But the closer you get to the schools the more you see how, despite all the odds, public schools are really doing an extraordinary job. Until we can get leadership at the political level that is willing to acknowledge that, I don't look for the state to do very well in this area."

Cohn's words were an apt summary of the prevailing attitudes among the three superintendents. Chagrined as they are with what is happening in Sacramento regarding education policy, they remain optimistic on account of the dedicated and talented people working in their schools.

"I agree with Carl and Ron in that none of us puts too much weight on what comes out of the state," Marcia Plumleigh said. "Obviously we don't, or otherwise we wouldn't have been moving ahead with our own initiatives. The state throws a lot of stuff at us, and it seems to me that

whatever sticks on the wall is what we have to be doing. That's not the way to do what's best for our kids. So in spite of the state we'll just go ahead with smart people who have faith and good will and care about kids, and do what we think is going to make them successful."

No Easy Resolution to the California Accountability Debates

It seems clear from the remarks of the 1998 EdSource conference speakers and panelists that the road to putting a state accountability system in place is going to be long and somewhat rocky. These policy experts and school practitioners express little confidence in the ability of the state's political system to work through highly complex school accountability issues over the time frame that success in such an effort would require. They worry that even a sustained effort can be abruptly sidetracked by a change in the political winds.

Still, these very real concerns do not mean that attempts to develop and implement a meaningful accountability system should not move forward. The notion that students will improve their academic performance if they and their teachers and schools are held accountable holds enormous sway in California, and almost every one agrees that a genuine effort at creating an accountability system must be made.

If California is to create that system, a number of extremely difficult, and potentially divisive, questions must be answered:

- Can policymakers and educators agree on a fair set of performance factors (more than a score on a single test) against which school performance will be evaluated?
- Do teachers and schools have the capacity to teach the skills and knowledge the new standards will require?
- If teachers will need additional training, what state policies on professional development are likely to ensure success the fastest?
- What additional resources should the state and public provide to the schools if they are to meet the accountability challenge?
- To what extent would teachers and schools respond to a system of financial rewards and interventions?
- What mix of incentives and consequences will do the most good and the least harm in holding students accountable for their academic achievement?

Developing a consensus around these questions will take political compromise and perseverance. Whether or not California possesses these attributes to a sufficient degree remains to be seen.

TO LEARN MORE

To order a copy of "Steering by Results," the report of the California Rewards and Interventions Advisory Committee, contact the California Department of Education's publication division at 916/445-1260.

The report can also be viewed on the California Department of Education's Web site: http://goldmine.cde.ca.gov

For a summary of states' efforts to make schools more accountable for academic achievement, read WestEd's Spring 1998 paper, "Can State Intervention Spur Academic Turnabout?" The paper can be ordered from WestEd at 415/565-3000, or viewed on their policy program Web site, www.WestEd.org/policy

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REPORT

Shifting the Focus to Learning: California's Accountability Debates

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David Ruenzel

EdSource is an independent, impartial, statewide not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization established in California in 1977.

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