

## Summary

# LESSONS FROM THE CLASSROOM LEVEL ABOUT FEDERAL AND STATE ACCOUNTABILITY IN RHODE ISLAND AND ILLINOIS



Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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In the winter and spring of 2007-08, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) expanded its ongoing research on the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by conducting case studies of 12 schools<sup>1</sup> in Rhode Island and Illinois. Our purpose was to learn more about the influence of NCLB and related state accountability policies on curriculum, instruction, and student achievement. As part of this project, we are also studying Washington State; the results will be reported this year.

In Rhode Island and Illinois, we interviewed dozens of district- and school-level administrators, instructional specialists, and instructional coaches, and held focus groups with scores of teachers, students, and parents. In addition, we took a more in-depth look at classroom practices by conducting formal “time-sampling” observations in several classrooms in a subset of case study schools. In particular, we documented the amount of time teachers and students spent on various types of instructional practices and interactions.

We found similarities, as well as differences, between Rhode Island and Illinois in the responses of administrators and teachers to federal and state accountability policies designed to raise student achievement.

<sup>1</sup>The schools chosen for this study do not constitute a representative sample, and therefore, the findings from each state are not generalizable to every school in that state. However, we did take steps to choose schools that represented different characteristics and would help us gain a more nuanced understanding of NCLB in different public school settings. In Rhode Island, we studied two high schools, one middle school, and three elementary schools; our sample included both schools that received federal Title I funds for low-achieving students in low-income areas and schools that did not. In Illinois, we studied four elementary schools and two high schools, all of them Title I schools.

## Similar Findings from Rhode Island and Illinois

Several common findings emerged from our studies in both Rhode Island and Illinois:

- ***Time for test preparation.*** In both states, many administrators and teachers reported using various forms of test preparation to familiarize students with the content and format of the tests used for NCLB accountability. In Rhode Island, many teachers and administrators specifically acknowledged the pressure to “teach to the test” by focusing curriculum on the specific content or skills likely to be tested. In Illinois, many teachers interviewed said they integrated test preparation into their instruction throughout the school year, but some noted that they could only teach more creative, broader-themed, or project-oriented lessons after the state test was given.
- ***Greater emphasis on teacher-led instruction than on independent student learning.*** In most of the classrooms in which we did time-sampling observations, teachers in both states spent a considerable portion of class time asking “closed questions”—those with just one or a few correct answers. In Rhode Island, teachers also devoted a sizeable portion of class time to lecturing and leading the class in discussion. Other types of more independent learning activities, such as students working in learning centers, were used somewhat less often.
- ***More time on tested subjects.*** In Rhode Island, study participants reported focusing more instructional time on the tested subjects of English language arts and mathematics at the expense of other subject areas. Interviewees in Illinois also spoke about the same general trend.
- ***Greater use of data to make decisions.*** In both Rhode Island and Illinois, administrators and teachers interviewed reported making

greater use of test data to reach decisions about curriculum, instruction, teacher professional development, and other areas. In Illinois, many interviewees said that their decisions about curriculum and instruction were driven by data from diagnostic tests and state tests.

## Differences between the Two States

We also found several differences between the two states in schools’ responses to federal and state accountability:

- ***Stronger alignment among curriculum, standards, and assessments in Rhode Island than Illinois.*** In Rhode Island, all the schools studied had taken steps to align their curriculum with state academic standards, but the high-performing schools seemed to have achieved the greatest alignment. Rhode Island schools that were still struggling with alignment either had nontraditional curriculum or lacked sufficient direction, leadership, or funding at the district level. In Illinois, many schools had engaged in curriculum mapping—a process that specifies which content and skills will be taught at various points in the school year—to achieve better alignment with state standards. However, interviewees at the high school level felt that Illinois high school standards were broad and vague enough to allow them to fit their curriculum to the standards relatively easily. In addition, many study participants in Illinois noted that there was a lack of alignment between state high school academic standards and the state high school accountability exam, which is based partly on the national ACT college entrance exam.
- ***Explicit mention of “bubble kids” in Rhode Island.*** In five of the six Rhode Island schools studied, interviewees discussed how they strategically targeted resources and interventions on the “bubble kids”—those scoring just below the proficient level on state tests—in an attempt to raise their scores to proficient.

- **Greater concern about the negative effects of testing in Rhode Island.** Some study participants in Rhode Island expressed concern about the negative effects of what they saw as an over-reliance on standardized tests to measure achievement. Teachers and administrators pointed to negative impacts of testing on teacher morale, development of the whole child, and the depth of the curriculum.
- **Specific concerns raised in Illinois but not Rhode Island about tests used for English language learners.** Several study participants in Illinois expressed concern about what they viewed as a last-minute decision by Illinois state officials to discontinue use of the IMAGE assessment (an alternate test for English language learners) in spring 2008. According to interviewees, the test was eliminated because the U.S. Department of Education ruled that it is not comparable to the regular state achievement test.
- **More frequent mention of parental involvement in Illinois as a positive influence on achievement.** Study participants in Illinois mentioned that strong parental involvement was an important, positive influence on student achievement. At several Illinois schools, interviewees pointed to specific steps that had been taken to help engage parents in their children's academic progress.
- **More concern about resources in Rhode Island.** Many Rhode Island study participants reported that their schools lacked sufficient resources, including funding, staff, and materials, to prepare students for the state tests or meet state and federal requirements. In Illinois, some study participants noted that their schools had obtained grant funding, which had helped to expand resources for professional development and other activities aimed at improving student achievement.

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The reports, *Lessons from the Classroom: Federal and State Accountability in Rhode Island* and *Lessons from the Classroom: Federal and State Accountability in Illinois*, are available on the CEP web site ([www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)) and can be downloaded free of charge.

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