Lessons from the Classroom level

Federal and State Accountability in Washington State

July 2009

Center on Education Policy
CEP

Lessons from the Classroom Level

Key Findings

In spring 2009, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) continued its research on the impact of test-based federal and state accountability policies by conducting case studies of six high schools in six different districts within Washington State. Our purpose was to learn more about the curricular and instructional changes that administrators and teachers have made to raise student achievement and respond to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and related state accountability requirements. A part of this research examined the impact of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), which is used as both the high school test for NCLB and the state high school exit exam. The schools studied used a variety of instructional practices and included a mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools with diverse demographics.

This study takes a more in-depth look at classroom practices than most other studies of NCLB, including CEP's previous survey- and interview-based research (CEP, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006). To collect data for this study, we not only interviewed school administrators, teachers, students, and parents, but also conducted formal classroom observations of instructional practices and teacher-student interactions in 15 classes within the six high schools. Our research was conducted from January to April 2009.

This report on Washington State is the third in CEP's *Lessons from the Classroom Level* series. The previous two reports, published in 2008, examined the impact of federal and state accountability policies in Rhode Island and Illinois (CEP, 2008c; 2008d).

Based on our work in Washington State, we arrived at several key findings:

- **The state standards and tests have had a significant impact on curriculum**. In most of the schools and classrooms we visited, we observed teachers teaching to the state standards. The content taught was consistent and seemed to be geared toward the appropriate grade level. Schools and districts reported making considerable and continuous efforts to align curricula with state standards. However, these efforts have been complicated by frequent changes in state standards, particularly in math and science. This has created stress and confusion between versions of the standards and has resulted in some inconsistency in curriculum and instruction across the state.

- **The testing format of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning has encouraged teachers to emphasize student reasoning and writing skills and has helped students improve these skills, in the view of study participants.** Many teachers, students, and parents had positive comments on the extended responses required by the WASL versus the typical multiple-choice examinations. In four of the six schools visited, teachers were observed leading class activities that mirrored the format of WASL extended-response questions, such as using released writing prompts as writing assignments or instructing students in reporting science lab results using the format of the science WASL. Teachers in the classrooms observed also emphasized the need for students to explain their thought processes and to provide coherent responses using the language of the test. Many of those interviewed noted requiring students to explain their answers has improved writing skills.

- **The nature of the WASL appears not to have stifled teachers from being creative in their instruction.** Although teachers in the classrooms we observed often referred to the WASL in their instruction and made an effort to teach skills they expected to be tested, we saw many teachers who frequently engaged in open-ended discussions, initiated Socratic-type dialogues that emphasized inferential and evaluative thinking, used technology in creative ways to stimulate students' interest, and used an inquiry approach to teach science.

Several teachers reported that while they feel a responsibility to teach to the standards and meet grade-level expectations, they do not feel constricted by the standards and enjoy significant academic freedom.

- **Several districts and schools offer additional courses or interventions for students who have failed or are at risk of failing state tests.** Some districts have implemented parallel academic programs and graduation requirements for students who may not be college-bound or who are struggling in traditional programs. For instance, the state of Washington provides Career Technical Education programs and has also instituted a "collection of evidence" portfolio as an alternative to passing the WASL. Schools also described various efforts to help students who need remedial math and language arts instruction.

- **Many teachers and administrators suggested improving the WASL rather than eliminating it.** Many study participants said that the WASL was cumbersome to administer and that the test results were difficult to understand and not very helpful for making instructional decisions. Some teachers and administrators also said the emphasis on teaching tested material has resulted in some narrowing of the curriculum, taking instructional time away from teaching content in depth, covering other topics, or assigning certain types of projects. Despite these challenges, many study participants have invested a lot of time and energy into aligning curricula and instruction with state standards and tests, and they do not want to see the WASL go away. However, they did suggest changes in test policies, such as implementing the system under development in the state to track individual students' test data; shifting to an assessment that includes pre- and post-testing and can show individual students' growth over the course of a school year; providing teachers with test data that are more informative for instruction; and providing more professional development on using test data.

- **Teachers and administrators also proposed changes to NCLB and related state accountability requirements.** These changes included using alternative measures of achievement for accountability purposes, revising accountability and test requirements to better consider the needs of English language learners and other students with special needs, and revising adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations to counteract the demoralizing effect on teachers and students in schools with high poverty and inadequate resources.

- **School administrators, staff, students, and parents were confused about the future of the WASL as a graduation requirement and the impact of standards.** Many study participants expressed that the possible elimination of the WASL has caused confusion for both students and parents regarding graduation requirements. In addition, many study participants worried that this confusion would impact student performance on the WASL during spring 2009 testing.

Background and Study Methods

Information for this study of Washington State was collected primarily through interviews and classroom observations, using methods similar to those CEP developed for studies of Rhode Island and Illinois.

STUDY FOCUS

The No Child Left Behind Act, like many state-initiated versions of standards-based reform, aims to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps for students of different races, ethnicities, and income levels, as well as students with disabilities and English language learners. CEP's studies of student achievement have concluded that in most of the states with adequate data, scores on state reading and math tests have gone up since NCLB was enacted in 2002, and achievement gaps have narrowed more often than they have widened (Center on Education Policy, 2007a; 2008a; 2009). Other CEP studies of NCLB implementation at the local level have found that many schools have increased instructional time for English language arts and mathematics but have sometimes done so at the expense of other subjects and activities (CEP, 2007b; 2008b).

This study seeks to better understand and explain recent achievement trends by looking more closely at curriculum and instructional practices undertaken at the school and classroom levels to raise achievement

and respond to standards-based accountability. We focused on changes in policies and practices that affect curricula and instruction in English language arts, mathematics, and science, the subjects that must be tested for NCLB purposes in high schools.

SELECTION OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

CEP selected case study high schools after consulting with Washington State officials and considering several factors. Although the schools chosen do not constitute a representative sample, we did take steps to ensure they represented different characteristics to help us gain a more nuanced understanding of the effects of NCLB in different types of public high schools. We chose school districts that were located in various kinds of communities (urban, suburban, or rural) and that differed in size and student population. Some of the schools were in the improvement phase of NCLB and some were not. It should be noted that the findings from the six case study high schools are not generalizable to every school in Washington State. As in most states, many key educational decisions in Washington are made at the state and local level, and schools in different districts may vary considerably.

To elicit straightforward responses and avoid possible repercussions for the people we interviewed, we guaranteed confidentiality to participating schools. Listed below are the schools and districts participating in this study, identified by pseudonyms.[1] The information below about whether the schools made adequate yearly progress and whether they are in NCLB improvement represents their status in school year 2008-09, as determined by tests administered in spring 2008.

- **Fuji High School**, a suburban high school in the Boeing School District, serves an ethnically diverse population of more than 1,900 students. Many of these students are English language learners, who speak more than 120 languages and come from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa, and East Asia (as well as the U.S.). At the time of our study, the school was in year 3 of improvement, the corrective action phase of NCLB.

- At **Honeycrisp High School**, an outer suburban school in the Microsoft School District, the majority of students are white, and about 30% come from low-income families. At the time of our study, the school had made AYP and was not in NCLB improvement.

- **Cameo High School**, a rural school in the Starbucks School District, serves a student body that is about 65% white and includes a growing Latino population (currently 30%). At the time of our study, the school was in year 3 of improvement.

- **Gala High School** is a very ethnically and socioeconomically diverse urban school in the Eddie Bauer School District. Students at Gala also speak more than 70 native languages and come from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa, and East Africa (as well as the U.S.). At the time of our study, the school was in year 5 of improvement, the implementation phase of NCLB restructuring.

- At **Jonagold High School**, a suburban high school in the Nordstrom School District, 84% of the students are white and the rest are Latino or African American. At the time of our study, the school had made AYP and was not in improvement.

- At **Pacific Rose High School**, a small urban school in the Weyerhaeuser School District, a little more than 50% of the students are white and nearly half are from low-income families. At the time of our study, the school was year 1 of NCLB improvement, which meant the school had to develop an improvement plan and offer public school choice to students.

CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS

To collect information for our case studies of the six schools, CEP researchers conducted numerous interviews. At the district level, CEP researchers spoke with the superintendent or assistant superintendent. In each of the case study schools, we asked the principal to identify a staff member to act as study liaison. This person arranged for school-level interviews.

In each of the six districts, we interviewed a total of 18 district- and school-level administrators and conducted focus groups with 68 teachers, 30 students, and 29 parents. In addition, five other school representatives,

[1] School pseudonyms are based on varieties of apples grown in Washington State, and district pseudonyms are based on well-known Washington companies.

including librarians and administrative interns, were interviewed. (Not every type of group was interviewed at every school.) Through these interviews, we hoped not only to gain detailed knowledge of district and school practices and policies but also to probe the assumptions and beliefs underlying the implementation of NCLB and test-driven accountability in general.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

The study used classroom observations to document the salient features of instructional practices and teacher-student interactions. The study liaison in each of the six schools helped with scheduling observations and selecting teachers to be observed. CEP researchers conducted observations of 15 classes, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, in grade 10 English language arts, mathematics, and science. During the observations, the researchers took detailed notes of teaching practices. The researchers visited each school for two to three days.

Through these classroom observations, we hoped to gain a better perspective on teachers' practices than many previous studies of school reform and NCLB implementation have done. Although surveys and interviews are important research tools, they are based on self-perceptions and can be influenced by respondents' beliefs. The classroom observations in this Washington State study were intended to address some of the limitations of earlier research, including CEP's own research, and to further explore and validate the findings from our interview data. We acknowledge, however, that the conclusions that can be drawn from the classroom observations are limited in scope because our sample is limited.

OTHER DATA SOURCES

CEP researchers also analyzed policy documents and other written information, including curricula where applicable, to understand how instructional policies have changed in response to the federal and state focus on student achievement and to determine how principals and teachers have attempted to comply with federal, state, and district policies and help their schools make AYP.

The teachers interviewed were also given a survey one week before the CEP researchers visited. The survey explored teachers' perceptions of the influence of federal and state accountability policies on curriculum and instruction. The survey questions mirrored the interview questions, and data from the survey were used to support teacher responses during interviews.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any study, this study has certain limitations. First are the inherent limitations of interview and self-reported data, noted above.

Second, the schools and districts studied may not represent the experiences of all Washington State schools, and their demographic characteristics may not reflect the student population in Washington State.

Third, although our efforts to include classroom observations have shown promise, we are cautious about drawing conclusions from observations alone that may be misleading on a larger scale. Therefore, we have used both the interview data and the classroom observation data to reinforce each other and have drawn our findings from both types of data.

Fourth, the educators' reports of how accountability requirements have affected their practice cannot be interpreted as definitive or complete. Rather, the study gives snapshots of how schools with different backgrounds have responded to state and federal accountability systems.

Finally, the study examines NCLB in the context of efforts that may have been underway before the federal law took effect. Our findings represent the interactions of federal, state, and local policies.

NCLB and Washington State

Washington State has been engaged in standards-based education reform for more than 15 years. Like many states, Washington views the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act as an expansion of its own standards-based accountability system.

STANDARDS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY IN WASHINGTON STATE

In 1993, the Washington state legislature initiated a performance-based system of education with specific learning standards. As part of this system, a state commission designed and implemented Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in eight subject areas—reading, writing, communication, math, science, health and fitness, social studies, and the arts. Subsequently, the state developed and phased in a series of tests, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), to measure how well students were meeting the standards. Intervention procedures were also established for schools that did not meet standards. Finally, the state created several programs to assist students in meeting the academic standards.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

After NCLB was enacted in 2002, Washington State adjusted elements of its standards-based accountability system, including the WASL, to fulfill the requirements of the federal law.

In the 2006-07 school year, 1,383 schools, or 65% of the state's schools made adequate yearly progress under NCLB. Of the state's schools, 112 were identified for improvement that year, including 32 schools that were placed in the restructuring phase of NCLB.

In 2007 the state received $378,758,177 in federal funding for the programs in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by NCLB. Since 2001, allocations to Washington State for these programs have increased by 51% (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

TESTING

The WASL tests were first implemented in 1997 in grade 4 reading, writing, and math. High school students were first assessed with the WASL in 1999. In subsequent years, testing was expanded to encompass all the grades required by NCLB. Currently Washington students take WASL tests in reading and math in grades 3-8 and 10; in writing in grades 4, 7, and 10; and in science in grades 5, 8, and 10. As explained below, students in the class of 2010 must take and pass certain WASL tests before they can graduate from high school.

The WASL tests are administered to students in the spring, usually in two-hour blocks over five to eight days. The tests include a mixture of multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions.

WASHINGTON STATE GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Students in the class of 2010-2011 are required to pass the reading and writing WASL tests and take the math and science tests in order to receive a high school diploma. (Certain types of certificates of completion are available for students who do not pass the required WASL tests, and alternate assessments are available for students with disabilities.)

Students who do not pass the WASL on the first try may take the tests up to four more times during their high school careers. After four retests, they may continue to retake the tests at their own expense. Starting in 2013, students will also be required not only to take but also to pass the math and science tests in order to graduate. Students who have difficulty passing the written test are eligible for an alternative form of assessment.

In addition to the testing requirements, the state has other graduation requirements. Students must complete a High School and Beyond Plan, meet course and credit requirements, and, as of 2008, complete a culminating project that involves analytical, logical, and creative thinking and allows students to explore a topic of their choice and apply learning in a practical manner.

For classes graduating after 2011, requirements had not been determined at the time of our study.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE WASL

In the fall of 2008, Washington State voters elected a new superintendent of public instruction, Randy Dorn. Dorn replaced the previous superintendent, Terry Bergeson, who had held the position for 11 years and who strongly advocated retaining the WASL. Throughout his campaign and after his election, Dorn has talked about eliminating the WASL and replacing it with a computerized standardized test—changes that have met with mixed reactions throughout the state.

In the weeks leading up to the spring 2009 administration of the WASL, numerous media reports appeared about the elimination of the WASL. Many of the school administrators and teachers we interviewed said

that these reports created confusion for both students and parents, many of whom believed the WASL would be eliminated and no longer count as a graduation requirement. The WASL, however, is still a graduation requirement for the class of 2011, whose members were sophomores in school year 2008-09.

A school administrator from Fuji High expressed frustrated with the media reports:

> *And now [Randy Dorn is] saying very publicly and on the news, "2010 the WASL will be no more. It'll be a shorter test. You'll get feedback back sooner. It'll be less costly." Okay, and I understand all of that but . . . all of the things we've been trying to get teachers to do, which you guys are assessing, is now in conflict with what he's saying. [I]t's a good test [as it is] . . . although, I think some changes could be made . . .*

A district administrator from the Microsoft School District noted how these media reports influenced students' attitudes towards the WASL at Honeycrisp High School:

> *You know, it is a very difficult message as educators to give to the kids that this is serious. We do need to understand that our AYP is contingent on how well you kids do during this time. We need you to take it serious[ly]. And yet, you know, our own Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is making that more difficult for us right now to even make that message clear.*

This administrator reported taking specific actions in response to the media reports to keep students on track in their preparation for the WASL:

> *I asked the principals to go in and talk in each of the classrooms. So, there has to be a message . . . from the teachers and then the administrators to come in to all the sophomore courses like the biology classes and talk to the kids about what it means to do your best on something . . . [W]hat we're trying to do is to have kids be intrinsically motivated to do their best, not because of the test, you know, or meeting some graduation requirement, but also what is their best effort.*

The district administrator also explained how school administrators and teachers have helped counteract parents' misconceptions about the elimination of the WASL:

> *Likewise, we have a huge parent education piece because even though some of the changes are really quite minor, the way that the [local] paper is writing about it, they're trying to sensationalize this huge change.*

Some administrators spoke to how their districts were handling the changes being proposed for the WASL. An administrator from Microsoft said the changes would probably have a minimal impact on that district for the following reasons:

> *I didn't want [the WASL] to just go away because I realized that we would lose a lot of momentum in working with our teachers because there was a clear target and there was a clear focus . . .[A]s these changes have been announced about going to an online assessment versus a paper assessment, what I've tried to do is help our administrators see what's still the same . . .*
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> *I've taken what [Randy Dorn] has said are going to be the anticipated changes, and I've tried to help our administrators figure out how they can message it with staff so that staff don't feel like, and kids don't feel like, "Oh, it doesn't matter anymore."*

A district administrator at Starbucks School District noted that changes in WASL requirements had already affected student participation in testing:

> *Last year, right before the WASL window, the legislature announced that, "Okay, you don't have to pass math to graduate, but you do have to stay enrolled in math classes. And you don't have to pass science until 2013." We just plain have kids not come for the testing day.*

A school administrator from Fuji observed that local administrators were "caught in the middle" of the differing positions of state leaders and the sometimes uncoordinated policies of the various state agencies involved in education. "It all comes down at the building level," said this administrator. "All these people up here are making these decisions and doing things, and it all gets put on our lap."

Impact of Standards-Based Accountability on Curriculum, Content, and Student Services

Our classroom observations and interviews indicated that federal and state accountability policies had influenced curricula and instruction in several ways. In this section, we describe the impact of these policies on the curricula and content being taught in the six high schools and on the services provided to students struggling to pass state tests.

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

Standards-based accountability has affected curriculum alignment in several ways. Teachers have attempted to adjust their instruction to cover material in the standards. In some cases, the process of alignment has encouraged greater collaboration among teachers and increased professional development. In addition, alignment has positively affected curricula for students with special needs. It has also led to stronger vertical alignment of curricula across grade levels. Recent changes in standards for math and science have brought more specificity and logical organization to the curriculum but have also created some upheaval during the transition period. These impacts are discussed in more detail below.

In most of the schools and classrooms we visited, we observed teachers teaching to the state standards. The content taught was consistent and seemed to be geared toward the appropriate grade level. The state standards were displayed in many of the classrooms visited.

Often teachers made clear what would be covered in class that day, and the standards formed the basis of these daily agendas. For example, English/language arts teachers at Pacific Rose High posted on a graphic organizer in the room all the learning objectives for a particular unit, including how these objectives connected to the final assessments. According to one teacher, this helps students understand that "this is what we need to know and this is what we need to work on." Teachers also posted and shared lessons plans on a department server.

In the survey CEP administered to teachers before the on-site interviews, a large majority (72%) of teachers reported that their school's curriculum and daily instruction were aligned to state standards to a "high" (41%) or "very high" (31%) extent. Less than 10% of the teachers surveyed reported that this alignment was "low" or "very low."

Several administrators and teachers noted that the content included in the curriculum and their day-to-day teaching had changed after the state standards were implemented. A Fuji High administrator said that standards-based accountability had made school curricula "much more purposeful and targeted" and had caused staff to be more explicit in identifying interventions that will help students grow. A math teacher at Honeycrisp High described the transition to standards-based instruction in this way:

> *[B]efore I was designing my curriculum based on what I felt the kids needed to know. And now, I have someone else not dictating to me, but justifying what I'm teaching in a way. So I'm not alone. This is what the state department of education has determined that the kids need to know . . . And so I feel more confident that I'm giving the kids what they need.*

Our interviews with administrators and teachers indicated that the process of aligning curriculum to state standards has been a continuous one at both the district and school levels for more than a decade. Districts have provided ongoing professional development focused on alignment and have supported academic coaches to sustain the focus on standards-based curriculum and instruction. This process has sometimes resulted in greater collaboration and a stronger sense of common purpose, interviewees said. Staff at Honeycrisp, Fuji, and Jonagold High Schools reported using a collaborative approach to align curriculum to standards. At Fuji and Jonagold, teachers said they were trained to "plan lessons backwards" from the standards. Several teachers expressed a desire for additional time to coordinate curricular and instructional planning with their colleagues.

The emphasis on aligning curriculum to ensure all students meet standards has also had positive effects for students with special needs. An English teacher at Gala remarked that before standards and the WASL, the ELL population was "those kids," but afterwards, ELL students and English as a second language teachers became an integral part of the school with a lot of support. Similarly, a Pacific Rose High School administra-

tor noted that it was "well worth any angst we've all had over [standards] because special ed kids now are expected to learn the same sorts of things as everyone else, and I think that's the biggest difference for the whole population of students in the system."

However, three of the six school districts we visited concentrated services for ELLs in a single high school, rather than spreading the services throughout all the district's high schools. Consequently, some schools have high percentages of students with special needs, which makes it much more difficult for them to make AYP, according to our interviewees.

Study participants from all six schools also reported an increase in initiatives to align K-12 curriculum vertically in their districts. Although the WASL is a 10th grade test, it assesses science and math content that is taught prior to grade 10, sometimes in grade 8. The test also builds on key concepts and skills taught in elementary and middle school.

Many teachers felt it was unrealistic, however, to expect students to build continuously on what they had learned in previous grades because students do not always remember what they learned in elementary school. For that reason, teachers admitted they felt the need to spend instructional time on topics outside the regular 10th grade curriculum. A Fuji High School math teacher, for example, referred to the need to re-teach basic skills and concepts such as decimals, negative numbers, and fractions. Science teachers explained that they modified the curriculum to ensure they addressed the material likely to tested on the WASL, even when it meant re-teaching topics covered in middle school. Some teachers also viewed it as a problem that some of the topics on the 10th grade WASL test in science are only taught in 9th grade, a year before the test. A Honeycrisp High School science teacher explained the curriculum modifications necessary to prepare 10th graders for the WASL:

> *You have to be creative to put in earth science, so we have to modify our curriculum quite often because there [are] some standards that [students] got in 8th grade but they're not going to remember the next year . . . We've chosen to continue to be more traditional with our courses so the kids have physical science in 9th grade and biology . . . So, for instance, if we do how life began, we make sure we have to do some evolution of earth in there to get the earth science. When we do biomes we have to throw in weather and climate. So that's a whole lot more work for us.*

Some Honeycrisp High School parents also remarked about how some of the material on the WASL science test was taught mainly in 8th grade.

Aligning curriculum with standards has been further complicated by the fact that the standards themselves have changed over the years. State math standards have been in an almost constant state of flux, according to our interviewees. Most recently, the state adopted new math standards in 2008. While teachers in the six study schools were conversant with the revised standards, their responses to interview questions suggested they have not had enough time to fully coordinate instruction and curriculum with the new standards. Some teachers were unsure how well curriculum was aligned to the revised standards, while others assumed it was aligned.

Several teachers noted the difficulty of making the transition to a new set of standards. A math teacher at Pacific Rose High explained how this played out in the classroom:

> *[W]e are at an interesting point right now because we're supposed to be using both the old and the new standards according to the state . . . So we kind of have this bizarre transition . . . [I]n our district, we haven't started aligning our curriculum to [the new standards] yet here at the high school level.*

Still, several math teachers in the six case study schools expressed hope that the new math standards would be less vague, more logical, more rigorous, and more focused on higher-level content. "[R]ewriting those standards has made them far more accessible—easier to unpack, easier to work with," said a Gala High School math teacher.

Another positive aspect of the new standards, according to a Fuji High administrator, is that they require students to explain how they reached their answers: "It's not multiple-choice, and we've been working very hard to get kids to think explicitly about, okay, not only what the right answer is, but why is that the right answer and explain your thinking. So kids can even get partial credit if the process is accurate but the answer is wrong." He added, however, that this shift has caused upheaval in the math curriculum:

[I]f your philosophy of education is different than what is supported by the WASL, teachers are now in conflict . . . I think the changes in math standards are responsible for a lot of the upheaval in math curriculum. I mean, the standards themselves have influenced us because the targets now are more clear . . . Because of that influence, it has added a whole lot of stress because there has not been consistency, and they've changed the target.

State science standards have also been revised recently. Some teachers commented positively about the new science standards, which they expected, in the words of one teacher, to be more "concrete," "less broad," and "more specific." But the new science standards, like the new math standards, require another round of curriculum alignment. A Honeycrisp High science teacher described the alignment process in this way:

[W]e're actually going through a curriculum review and finding curriculum that meets [the new] standards . . . [W]e have to find what parts of the book match the curriculum and what we need to supplement. So the state standards impact us a lot.

A Jonagold High science teacher described the process of aligning curriculum to standards as "a perpetual state of catch-up," adding that "I don't think you ever feel like, all right, you finally have all agreed this is what the standards are . . . we're never quite there. So it's frustrating."

A Cameo High science teacher reported that with each revision of the standards, the school's science team changed its curriculum again until she finally decided to teach "what I feel is really good for my students and do a really good job with that, and forget about this test because it changes."

NARROWING OF CURRICULUM

In all of our case study districts and schools, many of those we interviewed reported that the curriculum has narrowed as a result of standards- and test-driven accountability. They noted that the emphasis on teaching tested content has diminished time available for other subjects or activities. Some also bemoaned the limited time available to teach the full range of knowledge and skills in their subjects or other skills they feel are important to a complete education.

A Starbucks district administrator described the internal struggle teachers confront in deciding how much to teach the content on the state test versus other content. Many Cameo High teachers we interviewed seemed to agree, with some admitting candidly that the content on the WASL "pretty much directs what a teacher does," as one said.

Some English teachers at Gala High said that certain types of units and projects have gone by the wayside. A parent of a Jonagold High student expressed concern that as a result of the WASL, the district has focused on "certain core subject areas at the expense of other academic areas or arts, fine arts, areas that could enrich [students'] education."

Interviewees talked about the difficulty of finding time in the school year to do justice to the full range of knowledge and skills covered by the state standards. A Cameo High science teacher described it as "a bathtub of water kind of crammed into a one-gallon container." Several Pacific Rose High School science teachers said they felt rushed to cover the topics tested by the WASL rather than teaching concepts in depth—a sentiment captured by this comment from a science teacher:

I don't think you're able to really go in depth as you'd like to go. I don't think you're able to expand in some areas . . . because you've got to get through some of that material so that they have a chance to be successful at it and so they're not just going in there blindsided . . .

A science teacher at Honeycrisp High felt that the standards in that subject, though numerous, still omitted some important ideas:

[O]ne of the most important things I can think of to teach a kid about life science is probably about their body and about how the body works, and there's not a single standard in there on the new standards about their human system . . . I think the idea is amazing, and I wish they would maybe just collapse even less standards so that would give us some room to breathe and to throw in a few weeks of what we think is valuable for our kids in Honeycrisp.

Similarly, a Boeing district administrator stressed the need to teach a curriculum that was broader than just the material covered on the WASL:

[T]he staff got all tied up in WASL-izing and . . . we had to keep reminding people that what it was really about were the skills we wanted the kids to have . . . passing the WASL is important, but it's not sufficient. There's so much else we need to be doing with these young people. I would also like them to be civically minded. I'd like them to be engaged in their community. I'd like them to understand culture and art and the stories of our history.

SERVICES TO HELP STRUGGLING STUDENTS PASS THE WASL

Several Cameo High School math teachers said that the standards-based curriculum has been particularly troublesome for the many students who enter high school performing far below grade level and have difficulty catching up. One math teacher explained the situation in this way:

[I]t's almost impossible for some kids sequentially to get there because when they come to us they're three, four, some of them are five years behind in math. And so, you know, in a year and a half to get them ready or up to grade-level standards feels impossible. And we've done all the alignment and everything . . . but our next goal, if we can't get them there, is to get them closer, and we have done that.

Recognizing this problem, several interviewees reported that their districts and schools have mounted specific programs, services, or curricula to help students who are struggling to pass the WASL.

Science teachers at Cameo High have developed "key ideas courses" for struggling students and implemented different kinds of instructional groups to support adapted instruction. Pacific Rose High School offers a supplementary algebra class, a related algebra support class, and a "math essentials" class for students who need additional instruction to pass the math WASL.

At Fuji High, students who have failed the WASL are afforded extra instructional time through a combination of regular and "essentials" classes in both math and English language arts. An administrator at the school described how this works:

We have a block algebra class. It is sometimes referred to as Math Essentials. But a student that needs more time in math will be in a regular math class . . . [and] a companion section, two periods, with the same teacher. And so in one period they're doing new instruction with algebra. The other period is trying to fill gaps in understanding . . . We do the same thing in Reading Essentials for kids that are struggling readers and writers.

A Gala High School math teacher said that a support algebra class is co-taught by a regular and special education teacher team. While the school developed supportive coursework to accommodate core interventions, an unfortunate result was a narrowed curriculum for participating students.

A Fuji High School math teacher described one attempt to respond to the need for more support in mathematics for some students:

Well, my geometry's a block class, so it's a little bit different. I have two hours with the same kids. We designed that class to take some of the lower-level kids, not failing because they don't show up but failing because they just maybe need a little bit more time, or maybe they have a D or a low C . . .

Instead of pulling out low performers for essentials classes, Jonagold High School has developed a pilot program to keep struggling students in their existing classes with an additional teacher and student mentors. An administrator explained how this effort works:

We have decided that for about 30 kids that struggle the most, we're going to pull them out twice a week, and we're going to have some of our staff members volunteer their time during SSR [sustained silent reading]. And we're going to have our junior, senior strong academic students as mentors, and they're going to meet with those kids twice a week during SSR to help them with their reading, writing, and math.

For students who have been unable to pass the WASL after multiple tries, Washington State has created a "collection of evidence" alternative that allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through a portfolio of classroom work. A teacher at Jonagold High felt this was a positive alternative:

[O]ne of the things that we started a little bit last year as a pilot and this year to a greater extent is the collection of evidence. And at least I'm grateful that there is an alternative for kids. We have a student here that dropped out last year. Sat at home and watched TV

with her brother for a few months. And then realized that maybe she needed to be doing something else and get back to school. Realized how disappointed the family was in her. And she's come back. And it's very, very difficult for her to pass the WASL. So she has done a collection of evidence over this last semester of which she's very proud. And she's had to do this work . . . her own reading, her own research, her own writing. But she was able to do it over time. And not in the course of an hour and a half.

In the Starbucks district, the process for building the required portfolio begins at an early stage for particular students, as explained by a district administrator:

The first time that they don't pass the WASL, we may have them—you know, we can kind of take a look and say, "Well, this particular student, they may never pass. This just isn't their testing environment." So, the counselors and the teachers will work to make sure that they are placed appropriately to start that collection even before they're truly eligible.

The success rate for graduating using the collection of evidence is relatively low; however, some teachers attributed this low success rate to bureaucratic challenges and not the work of the students.

An administrator in the Nordstrom school district administrator mentioned a downside to the emphasis on helping students pass the WASL—namely, that it diverts attention from the needs of higher-achieving students who have already reached proficiency:

And so what you've got [with] accountability here is, either a kid's proficient or not, which changes the way you deliver your curriculum. And you focus on the kids who aren't there rather than the kids [who] are there, and that's why the curriculum here doesn't meet the needs of all children. We don't know if our highest-achievement kids are capable of growth.

Many of the high schools visited, such as Jonagold, recognized that some students require a different educational path from the traditional college preparation curriculum. A district administrator in Starbucks mentioned the implementation of a new class combining Career Technical Education and math to help low-performers prepare for the WASL.

About ten years ago, the Eddie Bauer school district created specialized programs, such as welding and culinary arts, within each of its high schools to attract students with different needs and interests. But according to an administrator, these programs have not stopped the drain of students away from Gala High, which is a high-poverty school. Despite the loss of students to other programs and the high cost in transportation due to specialized programs, this administrator maintained that the programs reduce dropout rates by serving a population that would otherwise be disengaged completely from school. "And honestly," he added, "with the accountability system, we spend less time trying to work out those questions because our time is focused on the accountability issue."

Impact of Standards-Based Accountability on Instruction

Our classroom observations and interviews also revealed the impact of federal and state accountability policies on instructional methods and other aspects of classroom teaching. CEP researchers observed an array of instructional practices and student learning activities in the 15 10th grade classrooms visited. In addition, many of our interview questions focused on the impact of accountability policies on instruction. The teachers we interviewed gave various responses about the impact of standards-based accountability on their instruction. Some said their instruction had been minimally impacted, while others cited specific changes.

This section describes several specific impacts. These impacts include 1) encouraging teachers to specifically address the WASL in their instruction, 2) allowing some flexibility for teachers to teach creatively and use methods that encourage student inquiry and reasoning skills, 3) increasing student motivation, 4) affecting teacher motivation and professional roles in both positive and negative ways, 5) spurring teachers to pay more attention to additional forms of assessment, and 6) encouraging the use of WASL data to inform instruction (although the data do not always lend themselves to this goal, as teachers noted).

SPECIFIC ATTENTION TO THE WASL IN INSTRUCTION

In our classrooms observations of all three subjects (English language arts, math, and science), we often noticed teachers making specific references to the WASL in their lessons. This took various forms—teachers explicitly telling students that they needed to learn the particular skill or knowledge being taught because it was likely to appear on the state test; teachers assigning students problems, essays, or homework with formats similar to those on the WASL; or teachers advising students how to approach certain question formats.

In many of the English classes, across all six high schools, we observed teachers referencing writing prompts from the WASL in their classes. Some math teachers used released items from the WASL as warm-up activities or as formative assessments in the classroom. Several science teachers integrated the scientific method as it appears on the WASL into their lessons. In Cameo and Honeycrisp High Schools, science teachers made specific references to the WASL and taught key words or phrases student would need to know for the test—"trying to get all the information out in the specific language that's being taught and used" on the test, as one teacher said.

Our interviews provided additional details about how teachers across the six schools approached test preparation. When asked about teaching to standards, many interviewees said they were more explicitly teaching to the WASL, although many did not see this as a negative thing. A Gala High School English teacher explained:

> *I thought it was, like, the biggest sin ever you could ever possibly say to a teacher, is to teach the test . . . [But] if you have a test that says, "Here are the skills you need to know," and you teach those skills, I don't see a problem with that. It makes more sense than, "Here's a bunch of random skills, and we're going to pick and choose some random skills to test you on.*

Most teachers interviewed reported threading test preparation activities throughout their regular instruction as a continual but subtle review. These activities often mirrored the format of test questions—for example, using released writing prompts and scoring rubrics from the test for writing assignments, reviewing sample scored essays, or using released test items to review science skills or provide math warm-ups and in-class practice tests. An English teacher at Fuji High explained that he developed a practice packet based on the format of the test so that students will be "able to recognize how to answer questions correctly that relate to those same concepts and ideas we've studied all year." At Jonagold High School, the science department had designed a rubric for lab write-ups, according to one science teacher, because explaining experimental procedures is a WASL requirement.

Many teachers reported using review and test preparation activities closer to the time of the WASL administration. However, several said they took pains to integrate skills embodied in state standards within their regular instruction, as this Fuji High English teacher explained:

> *We just do those skills amidst the others, you know, with the novels we're reading . . . [or] we would take a week to review all of our information, all our techniques about writing expository and persuasive perspective, but again, yeah, these are things we teach anyway . . . So I think if I was going to say any real changes, the persuasion has been what I've focused on now more throughout the year versus in those months prior [to the test].*

Teachers at Pacific Rose High administered practice WASL-type tests to their students to obtain a better idea of where their students stood and how they needed to adjust their instruction to help students pass the real test. A Fuji High English teacher described this process as follows:

> *I do sort of a WASL Wednesday . . . where [students] take one of the reading tests, and then, one other day in the week, we do either the expository or the persuasive prompt, and then, half the period for another day we'll talk about the elements, and then, the other half, we'll talk about what could you have improved on.*

Interviewees also noted the importance of familiarizing students with the language used on the test. "[O]n the WASL you have to say it specifically like this, because [otherwise] you get points taken off," said one Cameo teacher. "You have to be constantly talking around these little idiosyncrasies about this one particular test. So we definitely teach to the test."

Several teachers that we interviewed, including teachers of math and science, said that the emphasis on writing in the state standards and tests has led them to integrate writing assignments into their subject matter instruction. One Fuji High science teacher said she took pains to ensure that the formats of lab write-ups in class matched the format required on the science WASL. Another Fuji science teacher said that science teachers were spending more time on writing because the test questions on the WASL are "not so much the old multiple-choice kind" but are deeper questions that require students to transfer knowledge and integrate several kinds of knowledge into a written response.

At Cameo High, 9th and 10th grade English teachers explicitly taught expository and persuasive writing because those are the modes of writing on the WASL. As a result, said one teacher, most of the school's students have come to understand the elements of an essay—that "you need to have an intro, that there are bodies, and you need to have an ending. I think that that's something that they get." The high levels of writing proficiency on the WASL at Cameo High suggest that the expository/persuasive writing focus has produced the desired effect.

A Jonagold High administrator emphasized that the writing skills taught to help students pass the WASL were broad enough to apply to various types of writing:

> *[R]eally, [it's] a formula for kids to be able to learn to write to any prompt . . . It can be persuasive essay. It can be an informative essay. It works in any format, but the formula is pretty basic. But it really does give kids a tool. So when . . . a prompt is thrown at them, they know how to attack it. They know how to go at it right away because they've been using it.*

The students participating in our focus group interviews also said that instruction related to the WASL had been an integral and significant part of their educational experience since elementary school—at times too great a part, according to some students. A Pacific Rose High student described the ubiquitous influence of the test in this way:

> *[W]hen you start getting to grade school all the way up until now, that's all anyone's really talking about preparing for. You spend whole schools days on prompts for the WASL, they're always stressing the WASL and . . . the prompts . . . I think too much time is wasted on it where you could actually be teaching kids other stuff that can better help them than the WASL.*

CREATIVE AND INQUIRY-BASED INSTRUCTION

The need to prepare students to pass the WASL did not seem to stifle teachers from using more creative, thought-provoking, or varied types of instruction, according to our observations and interviews. Indeed, many administrators and teachers noted that the state's standards-based curriculum, as well as the different types of test items used on the WASL, encouraged a variety of instructional methods, including approaches to develop students' thinking skills.

Some teachers reported that in the earlier years of standard-based reform, they had the misimpression that teaching to standards meant using prescribed instructional methods, but they later found room for autonomy in their instructional decisions—for example, allowing oral versus silent reading, depending on class preferences, and using writing prompts differently. A school administrator remarked that even though the state has set common grade-level expectations, "we're all kind of trying to get there from still maybe different ideologies on instruction and academic freedom issues."

A Jonagold High parent also commended what he perceived as the WASL's intent to measure students' thinking:

> *I have seen WASL questions from the very beginning in the math section, and the samples that teachers send home for kids for practice . . . But the WASL is designed to do the things that a short-answer test can't do. It's designed to assess whether kids can think. Give them a set of information, and can they take one or two steps from that information to give you an answer to a problem? I love that about it. It's real-life stuff . . . for what it does, it's a good tool.*

In most of the high school classrooms we observed, and in all three subjects, teachers typically guided instruction by first presenting information—often by modeling writing formats or demonstrating geometric theorems, algebra problems, or scientific procedures. Then they followed up these demonstrations with extended discussions and question-and-answer sessions. Students appeared comfortable sharing responses, challenging others, and asking for clarifications. Teachers sometimes expanded on students' responses to questions to teach the class more about a topic.

In the classrooms we visited, many of questions teachers asked were "closed," meaning that they had just one or a few correct answers. Although some teachers suggested that students stick with the teacher's directions "word for word," several teachers gave students positive reinforcement when they suggested other good answers. In addition, some teachers posed "open" questions—those that had more than one answer, could be interpreted differently, and encouraged students to explore possibilities. At Jonagold High, for example, teachers typically led class discussions and extended students' thinking through both closed and open questions, paraphrasing students' responses and asking for clarification. During one English class at Jonagold, the teacher guided a Socratic-type dialogue that encouraged students to make inferences and think critically about a literary passage. Students and teachers read silently and aloud and offered written and oral responses to the passage. Students answered and generated their own inferential questions.

In the math classrooms we observed, students were engaged in solving problems, thinking algebraically, and explaining their thinking. Both teachers and students modeled problems, and the class discussed alternate solutions. Science instruction in the classrooms we observed generally followed an inquiry-based format; students often worked in pairs to outline the steps of a scientific procedure as they prepared for lab work.

Most of the classes observed also included time for students to work in small groups or pairs, doing in-class assignments or starting on homework, although there were always some students who chose to work independently. Teachers monitored students closely and went around the room answering questions, suggesting alternate approaches, and providing positive reinforcement by paraphrasing, clarifying, asking extended questions, and praising good ideas. Teachers made a point to interact with each student at least once during the observation period.

A number of teachers interviewed noted that the state standards and test encourage an inquiry-based approach. "[T]he whole section of state [science] standards is all about inquiry and using argument—using evidence and argument and things like that—and that's been our main focus as a group," said a Jonagold High science teacher. A Fuji High science teacher concurred:

> *I think the most direct impact of our state test on my instruction is around scientific method because I think it's the hardest thing for students to demonstrate on a test. And it's a big component of the test, where the more weighted questions are around design and how do you design a lab . . . I think that's probably much more emphasized in my classroom as a result of the test.*

One Cameo High School science teacher said that the state standards have moved the emphasis of instruction from content to process. She noted that as a result, her 10th graders are performing better on designing experiments. In a similar vein, the math teachers we observed often encouraged students to make plans for solving problems and to explain their math thinking orally and in writing. "Show the work, it's a learning experience," one Honeycrisp High math teacher reminded students.

English language arts standards also encourage students to build a case using evidence and engage in other types of critical thinking and writing, according to some of our interviewees. A Fuji High teacher explained how these skills are taught in English class:

> *[F]rom the very beginning, we've always taught to a standard about the WASL, asking for more sentences in a paragraph, asking for quotations to back up other ideas and so forth . . . So those are a couple of things that we've stressed . . . Using evidence, you know, creating facts and so forth, we use that, not telling our kids to make things up, but we did tell them that it's going to go to the importance of using evidence. So that was one of the things I think that they improved on, as well as writing better sentences.*

English teachers in some case study schools described how they collaborated to ensure their instruction was consistent with the writing standards. Most teachers and administrators remarked on improvements in writing performance that have occurred since the implementation of standards.

But the emphasis on good writing does not end in English class, according to our interviewees. A Jonagold science teacher said that across the science department, "this is an assumption that we're all fairly focused on providing the experiences for inquiry that would fulfill the standards in English." Across all the classrooms we observed, several science and math teachers, as well as

English teachers, directed students to keep careful notes in "interactive notebooks"; these teachers often asked students to respond to discussion questions by referring to their notes, suggesting that the teachers viewed note-taking as an important aid to learning.

Several teachers spoke about the importance of teaching students to explain their thinking in writing, a skill emphasized on the WASL. In the English language arts, math, and science sections of the WASL, students are expected to not only answer multiple-choice questions but also explain the thinking that led them to their answer. "[T]he WASL has so much free response," said a Fuji High math teacher. "We were making sure we were including some activities in our classroom that had the free response, the writing about and explaining our thinking . . . [W]e had to really work at where we were weak."

INFLUENCE OF TESTS AND INSTRUCTION ON STUDENT MOTIVATION

For students, their performance on the WASL determines whether they will receive a high school diploma. For administrators and teachers, the results determine whether their schools will be identified for improvement and subject to sanctions under NCLB. Several parents and one administrator that we interviewed commented on the shift in the purpose of the WASL from a test intended to provide information about students' learning to a high-stakes accountability measure. An administrator at Gala High School described the shift in this way:

> *[T]he WASL test was very rigorous. And it pushed students to really think about math . . . But I think it was devised to not be an AYP measure. It was devised to be evidence of where students [are] . . . and where can I move you forward . . . And then AYP came down. You've already invested all this time in this WASL system. It doesn't make sense to blow that up at this point. Can we make that work for AYP? But then you're asking students who maybe don't speak English, who are struggling readers and writers to now read and write at a high level, with their mathematics, too . . .*

According to our classroom observations and interviews, teachers seem to be using a variety of instructional approaches to motivate students to learn. These efforts appear to have increased students' motivation and performance, according to some interviewees. The accountability sanctions attached to test performance under NCLB have also affected teachers' views about teaching.

In many of the classrooms we observed, teachers used interactive learning, positive reinforcement, and other methods to engage and motivate students. In Jonagold High's English and math classes, we saw a variety of interactive practices, including instruction that gave students continual opportunities and encouragement to participate. The Jonagold teachers we observed appeared to tie the day's instruction to previous class learning and encouraged students to refer to their notes from previous classes. Teachers also urged students to explain their thinking orally and in writing. Students were often invited to share written responses to math and science problems on the board. One math teacher talked his class through a "story" and engaged students in developing a plan to solve a problem through an investigatory process.

In many of the classrooms we observed, teachers used technology in ways that seemed effective and often seemed to motivate students to participate and learn. For example, a geometry teacher was observed using a SmartBoard to engage students in an interactive problem involving probability and coin flipping. Another math teacher reported using PowerPoint regularly and noted that students could access the PowerPoint lessons on the internet.

Some teachers took particular steps to make learning active and relevant—for example, by having students weigh evidence presented by other students during a debate about whether discipline in the school is too lenient; by using math problems relevant to everyday life; or by having students work on a PowerPoint project. Although instruction in some classrooms was sometimes interrupted by typical high school student distractions and discipline issues, such as texting in class, falling asleep, or chatting, the teachers dealt directly with the behaviors and tried to keep students focused.

Some of the teachers observed also reminded students about the need to do well on the WASL. One teacher told students that the problems they were working on were geared to "get you ready for the WASL." Teachers we interviewed said they took similar steps. An English teacher at Honeycrisp High, one of two case study schools that have made AYP, reported telling students,

"It's not important because it's on the WASL. It's on the WASL because it's important." A Honeycrisp administrator spoke about the shared expectation that students will do their best on the WASL:

> *[O]ur teachers are responsible for making sure our kids understand . . . their performance on that assessment is really for them and for their brighter future. And whether or not this is going to be a graduation requirement in, you know, three years, or two years for this group, it really doesn't matter.*

Other teachers explained that their efforts to build personalized teacher-student relationships have improved students' confidence and achievement on the WASL. An English teacher at Gala described this approach:

> *[I]f we say, "We're going to get through this together, we're going to help you prepare for this"—I firmly believe it's a reasonable test . . . I worked really hard . . . to get my kids to understand that, "I really want you to pass it this year so we can get this behind us and move on. If you don't pass it this year, there's next year . . . [and] there are things that we can do, and we'll keep working with you. I'm not going to abandon you." So, you know, for people who say, "The WASL is punitive, it's demeaning or makes kids feel bad about themselves," I think it's all in how the teachers in the classroom handle it. The attitude is set there.*

Several teachers, including those at schools that have not made AYP, observed that standards-based accountability has changed students' attitudes toward learning. One English teacher noticed that students seem less focused on just "getting it done" and more interested in understanding what they are learning. The nature of the WASL likely plays a role in this.

INFLUENCE ON TEACHER MOTIVATION AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES

Many teachers also commented on the impact of federal and state accountability policies on their own professional motivation. Teachers at Honeycrisp, for example, attributed their level of motivation more to the feeling of responsibility for their students' achievement than to the pressure of NCLB. One teacher explained this dynamic as follows:

> *[W]hen we're committed, we're committed to the spirit or the idea of NCLB, not to the legislation of NCLB . . . I think that that's been our strength because . . . we've always said, "You know, love it or hate it, it's our kids' reality right now and we're responsible to our kids and so, we're going make sure that when they do come to that, they're going to be prepared to do their very best and, you know, get over that hurdle, if you will, but we never call it a hurdle.*

A Honeycrisp English teacher spoke about the impact of NCLB sanctions on teachers' professional growth:

> *If nothing else, NCLB has made us a little uncomfortable . . . It's compelled us to get out of our comfort zones and grow . . . We grow when we're uncomfortable . . . All schools, even, you know, schools who don't have the scores that we do, have probably, I would hazard to guess, improved in the curricular areas and in the instructional areas in their schools. And they may not have otherwise.*

As another positive outcome of NCLB and related state accountability policies, several administrators and teachers interviewed mentioned improved teacher collaboration on issues related to student achievement. Some interviewees at Pacific Rose High School pointed to their collaborative efforts to alter instruction, design common assessments, and identify struggling students and help them meet grade-level expectations. One administrator stressed that in the last two years, staff have made significant efforts to work as a team on the transition of students from middle to high school.

Collaboration and collegiality was valued highly at Honeycrisp and frequently commented on by all stakeholders. One administrator described the philosophy of collaboration as "teacher-initiated and led [and] administratively supported." This administrative support includes scheduling a later start for students every Friday to give teachers common planning time. In some case study schools, however, teachers noted that time constraints, competing schedules, and large instructional teams at the high school level sometimes make it difficult for them to collaborate, even informally.

Collaboration in Gala extends across schools, as well. School administrators in the district meet once a week as a professional learning community, where part of

the focus is on such topics as formative assessment and instructional improvement. An administrator at Gala found these weekly gatherings "fantastic."

The people we interviewed also noted some negative impacts of standards-based accountability on teacher motivation and professional roles. An administrator at Fuji said that standards-based accountability can become demoralizing for teachers in schools that lack sufficient resources. "Depending on the decision I make about which programs are in your school, I can determine whether you're going to make AYP or not," the administrator said. And a district administrator in Gala used a sports analogy to explain how AYP results can leave teachers in some schools feeling destined to fail:

> *We want to all be runners and we want to run a marathon, and so we're running along, but we only do the half marathon, and they said, "Too bad. You failed. You're out." You know, too bad that your heart is working better, that you've lost 25 pounds. Forget all that. You're done. You're a failure.*

In the Boeing district, teachers have gone from "being angry about [NCLB] to just being demoralized," one administrator said. "How do we keep looking these kids in the eye when we have to tell them that we know you work this hard, and it's not going to work. And it's really, really hard on the teachers . . . It's been just a horrible thing to watch this happen in our schools. There is an enormous amount of pressure."

Several teachers said they felt that alternatives to standardized tests should be used as accountability measures.

A few teachers mentioned the number of courses and tests they must take to be a qualified teacher. One science teacher who had been in the classroom for three years described this process:

> *I came out with a master's degree [in science] . . . and I got a master's in teaching, and then I got my job here, and now I have to do professional certification . . . Then I had to take a set of practice exams to even teach science . . . and it's $120.00 every time you take it . . . I have friends that are cardiologists and pharmacists, and I have more degrees and more science than they have. I mean if you don't love teaching . . . someone [can get] burned out on this.*

ATTENTION TO ADDITIONAL FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

Many of the teachers we observed or interviewed used formative assessments, such as quizzes, interim tests, or classroom questioning techniques, to see how students had progressed, diagnose students' learning needs, and determine adjustments to their own instruction. In a math class at Honeycrisp, for example, teachers used closure practice (a check on whether students learned what was taught during the class), as well as entry work, to adjust the next day's instruction and better prepare students to be successful in the next unit test.

The teachers and administrators that we interviewed also said classroom assessments were one of the most effective ways to gauge how well students understood the material being taught. A school administrator at Honeycrisp equated formative assessments to a medical physical in which "you take care of yourself, use frequent checks" and summative assessments, such as state accountability tests, to an autopsy in which students "take the big test and they're done, and you didn't really do anything to adjust your instruction." An English teacher at Honeycrisp observed that "for all effective educators, assessment isn't an end; it's the road that we walk every single day . . . [I]t's something that we're always checking in on with our kids." Some formative assessments are informal; for example, math teachers at Pacific Rose said they pay attention to exit slips and warm-up activities, as well as group tests, to gauge students' learning and guide instructional changes.

Some interviewees mentioned a movement toward the use of common classroom assessments within a single department. Math teachers at Gala High, for example, administer chapter tests created by all the teachers in their department. Results from these tests help them see whether their teaching is aligned with standards and whether they are teaching at the same pace. School administrators pointed out that these common classroom assessments have helped to improve instruction, increase conversations among teachers about student performance, and keep teachers focused on achievement targets. "If one group of students were doing better, it kind of promotes a conversation about what's happening differently in your classroom, and it also makes sure that everybody is kind of shooting for the same target," said one administrator.

Another example of common assessments came from interviews with English teachers at Jonagold High, who said that the district last year required students in 10th grade to complete a mini-research paper. "And we were all using the same rubric [to grade the students]," the teacher said.

Many interviewees discussed the usefulness of the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, a state standards-aligned computerized assessment developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association that provides information to improve teaching and learning. Math and English teachers interviewed at Honeycrisp High said the MAP test, which is administered at the beginning of the year, has helped them identify students who need extra help and to predict students' possible performance on the WASL. Several science teachers from Cameo said they would like a test like the MAP to identify areas for instructional targeting.

USE OF WASL DATA TO INFORM INSTRUCTION

Several administrators and teachers said that the state data from the WASL was used only for accountability reporting and did not provide information that informs classroom instruction. As explained above, teachers tended to find classroom assessments more useful for this purpose.

A number of teachers also expressed uncertainty about the usefulness of WASL score reports. A few teachers said the scores were not readily available to them, while others said these score reports did not help inform instruction. One math teacher made the following comment:

> *We can look at [the score report] and say, "Okay, in this strand, we had a 32 percent, but in this strand, we had an 86 percent." So obviously we're doing this somewhat well. When in reality, there was one question on the test that had to do with this question and apparently they all got it right . . . It could have been an easy question. It could have been a hard question. We don't know. It just tells us what percent we had."*

Science teachers at Pacific Rose pointed out that results of their school's common classroom assessments provide more useful information about students' strengths and weaknesses than the science WASL reports. The science test "doesn't count" for NCLB accountability purposes, said one teacher, so it may not accurately assess what students can really do "because a lot of times they don't even try on parts of it . . . and you can see whole strands of questions where they're just not performing, or maybe they are."

Several study participants made suggestions for how the WASL data reports could be more effective. These included implementing the system under development in Washington State to track test data by individual student ID number; shifting to an assessment that includes pre- and post-testing and that can show growth over the course of a school year for individual students; breaking down test data in ways that are more relevant to teachers; and providing more professional development on using data to guide instruction. Said one teacher:

> *I think the professional development . . . for using data as a guide to instruction is a huge gap. There's been a lot of focus on getting data . . . But there's never really been a focus for everybody of, "What do you do with that? And how do you use it? And how does that change what I'm doing day to day in the classroom?" There [are] people who do that very well, but there hasn't ever been a districtwide focus on doing that. I'll bet you when you talk to teachers . . . they don't buy some of the data, or they don't really get it, and it's because they don't use it day to day.*

As a side issue, administrators in two of the case study districts said their districts had to spend considerable effort "cleaning" test data—making sure that the data provided by the state was accurate and current. The effort was essential, in their view, because it ended up benefiting the districts in AYP calculations. A district administrator in the Nordstrom district explained that staff were trained to record, check, and correct data and create a paper trail for all information going into the database. As a result of cleaning the data, the district superintendent said the state-reported graduation rates for the district went up by 11 percentage points.

A district administrator in the Microsoft School District said the district created a "student information" position from its own funds specifically to clean data. "[This specialist] was very careful that every student who left our school was tracked to find out . . . did that student go to another school? Is that student a dropout?" In the case of students who arrived from a

different state, the specialist checked to see whether the student met a standard comparable to the WASL by passing the other state's exit exam. "That's kind of a lot of busy work," said the administrator, but it has led to better accountability results:

> *Our region's [newspaper] analyzed those school districts in the region in terms of their graduation rate with the class of 2008, and Microsoft had the highest . . . We definitely earned it, [but] some of the difference was around good—better—data . . . Part of the reason why our class of 2008 was the highest in the region was not only because we had really high student achievement, but we made an intentional effort to have our data clean.*

DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES AMONG CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

The six case study schools and their districts differed in their demographics and other respects, so not all of the impacts described above were apparent in all schools.

Four of the six schools we visited had very diverse student populations. Administrators and teachers in these schools mentioned that student diversity often affected their performance on the WASL and their AYP status. Administrators and teachers from three of the schools we studied spoke candidly of the tensions between accountability policies and broader academic and social needs of their disadvantaged students. While committed to standards-based accountability, staff in the study schools and districts offered additional thoughtful perspectives about their students' broader educational needs.

Gala High, for instance, has very high student mobility. In school year, 2008-09, more than 900 students either entered or left the school, according to a school administrator. It is very difficult to achieve academic goals, according to the administrator, in a school with high mobility and high poverty, and in which a third of the students do not speak English as a first language. A teacher at the school also noted that some students are homeless.

In the Boeing School District, a district administrator noted that many of the students, including refugee students, arrive at Fuji High School in the middle of the school year, which affects their performance in class and on state tests.

School administrators and teachers in the Weyerhaeuser district also described the difficulties some of their students face:

> *Teacher 1: [Students] come to school hungry, or they didn't have a place to sleep last night or mom and dad were fighting all night long or—*
>
> *Teacher 2: — or they are getting arrested tomorrow . . .*
>
> *Teacher 3: Or they were arrested this morning before they got to school.*
>
> *Teacher 1: I mean, not that we have bad kids. Bad things happen to a lot of kids . . . there's a lot of drama for these kids. And for them to be evaluated on this one test and say, "Oh, you didn't pass this test, so you deserve to fail in life?" That's not fair because if they can demonstrate in my classroom and my standards are higher and the WASL, I know my kids . . .*

Conclusion

CEP case studies of six schools in Washington State produced a portrait of schools and districts that are grappling with federal and state accountability requirements in a time of changing state leadership. Teachers and administrators, as well as parents, affirmed a strong commitment to standards-based reform and cited several ways that accountability policies have improved curriculum and instruction. At the same time, study participants shared significant concerns about some of the negative consequences of implementing standards-based accountability policies. Both the positive and negative aspects will be critical to consider in the near future as state leaders make decisions about the future of the WASL and related state policies, and as the President and Congress consider changes to the No Child Left Behind Act.

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Credits and Acknowledgments

This report was written by Deepa Srikantaiah, Ph.D., CEP senior research associate; Carolyn Moilanen, Ed.D., CEP consultant; and Lisa Swayhoover, CEP research intern. Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant, edited the report.

Dr. Srikantaiah and Dr. Moilanen conducted field work for this study. Adia Hoag, CEP consultant, helped to verify the data. Emily Davaney-Graham, CEP intern, contributed to the section on NCLB and Washington. Angela Minnici, Ph.D., former CEP employee, designed the original study which was conducted in Rhode Island and Illinois. Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO, and Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's director of national programs, provided advice and assistance.

The Center on Education Policy extends its deepest gratitude to all the participants in our study, particularly the students, parents, teachers, and administrators in our six case study schools who gave their valuable time to participate. We would also like to thank the Washington Department of Public Instruction for its cooperation.

We want to express our gratitude to the Gates Foundation for supporting this project. In addition, CEP draws on general support resources from the George Gund Foundation, and the Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the Center on Education Policy.

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