

Voices from the Field:

Educators Respond to Accountability



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About PACE

Founded in 1983 as a cooperative venture between the schools of education at UC Berkeley and Stanford University, with a more recent partnership with UC Davis, PACE is an independent policy research center whose primary aim is to enrich education policy debates with sound analysis and hard evidence. From issues around preschooling and child development, to K–12 school finance, to higher education outreach, PACE is dedicated to defining issues thoughtfully and assessing the relative effectiveness of alternative policies and programs. PACE provides analysis and assistance to California policymakers, education professionals, and the general public.

The Educator Responses to Accountability Project

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Executive Summary

Understanding Public School Accountability

Across the nation and in California in particular, it is impossible to ignore the increased emphasis on accountability and its impact on public school policies and practices. Accountability policy has gained wide support among state policymakers, in response to concerns that public schools were failing to meet the needs of all students. California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) holds schools and the educators within them accountable for meeting and sustaining high levels of student achievement. A system of standardized testing, curriculum standards, and rewards and sanctions provides the tools and motivation in an effort to improve school performance.

State and federal policymakers continue to support accountability as an effective means to improve schools, encouraged by early indications of increased test scores. Surprisingly, there has been little research on local educators' experiences with and responses to such reforms. This lack of research is striking, since teachers, principals, and superintendents are directly responsible for the implementation of accountability mandates, including administering tests, teaching to the state standards, and implementing state-approved curriculum packages.

In an effort to understand teachers' and administrators' experiences with public school accountability, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), with the support of the Noyce Foundation, established the Educator Responses to Accountability Project (ERAP). During the 2002–2003 school year, we conducted in-depth interviews with educators in eight elementary schools across California. We spoke with teachers, principals, and district leaders, exploring such topics as their knowledge and understanding of recent accountability mandates, the impact of accountability on their classroom practices and their sense of professionalism, and their efforts to address inequities in student achievement within the context of accountability.

Listening to Educators

This report discusses key themes that have emerged from our conversations with educators, drawing on the voices of public school teachers, principals, and district administrators to present a portrait of accountability policies at the school level. We heard critiques as well as expressions of appreciation for recent state efforts, and we heard suggestions on ways to improve or supplement existing policies.

Educators' responses to accountability are complex.

Our interviews reveal that educators, and teachers in particular, are responding to accountability in complex, and often contradictory ways. Teachers feel frustrated and overwhelmed by what they feel is a disproportionate amount of responsibility for accountability reform. However, at the same time, they recognize the need for school accountability and appreciate certain aspects of California's system. The standards component, for example, was seen as a

useful tool for teachers. Unlike the testing component, whose results often arrived too late in the school year to be of much use to teachers, or the rewards and sanctions element, which teachers felt was arbitrary and biased, standards elicited both positive and negative responses. Responses to accountability are simply not as uniform or unilateral as might be predicted.

School districts play a significant role in how teachers experience accountability.

Districts are often overlooked when it comes to accountability, because state policies target schools as the unit of change and do not hold districts directly accountable. This oversight is significant, given the district's role in the implementation, and in many cases expansion, of state accountability policies. Three of the four districts visited have increased testing considerably, in terms of the amount of testing required and/or the grades that are expected to participate. Three districts have also created standards-based report cards or other accountability measures used to determine both teachers' and students' understanding of curriculum standards. Only one district was notable for its relative lack of involvement, presenting an example of a more school-based approach to accountability.

Teachers may experience unintended consequences of accountability.

California's system of accountability is grounded in the assumption that curriculum standards and testing will focus teachers' instruction and thus produce improved student outcomes. Our research confirms that the system is indeed influencing teachers' work in elementary school classrooms, at times producing unintended or potentially negative consequences. Testing and test preparation often displaces other instructional activities and leads to a narrowing of the curriculum. In addition, accountability pressures are causing teachers to feel they have less control over classroom decisions and diminished satisfaction with their work.

Principals play a central role in how teachers experience accountability.

Our research revealed that principals often played a pivotal role in how teachers experienced accountability policies. Principals either acted as a "buffer," shielding teachers from test-score pressures, or as an added source of pressure for teachers, emphasizing the need to raise test scores and the school's ranking. Principals' attitude toward accountability and their leadership styles also influenced teachers' experiences with district and state mandates. Principals' emphasis on or avoidance of certain district and state instructional reforms, for example, was reflected in teachers' acceptance or critiques.

Accountability policies do not yet provide the necessary tools to address inequities.

A common goal of accountability reform has been to draw attention to discrepancies in achievement across groups of students, and to hold schools responsible for addressing any inequities. Standardized test score data, disaggregated by racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic subgroups, serves as the mechanism for reform. Our research reveals that the path from test score publication and analysis to pedagogical change and academic improvement was not always clear. Moreover, educators were not convinced that accountability policies could address achievement gaps, pointing to flaws in the current system. Educators recognized that any effective solution lies beyond simply reviewing test scores, and requires a deeper investigation as to "why" inequities exist.

Improving upon California's System of Accountability

The Educator Responses to Accountability Project has provided an opportunity to bring educators' voices into education policy discussions, in an effort to illuminate the benefits and challenges of the system, and to expand policymakers' understanding of accountability at the school level. Our conversations with educators also reveal aspects of the system, at both the state and district levels, that show potential for improvement.

Ensure coherency and consistency in state accountability policy.

Educators expressed confusion over the changing nature of California's system of accountability, including the calculation of API scores with different tests from year to year, and the availability and distribution of rewards. Although the PSAA has been successful in bringing attention to issues of student achievement, its clarity and understanding are essential to any sustained impact. The state must ensure that educators understand the policy's guidelines, and feel they have the ability and capacity to meet its requirements. As federal mandates continue to overlap with California's system, it is increasingly important the state make efforts to explain accountability policies to educators, parents, and students.

Focus on building and sustaining capacity at all levels.

State policy is based upon the assumption that most teachers and administrators have the capacity to address gaps in student achievement. However, as our conversations reveal, many educators felt they did not possess the proper tools, including time, resources, and administrative support, to systematically address issues of equity.

Professional development is a key factor in improving educator capacity, particularly in the use and interpretation of data from statewide assessments. Principals and teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills to decode data, with a focus on subgroup trends. Our research demonstrates that educators lack exposure to data as well as the time and skills to analyze data to inform instruction. As a result, educators are unable to achieve this primary goal of accountability, namely to address inequities through the analysis of disaggregated data.

Finally, the state must consider the implications of holding all schools to the same expectations while failing to address existing disparities in resources, materials, and funding.

Recognize the integral role districts play in accountability.

Currently, accountability policy assumes that individual schools are the primary locus of reform. While school-based reform is essential, our research shows that districts, through various programs and policies, have the power to facilitate or hinder school improvement. The state must recognize district influence in the implementation of accountability policy. As accountability demands continue to place pressure on schools, it is increasingly vital that schools are able to turn to their districts for support, guidance, and clarifications.

Due to federal NCLB requirements, the state is now considering ways to hold districts accountable for the performance of their schools. Educators interviewed agreed that the state should provide a ranking or score for districts, similar to the Academic Performance Index (API) system for schools. Such a system should include a special focus on the lowest-performing schools that have shown little to no signs of improvement.

Make strategic changes to the assessment and data components.

While educators appreciated the state's efforts to align its annual standardized test with state curriculum standards, with the recent shift from the SAT-9 to the CAT-6, they challenged the utility and fairness of relying on one assessment to measure a school's success. In order to piece together a more coherent picture of student achievement, state and district leaders should also consider using ongoing diagnostic assessments to measure improvements in student achievement over a school year. Such tests would provide more immediate feedback, helping teachers to focus instruction and facilitate student learning.

Although the state provides annual disaggregated data, few teachers are familiar with the data or are comfortable using it. Furthermore, teachers receive student test results too late in the academic year to be able to modify instruction. While this data does help illuminate achievement gaps, it fails to aid teachers in making valuable changes during the course of the school year. Specific attention needs to be made to the analysis of data, disaggregated by student subgroup, as a basis for conversations around the identification and explanation of any inequitable trends in achievement, and the strategizing of appropriate classroom responses.

Introduction

Policy Context

California, which had long prided itself on an excellent system of public education, was given a wake-up call in 1994 when its schools tied for last place on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). There was little doubt that California's public school system was in desperate need of improvement. Its low test scores contributed to a strong sense of failure, and state policymakers were moved to respond to mounting concerns about the quality of California's public schools.

California's former governor Gray Davis emphasized education as a top priority of his administration. In 1999 the legislature approved major elements of the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA), centralizing school reform at the state level. PSAA incorporated a system of statewide testing, rewards and sanctions, and the recently created curriculum standards. This legislation was seen as an important first step in monitoring and improving student achievement, allowing the state to measure each school with an achievement index, and offer assistance for underperforming schools or awards for schools making significant gains.¹

PSAA was designed for transparency and objectivity, holding all schools and students to the same standards and exposing to the public the successes and failures of local schools. However, Davis' PSAA faced immediate challenges. Teachers' unions and education associations criticized the legislation for lacking input from school-level educators. Moreover, California's recent economic growth took a sharp downturn, eventually forcing budget cuts across the state, including several PSAA components.

The last two years have brought further adjustments to California's system of accountability. The introduction of federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has resulted in additional layers of reporting and sanctions. California's Democratic governor Davis was recalled, replaced by Republican governor Schwarzenegger. Given this political shift, it is likely that California's system of accountability will face further adjustments in the coming years.

Educator Responses to Accountability Project

Amidst these shifts in policy and school reform at the state and federal levels, researchers at PACE have asked, "How are educators experiencing and responding to accountability at the school level?" At the heart of any system of accountability are educators—teachers, principals, and superintendents responsible for its successful implementation. Yet, despite policymakers' continued focus on school accountability throughout California and across the nation, very little is known about school-level actors' experiences.

With the support of the Noyce Foundation, PACE established the Educator Responses to Accountability Project (ERAP) in an effort to provide a much-needed focus on teachers' and administrators' experiences with the current system of accountability. ERAP is one of the first

This report aims to give policymakers a better understanding of how accountability reform plays out inside elementary schools.

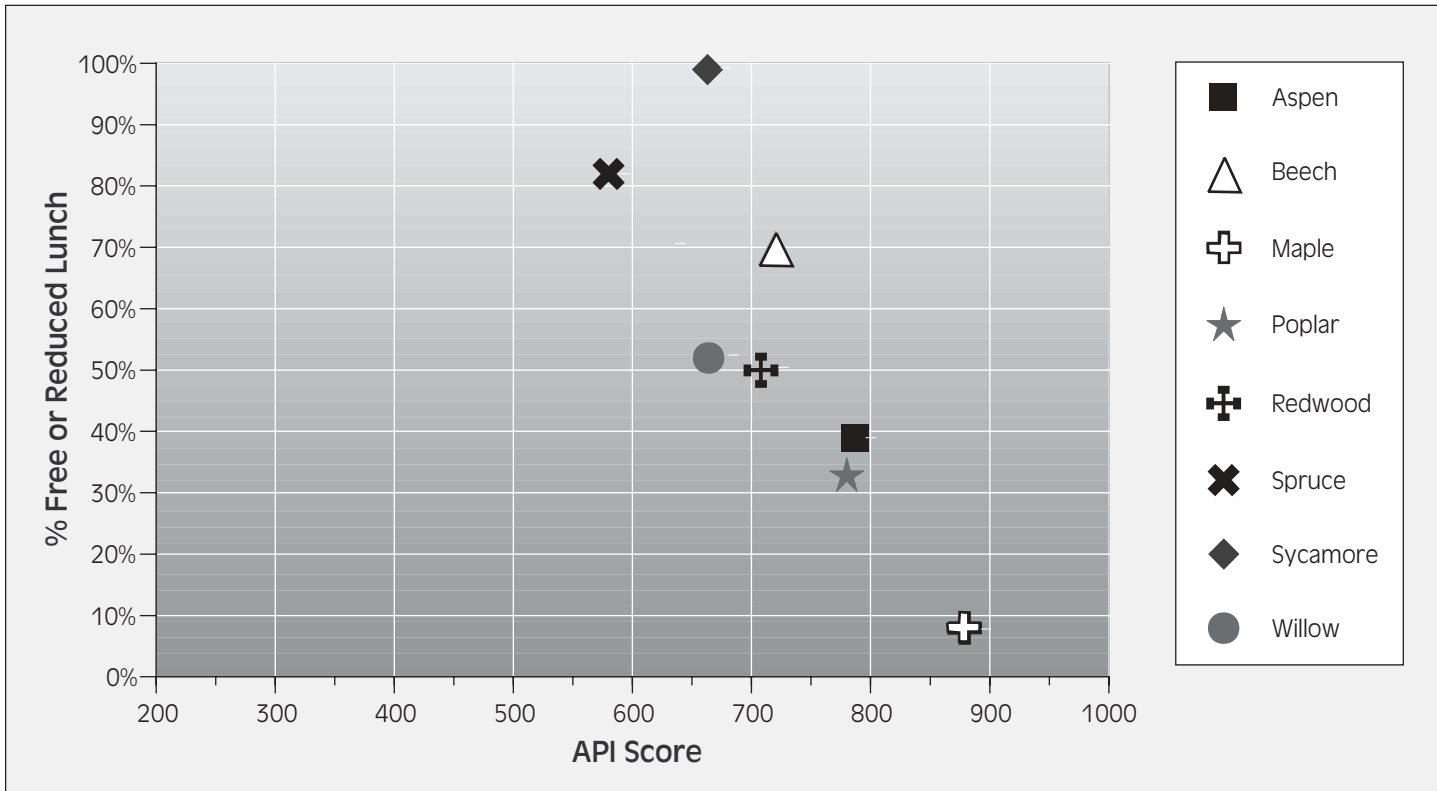
studies in California to look at such issues as the impact of accountability on classroom teaching and learning, educators' sense of professionalism, and the shifting role of the district in negotiating state mandates.²

ERAP also considers the potential for a system of accountability to address issues of equity, including ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity in California public schools. While the assumption behind California's system of accountability is to improve education for *all* students, the processes for achieving that goal are not always apparent. Thus, it is critical to examine the challenges and possibilities of addressing issues of equity within a study of accountability.

The voices of teachers, principals, and superintendents are rarely heard during discussions of education policy development. Yet, as we discovered, designing policy without educator input may result in a disconnect between the initial goals of a policy and the realities of school-level implementation. Despite early criticisms, there are strong indications that school accountability will remain a top priority on the state and national agenda. Thus, in an effort to improve upon current conditions, it is vital that we consider the experiences of educators.

This report aims to give policymakers a better understanding of how accountability reform plays out inside our schools. As California aspires to create and sustain high levels of student achievement, it is now more crucial than ever that policymakers have access to information that illuminates the intense challenges as well as potential rewards of public school accountability.

FIGURE 1. Educator Responses to Accountability Project: Distribution of 2003 API Scores by Student Socioeconomic Indicator



Methodology

The Educator Responses to Accountability Project provided an opportunity to listen to teachers and administrators, and to foster communication between educators and policymakers. Through a qualitative case study approach, we sought to document educators' experiences with California's public school accountability system. This research is unique in its ability to add the necessary layers of complexity to existing quantitative data, which often uses student outcome measurements to assess accountability's impact on achievement. While those measurements are important to consider, they provide little understanding of the impact of accountability on school and classroom practices and the lives of educators and students (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Research Sites

ERAP focused on educators' experiences in elementary schools, due to a lack of research on accountability at that level as well as an interest in the impact of accountability during the earlier grades of state testing. The study focused on eight elementary schools across the state—two schools each in four districts. In order to capture the diversity of California's public schools, the sites represented a range of student populations, community characteristics, and student achievement levels.³

Data Collection

During the 2002–2003 school year, each of the eight schools was visited once for an intensive three-day period, and again, when possible, for a half-day. Three research team members participated in each of the intensive visits; one senior member of the team conducted the half-day visits.

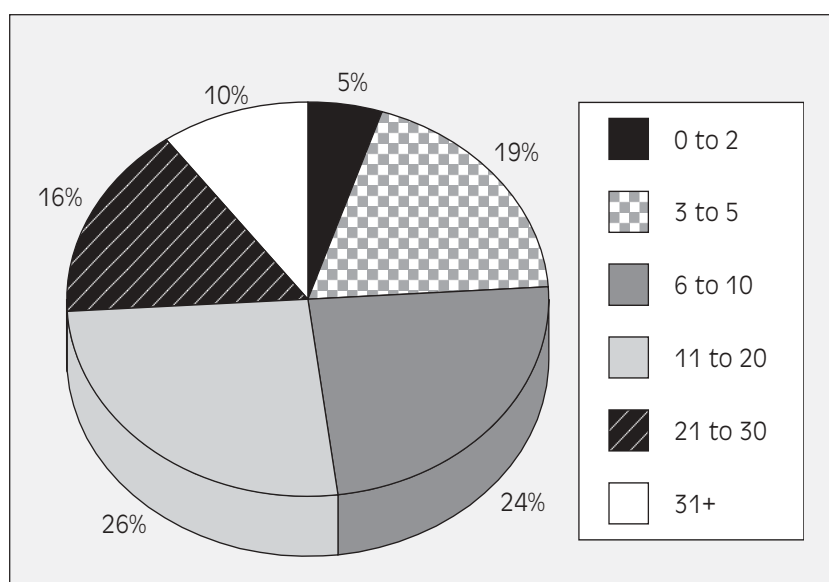
The three-day intensive visits included:

- Interviews with all kindergarten, second, and fourth grade teachers,
- Observations of a kindergarten, second, and fourth grade classroom,
- One focus group with other key personnel such as the assistant principal, Title I specialists, curriculum coaches, and special education teachers,
- An interview with the principal, and
- An interview with the superintendent or other district leaders.

In addition, the visit included two informational meetings with faculty and staff: an overview of the project at the beginning of our visit, and a summary of initial findings at the end of the visit.

The half-day visits were used to supplement the intensive visits. When the brief visit occurred in the fall, it served as an introduction to the project; when it occurred in the spring, it served as a follow-up. These visits allowed us to view changes that occurred in schools' policies and experiences throughout the year.

FIGURE 2. ERAP Teacher Experience*



*Does not include "no response"

Interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured protocol, covering a set of themes while allowing participants to shape the interview based on their unique experiences.⁴ Interviews and focus groups lasted approximately one-hour each and were audio-taped.

Teacher and administrator interviews and focus groups focused on the following themes: 1) the participant's professional background, 2) the school and district context, 3) the participant's experiences with and responses to accountability, and 4) equity issues. In total, we interviewed eight principals, four district administrators, and 65 teachers individually, and conducted seven focus groups of approximately 4-6 teachers each.

Alongside interviews with school-level educators, PACE interviewed eight key state-level policymakers, including members of Governor Davis' staff, the California Department of Education (CDE), the Senate Education Committee, and a statewide education association. Each policymaker was intimately involved with the design of California's system of accountability, and thus provided critical insight into the historical and political forces that shaped the reforms that were ultimately implemented. Each offered a definition of accountability and an understanding of the rationale behind the system.⁵

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings, policymakers uniformly praised California's system of accountability as an important step towards improving education. They were also asked what they would like to know from local educators about the implementation of the PSAA. Policymakers expressed a great deal of interest in educators' views on how accountability reforms played out at the school level and ways the program could be improved.

Data Analysis

The research team met weekly throughout the processes of data collection and analysis to debrief on site visits and discuss emerging themes. Team members prepared extensive field notes for each interview, which were shared with the entire team. They transcribed and coded all interviews and focus group discussions using a qualitative research software package. The thematic coding scheme was modified as necessary to accommodate emerging themes and complexities.

The findings presented in this report represent teachers' and administrators' experiences across a variety of school contexts. Despite differences in school and district leadership, student populations, and achievement levels, our interviews revealed common perspectives regarding the impact of the state's accountability system on educators' professional lives and their efforts to improve student achievement.

Review of Research Findings

Until recently, research on educators' experiences of accountability in California has been largely nonexistent, in part due to the fact that the state's system is relatively young. ERAP has provided the necessary insight into both the challenges and benefits of California's policy at the school level.

Chapters 2-6 present findings from our research in schools, organized by themes that emerged from our interviews with over 100 educators throughout the state. While the themes discussed in this report represent the broad range of perspectives, it is important to recognize

Until recently, research on educators' experiences of accountability in California has been largely nonexistent.

State Policymakers' Views on Accountability

Our conversations with state-level policymakers revealed several common assumptions and critiques of California's system of accountability, as exemplified by the following quotes:

"Ready, fire, aim."

The policymakers interviewed reminded us that PSAA was designed under intense pressure and made public in less than three months of development. As a result, educators implemented a complex accountability system with many details, including the testing system, still in transition. Furthermore, the system's goals did not always mesh with its design. For example, California included "world-class" curriculum standards as a key component of accountability, which were intended to guide and inform teaching and learning. Yet the state's original Academic Performance Index was based on results from the SAT-9, a nationally-normed test that is not aligned with California's curriculum standards. The PSAA subsequently tied rewards and sanctions to the API, essentially sending educators a mixed message. While acknowledging that the state needed more time to diagnosis and correct flaws, several policymakers noted that the political environment at the time encouraged expediency.

"If you build it, they will come."

PSAA was based on the assumption that educators would be motivated to reach and sustain high levels of student achievement by rewards (monetary, public recognition) and sanctions (low-performance labeling, threat of school takeover). Although policymakers agreed that teacher buy-in would be a crucial factor, time constraints did not allow for extensive dialogue with school-level actors. Instead, educators were simply expected to acknowledge the inherent value of an accountability system and make necessary adjustments in their practices. The state perceived its role as creating a framework to measure and reward growth, while educators were responsible for achieving that growth.

"The system sunshines the equity issue."

While a few policymakers mentioned curriculum standards as a necessary component to ensure equity, the majority of respondents believed that the achievement data would lead to more equitable practices and outcomes. The publication of API scores would highlight achievement gaps, ensuring that schools could no longer ignore low-performing subgroups. While the state would provide extra funding for a select group of schools (through II/USP), policymakers felt that the disaggregated data provided educators adequate capacity and tools to address disparities and close achievement gaps.

that educators' responses are not always unilateral, and in many cases are quite complex. Chapter 2 explores this issue of complexity, challenging the notion that teachers are unilaterally resistant to accountability. Teachers recognize positive aspects of the system, including renewed attention to issues of student achievement and the introduction or reemphasis of curriculum standards.

However, educators also offer criticisms of the system of accountability. Chapter 4 discusses educators' concerns about the impacts of accountability on curriculum and instruction, as well as their sense of professional satisfaction. Teachers, for example, report spending an increased amount of time on tested subjects (typically math and language arts), and a decreased amount of time on non-tested subjects. Such concerns have been echoed in studies of teachers' experiences with accountability in other states (Herman, 1990; Jones et. al., 1999; Stecher et. al., 1999; Taylor et. al., 2003).

Educators also report an increased sense of pressure as a result of the state system of accountability. This pressure stems from efforts to make sense of and meet the requirements of a complicated system, with what they feel is a lack of additional support or resources. Teachers and administrators were particularly concerned about overwhelming demands placed on their time, as a result of increased paperwork and reporting, as well as an increase in the amount of testing and material to be covered in the classroom.

The additional pressure and regulatory nature of accountability caused many teachers to report a decreased satisfaction in their work, coinciding with a loss of autonomy over their pedagogy and curriculum and a sense of not being treated as professionals. Similarly, principals and district administrators commented on the overwhelming nature of their work, as they struggle to balance efforts to raise test scores and close achievement gaps with mundane but equally challenging administrative tasks such as fixing a leaky roof. The education profession has clearly shifted in this age of accountability.

While ERAP focuses on teachers, our research reminds us that their experiences with accountability are mediated by district and principal leadership (Firestone & Mayrowetz, 2000; Herman, 1990; Noble & Smith, 1994; Simon, Foley & Passantino, 1998; Fairman & Firestone, 2001). Chapter 3 examines the role of the district, as superintendents may choose to emphasize certain aspects of the accountability system, or in some cases, implement additional layers of accountability. Chapter 5 examines the role of the principal as either a buffer or a source of pressure for teachers. Principals' interpretation of state and district mandates, for example, may influence teachers' acceptance of or resistance to accountability reforms.

Chapter 6 offers a broader analysis of one of the primary assumptions of accountability, namely that the system will facilitate educators' efforts to close gaps in student achievement. Policymakers had hoped that the presentation of disaggregated achievement data would highlight any inequitable patterns, and subsequent subgroup growth targets would motivate educators to make necessary adjustments to instruction. While the policy has raised educators' awareness of inequities, educators are concerned that it stops short of helping schools build capacity, in terms of time and resources, to design and implement solutions to achievement gaps.

In light of educators' responses to accountability, both positive and negative, Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the policy's current strengths as well as areas for improvement. Our interviews with teachers and administrators reveal aspects of the system that are working. They also suggest opportunities to adjust the system, at the state and district levels, to better equip educators to improve student achievement. It is our hope that this report will inspire continued discussions among educators and policymakers, in an effort to build upon California's efforts to improve education for all students.

Complex Responses to Accountability

While public school accountability continues to gain national prominence and federal support, concerns have been raised that such policies may negatively impact teachers and their work in the classroom (Darling-Hammond 1994; Elmore 2002). In California in particular, there was significant concern that the PSAA would lead to a lack of control, causing frustrated teachers to leave the profession (CTA, 2002). Yet, our interviews reveal that teachers are responding to accountability in complex, and often contradictory ways. Teachers do feel frustrated and overwhelmed by what they feel is a disproportionate amount of responsibility for accountability reform. However, at the same time, teachers recognized the need for school accountability, and appreciated certain aspects of California's system.

The standards component in particular was seen as a useful tool for teachers. Unlike the testing component, whose results often came too late for use, and the rewards/sanctions element, which teachers felt was arbitrary and biased, standards elicited both positive and negative responses. The notion of curriculum standards has provoked criticism for limiting teachers' freedom and control (Meier 2000; Nathan 2000), and our interviews with teachers did confirm those concerns. Yet those same teachers also felt that standards offered numerous benefits that positively impacted their work in the classroom. In essence, responses to accountability are not as uniform or unilateral as predicted.

Accountability as a Signaling Tool

There was general agreement that any efforts to improve education should include holding teachers responsible for their actions. While no teacher expressed that *they* directly needed accountability, teachers referred to others who were “not doing what they needed to do.” While it was not clear what “doing it” entailed, there was a general sense that some teachers were failing to meet the needs of their students. One Beech Elementary School teacher echoed this sentiment, noting:

We have some students who can't read. They went through the system and they don't have the skills. So people are saying, “Well how can you go through 12 or 13 years of school and still can't read, or read at a basic level?” And so things had to be happen where there were people more accountable.

Many teachers believed that under previous policies, unmotivated and incompetent teachers were allowed to remain in the classroom. A system of accountability was seen as the first step in sustaining improvements in the teaching profession.

By drawing attention to inefficiencies within the teaching profession, accountability was essentially a signaling tool, indicating that teachers had to refocus on “core” subject and content matter. Several teachers commented that accountability gave them direction and focus. For instance, a veteran teacher at Maple Elementary School commented that although

Teachers felt standards played a direct role in motivating them to expect more from their students.

she did not have much enthusiasm for accountability when it first started, she grew to feel that it was refreshing because it enabled her “to see what you teach in a new way.” By examining her teaching, she exposed her students to more difficult concepts and was motivated to present material in greater depth.

A teacher at Poplar Elementary School echoed this sentiment, explaining that accountability had motivated her to become more serious and committed in her work. For instance, she started placing more emphasis on problem-solving skills. In short, the focus on accountability led some teachers to reexamine their instruction and its impact on student achievement.

Excess Focus on Teachers

While teachers felt that accountability reforms drew attention to unproductive teachers, this attention was also seen as somewhat unfair or misguided. California’s system of accountability, with its emphasis on annual testing and API scores, placed a great deal of pressure on teachers to produce outcomes. Teachers felt they were usually the ones blamed for any occurrences of low performance at their schools. They advocated instead for a more holistic approach to student achievement, pointing out that administrators, parents, and students also play a role in a school’s successes or failures.

Indeed, several teachers raised the importance of parental involvement to student achievement, noting that the current system of accountability failed to involve parents in any substantial way. This failure was seen as a huge oversight, as one teacher observed:

To hold teachers solely accountable for remedying all of the ills of society is unconscionable. It’s not realistic. I think it’s important for there to be accountability and for there to be systems in place to provide that accountability, but there has got to be a way of balancing it, of not putting this threat over teachers. (Teacher, Maple)

Another teacher remarked that although accountability “starts with parents,” it was unclear how parents were being held responsible. Accountability placed unreasonable expectations on teachers, with limited support from parents and administrators.

Benefits of Curriculum Standards

Standards positively affect teacher expectations.

In the most basic sense, standards are a direct articulation of what students are expected to learn. Standards may also be seen as the first step in reducing educational disparities among high-poverty and underrepresented students, by holding *all* students to the *same* expectations. Therefore, it is noteworthy that we heard numerous accounts from teachers who felt standards played a direct role in motivating them to expect more from their students. For example, one teacher required her first graders to write more, another teacher exposed his students to more difficult math concepts, and a bilingual teacher became more conscious of motivating his students to read in English. One teacher at Beech described the direct effect standards had upon her expectations:

A few years ago, if the children were first-graders, they’d write two or three sentences. Where now, I found myself [thinking], “Okay. Well, two or three

sentences is good in September, but by now you should be writing a couple of pages.” I found myself requiring them to do more in a way that’s appropriate for their ability.

Although standards cannot guarantee an “equal” education, it is clear that they play an important role in providing teachers with clear goals and expectations for all students across the state.

Standards provide direction and focus.

Another strong argument for standards was that they provide a tangible direction and focus on specific material and concepts, a clear and detailed path for teaching: “I have a goal at the end now, I know what these things are going to look like, I know I have to go down this road” (Teacher, Sycamore Elementary School). The idea of knowing what to teach was a huge benefit, as one Redwood Elementary School teacher explained: “[I can] look at what I am supposed to teach, what students are going to be tested on, and know what is coming up.” It is important to note that support for standards does not imply that teachers were previously “lost,” but simply that this aspect of the system of accountability provided a means to refine and improve their teaching.

Specifically, teachers reported that standards helped them with lesson planning, enabling them to review and incorporate key concepts. One teacher emphasized that planning was an easier task, as she divided her school year on how she was going to meet the standards. Another teacher recalled the difficulty of teaching in a pre-standard environment, noting:

The standards are the best thing they ever did. Because, I was just newly teaching and I went into a classroom with nothing. There were some books. I’m supposed to teach them what? The first year I started, the standards weren’t out. So I went to the teachers in the grade above me and said, “What do you want the kids to know?” And then I went to the other teachers and asked, “What are you teaching your kids?” I tried to figure it out in between, and I mean, that was difficult for me. (Teacher, Maple)

The inability to properly plan and prepare was seen as a barrier to effective teaching, and standards played a direct role in alleviating this burden.

Along with a sense of clarity, teachers reported that standards facilitated reflection. Reflection plays an essential role in teaching, helping teachers to constantly grow and search for new ways to reach students. Yet, it is often difficult to reflect without benchmark tools. One experienced teacher at Aspen Elementary School noted that with standards,

You look and you think, “Alright, here is my timeline and this is what I need to teach, and I want to get them to a certain point.” So as a teacher, it makes me look at myself, and every June, I reflect back on the year, what went right, what didn’t, and how I can change it. Because I think as educators, we can always change what we’re doing and we can always improve on things.

Furthermore, reflection entails the sharing of strategies, successes, and failures. Because grades now follow uniform standards, teachers were able to partake in grade-level reflection and planning. A group of teachers at Poplar reported that they meet before the start of the school year to review strategies to incorporate standards. Looking at previous test scores in conjunction with the standards, they focused on key areas of concern to determine which standards were the most essential for student achievement.

Teachers across all sites expressed concern that the current grade-level standards were developmentally inappropriate.

How Ongoing Standards-Based Assessment Enhances Accountability

The majority of educators interviewed expressed concern about the inability of the state's standardized test data to influence classroom practices in meaningful ways. While the state has recently made efforts to align the tests to curriculum standards, scores are still not released until the end of the summer. This delay prevents teachers from using test scores to inform and modify their instruction during the course of the school year.

In fact, our study revealed that teachers value data if it is provided in a clear and timely manner. This strategic use of data was evident at Poplar Elementary, where teachers supported a practical and valuable ongoing classroom assessment program. The program is based upon the notion that in order for students to understand advanced concepts, they must first have basic skills. Unlike state testing, the assessment program evaluates student achievement in smaller, more useful, increments. Since it provides immediate scores and feedback for each student, teachers have multiple opportunities to reteach and reemphasize key standards. As one teacher noted:

We're using assessments in smaller increments to see student growth instead of, "Oh the next grade level, what do we do with them?" And we're really trying to assess students and change our instruction while they're still in our classroom.

In addition, the program is standards-based, providing compatibility, rather than competition, with the state's system of curriculum standards and testing. One teacher explained that the program, "made me stop and think, Why am I teaching this? Why am I doing this? Now, we are stopping and thinking, What is this

teaching? What standard am I covering now by doing this project?" Moreover, teachers could use these test scores as early indicators for the end-of-year state test, and adjust daily lessons plans as necessary.

Several teachers commented that they now have a common language to use for student assessment, allowing teachers to meet on a regular basis to discuss patterns and areas of concern. As one teacher explained:

We look at testing scores. That data is analyzed for each individual student and any kind of patterns are analyzed, any trends we might see, inadequacies in certain areas. And then we decide what our plan of attack is going to be.

There was a noticeable sense of collaboration at Poplar, as teachers offered critical feedback and shared advice and strategies.

The success of the assessment program at Poplar can be attributed in part to its useful and timely data and its compatibility with the state system. It is also important to note that the program's implementation was initiated by teachers, and enjoyed strong support among school and district administrators. Indeed, the support of the principal was central to the program's success, as one teacher remarked:

He [the principal] went to our weeklong training with us. It made a big difference in terms of my buy-in to the whole project because he was willing to be there, he didn't have to do that...so that made a big difference.

Poplar provides an interesting model of assessment and data analysis. With strong teacher and administrator buy-in, educators recognize the usefulness of ongoing assessments that allow for immediate reflection and adjustments to classroom instruction.

Critiques of Curriculum Standards

Standards place unrealistic demands upon teachers and students.

Numerous teachers remarked that state curriculum standards placed unrealistic demands upon their profession. They felt that teachers were fighting a losing battle because the standards were simply too high for the majority of their students. One teacher at Maple shared her daily frustration of trying to balance the standards with the academic needs of her students:

I think that the standards they're trying to meet are fair for kids who come into this school prepared to learn. But the standards keep increasing as the years go by, and the kids who are not at grade-level early on, in kindergarten, first, or second-grade really struggle. Even at my grade level, we have some kids who just can't read the curriculum [material]. And we try to catch them up, but at the same time I have 18 other kids and often 10 or 15 of them are way beyond their grade-level.

Second grade teachers interviewed, for example, often struggled to teach students the complex concept of time, or advanced math properties of multiplication and division, which many felt were inappropriate at that grade level.

Indeed, teachers across all sites expressed concern that the current grade-level standards were “developmentally inappropriate.” Such concerns caused a pedagogical dilemma for many teachers—should they teach material for which students were not ready? And if not, what were the ramifications of not shoring up basic concepts, such as addition and subtraction, before moving on to multiplication? For example, a Maple teacher reported that a fourth grade standard requires students to master algebra with expressions and variables. With her best students struggling to master these advanced concepts, she felt conflicted over the appropriateness of the required material.

The inappropriate nature of standards led to strong feelings of resentment among many teachers interviewed, who disliked being told what to teach by policymakers who were perceived as removed from classroom realities and having little or no teaching experience. Teachers attributed the unrealistic nature of California's standards to a lack of teacher input during the development process, and many felt the state failed to address the difficulty of implementing standards. One discouraged teacher remarked:

Sometimes I'd like to see them [the state] come in to our classrooms and teach some of the programs, and [then] let us know what they really think about the program. Do you think that these students are going to progress as fast as, you know, we expect them to do on that state standard? (Teacher, Spruce Elementary School)

Despite their overall support of state curriculum standards, teachers were nonetheless frustrated by their not having a voice in policy decisions.

Teachers were also concerned about the sheer magnitude of standards, forcing them to adopt a “breadth over depth” approach to teaching. The large number of topics forced them to move through the curriculum before students had a chance to master concepts. One teacher told us how she was able to just teach “a little bit of this” before she had to move on to “a little

bit of that.” (Teacher, Aspen) Another commented that teachers would better “serve our students if we had a more narrow field of what they asked us to do.” (Teacher, Poplar)

Despite their support of standards as a policy reform, teachers ultimately felt frustrated with the realities of implementation. As one teacher explained, “The biggest challenge is trying to cover everything and having students grasp what they are learning in the amount of time we have to do it in, in the quantity of time and quantity of material to teach. It’s a losing battle.” (Teacher, Aspen) These concerns call into question the fundamental rationale behind curriculum standards as an aspect of accountability. What is the purpose of standards if teachers are unable to keep pace with rigorous demands?⁶

Teachers’ responses to California’s system of accountability reflect the complexity of the issues involved. The teachers interviewed were not resistant to the idea of being held accountable. They supported certain aspects of accountability such as curriculum standards, which facilitated, not hindered, their efforts to improve student achievement. They also offered critiques of those and other aspects, such as standardized test data which did not meet their needs. Finally, teachers provided examples of alternative accountability efforts, such as the use of an ongoing classroom assessment program, which suggest adjustments to the current state system.

The Role of the District

Districts are often overlooked when it comes to accountability. Most state policies, California's included, target schools as the unit of change and do not hold districts directly accountable. However, recent research has revealed that, in fact, districts do matter. Districts often respond in one of two ways: they either buffer or pay little interest to state policy (Firestone and Fairman, 1998), or they add an additional layer of accountability by mandating their own assessments and developing their own performance incentives (Chrispeels, 1997; Goertz et al., 1998). Our research primarily supports the latter finding. As one teacher in the Tech Valley district explained, "It definitely feels like there's a lot more assessment coming from the district and that they're writing a lot more of their own accountability measures" (Teacher, Aspen). Furthermore, when asked who they felt accountable to, many teachers cited the district above the state.

Three of the four districts visited have expanded testing considerably, both in terms of the amount of testing required and the grades expected to participate. Three have also created either standards-based report cards or other accountability measures in an effort to track teachers' use and students' understanding of the standards. In addition, two have mandated curriculum packages that are aligned with the standards, and developed accompanying pacing plans that dictate the order and timeframe in which concepts are taught and tested.⁷

However, one district was noticeable for its lack of activity in comparison to the other districts, especially since more than half of its schools did not meet their state growth targets.⁸ It is difficult to conclude from our data whether the district saw additional accountability measures as unnecessary or if it was intentionally buffering state policy. Possible reasons for the district's behavior will be discussed later in this chapter.

Additional Layers of Accountability

District testing

Teachers in three of the districts talked extensively about testing required by their districts, in addition to the SAT-9. In North and South City districts, where Open Court and Scott Foresman are mandated, teachers were expected to administer Open Court tests approximately every six weeks and Scott Foresman tests every quarter. The South City district also mandated its own math test, administered four times a year, as well as an annual performance writing assignment. It is notable that unlike the SAT-9, which is only mandated by the state for grades 2–5, North and South City require district tests for all grades, including kindergarten. South City also requires its first-graders to take the SAT-9, even though their scores are not sent to the state.

Teachers in Tech Valley have also experienced an increase in district testing. In grades K–2, teachers are expected to administer a language assessment, which measures students'

reading ability four times a year. The district also requires students to take performance based assessments in math, language arts, science, and social studies.

Only two teachers interviewed in the Central Plains district mentioned tests required by the district. One teacher talked about an annual writing assessment, which is given to all students; another referred to an end-of-the-year district test for students in kindergarten and first grade. Instead most teachers discussed the assessment programs used at their specific schools. While teachers in the Central Plains district test their students just as frequently as the other districts, they do not see assessment as a burden but rather as a tool that informs their instruction. This is likely attributable to the fact that these programs were chosen by teachers, not mandated by the district.⁹

Teachers in the Tech Valley and South City districts told us that increased testing has become a source of pressure in the classroom. Due to the number of required district tests, some teachers are administering at least one and as many as three tests a week. As a teacher from South City remarked,

There is so much testing that we have to do with the kids that I would say a month of the year is spent on testing the kids. And our kids are in school for only eight months. So what is that, 12%? And that is a long time that you cannot really be teaching them because you are testing them.
(Teacher, Sycamore)

Interestingly, this stands in stark contrast to the amount of time South City district leaders estimate its teachers spend on testing. One district administrator agreed that “some of the rhetoric that you hear regarding the testing burden makes it sound like it could be a very large number.” According to his calculations, however, just “a little over 1% of elementary students’ time is spent in testing for assessment.” While it is impossible to determine which percentage is more accurate, it is clear that the district may not have a sense of the impact of the “testing burden” on teachers’ work in the classroom.

Districts often create additional layers of accountability by mandating assessments and curriculum packages.

Because of the immediacy and frequency of district tests, some teachers explicitly identified the district as the entity to which they feel they are being held accountable. This is not altogether surprising, since *who* teachers see themselves being held accountable to is often influenced by *what* they see themselves being held accountable for (Abelman & Elmore, 1999). The teachers who named the district as the agent of accountability also identified district-mandated curriculum tests as what they were being held accountable for:

The district is [holding us accountable] because we were told that all our test scores go to the district and there is some guy at the district who looks at all the test scores....I think many of the teachers feel the same way as I do, [they feel] a lot of the pressures, a lot of the stuff that is going on that the district is requiring us to do. (Teacher, Sycamore)

Interestingly, as implied in the quote above, some teachers felt that they were not necessarily being held accountable for their students’ performance on the test, but simply for the fact that the tests were administered. As one teacher in South City explained,

We have tests...that must be given to our kids and they must be turned into the district. So all the paperwork has to be done. That is where the major accountability comes in—if you are not complying and getting the scores in on time. (Teacher, Sycamore)

Similarly, a teacher in Tech Valley noted that teachers were expected to administer and grade the district assessments in math and writing themselves, but were not required to turn the scores into the district.

The district's role in mandating additional testing clearly had an impact on how teachers perceived the usefulness of those assessments. District-mandated tests were generally seen as a source of pressure for teachers, rather than a means to improve teaching. Additional testing chosen by teachers, however, was seen as more useful, given teachers' engagement in policy decisions and the timeliness of that data.

District pacing plans

Teachers in both the South City and North City districts also identified district pacing plans, which accompany mandated curriculum packages and prescribe the order and time frame in which the lessons and tests are given, as a source of pressure. Many teachers complained that they were restrictive and unrealistic and tried to cover too much material in a short period of time:

Because of the testing now...not anyone of us probably [are] right on the target date for where we're supposed to be on the calendar so...it's hurry up...because you're already behind. They [the district] don't allow time for the assessments when they schedule your calendar...But I'm behind schedule and they're going to do the next assessment...so you could see the madness of that. If you start acting like a robot and...following it to the millimeter you could probably pull that off but at what expense to kids? (Teacher, Maple)

Teachers in both districts also expressed concern that the pacing plans did not allow enough time to reteach material, and that they sometimes had to administer assessments before covering all the tested concepts:

This year we are so bogged down...it is not good for the kids to have all these things. You have to teach Open Court for three hours and you have to be on a certain story, and you have to teach one math lesson a day. And if your kids don't get it you are supposed to move on when you can't, and then you get so behind that they have to take a test that they are not ready for. (Teacher, Beech)

Pressure to keep up with the pacing plans has also led to a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers focus primarily on language arts and math at the expense of other subject areas or interdisciplinary projects:

Impossibility is scheduled and you try to figure it out. How do you do 15 minutes minimum of Hampton Brown for English language development? And two-and-a-half hours of Open Court a day? And a minimum of one hour of math a day? Plus the music, the art, the social studies, the science? I challenge anyone in the district to show where that could be possible with a scripted program that doesn't overlap. I used to do interdisciplinary things, but you can't do that with scripted programs. (Teacher, Redwood)

Some teachers are administering at least one and as many as three tests a week.

District pacing plans raise concerns about the quality of student learning when teachers feel pressure to move on before students master the material.

District pacing plans further exacerbated the time crunch teachers experience in the classroom; moreover, they raise concerns about the quality of student learning when teachers feel pressure to move on before students master the material.

District monitoring

The two districts using Open Court applied additional pressure by sending district personnel to schools to monitor program implementation and instruction. Teachers sometimes referred to these individuals as the Open Court “police.” One teacher at Redwood in North City who had been openly critical of Open Court in school and district meetings, told us that the superintendent visited her room three times in four months to make sure she was following the curriculum. In addition, one teacher at Sycamore in South City was told by the Open Court coach to stop using reading groups in her classrooms, since the curriculum package only allows for whole-class instruction.

Several teachers at Willow Elementary School in Tech Valley also talked about district monitoring of test scores and direct pressure they felt from the superintendent. When their students performed poorly on the SAT-9, the superintendent visited the school to berate them for their students’ test scores. However, the teachers added that the superintendent also praised the teachers when their scores improved the following year.

The amount of direct pressure teachers felt from the district was mediated by the school’s academic performance. For example, in North City none of the teachers at Maple, with an API score of 858, identified the district as a source of pressure. One teacher there said that people from the district had stopped visiting, and now one of the teachers at the school simply collects the Open Court test scores and sends them to the district office. However, teachers at Redwood, also located in North City, but with an API score of 655 and an II/USP designation, expressed resentment over the way in which the curriculum was mandated by the district and how the district monitored instruction.

Standards-based district accountability measures

The South City district has developed additional accountability measures designed to help teachers focus on instruction and the use of standards in the classroom. For example, the district does walk-throughs at the schools, during which the superintendent, principal and/or other administrators and teachers visit classrooms and talk to students and teachers. They observe how a teacher questions, probes, and leads class discussions using the standards, and the degree to which students can articulate the standards that they are learning. In addition to incorporating standards “language” in the classroom, the district also promotes the use of other district “learning principles” such as setting clear expectations and encouraging academic rigor.

The Tech Valley district issues its own version of curriculum standards, distilling the state standards into “essential” district standards. Tech Valley, as well as the Central Plains district, also implemented the use of standards-based report cards, thus bringing further emphasis to the curriculum standards component of the state accountability system. Teachers at Willow in Tech Valley were overwhelmed by the length of the report card, which required teachers to describe a student’s performance on each standard. Despite the district’s efforts to limit the standards, teachers still felt overwhelmed by the additional requirements associated with this aspect of accountability.

As with additional district testing, the effectiveness of these accountability measures is tied to the degree to which they allow teachers to reflect upon and improve their teaching practices. Without this connection, these measures simply create additional work which teachers may eventually grow to resent.

Taking a Less Active Approach

Teachers in Central Plains rarely mentioned the role of the district in discussions of testing or accountability. They most often talked about the SAT-9, understood as a state-mandated test, and the assessment programs required within their schools. Unlike the other three districts, the Central Plains district has developed few accountability measures to supplement those of the state. They appear to have taken a more reactionary approach, addressing problems as they arise rather than trying to anticipate and prevent them.

For example, when Spruce Elementary had allowed too many waiver exemptions for the SAT-9, the district did not inform the principal of the state's policy on the number of students required to take the test. As a result, Spruce did not receive an API score that year and was reprimanded by the state. Both principals we interviewed in Central Plains have taken a more proactive approach in educating themselves and their teachers about state accountability policies.¹⁰

The Central Plains district's lack of activity can be attributed to several factors. First, the district may not have the resources or capacity to develop their own assessments or accountability measures, given its relatively small size. One principal described the district as "too busy and overwhelmed," and has taken it upon himself to support his teachers in preparing for the state Standardized Testing and Reporting assessments. Smaller districts may be at a disadvantage in comparison to large districts that have the resources necessary to facilitate policy implementation, and thus may require additional support from the state in order to meet accountability demands (Hannaway & Kimball, 2001; Fairman & Firestone, 2001).

Second, the district may have wanted to see how the state policy would unfold before responding. Recently, the district has begun showing signs of moving in a similar direction as the other districts, taking on a more active role in accountability. During the 2002–2003 school year, a few teachers at Spruce and Poplar piloted the Houghton Mifflin reading program, slated to be implemented throughout the district the following fall. Whether the district plans to mandate additional testing requirements or an accompanying pacing plan is still unclear. A few teachers at Spruce told us that the district is also planning a district-wide expansion of the popular assessment program used at Poplar. Thus, it appears as if the Central Plains district may be developing its own accountability system similar to those already underway in other California districts.

Our research confirms what others have found, namely that districts play a key role in the implementation, and in many cases enhancement, of California's system of accountability. Three out of our four districts took an active role in ensuring schools' compliance with state accountability mandates, through the development of additional testing and standards-based measures. The Central Plains district appears to be taking on a more active role as well. With increasing state mandates and the overlap of NCLB requirements, more districts are likely to expand their role in school policy to meet the demands of accountability.

Unintended Consequences of Accountability

Previous research has documented the effects of state accountability systems, and high stakes testing in particular, on elementary school curricula, teachers' work, and student learning in Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, and Ohio. This research confirms that testing causes elementary school teachers to increase the time spent teaching tested subjects, and to decrease the time spent teaching non-tested subjects such as science and social studies (Jones et al., 1999; Stecher and Barron, 1999). In addition, teachers report increased time spent teaching directly to tests (Smith, 1991; Whitford and Jones, 2000).

Teachers find high-stakes testing stressful and believe it negatively affects their students (Kubow & Debard, 2000). States' efforts to motivate improvement may be undermined by teachers' perception that testing is not a valid measure of teaching and learning, and their resentment in shouldering an unfair burden of responsibility (Mintrop, 2003). Our study confirms and extends these findings by documenting elementary school teachers' experiences with accountability in California.

California's system of accountability is grounded in the assumption that curriculum standards, testing, and evaluation of schools will focus teachers' instruction and thus produce improved student outcomes. Our research confirms that this system is indeed influencing teachers' work in many elementary school classrooms, at times producing unintended or potentially negative consequences. Specifically, testing and test preparation may displace other instructional activities and lead to a narrowing of the curriculum. In addition, accountability may negatively impact teachers' work, ultimately causing teachers to feel less control over classroom decisions and diminished satisfaction with their work.

Negative Impacts on Curriculum and Instruction

The teachers we interviewed expressed a great deal of concern about the negative impact of accountability reforms on their classroom practices and the material covered. Increased state and district testing has resulted in teachers devoting more time to test preparation and administration. The tests' focus on math and language arts, coupled with district-mandated curriculum packages in those subject areas, has reduced the time teachers can spend covering other subject areas, including science, social studies, and the arts.

At the same time, teachers have struggled to incorporate a vast array of state curriculum standards, forcing them to choose between "breadth versus depth," as discussed in Chapter 2. These various pressures of accountability ultimately have left students with a more expansive yet superficial exposure to math and language arts, and minimal exposure to other subjects.

Testing and test preparation displace other instructional activities.

While the state test only occurs during one week in the spring, each of the schools we visited administered additional tests as a result of state and district accountability policies. Consequently, many teachers report that frequent testing takes up time that would otherwise be spent teaching:

[Considering] what's required from the district, and from the state, it is almost like we should sit down and pick and choose, and come up with some kind of schedule where we are not always bombarding the students with this test and that test....I just feel it takes away from instructional time. (Teacher, Willow)

Beyond the time spent actually administering tests, teachers also experienced pressure to prepare students for those tests. It is important to note that teachers often distinguished test preparation activities as separate from or in addition to regular content area instruction. For example, a teacher at Beech Elementary explained,

I'm doing more test preparation with the students because it's not that they're not capable; some students are. But if they're not translating their knowledge in the classroom onto the test-taking themes, then it's not really showing what they can do. So after I learned that, I said wow, I'm going to really work with my students more, and prepare them with more test prep so that they can be successful.

Consequently, test preparation has become another activity that teachers must fit into their already limited instructional time with students.

Test preparation has become another activity that teachers must fit into their already limited instructional time.

One potential consequence of constrained instructional time coupled with high stakes testing is that teachers will begin teaching directly to the tests. Approximately one in five teachers reported that they teach explicitly to tests. Additional teachers reported that they are aware of the phenomenon at their school, but did not comment on their own practice. Some teachers were concerned that teaching to tests would contribute to the narrowing of the curriculum to tested subjects. Others worried that teaching to the test would force teachers to cover more content but with less depth:

You do not have time because you know that test is coming up any day now and they have to know this, this, and this. And if you introduce it to them, it will be better than if they have never seen it at all. So it fosters just skimming the water as opposed to going down deep. (Teacher, Sycamore)

Narrowing of the Curriculum to Tested Subjects

Two competing tensions have emerged from recent accountability reforms in California. On the one hand, state and district accountability measures have directed teachers to address a broader range of curriculum standards within the same amount of instructional time. On the other hand, at the time of this research, the state's evaluation mechanism, the SAT-9, focused only on mathematics and language arts.¹¹ Not surprisingly, many teachers reported that they respond to the more immediate pressure of raising achievement scores by narrowing instruction to focus on tested subjects.

Indeed, the testing, standards, and mandated curriculum components have all pushed teachers to focus on tested subjects at the expense of other content areas. The majority of classroom teachers reported that they spent very little time teaching science, social studies, or fine arts because they must emphasize math and language arts instruction to meet state or district level accountability demands. In the words of one teacher,

There's so much they expect you to do that it's science that doesn't get taught, art doesn't get taught, you know. The things that cause children to love school and learn on their own are being cut. (Teacher, Aspen)

Many teachers believe that they simply do not have enough time in the classroom with students to teach all content areas. Given time constraints, it is not surprising that they choose to emphasize the tested subjects that will form the basis for evaluating student, teacher, and school performance.

The fact that language arts and math were the only tested subjects sent a clear, albeit unspoken, message to teachers about which subjects they should emphasize in the classroom. A teacher at Maple explained, "I look at people and I see that things don't happen unless they're tested...people teach what's on the test. And if we get held accountable for teaching social studies and sciences, then they will be taught." Teachers were more likely to report the narrowing of the curriculum in schools with district-mandated curriculum packages. In conjunction with program implementation, districts designed pacing plans for teachers, indicating what lessons they were expected to cover daily. One teacher described her frustration with her district's pacing plan saying, "If a program takes three hours long, well, what about the other things you have to do?" (Teacher, Beech)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, district-mandated curriculum packages in math and language arts further contributed to an emphasis on those subjects at the expense of others. Within the context of limited time and the realities of accountability demands, teachers have been forced to make judgments about the relative value of each subject based on its inclusion or exclusion on standardized tests or in district mandates.

Teachers voiced a number of concerns stemming from the narrowing of the curriculum. Many spoke of their inability to pursue student interests in the classroom through science, social studies, and art projects, and the negative impact this had on student engagement and motivation. One teacher at Redwood explained,

I feel like I have less opportunity to be creative. It's really hard to just find something kids like, and it's hard to take it and run with it. You know? Because you have to be on a certain page or you have to be in a certain story, or you have to be ready for the SAT-9 or CAT-6 or whatever. (Teacher, Redwood)

In addition, teachers feared that the exclusion of creative components of the curriculum took away an avenue for some students to experience success in school. A teacher at Aspen explained:

Music will be cut you know, when for a lot of my kids that may be the one spot where they get to shine. One place where they get to have something they're good at, or to be the best, because they might not be a good reader or good at math.

How Accountability is Impacting Kindergarten

Kindergarten is more complicated than it used to be...My recollections of kindergarten were clay, and games, and beads...Now, we're reading by the end of kindergarten. (Teacher, Willow Elementary)

Many of the kindergarten teachers in our study commented on the changing nature of kindergarten in recent years, and the role accountability pressures have played in this shift. They felt the curriculum is much more academic as a result of the new standards and focuses less on students' social and physical development. For example, a third of the teachers interviewed reported that they feel as if they are teaching first grade now rather than kindergarten. As a teacher from Poplar Elementary explained,

The standards from first grade have been pushed onto kindergarten, and we're supposed to teach them to read in kindergarten now...From when I started [teaching] 17 years ago, it's a big change.

Teachers noted that while the expectations have changed, what kindergarteners are ready for has not. They voiced concern that the standards were developmentally inappropriate and that the expectations were too demanding and potentially detrimental to students' future academic development:

The pressure now is to do more academic [work]...[but] the kids are still developmentally in the same place where they were...And for some of these kids, you are stepping over all of their developmental foundation things. To teach them something that they are not ready for. (Teacher, Redwood)

Some teachers also expressed concern over the amount of testing required at the kindergarten level. Two-thirds of the kindergarten teachers mentioned a noticeable increase in testing over the past few years. While teachers are not expected to administer the annual state standardized test, they are often required to give district assessments, such as the Open Court and Scott Foresman tests or the Language Observation Survey (LOS):

When I was a younger teacher in the district...we were just getting [one] standardized test...we thought that was really bad for kindergarteners [laughs]. And that's nothing compared to what we have now. It's like we took all these steps *backwards* rather than forward as far as I'm concerned with the testing issue. (Teacher, Aspen)

As a result of these raised expectations, now more than ever before kindergarten teachers see themselves as the bridge between home and school. Many teachers commented on the importance of educating not only the students, but also the parents, so that they can reinforce classroom learning at home. Ultimately, accountability has brought kindergarten teachers a greater sense of responsibility for laying down the foundation for future academic success:

I'm not doing the *state* testing in kindergarten. So I don't have *that* kind of pressure, but it starts in second-grade and I know that if I haven't taught certain things in kindergarten, that probably by the time the kids get to second-grade and take that test, they won't be prepared for it. So I feel responsible in kindergarten that I need to...build my part in the foundation. (Teacher, Willow)

Negative Impacts on Teachers' Work and Professionalism

Teachers report a disproportionate amount of pressure.

One of the assumptions underlying the state accountability system is that giving teachers more explicit instructional guidelines and materials—such as content standards and curriculum packages—will focus and improve teachers' instructional activities, and in turn result in improved student outcomes. Not surprisingly, teachers feel more pressure due to greater scrutiny of teacher and student performance. The majority of teachers interviewed reported feeling higher levels of pressure that can be directly attributed to the accountability system. Sources of performance pressure include frequent testing, public reporting of test scores, and punitive aspects of the system such as labeling schools low-performing. Here's how one teacher described the dilemma:

You know there's just a lot more pressure. We're published in the paper. I mean, everything is a mark on what you look like and it's never the children, it's never the parents, it's what are you doing. It's your [the teacher's] fault. Your school isn't scoring, you're school isn't doing well. What is your problem? (Teacher, Aspen)

Policymakers may argue that pressure is a desirable component of a system that demands more from teachers. However, most respondents felt that the constant pressure directed at teachers was not motivating. A teacher at Spruce explained,

So the only thing that's being addressed right now is the teachers. And it seems like teachers become very defensive about it and that's not the right atmosphere for change and improvement.

In fact, this Sycamore Elementary teacher suggested that the added pressure may be having the exact opposite effect on motivation:

I think it makes the teachers feel bad because no matter what we do, it is just not good enough. And to be judged on that is very frustrating. It almost makes one want to not do this anymore.

Ultimately, teachers resented what felt like a disproportionate amount of blame directed at them when students did not perform well on tests. "I think in general teachers are whipping boys for all of this," said one Redwood teacher.

In addition to the effects on teacher motivation, pressure resulting from the state's accountability mandates may exacerbate other negative consequences of the accountability system. For instance, pressure to improve student performance on standardized tests may exacerbate constraints on instructional time and the narrowing of the curriculum, as teachers feel compelled to emphasize test preparation or teach to the test. In addition, stress may negatively impact the relationship between teachers and students. When asked if the system of accountability had changed her relationship with her students, a teacher at Sycamore told us,

I am now more business-like and less, I mean you know as a parent you fool around with your kids and let them explore ideas, which I used to do with kids. They would come up with a question and we would talk about it more. And now it's, "I am sorry children. We can't talk about this now because I have this lesson I have to teach you." So it kind of stifles the children's curiosity.

Many teachers have responded to the pressure of raising achievement scores by narrowing instruction to focus on tested subjects [math and language arts].

Teachers report a loss of autonomy and professional satisfaction.

Teachers reported that certain aspects of state and district accountability are a source of pressure, not motivation or assistance. Time pressure resulting from the number of content standards, frequent testing, and mandated curriculum packages, combined with performance pressure originating from testing, public reporting of test scores, and potential consequences for failure to improve, together have serious implications for teachers' work and students' educational experiences. In addition, our data suggests that accountability has caused a reduction in teacher discretion over classroom level decisions and a decrease in professional satisfaction.

Many components of the state accountability system place tighter external controls over school policies and practices; consequently, teachers feel less control over their work in the classroom. The vast majority of teacher interviews touched on the issue of autonomy under accountability:

It's almost to the point where a teacher's scripted as to exactly what they're supposed to say and teach, what page you're supposed to be on, a certain stage of the book, and what books you can use. (Teacher, Poplar)

Some proponents of the accountability system argue that the loss of autonomy is not an altogether negative consequence of a system that seeks greater uniformity in teacher practice with the goal of more consistent positive student outcomes. Indeed, a stated goal of California's accountability system was to limit teachers' coverage to "important content" (California Department of Education, 1998). However, this teacher at Redwood reminds us how loss of autonomy can discourage teacher engagement and performance:

I think maybe it [the system of accountability] has affected me negatively. I always think that somebody is breathing down my neck. And so if I deviate... if I say, we are going to plant some seeds today and put Open Court on the shelf. I kind of look over my shoulder to see if anybody heard me say to the kids that that is what we are doing. Or if I read this book instead of what the Open Court is telling me to do. I think it is a discomfort. It has not been anything that has enhanced my teaching or driven it in a positive way.

Our research indicates that many teachers feel constrained in their ability to teach because of California's system of accountability. As a consequence, teachers have experienced a loss of professional satisfaction.

Everything has changed now. Um...the pressure. I am trying to be so professional about not having the stress and the constant pressure affect the classroom climate. It just took all the fun out of teaching. (Teacher, Redwood)

Indeed, several teachers noted a loss of joy or creativity in their teaching, and the negative impact of that loss on their students:

Everything we have to do we are so bogged down, there is absolutely no creativity in teaching anymore, and because of it our children are suffering. (Teacher, Beech)

The narrowing of the curriculum, constant time and performance pressures, loss of autonomy, and negative effects on students have caused teachers to derive less satisfaction from their work. Erosion of professional satisfaction may have serious consequences, as professional

satisfaction is strongly related to commitment to teaching (Fresko et al., 1997). The prevalence of these themes throughout our sample suggests that this is a situation to be monitored; if loss of autonomy and professional satisfaction continue to escalate, teachers may be discouraged from remaining in the classroom. Consequently, erosion of satisfaction among California's teachers may have serious implications for the state's ability to staff classrooms with high quality, committed teachers.

The Role of the Principal

Researchers have long pointed to the importance of school leaders and principals in implementing education reform (Fullan, 2001; Glickman, 1993; Senge, 2000), even in the context of state-driven accountability systems and state-mandated testing (Firestone, et al., 2001a, Smith, 1991b). While state and district mandates do have an impact on teachers' work and instructional choices, principals can have just as much, if not more, impact on teachers' understanding and implementation of accountability reforms (Firestone, et. al., 2001b; Herman, 1990). In our study, we found that principals often played a pivotal role in how teachers experienced California accountability measures.

In schools with low test-scores or a low-performing label, principals either acted as “buffers,” shielding teachers from pressures related to test-scores, or as an added source of pressure for teachers, by emphasizing the need to raise students' test scores and the school's API score. Principals' attitude toward accountability and their leadership styles also affected how teachers experienced district and state accountability. Principals' emphasis on or avoidance of certain district and state instructional reforms, for instance, was reflected in their teachers' concerns and practices related to accountability. Moreover, teachers seemed most accepting of reforms when they felt principals had engaged them in decision-making around the implementation of accountability mandates at the school site.

Principals: Buffer or Source of Pressure?

Every principal in our study said they felt pressure related to accountability—usually in terms of raising test scores or enforcing new directives from the district. Some principals passed this pressure on to their teachers, however, while others worked as a “buffer,” shielding teachers from district and state pressures. The contrast between principals as buffers and principals who created additional pressure was most apparent in schools with low API scores, since those schools tended to be under the most external pressure to raise student achievement.

For instance, during the year of our study, Willow and Aspen, two schools in the Tech Valley district, were in danger of having to send out letters informing parents of their status as “failing” schools. In both cases the schools had achieved this status based on the failure of one student subpopulation to meet its API targets.¹²

At Willow, where the principal focused energy and attention on standards-based reform and teachers' instructional strategies, teachers reported feeling little pressure to improve test scores, and the pressure they did feel they attributed to the district rather than to their principal. As one teacher explained,

[The principal] takes a lot of heat off of us. Certainly he's getting a lot of pressure from the district and outside sources....he sort of feels like it's his role as principal to buffer us from that negativity....he tries to keep us moving forward in a positive way instead of getting bogged down.

Principals often played a pivotal role in how teachers experienced California accountability measures.

While one teacher recalled feeling pressured by a part-time assistant principal to improve her students' test scores, most teachers we interviewed felt that the focus at Willow was on instruction and standards versus testing, and felt supported rather than pressured by the principal to improve.

Willow teachers cited the principal's effort to create a schedule that conformed to their needs, his encouragement of teachers to work together as grade-level teams, and his implementation of site-based decision-making as examples of how he actively supported them. The principal explained that he gave teachers more control and authority in making decisions affecting classroom instruction and curriculum under "the assumption that they'll make good decisions." He felt that this assumption was pivotal if accountability was to be meaningful for teachers. If teachers were going to be held responsible for what goes on at the school site, he explained, then "they have to have the authority to make [the necessary] changes." Teachers' statements in interviews and focus groups reflected this perspective. "We are *definitely* allowed to be professionals in the classroom... our principal believes in us," one teacher remarked.

While the principal at Willow buffered his teachers from testing pressures by focusing on instruction and training, the principal at Tech Valley's Aspen, although very well-liked by his teachers, seemed to add to accountability pressures. Aspen's principal viewed himself as protecting his teachers from district demands, yet teachers at the school felt enormous pressure to maintain their relatively high test-scores, and more often than not they cited the principal as the source of that pressure.

For instance, some teachers referred to the principal as "test-driven," particularly the kindergarten teachers who had explicitly been told by the principal that they needed to raise their students' scores on district tests. Teachers often identified the pressure they were feeling to raise test scores as coming from the district, characterizing the district as "breathing down" their necks, but it was the principal who reportedly conveyed the district's message to them. Indeed Aspen's principal acknowledged that he stressed testing and the school's API with teachers, explaining that his attitude was to accept the state's accountability system and encourage his teachers to do well within it. Whether or not he agreed with the system, he told teachers, "It is here and we have to do it, do it well, do it right, and do it the best you can."

Some teachers at Aspen cited the principal's "competitive" personality in explaining the pressure they were feeling regarding test scores. Stated one teacher, "He wants us to be the best...that's the bottom line. The best of all the schools in our district, in our state." While Aspen teachers appreciated the high expectations set for them and their students, and for the most part felt supported by their principal, his emphasis on test scores and API rankings added additional accountability-related pressure to teachers' day-to-day work at this school. As the above examples demonstrate, two schools under similar testing pressures and the same district directives have experienced accountability quite differently through different principal leadership.

Principals' Attitudes Shape Instructional Response.

The importance of the principal's role in how teachers experienced California's system of accountability went beyond adding to or shielding teachers from pressures to raise test scores. Our study found that principals' attitudes toward specific accountability-related reforms also

The contrast between principals as buffers and principals who created additional pressure was most apparent in schools with low API scores or which had been labeled "failing."

impacted teachers. For example, schools in the same district at times implemented district-level accountability measures very differently based on their principals' perceptions of the district directives.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in South City, the school district had mandated curriculum packages, pacing plans, and unit assessments along with an instructional approach centered around learning principles and standards-based language. However, the two South City schools in our study experienced these reforms quite differently as a result of the principals' differing perspectives. The principal at Beech, who had worked at the district office in developing its instructional program prior to becoming a site administrator, described herself as well-aligned with the district and actively worked with her teachers to implement the district's new reforms. At Sycamore, on the other hand, the principal was openly skeptical of the district's new programs, and focused instead on being sensitive to the school's history of strong teacher leadership and site autonomy.

These two principals' attitudes towards district accountability requirements were reflected in their teachers' experiences. When asked about the various aspects of accountability, teachers at Beech often mentioned classroom walk-throughs and standards-based language along with state- and district-mandated testing. One teacher noted her new principal's focus on accountability:

[Our former principal] didn't really care too much about exactly what the district wanted. Whereas our principal now is very much "This is what the district wants and this is what we have to do."

Moreover, teachers at Beech tended to associate their new principal with accountability. Even when they knew that the programs were coming from the district, they saw them as part of their principal's agenda.

Few teachers at Sycamore, on the other hand, mentioned classroom walk-throughs in their interviews, and none mentioned the instructional learning principles or standards-based language when asked about accountability. Instead, Sycamore teachers tended to speak of the district-mandated curriculum packages and accompanying tests. They did not associate accountability at all with their principal, who they saw as a "hands-off" leader. As one teacher explained:

The principal, he's very nice...it's not like he makes you do a lot of extra things or anything, but... everybody is in the same boat. We all have to do it so it isn't something he can help us out with. It is just something that everybody has to do.

This teacher's portrayal of the principal as disconnected from the district's accountability reforms and somewhat powerless to impact change at the school site reflected the principal's own view of himself as having to follow orders. He described the principal's role in accountability as one of being "...good soldiers—whether we necessarily agree or not, we do carry out the edicts and the dictates." Sycamore's principal tried to support the instructional programs already in place at the school by not emphasizing additional district rules and programs. While this did not constitute adequate support for those who were strongly opposed to the district's mandates, teachers appreciated the principal's buffering efforts:

[The principal] filters a lot of it, which is why I think we still have some buy-in. He really tries to, because he knows how independent we are as a staff.

Interestingly, teachers at both schools had mixed views about their principals' instructional leadership. While some teachers at Sycamore appreciated the principal's efforts to minimize directives, others expressed frustration that the principal was not more of an instructional leader and did not push teachers to improve their practice and look carefully at student achievement. Similarly at Beech, while some teachers appreciated the principal's attention to classroom instruction and pedagogy, others felt that in stressing accountability she ignored other important aspects of teaching, such as classroom management. At both schools, however, whether they liked their principals' leadership styles or not, teachers' understanding of and experiences with accountability reflected their principals' commitments and styles as instructional leaders.

Involving Teachers in Accountability Decisions

Teachers overall were most accepting of accountability-related reforms when they felt they had played a role in their adoption at the school-site. For example, Poplar Elementary in the Central Plains district had not implemented many district-wide reforms at the time of our study, yet teachers there spoke positively about the instructional reforms they had chosen to implement. Poplar teachers were particularly supportive of a standards-based assessment program they had adopted the year before, and the way that it brought student achievement to the center of their staff discussion.¹³ While they emphasized that much of their support for the program stemmed from the fact that its adoption had been a teacher-initiated “grass-roots” process, they also credited the principal in particular for promoting teacher-led accountability at Poplar:

[The principal's] philosophy has been ... if we all decide to do something, then it will be successful, if we all buy into whatever we decide.

This atmosphere created greater buy-in at the school site, and made teachers feel more accountable for the program's success. Poplar's principal agreed that he promoted teacher buy-in as a critical part of accountability, explaining, “We know, [if] teachers and people believe in what they're doing then it's much more likely that's going to happen.” Teachers saw a clear relationship between feeling empowered by the principal and feeling accountable:

[The principal] really takes into account where *we* want to go...we're *all* deciding what direction this school will take. Of course that's *empowering* and makes you *want* to do a better job because you feel like you have a say in what you're doing.

Similarly, teachers at Willow, where the principal had implemented site-based decision-making, tended to view accountability in terms of their responsibility to one another and their students. While schools in Tech Valley were somewhat more constrained by district initiatives than those in Central Plains, Willow had been able to implement some instructional programs on its own. One such program, which involved a guarantee that all children at the school would be able to read by the end of second grade, had been initiated by the principal. However, in bringing the program before the faculty and asking them to decide as a group to implement it, he had produced strong teacher buy-in. As one teacher explained, “that was *real* accountability.” She continued:

It's self-imposed, which was really nice, rather than an outside agency saying you will do this. I mean we decided we would do it.

Just as at Poplar, teachers at Willow tended to credit the principal's promotion of teacher buy-in and teacher-led decision-making as crucial to their sense of accountability.

Limitations on Principal Influence

It is important to note that not every principal in our study played a pivotal role in teachers' understandings of and experiences with accountability. Principal leadership on accountability was more difficult to detect in both of our North City schools. This district placed strict limitations on principals' autonomy. The presence of the Open Court coaches, for example, brought district-level supervision directly into the classroom, essentially superseding the principal as instructional leader. In addition, there were specific contextual factors at both North City schools that may have limited the principals' impact on teachers' experiences of accountability.

At Maple, where the API was over 800, teachers were for the most part insulated from accountability pressures and left to make pedagogical and curricular decisions on their own. At Redwood, a core group of teachers actively opposed both accountability-related district reforms and the appointment of the new principal. Their efforts to become a "teacher-run" school and their open resistance to the principal likely impacted his ability to be an effective school leader. At both schools, teachers rarely mentioned their principals in the context of accountability, classroom instruction, student assessment, or professional development. However, the principal at Redwood did say that he tried to "buffer teachers and other staff from the insanity that is downtown [i.e., the school district]."

Our research found that these schools were the exception rather than the rule. In general, we found that principals played a key role in how individual schools and teachers experienced state-led accountability in California, and that the importance of their role should not be underestimated in future educational policy decisions.

Teachers were most accepting of accountability-related reforms when they felt they had played a role in their adoption.

Accountability and Equity

A common goal of accountability reform nationwide, at both the state and federal levels, has been to draw attention to discrepancies in achievement across groups of students, based on such factors as race/ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status, and to hold schools responsible for addressing any inequities. This chapter examines the challenges and possibilities of California's accountability policy to address issues of equity, given the realities of educators' assumptions and experiences within today's school context.

The state policymakers interviewed felt that a primary aim of California's system of accountability was to shine the light on inequities: "Explicitly the system sunshines the equity issue. The major motivation was to look at subgroups" (California Department of Education official). The system provides educators with data from the state's annual standardized test, disaggregated by subgroups, with the assumption that educators will use that data to illuminate discrepancies and construct solutions in order to close gaps in achievement. State (and now federal) policies provide the mechanism in the data; teachers and administrators are expected to effect the change. A system of rewards and punishments is intended to provide further motivation for schools to close gaps.

Disaggregated Data as a Mechanism for Change

Policymakers hoped that the distribution of disaggregated test scores, both within the school and district contexts and in the public arena (through publication in local newspapers and the state education website), would create a heightened awareness among educators of gaps in student achievement. This in turn would spark a sense of accountability, as teachers and administrators would be motivated to adjust practices to better serve students and, ultimately, raise test scores. However, such an assumption does not take into account school-level challenges of ensuring access to the data, skills to analyze the data, and most importantly, opportunities to design and implement solutions to any gaps the data might reveal. Our research reveals that the path from test score publication and analysis to pedagogical change and academic improvement was not always smooth.

Exposure to and use of subgroup data to influence school-level policies and practices were inconsistent or nonexistent at the sites we visited. District administrators and principals were generally familiar with the data; however, the same could not always be said for teachers. Some teachers had no knowledge that data existed in a disaggregated form. Others were aware of its existence, but unfamiliar with the details for their school. Most teachers were familiar with subgroup data only in the context of whether the school had met its subgroup targets that year. They knew, for example, that their Latino population had gone up by 30 points, but that their Asian population had missed the target by 1 point. It was less common to hear teachers involved in an ongoing analysis of disaggregated data to inform instruction.

Teachers' exposure to and use of subgroup data was often linked to principal involvement. For example, 70% of teachers interviewed at Poplar mentioned the use of subgroup data, as compared with only 10-25% of teachers at most other sites. Poplar's teachers repeatedly described how their principal presented disaggregated test scores at staff meetings throughout the school year. Teachers at other sites, however, usually only encountered the subgroup data once a year, at the time of release, when the principal would post the school's scores.

Among those teachers who had seen the data, some felt it merely confirmed what they already knew about their students' performance. Yet the majority of teachers who were exposed to the data did report an increased awareness of inequitable patterns of achievement. In some cases, those patterns came as a surprise, challenging educators' assumptions about race and student achievement:

I think what was interesting that came out with Maple's [results] was that those kids who had scored in the lower 25th percentile were *not* all African American; there were a fair number of Caucasian kids in there too. I think everyone kind of went, "Oh! We made this assumption and look, it isn't necessarily true." (Teacher, Maple)

Occasionally, subgroup data analysis illuminated the need to find a balance in instructional focus between both low- and high-performing students:

This last year we saw an increase in our English language learners and how they performed. But actually a decrease in our English-*only* speakers. And we were trying to figure out what that could be attributed to. If it was that we were putting more energies towards English language development. (Teacher, Poplar)

Exposure to subgroup data generally had the intended effect of increasing educators' awareness of discrepancies in student achievement. What they did with that awareness, however, varied across sites.

Only two of the schools visited responded with programmatic changes, creating after-school or Saturday programs for low-performing students. The principal at one of those schools explained how the subgroup data was useful in leveraging scarce funds for her Saturday program, as she could now document the need:

It helps me, particularly with my parents and teachers...I would *never* be able to get my parents to focus in *that* way without the data. That [Saturday program] never would have passed through the PTA board or the teachers if we didn't have the data to show the specific target group. (Principal, Maple)

Unfortunately, awareness of discrepancies did not always lead to changes in practice. Most teachers expressed a sense of futility. They knew that inequities existed—it was the solutions that remained unclear. Frustrations stemmed from teachers feeling overwhelmed and lacking the resources and support to implement a solution. One teacher explained the challenges of addressing a low-achieving English Learner (EL) population at her school:

We have felt for a couple of years with our increasing EL population, that there was no way classroom teachers were going to be able to, you know,

with all the other stuff that the classroom teacher has to do to bring *that* group along....We don't have the materials because we don't have money in our budget....We definitely try to do some things. I don't think we're satisfied with what we're able to do. (Teacher, Redwood)

While some educators struggled to focus attention on a specific population despite limited resources, others simply resisted a group-specific focus in their teaching:

We look at kids as individuals, not as Hispanic. Not as Asian kids, not as white kids....This disaggregated data gives us some information. Does it change what we do? No. And the reason it doesn't change what we do is because what we do is based on individual kids, not on classifications of kids. And we bust our butts with Jose as much as we bust our butts with Ronell as much as we bust our butts with anybody else. (Aspen principal)

In fact, it is significant to note that the majority of teachers and administrators interviewed insisted that they focused attention on students as individuals, not as members of a certain subgroup. While accountability policies highlight race and other subgroup categories as key student identifiers, educators insist that such categories do not factor into their teaching. Teachers resisted the policy's intention to focus instruction based on students' achievement by categories of race, language, or class, and not by individual.

California's accountability system employs subgroup data as a mechanism for change. The success of such a system is dependant upon several factors, including educators' exposure to the data and their willingness and ability to analyze the data, their capacity to respond to the data with effective solutions, and an approach to teaching which emphasizes the categorization of students above individual differences. As our research demonstrates, such factors were not always in place to ensure the use of disaggregated data as an effective means to address inequities.

Roadblocks on the Path to Equity

Educator capacity

Despite educators' insistence on a "color-blind" approach to instruction, our interviews revealed certain assumptions about student achievement as related to race, class, and culture that, unless challenged, may limit the ability of the state's accountability policy to address issues of equity (Lipman, 1998). It was not uncommon, for example, for teachers to excuse low achievement among Latino and African American students by citing a lack of parent support, or a community culture that does not value education. A focus group discussion among teachers and administrators at Beech included the perception that African American students at that school were simply more interested in basketball than academics. The success of any accountability reform lies in the belief that *all* children can succeed. However, our research finds and other studies confirm, that not all educators may hold that belief, or more importantly, feel that they have the capacity to act on that belief (Kannapel et al, 1996).

We heard a sense of futility among educators, a feeling that there was only so much improvement they could expect, given the demographics of their school:

Exposure to and use of subgroup data to influence school-level policies and practices was inconsistent or nonexistent.

We do a lot with what we have. And to me the natural consequence is they're gonna improve and you're going to reach a certain point. And then based on your demographics, you're not going to improve anymore. (Principal, Aspen)

The expectations of accountability policy were seen as unrealistic, given the enormous diversity of students. Several administrators suggested that progress should be measured in the context of their particular student population, echoed by analysts who argue that an accountability system must provide additional time and resources to high-poverty schools (Betts et al, 2000).¹⁴

This teacher felt frustrated that schools with a high-poverty student population faced the same sanctions as wealthier schools, with little or no support from the state:

[Policymakers] are just putting pressure on saying, fix it or I shoot, you know. How? I don't know, but you are going to have this test and you make sure they pass it or you are gone....And it is ridiculous because it is not like we are given tools with which to help correct the problem. (Teacher, Aspen)

Other researchers have noted that accountability policies do not typically provide sufficient guidance and resources to ensure a school's capacity to improve (Fuhrman, 1999).

Flaws in the system

Educators across all sites discussed the challenges presented by their particular set of students, whether the result of racial and socioeconomic diversity or high percentages of EL or SPED students. Yet while most educators used demographics to explain student performance, it is important to note that they did not all use it as an excuse. The principal and teachers at Spruce, for example, articulated a “no excuses” attitude, striving to serve the needs of their students regardless of high rates of poverty and second language learners. Ultimately, educators were frustrated by the system of accountability, and what many felt were its failures to provide solutions to the very real challenges of today's diverse student populations.

Teachers spoke a great deal about the mismatch between state and district-mandated curricula and testing and the diversity of students, particularly EL and SPED, in their classrooms. As noted earlier, the state's annual standardized test was seen as an ineffective measure of learning for students who had not yet mastered the English language. The pacing plans for mandated math and reading programs were too fast, and teachers needed to supplement them with materials more appropriate for EL and SPED students.¹⁵ The notion of having one curriculum meet the needs of all students seemed unrealistic.

Educators were not convinced that accountability policies could address achievement gaps, pointing to flaws in the current system. They recognized that any effective solution would lie beyond simply reviewing test scores. Yet current policies and school practices do not always allow for a deeper investigation as to “why” inequities exist:

But the reason *why*, those issues aren't dealt with. So I think if you're going to look at them [scores] and compare, they need to deal with the issues to *why* there is any discrepancy....And so when they just say, ‘Well, teachers need to provide interventions,’ you're still not dealing with why there is such a discrepancy. (Teacher, Maple)

The Fallout of the Accountability System

Both the California and the federal No Child Left Behind accountability policies operate under the assumption that disaggregated achievement data is a mechanism to highlight inequities and close gaps. Moreover, state and federal sanctions are tied directly to a school's ability to meet performance targets by subgroup, and not simply school-wide. While such a focus on subgroups has increased educators' awareness, it occasionally results in a case of misguided attention.

Willow Elementary School presents such a case. While still below the state target of 800, Willow has made significant gains in overall student achievement, raising its API score from 557 in 2000 to 664 in 2003. The school's Latino and low SES subgroups have made considerable progress as well, moving from 459 to 599, and 493 to 628, respectively. Willow's other two subgroups, white and Asian students, have consistently outperformed their peers, with scores of 699 and 780 respectively, in 2003.

In 2002, Willow's Asian subgroup scored 741, yet missed their growth target by three points. A similar situation occurred the year before when the white students, Willow's second highest subgroup, improved but failed to meet their target by one point. NCLB legislation includes a sanction against any school that fails to meet a subgroup growth target two years in a row. Thus Willow was told it would have to send out a letter informing parents that the school was underperforming and that they could choose to transfer their children to a different school, at Willow's expense.

In many ways, Willow represents a school that has embraced the system of accountability, adopting state and district standards and implementing a successful reading intervention program. The school had recently been portrayed as a success story in the local media and held up as a model for other struggling schools in the district.

Understandably, the news of this letter came as a shock to administrators and teachers.

Educators felt demoralized by a misdirected "low-performing" label, and frustrated by continued pressures from district, state, and federal policymakers despite improved test scores. As the school's principal remarked, "It just makes you feel like all your effort is for nothing." The principal was particularly concerned about how this would affect his staff:

Well, I think it's going to most affect the teachers because we work so hard. Just like, all the pressure we experience, we've totally come together as a team and we're feeling really good about ourselves, and then we get this news that we didn't do good enough. And all the other subgroups just did amazingly well, except the highest one didn't go up enough, you know? And because of that, we're being labeled a low-performing school. I can't even believe the idiocy of that.

The educators we interviewed were acutely aware of the fallacy of the policy. The superintendent described the situation as "absolutely ridiculous," calling this "the fallout of the accountability system." While attention to student performance by subgroups is a necessary step to addressing inequities in achievement, it is important to recognize that a singular focus may not allow for the complexities of school reform. The intentions of accountability reform had backfired; now the policy was drawing attention to the highest-performing students. And in its haste to hold schools accountable for raising all students' achievement, the policy left no room to recognize one school's efforts to close the gaps.

In a further twist of irony, Willow was later informed that it would not actually have to send out the letter, following the state's recalculation of API scores in 2003. With an adjustment of a few points, the school had met its subgroup targets and was now deemed a success.

Interestingly, another teacher at Maple told us that the district had actually provided in-service training around issues of diversity, yet there was no follow-up or productive outcome:

North City spent *a lot* of money doing this particular workshop. I think it was a three-day workshop and we were given a big binder in regards to this equity, you know racial relationship, how we see people, those sorts of things....Then, where did it go? You know, there is no continuity. They spent so much money. *So* much money is wasted. (Teacher, Maple)

While the district initially opened a space for dialogue around issues of diversity, it did not provide opportunities for ongoing discussions as to why inequities exist, and more importantly, how schools could address them. The educators interviewed continually reminded us that quick fixes are not the solution to addressing issues of equity.

Educators also raised concerns about a policy based on designating students into subgroups. While they supported a policy that required improvement for all students, many worried that the policy's focus on racial subgroups might lead to negative stereotyping or misguided attention to certain groups of students:¹⁶

I think there's some danger in that because teachers will look at that and say, "Those goddam whatever it is, they screwed our whole school." You know? You can look at that and it can create more problems....Or it can be used as a justification for the stereotypes that people already have, or "Yea, if it weren't for those whatevers, we would be doing fine." (Principal, Aspen)

Others felt the designations were inaccurate or did not take into consideration within-group diversity. A racial subgroup designation of "white," for example, might not capture the complexities of language, class, and ethnicity within that group:

You're talking about white, but white in our school could mean Bosnian, it could mean born here in Tech Valley, it could be Indian. And all of those have mitigating factors. We could be talking about differences of poverty, in education level,...differences in language skills....Are we talking equal when we're talking about a child who lives in Tech Valley versus a child who's brand new from India, Pakistan or some other part of the world? They're not equal and yet they're both white. (Teacher, Willow)

Concerns about language, which cut across racial subgroups, were echoed at all of our sites. Yet during the time of our interviews, California's system of accountability did not include English language learners as a subgroup.

Due to NCLB requirements, California now includes EL and SPED subgroup designations, beginning with the 2003-2004 achievement data.¹⁷ With the addition of these categories comes further incidents of overlapping subgroup designations. It would not be uncommon, for example, for a student in California to fall into the Latino, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and EL subgroups. This has brought an additional layer of complexity to the system of accountability, and in some cases, the potential for additional sanctions.

The inclusion of EL and SPED subgroups is laudable in its effort to encourage those students to work toward the same high levels of proficiency expected of other students. However, with

Accountability policies do little to help schools move from that "low-performing" label to a place where all students meet proficiency targets.

an expanding list of subgroup categories comes increased possibilities for schools to receive a “low-performing” label. Recent analysis of California’s achievement data suggests that schools with three or more subgroups have a more difficult time meeting state and federal accountability requirements, as they face more “trip wires” in the system (Novak & Fuller, 2003). Furthermore, early research on the impact of state subgroup systems finds no evidence of improved minority student achievement as compared to state systems without subgroup targets (Kane & Staiger, 2002).

These issues do raise questions as to the purpose of state and federal accountability policies. At this point, such policies serve the purpose of identifying and penalizing schools that fail to meet growth targets. The focus is on the outcomes, not the processes. Accountability policies do little to help schools move from that “low-performing” label to a place where all students meet proficiency targets, regardless of the diversity of the school.

Educator Suggestions to Address Equity Issues

Given educators’ critiques of current accountability policies, and the challenges they face in today’s classrooms, what is the potential for a system of accountability to facilitate the closing of achievement gaps? Some educators say efforts to find solutions by illuminating inequities are futile:

I suppose if we could *get* the answers, that’d be great, but what if we couldn’t?
What if it really just meant, “Sorry, they don’t do as well.” (Teacher, Beech)

Others argue that many of the factors that contribute to low-achievement are beyond the school’s control, including student demographics and family values:

Yeah, I mean we talk about it a lot, but it boils down to the same thing....it’s what they see at home, it’s their values and it’s their beliefs. There’s really nothing you can do ... because it’s out of our hands. (Teacher, Aspen)

It is especially important to note that for many educators, the goal of policymakers to expose inequities and motivate schools to close gaps went largely unrecognized. The link between the system of accountability and the closing of achievement gaps was unclear. For many, the end result of the system was simply to expose school failures or successes. The potential for a system of accountability to address inequities was often not considered at all or else not seen as feasible.

Yet amidst the challenges and critiques, our conversations with educators did reveal aspects of the system that show potential to address issues of equity. The best example of this was the curriculum standards component. The majority of teachers interviewed saw standards as a practical tool to ensure equal opportunities, so that students in poorer districts received the same quality of education as students in wealthier districts. The uniformity of standards meant that all students would, in theory, be exposed to the same material and be held to the same expectations, regardless of their background or school characteristics.

Educators also spoke about the effectiveness of data to address equity, if used in a constructive, creative approach at the school level:

You can look at it and say, “Why is this so?” instead of taking that information and saying, “You’re not doing a good job. These scores are low. Bring them up.” There’s a difference between taking information and using it to try to determine why it’s so *and* [seeing] if something can be done. (Teacher, Aspen)

For example, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the teachers and principal at Poplar relied on a series of ongoing assessments to track student achievement throughout the year. Broken down by subgroups, the data from these more frequent, less “high-stakes” tests allowed teachers to note any gaps and adjust instruction in a timely manner. A few teachers also suggested that it might be more effective to look at data tracked over time by both student and teacher. The student data demonstrate patterns of low-achievement, perhaps revealing that a school’s Latino population is underperforming. The teacher data might take that a step further by pointing to effective instructional solutions if, for example, one teacher consistently produces higher-achieving Latino students over several years.

Teachers and administrators also offered suggestions to improve the existing system’s efforts to address inequities. They emphasized the need for a more holistic approach to equity, incorporating institutional and community support. The Central Plains superintendent believed that a more equitable system “really depends on the instructional leader, the principal, . . . the superintendent, and the local board and the local culture in the school district.”

She recognized that the teacher ultimately held the power to make a difference:

If they’re left alone in the isolation of their classroom . . . and there isn’t someone who is saying, we will improve all children, . . . then there won’t be the real, true equity change we need (Superintendent, Central Plains).

Finally, educators called for an expanded definition of equity, reminding us that such considerations must include not only student achievement, but also equality of resources and funding within schools and across districts:

The accountability is placed on the wrong place. They need to look more at the . . . economic equity, and once we work on that element, *then* teachers and parents and politicians, you know, *all* of us, can work together to really help the students (Teacher, Maple).

Equity for students can not be achieved without an infusion of resources, both material and non-material, to those neediest schools and districts. Some argue that the state needs to be held to “opportunity to learn” standards that would ensure adequate resources to all schools (Koski, 2002; Winfield & Woodard, 1994).¹⁸

While California has seen a slight narrowing of the achievement gap in elementary schools, it is still too early to determine whether this trend is sustainable. Research on similar systems of accountability in other states does not support the notion that a system of testing and rewards and punishments can ensure equitable outcomes, and may actually produce negative outcomes for students (Diamond & Spillane, 2002; Haney, 2000; Madaus & Clarke, 2001). The theory of action behind accountability systems often falls short, as most states do not provide the necessary tools to help schools move from that initial awareness of the problems to a realization of solutions (Furhman, 1999, Massell, 1998).

In short, the issue is one of school capacity. Schools often lack the resources, both financial and intellectual, to close achievement gaps, and accountability policies have failed to address this issue. Higher-performing schools, for example, are more likely to use data to improve instruction and student learning (Diamond & Spillane, 2002). Lower-performing schools may lack the capacity to analyze data and implement an appropriate pedagogical or curricular response to low achievement.

The current system is based largely on negative motivation. Educators have seen few positive “carrots,” especially within the context of California’s fiscal crisis. State and federal policies need to focus more on the successes, especially among those schools that are outperforming expectations. What little assistance that does exist should be continued, and expanded if possible, in an effort to build school capacity. For example, professional development and other “categorical” funds can be focused on building educators’ capacity to analyze data to influence instruction. District and school-level administrators need to engage teachers in the analysis of disaggregated data, as a means to recognize and address inequitable patterns of achievement.

As the teachers and administrators interviewed remind us, it is not enough to simply point to the problems; the challenge of raising achievement for all students lies in building educators’ capacity to respond to that awareness. Educators need to feel a sense of possibility, not futility.

Policy Discussion

As the voices of teachers and administrators bring to life, educators did not always respond to accountability according to the assumptions or intentions of the policy. However, their responses did not merely reflect a resistance to the system of accountability, but also an acknowledgment of its complexity. In spite of their critiques of the system, teachers and administrators also recognized its benefits.

One noticeable result of recent accountability reforms is an increased awareness of issues surrounding student achievement, in large part the result of the API system and subsequent publication of school test scores and rankings. As one district administrator remarked, educators can now “really begin, if we are willing to, to discuss those issues of equity and opportunity and access in a different way.” (Superintendent, Central Plains)

Teachers also told us that they considered the state curriculum standards to be a useful tool, providing teachers with focus and ensuring uniformity across the state. There was evidence that standards encouraged teachers to hold their students to higher expectations. Furthermore, California’s recent efforts to align its annual test with standards may provide educators with further understanding of the ways to enhance student learning, as curricular efforts will now be more directly reflected in students’ test results.

Yet while educators believed that California’s system of accountability contained worthwhile components, many felt it was heavy on regulations and short on solutions.

A primary goal of ERAP was to uncover the realities of school-level implementation in light of certain assumptions underlying California’s accountability system. One key assumption is the notion that the school is the primary locus of change, teachers are the primary actors of that change, and the expected outcome is improved instruction resulting in higher student achievement. Another assumption is that teachers will be motivated to enact change in response to a system of external rewards and punishments.

Our interviews with teachers, principals, and district leaders remind us that putting policy into practice is a far more complex endeavor than setting policy guidelines. While the school may be the ultimate locus of change, it cannot be considered a solitary unit. The school is situated within a district, with its own set of policies and influences. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 3, the district is often a source of additional accountability policies and pressures that may reinforce or complicate state policy.

Similarly, teachers are not the sole actors within a school, but instead work in relationship with school administrators and students towards the goal of student learning. As discussed in Chapter 4, many educators were concerned that the state policy placed a disproportionate amount of responsibility on teachers, without taking into account the impact of other factors including student diversity, principal and district leadership, and capacity for improving student outcomes.

California's accountability policy not only assumes that teachers will be in a position to enact change, but that they will be motivated to do so by a system of rewards, such as the Governor's Performance Awards program, and punishments, ranging from a low-performing school label to the threat of state takeover. Our research suggests that such mechanisms did not have a significant effect on teacher motivation, in large part because the promises or threats of the policy did not seem real. The awards programs disappeared as a result of state budget cuts before many teachers saw a reward. Those who received the awards often felt they were not an appropriate gesture for their efforts, nor was it a motivating factor. Likewise, few educators felt that the state was in any position to take over a school, much less do a better job. Teachers reminded us that pressure and public shaming are not effective means to motivate teachers to improve instruction, and instead may lead to negative or unintended consequences for student learning and professional satisfaction.

California's accountability policy was also grounded in the assumption that test score data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, would act as a further mechanism for change, specifically addressing inequities in student achievement. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, such an assumption did not take into account school-level challenges of ensuring access to the data, skills to analyze the data, and most importantly, opportunities to design and implement solutions to any gaps the data might reveal.

Policy Considerations

Findings from the Educator Responses to Accountability Project have helped to amplify teachers' and administrators' voices in education policy discussions, in an effort to illuminate the benefits and challenges of the system, and to expand policymakers' understanding of accountability at the school level. Our conversations with educators also reveal aspects of the system, at both the state and district levels, that show potential for improvement.

Ensure coherency and consistency in state accountability policy

Educators expressed initial confusion over the alignment of standards with testing, the qualifications for rewards, and the efficacy of interventions. Educators also expressed confusion about the changing nature of the system of accountability, including the calculation of API scores with different tests from year to year, and the availability and distribution of rewards. For example, the state's initial system of rewards and sanctions has been shifted to essentially a system of sanctions. In order to support and encourage schools, the state should consider alternative positive incentives, in an effort to maintain consistency with the system's original intention. A reform strategy relying on punishments alone can not provide the motivation to sustain improvement efforts in schools.

Although PSAA has been extremely successful in bringing attention to issues of student achievement, its clarity and understanding are essential to any sustained impact. As federal mandates continue to overlap with California's system, it is increasingly important that the state make efforts to explain accountability policies to educators, parents, and students. The state should investigate ways to improve educators' understanding of the policy's guidelines, as a first step to ensuring their capacity to meet its requirements.

Focus on building and sustaining educator capacity at all levels

California's accountability policy is based upon the assumption that most teachers and administrators hold the capacity to improve performance and address gaps in student achievement. However, as our conversations revealed, many educators felt they did not possess the proper tools, including time, resources, and administrative support, to systematically address gaps in achievement. State and district leaders should consider ways to ensure that educators have the capacity to improve instruction and student learning.

Professional development is a key factor in building and sustaining educator capacity. Educators often felt frustrated by a lack of control over their professional development time and funding. The implementation of district-mandated curriculum packages, for example, included district-mandated trainings, often leaving teachers and principals with few opportunities for collaboration and development in other areas. Training in a curriculum package may provide only one aspect of educators' development. Moreover, teachers' commitment to improvement necessitates a role in decisions around the timing and topics of professional development.

Together, state and district leaders should explore additional ways to allow schools to address their particular needs and interests. The state might develop guidelines around professional development, allowing for district- and school-level flexibility while ensuring adequate capacity-building opportunities to meet the demands of accountability.

In particular, professional development should address the use of data. Our research demonstrates that educators lack exposure to data as well as the time and skills to analyze data to inform instruction. As a result, educators are unable to achieve a primary goal of accountability, namely to address inequities through the analysis of disaggregated data. Professional development could provide opportunities to raise educators' awareness of the availability of data and then provide the skills to decode it. Trainings might focus, for example, on the usefulness of disaggregated data to reveal trends in student achievement. Furthermore, trainings might demonstrate ways to link data to pedagogical responses.

Finally, the state should consider the implications of holding all schools to the same expectations while failing to address existing disparities in resources, materials, and funding, within and across districts. The state cannot afford to continually label schools as failing without providing necessary support. The state's High Priority Schools Grant Program represents an effort to direct resources and support to those schools that need them the most. Likewise, the states' consideration of "Opportunity To Learn" indicators is an important first step in ensuring that all schools are provided with adequate essential resources.¹⁹

Recognize the integral role districts play in accountability

Currently, accountability policy assumes that individual schools are the primary locus of reform, focusing on school API scores, student subgroup data, and classroom curriculum and instruction. While school-based reform is essential, local districts play a large role in determining how individual schools interpret and implement various mandates.

The state should recognize district influence in the implementation of accountability policy. As accountability demands continue to place pressure on schools, it is increasingly vital that schools are able to turn to their districts for support and guidance. Our research shows

While educators believed that California's system of accountability contained worthwhile components, many felt it was heavy on regulations and short on solutions.

that districts, through various programs and policies, have the power to facilitate school improvement. Teachers, for example, appreciated district efforts to clarify the sometimes cumbersome state standards into “essential” standards. The state can provide a means to research and disseminate similar examples of successful district responses to accountability.

Due to federal NCLB requirements, the state is now considering ways to hold districts accountable for the performance of their schools. Educators interviewed agreed that the state should provide a ranking or score for districts, similar to the Academic Performance Index (API) system for schools. Such a system should include a special focus on districts with the lowest-performing schools that have shown little to no signs of improvement.

California's
accountability policy
does not take into
account challenges
of ensuring teachers
access to test data,
skills to analyze it,
and opportunities to
implement solutions.

Make strategic changes to the assessment and data components

While educators appreciated the state's efforts to align the annual test with curriculum standards, they challenged the utility and fairness of relying on one assessment to measure student achievement. In order to piece together a more coherent picture of student learning, state and district leaders might consider the use of ongoing, standards-based diagnostic assessments. Our research demonstrates that the success of such assessments is directly linked to teachers' involvement in decision-making processes around adoption and implementation. Moreover, it is important to note that this testing should not carry any rewards or sanctions, so as to not add to the “testing burden.” Instead, such tests would provide more immediate feedback, helping teachers to focus instruction and facilitate student learning.

Data from diagnostic testing would also supplement data from the state's annual standardized test. Teachers interviewed critiqued the timing and alignment of standardized test data. Many felt that test results were delivered too late to be of use with their students during the current academic year. Although data did help illuminate achievement gaps, it failed to aid teachers in making valuable instructional changes during the course of the school year. Ongoing assessments would provide teachers with more timely information about their students' learning. It is too soon to tell whether data from the standards-aligned CAT-6 test will meet teachers' diagnostic needs. If not, state and district leaders should consider alternative diagnostic measures, in conjunction with efforts to expand educators' capacity to utilize such data.

Conclusion

This report provides policymakers with an understanding of educators' experiences with California's public school accountability system. As state and federal policies continue to place demands upon schools and districts, it is essential that policymakers continue to listen to teachers and administrators. ERAP findings provide the impetus for an ongoing dialogue between and among policymakers and educators.

One aspect of that dialogue must include consideration of how best to meet the goals of accountability, namely to enhance student learning and close achievement gaps. In reflecting upon the successes and challenges of California's system of accountability, educators inevitably asked, “Where do we go from here?” There was little disagreement with the policy's assumptions, for example, that many of California's public schools are in need of improvement, or that teachers and administrators should be held accountable for their students' learning. Educators especially appreciated the system's efforts to hold all students to the same high expectations.

What was less clear to educators was how to improve those schools, and how to ensure high levels of accountability and student achievement. Our research provides a glimpse into those next steps, revealing some of the more creative ways schools and districts are choosing to respond to or supplement accountability mandates. This is only a first step in a necessary investigation and sharing of knowledge—knowledge between policymakers and educators, and among teachers and administrators. All could benefit from further discussion of effective responses to accountability; stories of a teacher using data to transform pedagogy, for example, or a district’s creative approach to improving its lowest-performing schools.

Above all, California’s “next steps” in public school reform must include a more holistic approach to accountability. Policymakers and educators might consider whether the current system of accountability, with its singular focus on teachers and school-level change, is the most effective means to improve student achievement. As our research in schools demonstrates, the district plays an integral role in school and classroom practices. Likewise, parents and students contribute to the success of a school. A more inclusive approach to accountability, one that recognizes the influences of the broader community, would better support teachers in their efforts to improve California’s schools.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Appendix 1 for overview of California's system of accountability.
- ² At the time of our research, NCLB requirements had not yet been integrated into the state's accountability system. Therefore, our conversations with educators focused on the state system, with some educators offering early perspectives on NCLB.
- ³ See Appendix 2 for details on ERAP schools.
- ⁴ See Appendix 4 for interview protocols for teachers, principals, and superintendents.
- ⁵ See "State Policymakers' Views on Accountability" in Chapter 1 for themes that emerged from our conversations with policymakers.
- ⁶ As discussed in Chapter 3, the Tech Valley district chose to distill the state standards into "essential" district standards, in an effort to provide teachers with the benefits of focus and direction in a more manageable system.
- ⁷ Under the new Instructional Materials Funding Realignment Program (IMFRP), which began in 2002-2003, all districts must adopt state-approved curriculum materials in math, reading, science and social studies within 24 months after their adoption by the State Board of Education.
- ⁸ In 2001-2002, seven schools in the Central Plains district met their growth target, three schools showed an increase in their API scores but did not meet their growth targets, and five schools maintained or showed a decrease in API scores and did not meet growth targets. Both schools in our sample showed a decrease in their API scores and did not meet their growth targets. These two schools raised their API scores and met growth targets the following year.
- ⁹ The usefulness of these programs can also be attributed to the timeliness of their data, as discussed in "How Ongoing Standards-Based Assessment Enhances Accountability" in Chapter 2.
- ¹⁰ See Chapter 5 for further discussion of the Central Plains principals.
- ¹¹ Science was added to the STAR testing program during the 2002-2003 school year.
- ¹² See "The Fallout of the Accountability System" in Chapter 6 for further information.
- ¹³ See "How Ongoing Standards-Based Assessment Enhances Accountability" in Chapter 2 for further discussion.
- ¹⁴ California did provide additional resources to low-performing schools through the II/USP program. However, an extensive evaluation of the program did not reveal significant benefits to those schools enrolled in II/USP as compared with similar schools outside the program (O'Day & Bitter, 2003).
- ¹⁵ The programs in use at many schools are required to have an EL component, yet it was clear that educators did not find that adequate. Interestingly, the state also includes a reading intervention program for EL students on its list of state-adopted curricula. Yet this program was mentioned in only a handful of our interviews with educators across the state. Teachers and administrators were either unaware of or did not have access to the materials, and thus were left with the sense that the state was not doing its job of providing teachers access to the most effective materials for their diverse range of students.
- ¹⁶ See "The Fallout of the Accountability System" in Chapter 6 for an example of "misguided attention."
- ¹⁷ Neither California nor NCLB accountability policies designate gender as a subgroup growth target.
- ¹⁸ California is currently involved in a legal dispute around issues of adequacy. The state is also in the process of appointing a commission to look into the development of Opportunity to Learn standards.
- ¹⁹ California's Quality Education Commission has been charged with developing a quality education model which would ensure the necessary resources for students to meet the state standards. The future of this commission is uncertain, given recent political shifts.

Appendix 1

PSAA Overview & Evolution

	1999-2000	2002-2003 *
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE INDEX	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Composite based on results on the Stanford 9 test, a normed referenced test. 2. Weight given Sat-9 content areas: math (40%), reading (30%), language (15%), and spelling (15%). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Composite based on the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) California Achievement Test (CAT-6) a normed reference test (20%). b) California Standards Test (CST) in ELA and Math (80%). For grades 4 and 8 a writing assessment is included.
STANDARDS	Although SBE adopted standards for ELA, mathematics, social science/history, and science in 1997, they are not reflected in API testing.	CST reflects content standards.
REWARDS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Governor's Performance Award Program (GPAP) \$96 million is provided for schools that meet or exceed their API growth targets overall and for significant subgroups. 2. Certificated Staff Performance Incentive Act \$50 million is provided for one-time bonuses to teachers and other staff in underachieving schools that significantly improve. 3. Non-monetary awards 	Rewards program did not receive any funding after Fall 2000.
INTERVENTIONS	<p>Immediate Intervention/ Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP)</p> <p>\$96 million is provided to support an initial group of 430 schools that volunteered and were selected. Schools must be in lower five API deciles.</p>	<p>II/USP program did not receive any funding after Spring 2003.</p> <p>High Priority Schools Grant Program (HPSGP)</p> <p>It replaced II/USP, and provides assistance to lowest performing schools (decile 1), regardless of progress.</p>
SANCTIONS	Schools in the intervention program that do not meet growth targets or show significant growth over time will be subject to local interventions and eventually state sanctions.	As of 2003, the state had not subjected any schools to state sanctions.

* ERAP site visits occurred during this school year.

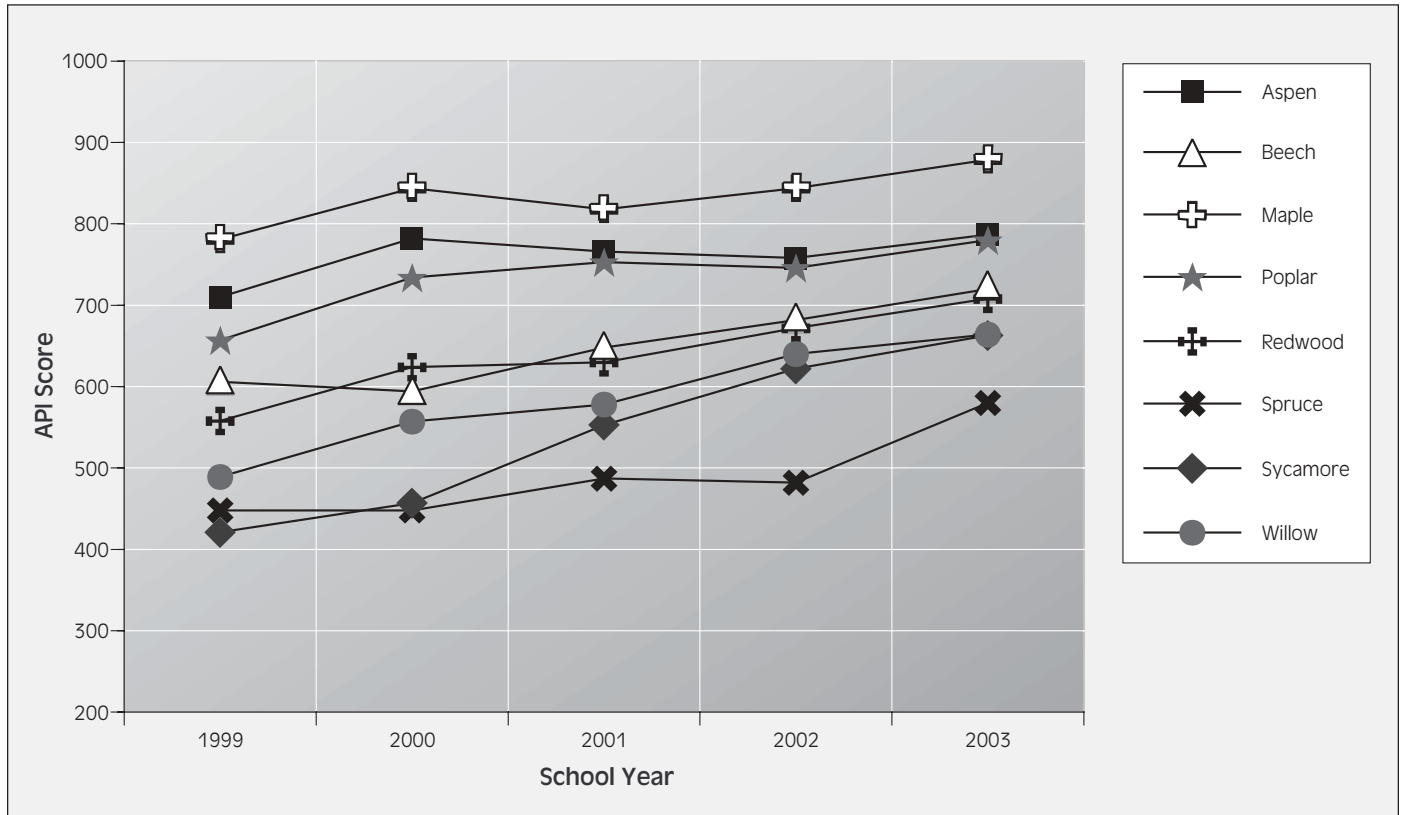
Appendix 2

ERAP Schools (2002-2003)

School	District	Location	Enrollment	Ethnic Distribution	API Subgroup Scores	State/Sim Rank	API Overall Score
Aspen	Tech Valley	Suburban	386	6% Afr. American 17% Asian 36% Hispanic 20% White 69% F/R Lunch 37% ELL	NA 870 705 869 731 NA	7/10	787
Beech	South City	Urban	313	38% Afr. American 2% Asian 44% Hispanic 16% White 71% F/R Lunch 16% ELL	741 NA 677 NA 695 NA	5/7	720
Maple	North City	Urban	432	21% Afr. American 5% Asian 5% Hispanic 60% White 10% F/R Lunch 2% ELL	785 NA NA 920 NA NA	9/9	879
Poplar	Central Plains	Rural	292	.5% Afr. American 1% Asian 30% Hispanic 69% White 25% F/R Lunch 12% ELL	NA NA 675 824 642 NA	7/7	780
Redwood	North City	Urban	334	70% Afr. American 8% Asian 12% Hispanic 7% White 67% F/R Lunch 14% ELL	693 NA NA NA 688 NA	5/6	708
Spruce	Central Plains	Rural	141	1% Afr. American 2% Asian 82% Hispanic 11% White 100 F/R Lunch 67% ELL	NA NA 557 NA 570 NA	1/NA	580
Sycamore	South City	Urban	1206	1% Afr. American .1% Asian 96% Hispanic 2% White 94 % F/R Lunch 80% ELL	NA NA 658 NA 663 NA	3/9	663
Willow	Tech Valley	Suburban	439	5% Afr. American 18% Asian 50% Hispanic 19% White 83% F/R Lunch 59% ELL	NA 780 599 699 628 NA	4/3	664

Appendix 3

Trend of API Scores



Appendix 4

Interview Protocols

Teacher Interview Protocol

A. Teacher Experience and Background

- Please fill me in briefly on your background.
- What do I need to know about you as a teacher?

B. School Context

- How would you describe this school to colleagues in another school?
- Please tell me about your students this year?
- How are they similar or different from other years?
- What are the most pressing issues you currently face in the classroom?
- How are you addressing them?
- What are the big issues or pressing concerns currently facing the school?
- Do you feel you have a part to play in addressing those issues/concerns? If so, then how?

C. School Reform

A lot of people in California are talking about how to improve the schools. I now want to talk with you about recent changes and how these changes may be affecting your work.

- What are the most significant reform changes you as a teacher and the school have faced in the last few years?
- Have those changes affected your work? If so, how?
- The main focus of our study is how educators are responding to California's system of accountability. Can you tell me how accountability plays out over the course of the school year?
- Has the school structured activities or professional development in response to accountability?
- What does test month look like in your school?
- Are you aware of your school's API score, subgroup data, or its ranks? What are they?
- Do you feel this system of scores and ranks provides an accurate representation of your school? Why or why not? Are these scores and ranks useful?
- How do this school's API score, subgroup data, or ranks affect the work of the school?
- How does the school use the data?

D. Equity

Some people hope that the system of accountability will promote higher achievement for all students.

- Does your school use the API or subgroup data to promote equitable achievement?
- Do you think the system of accountability is addressing issues of equity for kids throughout the state?
- Are there other ways that the school responds to student diversity (like race/ethnicity, class, or language issues)?

E. Pedagogy/Professionalism

- Has the system of accountability affected your sense of what it means to be a teacher? If so, how?
- Have your goals for your students been affected by the system of accountability? If so, how?
- Has your teaching practice changed as a result of the system of accountability? If so, how?
- Has the content of your teaching changed as a result of accountability? If so, how?

F. Wrap-up

- Where do you see yourself professionally in the next 5-7 years?
- Is there anything else you would like to add before we end, in particular any recommendations about the system of accountability for policymakers?

Principal Interview Protocol

A. Principal Experience/Role as Principal

- Please fill me in briefly on your background, and how you came to be a principal at this school.
- How would you describe your philosophy as a principal?

B. School Context

- How would you describe this school to colleagues in another school?
- Please tell me about the students and parents at this school.
- What are the most significant reform changes you as a principal and the school have faced in the last few years?
- Have those changes affected your work? If so, how?

C. Philosophy and Practices around Accountability

- The main focus of our study is how educators are responding to California's system of accountability. What is your philosophy on accountability?

- Has California's system of accountability influenced your philosophies and practices as a principal? If so, how?
- How do you implement your philosophy? What are the tools or techniques that you use?
- How do your teachers respond to those tools?
- Are you aware of your school's API score, subgroup data, and its ranks? What are they?
- Do you feel they are an accurate representation of your school? Why or why not?
- How does this school's API score or rank affect the work of the school? Your work as a principal?
- How does the school use the data?

D. Equity

Some people hope that the system of accountability will promote higher achievement for all students.

- Does your school use the API or subgroup data to promote equitable achievement?
- Do you think the system of accountability is addressing issues of equity for kids throughout the state?
- Are there other ways that the school responds to student diversity (like race/ethnicity, class, or language issues)?

E. Their "Place in the Chain"

- What are your district's expectations in terms of accountability for your school? For you as a principal?
- Do you receive support or resources from your district to meet those expectations?
- How do you work with teachers to meet those expectations?
- Are their ways for you and your teachers to voice input about accountability to the district?

F. Wrap-up

- Where do you see yourself professionally in the next 5-7 years?
- Is there anything else you would like to add before we end, in particular any recommendations about the system of accountability for policymakers?

Superintendent/District Administrator Protocol

A. Superintendent Experience/Role as Superintendent

- Please fill me in briefly on your background, and how you came to be a superintendent in this district.

- How would you describe your philosophy as a superintendent?

B. District Context

- Please tell me about the students and parents this district. And the teachers?
- What are the most significant reform changes the district has faced in the last few years?
- Have those changes affected your work? If so, how?

C. Philosophy & Practices around Accountability

- The main focus of our study is how educators are responding to California's system of accountability. What is your philosophy on accountability?
- How do you implement your philosophy? What are the tools or techniques that you use?
- How do your principals respond to those tools?
- Do you think the current system of accountability is addressing issues of equity for students? If so, how?
- Are you aware of our two focus schools' API score, subgroup data, and ranks? What are they?
- Do you feel they are an accurate representation of those schools? Why or why not?
- How does those schools' API score, subgroup data, or ranks affect the work of the district?
- How does the district use the data? Is it used specifically to address issues of equity?

D. Their "Place in the Chain"

- What are your expectations in terms of accountability for your district? And where are those expectations coming from?
- Do you receive support or resources from the state to meet those expectations?
- How do you work with principals and teachers to meet those expectations?
- Are there ways for your principals and teachers to voice input about accountability to the district or the state?

E. Wrap-up

- Where do you see yourself professionally in the next 5-7 years?
- Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?

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