

Chapter 1

Introduction

Study Background and Purpose

In the spring of 1998, the California Department of Education (CDE) awarded a contract to WestEd, in collaboration with Management Analysis and Planning, Inc. (MAP) to evaluate standards-based accountability in California. The evaluation was to examine the processes and impact of the state's Standards-Based Accountability System in school districts across the state and the relationship of this system to school district efforts to improve student performance through accountability measures. Although the evaluation was initially slated to be conducted over three years, from June 1998 through June 2001, lack of funding at the state level caused the study period to be shortened to one year, ending in November 1999. The findings of the study and its implications for policy are reported in this document.

California's Standards-Based Accountability System was established in 1997 by CDE in response to federal requirements of Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), and in accordance with the state's IASA plan. The Standards-Based Accountability program was largely a system of locally defined programs. Districts were expected to develop and adopt local content and performance standards (comparable to state standards) and to use multiple assessment measures to determine whether students were meeting the local standards. As part of the state's Consolidated Application for Funding Categorical Aid Programs, Part II, districts were required to report on the progress of their standards-based accountability systems. In particular, districts were to include a description of their accountability and assessment system along with student achievement data for all schools within the district. (McKenna, 1997 and 1998; Fausset, 1998).

Significant events occurred during the course of the study which have some bearing on its implications. In April of 1999, the legislature enacted and the governor signed a new state-driven accountability program, the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999. This new law essentially replaced the program that this study was in the midst of evaluating. Districts still have the option to continue developing their own standards-based systems, but they will no longer be required by the state to use multiple measures or to submit accountability reporting information as part of the Consolidated Application. This change in law meant that, as data were being collected from the field on accountability, much of the information reported by district and school personnel reflected not only the progress to date on the pre-existing program, but also their concerns about the implications of the PSAA.

As such, although the study was originally charged to examine a program that is now transitioning to the new PSAA legislation, its findings are still relevant. As described in this report, the implications of this study are important for the state's consideration as it moves forward in implementing the requirements of PSAA.

Study Questions

This study focused on the following major research questions relating to standards-based accountability:

1. At what stage or level are districts in planning and implementing their standards-based accountability systems?
2. What is the nature of local content and performance standards in language arts and mathematics and how do they compare with the state standards? What mechanism does the district use to compare its standards with the state's model standards?
3. To what degree have district standards been implemented in schools? At what stage or level are districts and schools in planning and implementing the district standards?
4. What is the nature of local assessments for standards-based accountability and how are they used to determine whether a student has met or has not met the local standards?
5. How are data from local accountability systems used?
6. What types of performance targets do districts set for schools?
7. What types of incentives do districts provide for schools to meet their targets? What consequences do schools face if they do not meet the targets?
8. What practices or features of a district's standards and accountability system are associated with particular educational outcomes and practices?

9. What practices of the state education agency and other education-related institutions and assistance centers help or hinder districts in implementing their standards and accountability systems?¹

10. What obstacles do districts face in implementing a standards-based accountability system and how can the state education agency and other educational institutions and assistance centers help districts in overcoming those obstacles?

These questions are addressed in Chapters 5–11 of this report, as described in Figure 1.1. In addition, other sections of the report discuss the changing educational and political context for this evaluation (Chapter 2), the conceptual framework that served as a lens through which to view accountability (Chapter 3), the methodology and data sources employed by the evaluation (Chapter 4), and recommendations and conclusions (Chapter 12). The Appendix contains the instruments and protocols that were used.

Figure 1.1

Table Linking Study Questions to Report Chapters

Study Question	Chapter in Which Question is Addressed
1. At what stage or level are districts in planning and implementing their standards-based accountability systems?	Chapter 5, “The Status of Local Accountability Systems”
2. What is the nature of local content and performance standards in language arts and mathematics and how do they compare with the state standards? What mechanism does the district use to compare its standards with the state’s model standards?	Chapter 6, “Content Standards”
3. To what degree have district standards been implemented in schools? At what stage or level are districts and schools in planning and implementing the district standards?	Chapter 6, “Content Standards”

¹ This question, #9, and the following question, #10, were originally framed around assistance to and obstacles for schools, rather than districts. Because a major data collection at the school level was not possible within the constraints of this evaluation, and because local standards-based accountability systems were districtwide rather than school-based, both questions were reshaped to focus on the district as the primary unit of analysis.

Study Question	Chapter in Which Question is Addressed
4. What is the nature of local assessments for standards-based accountability and how are they used to determine whether a student has met or has not met the local standards?	Chapter 7, “Assessment Measures”
5. How are data from local accountability systems used?	Chapter 8, “Use of Data”
6. What types of performance targets do districts set for schools?	Chapter 9, “Consequences and Incentives”
7. What types of incentives do districts provide for schools to meet their targets? What consequences do schools face if they do not meet the targets?	Chapter 9, “Consequences and Incentives”
8. What practices or features of a district’s standards and accountability system are associated with particular educational outcomes and practices?	Chapter 10, “Impact of Standards-Based Accountability Systems”
9. What practices of the state education agency and other education-related institutions and assistance centers help or hinder districts in implementing their standards and accountability systems?	Chapter 11, “Challenges and Assistance”
10. What obstacles do districts face in implementing a standards-based accountability system and how can the state education agency and other educational institutions and assistance centers help districts in overcoming those obstacles?	Chapter 11, “Challenges and Assistance”