

Chapter 11

Challenges and Assistance

Highlights of Findings

Districts have received assistance from a wide range of organizations in the development of their standards-based accountability systems.

More than half the districts have received assistance from CDE. Other common sources for support include county offices of education, other districts, and professional consultants. The most helpful assistance to districts from CDE has been in the areas of standards and development of multiple assessment measures.

Many district officials expressed frustration and confusion about the lack of a consistent, coherent, and/or fair statewide reform agenda.

Districts express great concern with their ability to keep up with the rapidly changing set of reforms initiated at the state level. The requirements associated with new initiatives are often unclearly communicated and sometimes send mixed messages about what is most important. Moreover, districts and school personnel complain that these reforms are not thoroughly tested or founded on solid research. Finally, districts believe that many expectations inherent in new state or federal initiatives are unfair, unreasonable, or technically unsound.

Districts have faced many specific challenges in developing and implementing key components of an accountability system.

Close to half the districts rated the following items as one of the top five most significant challenges they face:

- aligning curriculum, instruction, assessment, and content standards
- dealing with limited resources
- finding or developing valid and reliable forms of assessment
- making sure the system is equitable for all groups of students

Gaining buy-in from teachers — and from others at the school level — so that reforms are actually implemented was also identified as a key challenge in district interviews.

Districts would like further assistance related to accountability.

In particular, districts seek more accountability-related professional development, assistance with the use of data, help in improving student and school performance, and models of successfully integrated accountability systems.

The development of an accountability system presents two major challenges. The first is designing a detailed, workable system that incorporates all the key components of accountability. The second is implementing it. Each of these challenges, of course, can be divided into numerous “sub-challenges.” This chapter discusses what these challenges are and what forms of assistance districts said would be helpful in responding to the challenges they face.

For the purposes of this study, the overarching research questions on the topic of challenges and assistance were:

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?

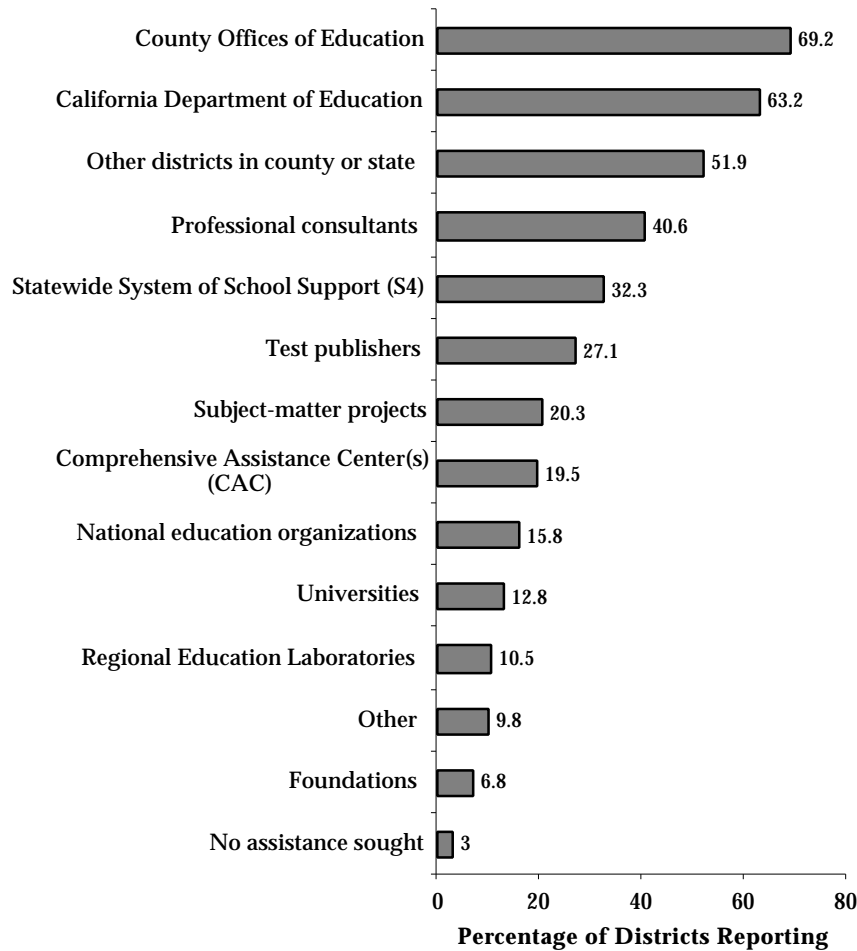
What obstacles do districts face in implementing a standards-based accountability system and how can the state education agency and other educational institutions and assistance centers help districts in overcoming those obstacles?

Practices that Help Districts in Implementing Their Accountability Systems

Several different organizations, including the California Department of Education, have provided helpful assistance to districts in implementing their standards-based accountability systems.

Districts turn to a variety of organizations for help in implementing their standards-based accountability systems, as Figure 11.1 shows. Many districts (63.2 percent) reported on the survey that they have received assistance from CDE in developing, implementing, and refining their accountability systems. In fact, the only agency/organization that more districts reported assistance from than CDE was county offices of education (marked by 69.2 percent of respondents). Other agencies/organizations that many districts marked were “other districts in county or state” (51.9 percent of districts), professional consultants (40.6 percent of districts) and the Statewide System of School Support (S4) (32.3 percent of districts).

Figure 11.1
District Reporting of Sources of Accountability Help
(N = 133)



Nearly all survey respondents (128 of 132) reported that, over the past year, they or someone from their district had participated in workshops for districts related to standards-based accountability. Overall, respondents were almost evenly divided between rating these workshops as “somewhat helpful” and rating the workshops as “very helpful.” Only four respondents said they had attended workshops that were “not helpful.” Apparently, the workshops that are available to districts from a variety of sources have been successful.

Some district staff who were interviewed discussed what they had found to be helpful, not just about workshops, but in general. For example, one administrator mentioned that her

participation in various state committees had been helpful, such as in understanding the standards, and that she was able to take back to her district what she learned from being on these committees. She also appreciated the state’s “try it and see what happens” attitude, giving the district flexibility and leeway to experiment with new ideas.

An administrator in a different district said that although the district relies mostly on in-house staff and assistance, they do attend informational CDE meetings. Also, this administrator noted, the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program has been very helpful for new teachers. (A few first-year mathematics teachers who were interviewed also mentioned BTSA as having been helpful to them.)

Administrators in a third district stated that they had recently received some assistance from CDE, from their County Office of Education, and from the Comprehensive Assistance Center. Most of this assistance, however, seemed to be aimed at implementation of the various provisions of categorical programs (e.g. CCR, PQR) rather than at accountability systems *per se*.

Districts were particularly positive about the assistance they received related to content standards and multiple measures.

When asked whether any particular state-level practices or documents had helped districts to develop and implement their accountability systems, 76 of 130 respondents (58.5 percent) replied “yes.” Documents that many districts listed as being “most useful” included the CDE Multiple Measures Guidelines/Ruth Ann McKenna (1998) Memo (33.3 percent of districts) and the state content standards (29.2 percent of districts).

Similarly, when asked to rate the communication from the California Department of Education about state and federal expectations/requirements in a variety of areas, areas that received the highest ratings had to do with content standards and multiple measures. More than half of responding districts rated communication about “developing adopting, and implementing content standards” to be good or very good, and 47.8 percent rated communication about “combining multiple measures to determine whether students meet grade level standards” to be good or very good.

Content standards and multiple measures were also the areas for which many districts felt they had received strong support. When asked to rate the support their districts had received in several different areas, areas rated highly (“good” or “very good”) by survey respondents included “developing, adopting, and implementing content standards” (67.3 percent of respondents) and “combining multiple measures to determine whether students meet grade level standards” (63.5 percent of respondents).

Major Obstacles for Districts in Implementing Accountability Systems

Although 58.5 percent of districts reported that particular state-level practices or documents had helped them in developing and implementing their accountability systems, nearly as many—57 percent—also stated that there were particular state-level practices or documents that had *hindered* them. As discussed in the chapter on assessment measures, respondents frequently mentioned the use of a norm-referenced test (the SAT-9) and the requirement that all students be tested in English as obstacles that districts face. Other frequently cited hindrances included the “layering” of requirements, frequent policy changes, and political factors. These challenges will be discussed further in this section.

The addition of new requirements without the elimination of older ones causes a strain on districts. It also sends mixed messages about what is important.

Several state-level officials who were interviewed commented that the addition of new requirements and expectations without the elimination of older ones creates problems for districts. For example, they pointed out that school districts are still required to undergo inspection by state teams or to follow state procedures to complete Coordinated Compliance Reviews (CCR) and Program Quality Reviews (PQR). Secondary schools, to be accredited, undergo periodic reviews by teams from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Teachers are required to develop objectives and be evaluated consistent with the requirements of the Stull Bill.

State officials suggested that each of these requirements, and probably others, sends a slightly different message about what is important and what is expected, and all drain significant time and energies that could be devoted to focusing on student achievement. Some district administrators made similar comments. They suggested that the “layering” of new requirements on top of existing mandates adds a great deal of work and paperwork and causes a strain on resources that are already taxed. (Resources will be discussed further in the following section.) One large-district administrator, for example, expressed the opinion that the state does not take into account the “real costs” associated with implementing social promotion policies, class size reduction, and all the other recent interventions “heaped” on districts. He said that not “pruning out” older policies and interventions, such as CCR and PQR, stretches district resources even thinner.

Moreover, the continuation of all of the different requirements has philosophical as well as practical implications. CDE administrators suggested that the underlying premise of a modern education accountability system is that schools, districts, and individuals should be

held responsible for *student outcomes*. To the extent that the state and other entities prescribe *processes*, schools, districts, and individuals may find it more difficult to focus on improving outcomes. For example, various categorical programs are replete with planning, reporting, and other procedural requirements that prescribe how local educators should proceed, rather than how they will be held responsible for improving student outcomes. As one district administrator wrote on the survey, “CCR, PQR, WASC-FOL are antiquated procedures. Eliminate them and rely upon student performance indicators *alone*.”

The frequent changes in state requirements, and the lack of coordination between different state initiatives, vexes district and school personnel.

We were using [a particular program] and the results were positive. However, it was in and then out. Now we're on to something else and I can't begin to tell you why—I do as I am told.

—Principal

For some, the problem is not that previous policies are kept, but rather that they are thrown out before they have a chance to prove effective. In interviews, some administrators voiced concerns about “constantly changing requirements.” They said they feel that districts work hard on designing a reform, but, before they have time to fully implement it and see if it works, they are told to replace it with something else.¹ This causes considerable frustration over the waste of previous efforts.

Moreover, constant changes foster an attitude of “this too shall pass.” In the experience of administrators who were interviewed, people at both district and school levels have seen so many reforms come and go that they have learned not to get personally invested in any of them. For example, the superintendent of one small district said that he did try to involve many people and the community in the policy adoption process *vis-à-vis* accountability. Most staff, however, had the attitude that reforms come and go without any real impact, and they thought that this one (about accountability) wouldn't really come to pass either. An administrator in a different district felt that “accountability” was just “the latest buzz word.”

A few people at the school level, as well, expressed frustration over the rapid pace of change. One principal, for instance, commented in an interview that the state needs to slow down, let the dust settle, and let schools see what is and is not working. She indicated that she likes thoughtful change and feels that the current reforms have been much too rushed. In her opinion, the state needs to realize that everyone is experiencing change anxiety and

¹ The passage of the PSAA has exacerbated this sentiment. For example, administrators in one district said that they wished they could have another couple of years to see if their current system was working before having to change over to the new state system. They would like to see some sort of waiver process through which, if they could prove their system was working, they would be exempt from parts of the state requirements.

that it is tremendously stressful for administrators and teachers. She reported hearing more and more staff say, “I can’t keep up this pace; I’m going to get out of education.” She is worried that they will be losing their best teachers and administrators because of this.

The survey, too, generated numerous comments about how difficult it has been for districts to keep up with a parade of ever-changing, often-uncoordinated policies and requirements. Among the state-level “practices” that were mentioned by districts as hindrances were the following:

Lack of long-term consistent process for measuring student achievement.

Asking us to create a plan as though it will be our call and later changing to a state plan.

Late notification, uncertainty at state level, changes by State Board, expectation that districts develop and then change to meet state requirements at a later date.

State testing program changes every year.

The CDE’s constant changes.

Lack of consistent requirements—we need a sustained focus over enough time to yield meaningful information.

It has been like trying to learn to ride a horse that you got on half way to a destination that keeps changing i.e. designing grade level assessments without guidance of defined state performance standards.

Inability of state to evaluate and adopt a system that is consistent, based on proven implementation, with professional development attached.

Constantly changing state legislation.

State system not consistent year to year.

Putting a system together in a piecemeal fashion and acting like it means something to public.

As with this last remark, several districts criticized the state for its lack of consistency not only over time but also across the new policies that have recently been instituted. State-level practices, wrote one survey respondent, “are not well coordinated.” A district administrator who was interviewed recommended that “the state adopt a coherent plan and stick with it.”

State policymakers who were interviewed—legislators, Governor’s Office officials, State Board members, etc.—acknowledged that there is still a long way to go before all the pieces of the accountability system are fully aligned. Besides the standards, testing, and consequences components, a number of other initiatives will have a major impact on accountability: staff development, the state high school exit exam, teacher preparation, teacher quality, class size reduction, school finance (both adequacy and equity), and collective bargaining. State policymakers agreed that aligning all of these various initiatives is vitally important, and they urged the state and the public to have the patience and persistence to see the process through until alignment can take place. The key, they admitted, will be long term commitment and an “appropriate balance between idealism and pragmatism.” They view accountability as a long-range project that, to be successful, will take extraordinary effort over time. Whether they have communicated this view to implementers up and down the educational ladder, as well as parents, remains an open question. (Communication issues will be discussed later in this chapter.)

Political and organizational dynamics are partly responsible for the apparent lack of consistency and coordination.

To some extent, the apparent lack of consistency and coordination between various policies stems from political or organizational factors. One district administrator who was interviewed speculated that state policy tends to be driven “more by politics than good education.” On the survey, as well, several respondents attributed the lack of consistency and coordination to state-level political dynamics, and they cited various political or governance-related factors as hindrances in their development of accountability systems:

Target continues to move as various political forces propose their solutions.

Politics and arguing of what standards should be adopted.

Legislation vs. CDE guidance not coordinated over time (0 credibility); site left to deliver multiple often contradictory directives.

Legislative, political vs. research-based practices.

Lack of collaboration among state level personnel.

The “lack of collaboration among state-level personnel” was also discussed by state personnel themselves. CDE officials who were interviewed noted that elements of

accountability are located in at least four divisions², reporting directly to two Deputy Superintendents and one Chief Deputy Superintendent. Division titles provide few clues as to where the various functions reside. The Standards, Curriculum and Assessment Division apparently has responsibility for neither standards nor curriculum. Neither that division nor the School and District Accountability Division reports to the Chief Deputy for Educational Policy, Finance, and Accountability. Of the four, only the Office of Policy and Evaluation, which is responsible for managing the school report card program, does report to the Chief Deputy for Educational Policy, Finance, and Accountability.³

In this environment, CDE administrators suggested, it has been extremely difficult to coordinate related activities or even communicate between key actors. For example, differences between the Office of Policy and Evaluation and the Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Division theoretically would have to be referred to the Superintendent to be resolved. In other words, in the opinion of most of the staff who were interviewed, responsibility for accountability-related functions has been fragmented within CDE. Coordination among the various divisions appears to be mostly informal and largely the result of long-established working relationships among the division directors rather than any coherent plan. (The new reorganization may, however, help address these problems.)

Indeed, until recently, there has not appeared to be a Department-wide strategy or vision of accountability. Department administrators attribute much of the lack of clarity in this area to the often-contentious relationship between the State Board of Education and the Superintendent and her staff during the past several years.

Political dynamics at the district level, as well as at the state level, can also interfere with accountability systems. For example, one district administrator commented that ever-changing district leadership has discouraged further action on the implementation of an accountability system; this district has had three superintendents in as many years. A change in superintendency in another district that was visited also has had a powerful impact on the accountability system, causing it to change course midstream.

The majority of districts do not believe that the expectations and requirements for districts with regard to accountability are fair and reasonable.

When asked, “Do you believe that state and federal expectations/requirements with regard to accountability and districts’ roles in accountability are fair and reasonable?,” 59.2 percent of survey respondents replied “no.” Many of the reasons given for “no” responses were similar to those discussed above and in previous chapters: use of a norm-referenced test,

² Elementary Education Division; Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment Division; School and District Accountability Division; and the Office of Policy and Evaluation.

³ Since conducting the state interviews, we have learned that CDE has taken steps to consolidate related functions. However, it is too soon to comment on the nature of the reorganization.

lack of consistency and coordination at the state level, and so on. Many, however, expressed concerns about the state expectations and goals for student achievement, which, until the passage of the PSAA, aimed for 90 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards by 2007 (McKenna, 1997; CDE, 1998a):

90% meeting grade level standards within 10 years—not realistic.

The goal of 90% of students reaching standards is absurd until society changes and all students come to school ready to learn and parents do their part.

Federal expectations in 1994 IASA reauthorization are OK. California's are not fair and very unreasonable—90% of all students at or above grade level.

The 90% above grade level goal by 2007 is not logical, appropriate, or realistic!

For many respondents, the issue was one of equity.⁴ Many people felt that it was unfair for the state not to factor in differences among schools and students in terms of socioeconomic status, language differences, special education, etc:

All 8th grade students are not college bound, not all students are capable of grade level performance.

Too simplistic; treat all schools as though clients have identical needs.

State expectations do not address uneven playing fields among schools.

Doesn't account for student differences.

[Expectations are] only [fair] if we look at subgroups of students and give credit for progress toward targets.

Clearly schools in the higher SES will have the advantage.

Poverty and LEP status influence student scores more than instructional practices (i.e., good teaching is happening in “low performing school”).

LEP student needs are ignored.

No reasonable provisions for English language learners.

⁴ Developing an equitable accountability system was another challenge cited by some districts, especially in interviews.

State does not factor in certain issues like English proficiency. Our fear is the schools that most need stability will be least likely to achieve such.

Special Ed and LEP included are not reasonable.

For some survey respondents, the source of unfairness in state expectations and requirements was not differences among students and schools, but rather among *districts*. As one person put it, “One shoe does not fit all feet! State and Federal tend to look at every district the same and they are not.” Conversations with representatives from rural districts reveal that these districts, in particular, fiercely resent “one-size-fits-all” accountability schemes.

Specific Challenges at the District Level

Districts face many challenges in developing and implementing their accountability systems. The most important challenges reported on the survey relate to alignment, resources, assessment, equity, professional development, and changing requirements.

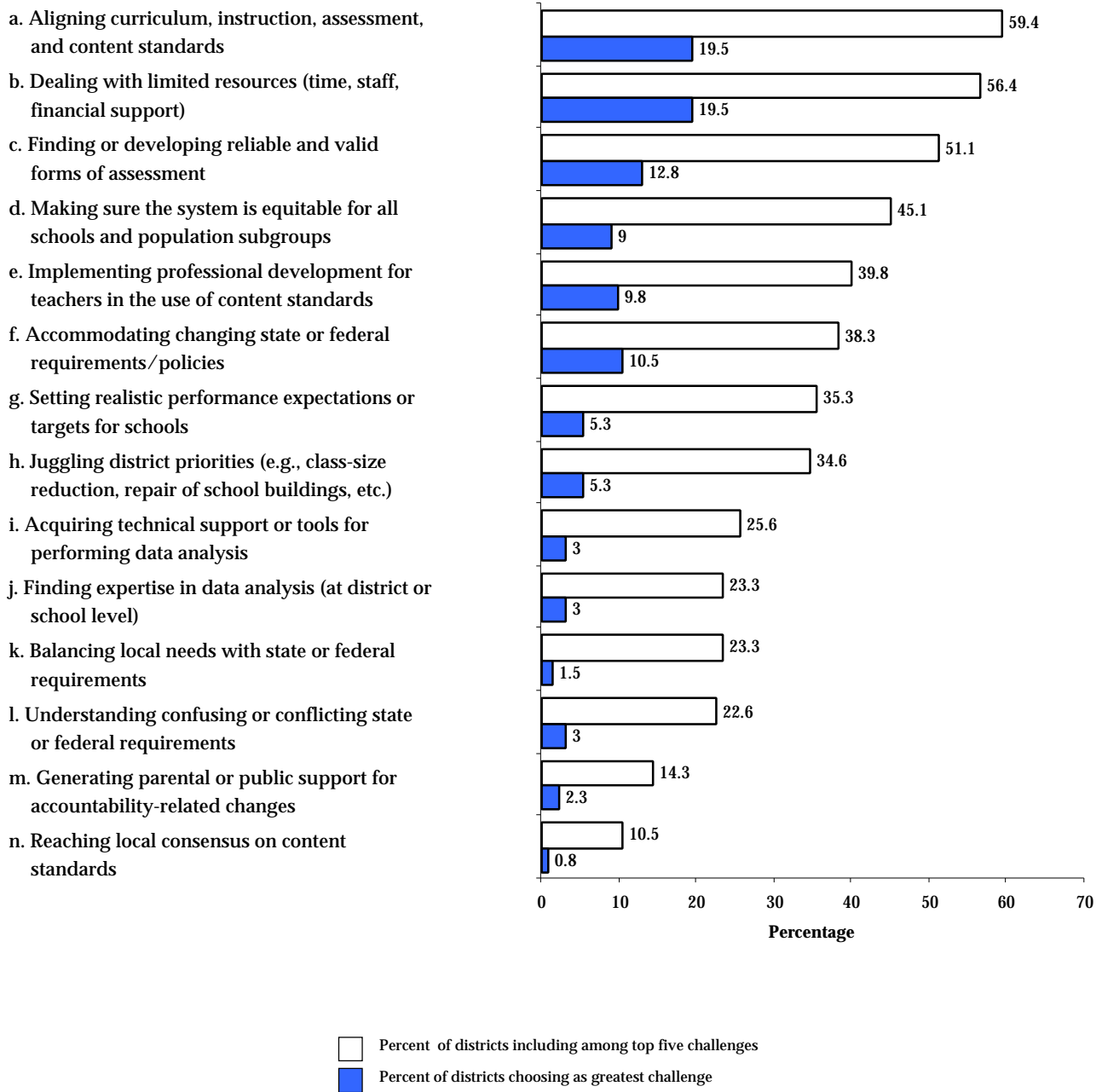
Figure 11.2 presents a list from the questionnaire of 14 possible challenges districts might face in developing and implementing their accountability systems, and it shows the proportion of survey respondents who selected each area as one of their district’s “top five challenges.” As the figure shows, districts selected the following items most frequently:

- aligning curriculum, instruction, assessment, and content standards
- dealing with limited resources (time, staff, financial support)
- finding or developing reliable and valid forms of assessment
- making sure the system is equitable for all schools and population subgroups
- implementing professional development for teachers in the use of content standards
- accommodating changing state or federal requirements/policies

Figure 11.2

**District Rankings of Challenges for Developing and Implementing
a Standards-Based Accountability System**

(N = 113)



Several of these items have been discussed in previous chapters or earlier in this chapter. The rest of this section elaborates further on the remaining items and on other challenges mentioned not only by districts but also by schools and by state-level policymakers and policy implementers.

Creating buy-in from teachers, implementing changes at the classroom level, and improving student performance were challenges mentioned by several districts.

“Creating buy-in” and “implementing changes in the classroom” were not listed as options on the survey question about challenges faced by districts. Both, however, were mentioned frequently in district interviews in response to the question, “What do you see as the biggest challenges to implementing a successful accountability system in your district?” In almost all districts where interviews occurred, administrators expressed concern that understanding about accountability had not filtered down to the classroom teacher. In addition, many suggested that lack of buy-in by teachers would hinder the successful implementation of any accountability measures.

In one district, for example, a Program Specialist said that one of the biggest challenges was getting everyone to buy into the system and to understand why it is important. Another challenge, this person said, was in building the system down to the classroom level. A Director of Research and Evaluation in a different district commented similarly that a major challenge is achieving consensus and overcoming staff resistance; staff, the administrator continued, have to agree and buy into what they are being evaluated on. The Superintendent in a third district, too, said that the greatest challenge is getting the message to people and getting them to respond. Finally, a district administrator in yet another district stated that the biggest challenge was changing the beliefs and expectations of education professionals.

State policymakers also discussed the importance of buy-in. They generally agreed that a high degree of local buy-in is essential to the success of any accountability system. Accountability cannot be solely top-down, they emphasized; in order to be truly effective, it must also become bottom-up reform. They felt that the real test will be whether people at all levels of the system, particularly teachers, become committed to the idea of accountability, or if they will continue to see it as an outside scheme imposed by the state. The policymakers who were interviewed also expressed the concern that others at the state level may underrate the difficulty of attaining this important goal.

Communication-related issues, such as lack of clarity in state directives and delayed information, have created challenges for many districts.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, CDE communication regarding content standards and multiple measures was rated highly on the survey. In other accountability-related areas, however, CDE communication scored less well. For example, one area in which CDE communication received low marks was data analysis. With respect to “analyzing assessment and other data,” 36.9 percent of respondents rated CDE communication as poor and 40 percent rated it as fair.

Districts were also somewhat negative about communication regarding the improvement of student and school performance. For “improving student performance,” 37 percent of survey districts rated CDE communication as poor, and another 37 percent rated it only as “fair.” Similarly, for “improving school performance,” 34.4 percent of districts thought CDE communication was “poor,” and 39.8 percent marked “fair.”⁵

Although the survey did not ask districts to explain their communication ratings, it seems likely that the low ratings in these two areas stemmed from a *lack* of communication rather than from *unclear* communication. A few respondents wrote comments to this effect next to the “improving school performance” and “improving student performance” items: “These have not been addressed by the Calif. D.O.E.” wrote one person; another asked, “Has there been any [communication in these areas]?” Also, respondents were more likely to leave these two items blank or to answer “don’t know” than they were for the other communication-related items.

A superintendent who was interviewed also commented on a lack of communication. He mentioned that when he wants information on what is happening at the state level, he feels that he has to actively go get it. “If you just wait for information to come to you,” he said, “you’re lost.”

Some districts did cite a lack of clarity in state directives as having hindered them in developing and implementing their accountability systems. One district administrator who was interviewed said that the accountability measures in the new legislation are not clear and that “the whole message never gets out”; the new rules are too confusing and too complex, she felt, and districts are getting multiple contradictory messages. Survey comments about how lack of clarity in state guidelines had hindered districts included:

⁵ These two areas—improving student performance and improving school performance—were also the areas in which districts felt that they had received the least helpful *support*. Fifty-six percent of districts rated the support they had received in improving student performance as poor or fair, and 55 percent rated the support they had received in improving school performance as poor or fair.

Not giving clear standards for district to follow. For small districts this has been a difficult process.

Bulletins gave discrepant information. We are still trying to get information regarding 8th grade algebra.

The state level documents tend to be confusing.

Unclear expectations.

Lack of clarity in directions during early years of the program.

The timing of CDE-issued information was another communication-related area that some districts commented on. Several survey respondents commented that slowness at the state level had hindered their districts' development of accountability components:

The "late" issuance of guidelines and procedures.

Standards were very slow in coming.

The slow political process of establishing state performance standards and curriculum alignment via textbooks and standards-based assessments.

Similar comments came up in district interviews. One district administrator, for example, expressed the concern that CDE has a problem with "procrastination" and takes too long to disseminate information. Moreover, several administrators commented that their districts had expended considerable efforts in developing content standards or in devising systems for combining multiple measures, only to be told *later* by the state what was and was not acceptable. Districts suggested that this led to a lot of wasted effort, additional work, and bad feeling.

Case Study of Miscommunication: “90 percent of students doing what?”

A case-in-point where miscommunication is concerned relates to the state goal of 90 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards by 2007.⁶ Some districts interpreted this goal to mean that by 2007, 90 percent of students had to be scoring above the 50th percentile on the SAT-9. Based on the number of districts who commented on the survey about the statistical implausibility of such a goal, this was a fairly widespread misconception:

Statistically, having 90% of all students above the 50th percentile does not make sense.

Thinking that 90% of students can be above the 50th percentile on an NRT [is unreasonable]. This must be Lake Wobegon!

Goal of 90% of students is statistically impossible. They will renorm SAT.

State concept of everyone at or above the 50th percentile is incredibly flawed. Someone at the state needs to understand populations, statistics, and assessment!

Some students will always fall below the 50th percentile on norm referenced tests. Getting everyone above the 50th percentile is statistically impossible.

With SAT-9 the 90% proficiency by 2007 is not statistically attainable.

Even one teacher who was interviewed commented on this statistical riddle. “None of this really makes sense to me,” she said, “because statistically you *have* to have [people] below the 50th percentile. I mean, the 50th percentile is the middle mark, you can’t have nobody below the middle.”

How did so many people form the impression that the goal was to have 90 percent of students above the 50th percentile? It is difficult to say for sure. However, it seems likely that it was a result of miscommunication or misinterpretation of state documents.

In particular, an accountability packet (Fausset, 1998) distributed to districts by CDE on July 20, 1998 included several different pieces. One piece, the “Summary of Guidelines for Identifying Title I Schools for Program Improvement: Refinements for 1997–98” (CDE, 1998a), mentioned the state goal of “90 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards.” Another piece included in the packet was “Frequently Asked Questions About Standards-Based Accountability, Spring 1998” (CDE, 1998, Spring). One of the “frequently asked questions” cited in this document was, “What is the rationale for using the 50th percentile as the grade-level standard on a norm-referenced test?” The answer given was the following:

The 50th percentile is an interim standard or benchmark for norm-referenced assessment like the SAT-9....

The 50th percentile was selected because California cannot justify an expectation for our students that is lower than the current national average.

(continues)

⁶ This goal mostly likely will be eliminated with the adoption of a new statewide target as required under the PSAA.

Case Study of Miscommunication — continued

It seems conceivable that many districts may have interpreted this to mean that in order for students to meet grade level standards, they must score at or above the 50th percentile on the SAT-9. Thus, given the goal of 90 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade level standards, it is a short leap to the assumption that this means 90 percent of students scoring above the 50th percentile.

Districts voiced concerns about having insufficient time to meet reporting requirements and to make the multiple changes and implement the new systems required by the state.

Other “hindrances” that many districts cited on the survey had to do with limited time. A few districts complained that the amount of time needed to satisfy state reporting requirements was excessive:

Too many reports, too much paperwork.

We feel that the burden of state and federal accountability is onerous. Too much time is taken away from our main job: educating kids!

Multiple requirements (CCR, WASC, accountability report cards, categorical programs) which aren't particularly useful and take too much time.

In addition, numerous districts made remarks on the survey about “short timelines,” “too much too soon,” and “too many changes, too fast!” Some elaborated further:

Too much required too quickly. Need time and resources to implement standards and accountability system.

Process used for developing standards for Eng./Lang. Arts and Math were not conducive to easy implementation—still very controversial. Way too much at once.

Challenges to report on SASR data before system could be in place to aggregate/disaggregate data.

Not enough lead time to develop program to capture newly required reporting data.

Concerns about “unrealistic timelines” also came up in interviews with district administrators. Some commented that they felt that timelines were being driven by politicians, rather than by realistic educational goals. They pointed out that it takes a long time to develop each piece of the system; rushing it, they suggested, leads to poorly designed, badly flawed systems.⁷

Some districts cited insufficient resources as a major hindrance to their accountability efforts.

Lack of time and other resources appears to have been a particular issue with smaller districts. Some smaller districts commented on the survey that, as a result of their size, they were at a disadvantage in terms of meeting state requirements:

Not enough support for smaller districts.

Not always reasonable timelines for small districts with 1 or 2 people responsible for organization, preparation, and submission of accountability info.

Small rural districts have unique needs and problems meeting requirements.

Conversations with representatives from rural districts yielded similar remarks. Rural districts feel strongly that they simply cannot respond appropriately to the State’s accountability thrust without additional resources.

Some large districts, too, commented on a lack of resources—particularly discretionary, non-targeted resources. The Assistant to the Superintendent in one large district voiced a desire for more resources without strings attached, controlled at the local level. For instance, the district already has “safety system infrastructure” up and running, so new funds from the state earmarked for that would not be helpful. However, the district is badly in need of funding for facilities and maintenance (the schools are very old and crowded), for textbooks, and for funding innovations. District administrators suggested that funding is now so targeted that districts do not have the money they need to hire additional staff to oversee assessment, for instance, or to institute student data tracking systems.

⁷ Even some state-level policymakers acknowledged that accountability is very complex, perhaps too complex for successful implementation, especially in the time allotted.

A lack of resources at the state level is problematic for districts seeking assistance as well as for CDE officials trying to provide leadership for accountability.

The state itself has limited resources to work with, as some districts acknowledged. One district administrator, when asked what additional assistance he would like from the state, replied that CDE had been cut back so much that it was hard to imagine what support they could give. Similarly, a survey respondent commented:

CA Dept. of Education is devastated by budget cuts, etc. Other out-of-state districts have developed excellent models. However, many of these districts are spending \$40,000+ per student; we spend \$5,000 per student.

Unsurprisingly, CDE's lack of resources was also mentioned by numerous state officials. Virtually every person interviewed at the state level, at CDE and elsewhere, mentioned that CDE lacked sufficient resources to provide the leadership necessary to successfully implement any accountability program. State policymakers, for example, expressed much skepticism about CDE's capacity to administer the accountability system, given the quantity of things that need to be done on an extremely constricted timeline, and given CDE's limited resources. In part because of this limited capacity, state policymakers expressed very little confidence in takeover by the Superintendent of Public Instruction as a way to materially improve school performance.

CDE administrators were particularly candid in their admission that the Department was unable to assist districts or even to enforce compliance in any meaningful way. Several commented that over the past decade, resources available to the Department have been reduced dramatically. The quantity and in some cases the quality of staff have suffered, in the opinion of some people who were interviewed. Operating budgets have been cut repeatedly. Salary levels are no longer competitive with those paid to local educators, making it more and more difficult to attract high-caliber talent to work in the Department. This situation is likely to be exacerbated, said officials, as more experienced employees leave the agency.

Although CDE resources have been cut severely, expectations and responsibilities required of the Department have not been reduced concomitantly, according to Department officials who were interviewed. Quite to the contrary, they said, new and expanded expectations have been added to existing expectations. Accountability is just the most recent example of this problem. The results of this practice are predictable, suggested the people who were interviewed: when it is impossible to do everything, some things will not be done well and others will not be done at all.

District Spotlight: Plight of a Medium-Sized District

An interview with administrators from one medium-sized district highlighted many of the challenges discussed in this chapter. Although this district's Consolidated Application Accountability Plan received an "exemplary" rating from CDE, administrators did not feel they had any promising strategies to share with other districts. If anything, they felt that their district was an example of how the system was *not* working.

They reported that they are in a condition of continual triage in an effort to meet a flood of state requirements. All of their time and resources, they said, are spent meeting the letter of the law, and they do not have the time to actually develop the programs necessary to implement the spirit of the law. They feel hindered in their efforts by the state's rapidly changing requirements, its failure to eliminate previous requirements, its failure to provide districts with clear and timely information about changes, and its failure to provide the necessary resources.

Constantly Changing Requirements. District staff felt that the state requirements resulted from a political process rather than from a well thought-out educational process, and that the legislature is out of touch with how districts actually work. They want the state to lay out a clear long-term vision of how accountability is going to work in California, rather than the current piecemeal approach. They also want to see a reasonable timeline with sequential reforms and a plan of how it is going to be phased in.

Timing of Information from CDE. The administrators interviewed cited several specific instances when the lack of timely information from CDE caused the district to have to redo programs it had already put significant time and resources into. In one instance, they spent a year developing a rubric for combining multiple measures, which then had to be discarded when the state guidelines were disseminated. In another instance, committees spent untold hours developing a local assessment to satisfy the multiple measures requirement. Then they heard from CDE that the multiple measures reporting system may not even be required this year. (At the time of this interview, in mid-July of 1999, they still had not received final notification about this.) In their opinion, April or May is too late to notify districts about reporting requirements for that year. District staff said that this kind of thing has serious effects on teacher and administrator morale, and that staff are now much less willing to work on these types of projects. The best teachers and administrators are burning out and leaving.

New Requirements Without Eliminating Old. District staff were unhappy with how the state was layering requirements on districts, instituting new mandates without eliminating old ones. They said that the paperwork that came with funding opportunities was often so great that it was not worthwhile to apply, and that it was creating a substantial burden on staff. The current staff do not have the time to deal with the additional requirements, but, because the funding is almost all targeted now, there is no money to hire additional people. Some of the key clerical staff have left, after having worked out of classification and having put in substantial overtime for years. One administrator commented that the state is moving to an accountability system based on outputs, but it is still controlling the inputs.

(continues)

District Spotlight — continued

Unrealistic Timelines. District staff said that they were rushing to meet the state requirements, but that they never had time to design programs that were good. They also noted that the sequence of requirements often did not make sense. For instance, they had to begin reporting for the Consolidated Application before they had standards and assessments in place, so the data were not comparable from year to year.

Limited Resources. District officials cited understaffing as the biggest challenge the district faces. They said they were an administrator-poor district, and there was no slack in the system that they could use to accommodate the new requirements. Developing multiple measures for each grade level was an incredible strain on the district staff, and they felt that it was unreasonable to expect each district to come up with its own measures. Moreover, while they collect all the student data, they do not have the time to analyze any of it. They would like to be able to assess their program at the district level, identify weaknesses, and institute programs to address them, but they do not have the time or the resources to do this. Another example they pointed to was the program they are developing to end social promotion. The program will allow them to identify students below grade level, but it ends there—they do not have the diagnostic system necessary to help them figure out how to address those students' needs. In other words, the district provides “quick fixes” to respond to the state requirements, but does not have the time or resources to really develop programs or make them work. The targeted funding does not allow them to hire the additional staff that they need.

In short, this is a district that believes in accountability and can envision how a good system would work, but feels that it does not have the capacity to develop and implement one.

Particular Challenges Presented by the Public Schools Accountability Act

As noted previously, many districts voiced concerns about the constantly changing nature of state accountability policies and legislation. In fact, on the survey question about whether state and federal expectations/requirements with regard to accountability were fair and reasonable, several districts declined to make a judgment on the grounds that the expectations/requirements were too much in flux to say:

We need more clarification (program advisories) of new legislation before making a determination in this area. There is such short turnaround time!

They [state expectations] are changing constantly. Have to wait till the smoke clears.

I'm not sure at this time—too many bills just passed.

They are changing as I write—which expectation?

One major change to which these districts may have been referring was the PSAA. As discussed in Chapter 5, most districts' overall reactions to the PSAA were quite positive. Many did, however, have concerns about the details of implementation. Some of these concerns (e.g., about the role of the SAT-9, rewards and sanctions, and equity) have been discussed in previous chapters. Other concerns are discussed below.

Many districts' concerns about the PSAA are logistical in nature, dealing with the time and resources needed to implement the new policy—especially in conjunction with other requirements.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, many districts are critical of the short timelines and limited resources with which they have to make major accountability-related changes. These concerns apply equally to the new PSAA accountability system. District administrators who were interviewed suggested that not enough time and resources are available, either at the state or local level, to respond adequately to this latest state initiative.

In fact, the new system was perceived as *compounding* extant logistical problems, because it appears to some districts as “one more thing” to implement on top of every other requirement they must meet or initiative they are responding to, such as class-size reduction. Representative survey comments about this included:

The difficulty centers around so much “coming down” all at once, with current employees left to facilitate all of the implementation.

It is not feasible to reach achievement goals without help with facilities, professional development, technology, and extended learning time. We do not have space to even offer 20:1 at all eligible grades.

I am concerned [about the pace at which] new legislation is being introduced and implemented. As an educator I feel I'm getting set up for failure.

Theoretically, it is sound and necessary. Timelines are unrealistic and the financial support is not there (i.e., increased need for extensive staff development while at the same time SBCP days were eliminated).

Most educators feel this new system could be beneficial if there is follow-through as advertised. Having one accountability/assessment package that is coordinated is much preferable to a piecemeal approach. We are concerned that the popularity of this hot initiative

(assessment/accountability) will result in a flurry of sometimes conflicting expectations...not supported with resources, and nothing else has gone away, so it has added another layer of tasks. We need help if we are going to thoughtfully and successfully implement these demands.

It seems to be coming down to the local level at a fast and furious pace. It is difficult to thoughtfully implement new policies and programs and accountability measures given quick turnaround time.

State expectations for full implementation are unreasonable given the limited time for preparation.

The concern we have is the short timeframe for implementation of some of the state initiatives. Class size reduction would be a good example.

Teachers, administrators, and board members feel overwhelmed. Too much is coming down for us to catch our breath and do what needs to be done.

Several districts voiced concerns about the level of coordination between the PSAA and other initiatives, policies, and requirements.

As is suggested by several of comments above, a number of districts are also concerned about the level of coordination (or lack thereof) among the new accountability legislation, other state legislation and policies, federal requirements, and districts' own existing policies. Additional comments from the survey along these lines included the following:

We are in the process of sorting through SB1X [the PSAA], SB2X, AB1626, and AB1639 to determine counter supports and conflicts. We are attempting to modify our programs in a coordinated manner using all new legislation.

State legislation must align with federal regulations. Schools are getting mixed messages on expectations.

Restrictive state legislation results in a loss of local control. Concern—our ability to meet the federal requirements for showing impact of Title I students.

There needs to be better coordination between the state and local districts before the mandates are put into effect.

The concern is that there are too many different accountability systems (Stull Bill, Title I, District, etc.). There has to be a way to meld them all together.

Districts would like time and resources to see what strategies might help to remedy problems identified by accountability measures.

A number of district survey comments referred to the need for time to figure out what works and what does not, and the importance of using such research to drive policy at both district and state levels:

We are dying under the paperwork, unfunded mandates, and changes made with no planning or direction. We need an implementation-evaluation period to find out what works—not more mandates.

SB1X [the PSAA]—should not expect to be implemented for 2 years—need to gather reliable data for ranking—only SAT-9 currently available.

The state needs a “master plan” to help guide the school accountability process. State legislation is coming faster than districts can implement and assess the outcomes.

Legislation is feasible but need time and resources to implement. Also need consistency of policies based on educational research.

Districts need time to gear up, implement, and evaluate progress toward accountability.

High stakes pressure—asking for too much in too short a time period. If this is what we are to do then “hold the same target” for 5 years and then assess results.

Districts will make a good faith effort to abide by the new accountability system.

Despite their concerns, many districts seemed resigned to the new accountability system and indicated that they would “do their best” to implement it. One Director of Research and Evaluation who was interviewed, for example, commented that his district’s policy is essentially to make itself compatible with State requirements. He said it was counterproductive to object or argue with decrees, so the district would just have to “get with the program.” He said that “we take what we’re given and make the best of it.” Several survey respondents made similar remarks:

We’ll implement but will find it challenging given all the other mandates.

It is my belief that when we’re discussing mandated state legislation, there is no option but to implement.

We will do the best we can.

As always, we will honestly attempt to implement the policies in spirit and intent. There are sure to be pitfalls and as-yet-unanticipated issues.

Of course we'll do what needs to be done but the major question is: "Does all this really improve student learning?"

The question raised by this last comment, "Does all this really improve student learning?" is a question that others have as well. A few survey respondents expressed skepticism that any of these changes are of tested, proven educational value. As one person put it, "As with so many past reform efforts, there is great haste at the start, but ultimately few appreciable results." Another respondent said, "In all honesty, more hurdles for districts with limited personnel and resources to jump through, especially when there is no proof or evidence that change will affect schools and students in a positive way." Nevertheless, as indicated by the comments presented in Chapter 5, many survey respondents did express optimism—albeit cautious optimism—about the potential effects of the PSAA.

What Would Help Districts in Implementing Accountability Systems?

Districts are eager for more accountability-related professional development in areas such as developing assessments and aligning curriculum with standards.

When asked, "Would you or others from your district like to have an opportunity for more professional development related to standards-based accountability?" over 80 percent of survey respondents answered in the affirmative. In addressing the follow-up question, "What would be most helpful?," many districts provided additional written comments about the need for more professional development and in-service. The types of professional development desired were quite varied; some themes, however, did emerge from the responses.

Many districts, for example, said that they would like more professional development in developing reliable and valid assessments or in combining multiple measures. Districts also seek assistance in aligning assessments (and multiple measures in general), standards, and curriculum and instruction. Professional development requests along these lines included:

Assistance in aligning curriculum to standards, designing cumulative and summative assessments, and selecting appropriate curriculum to fill the gaps would be most helpful.

More information on criterion-referenced tests—what’s available? What’s reliable and valid? How can tests be used to improve instruction?

1) Research-based teaching strategies to implement standards; 2) Student performance tasks and rubrics to measure the accomplishment of each standard.

Alignments of curriculum to standards to assessment.

Developing assessment systems aligned to standards. Fair ways of combining multiple measures.

Practical use of standards in teacher planning.

Moving towards standards-based teaching and assessment, how to use standards in the classroom, how to report to parents in a standards-based system.

Aligning assessments; using assessments to guide instruction.

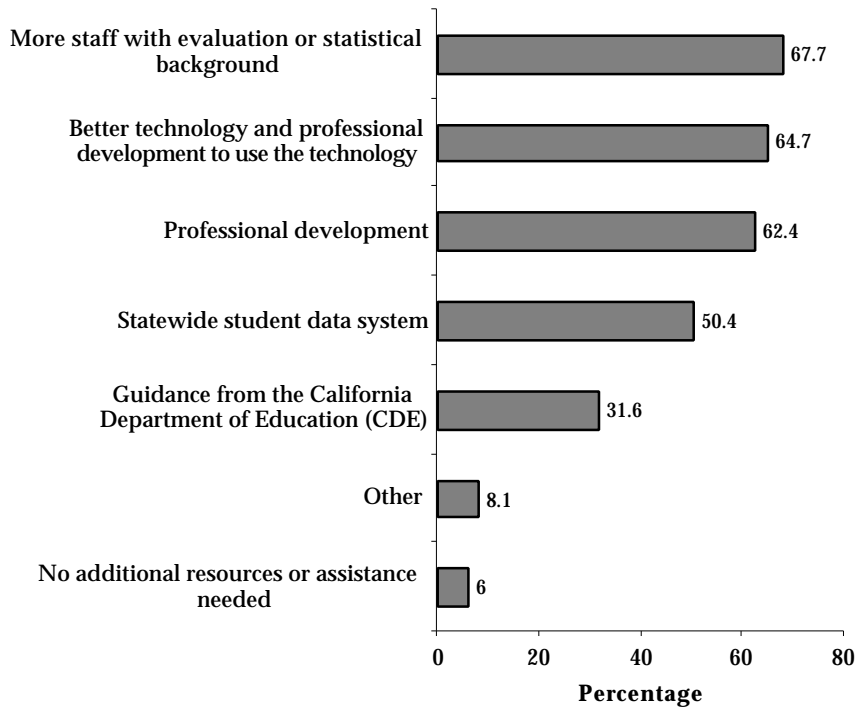
How to most effectively implement standards-based accountability in the individual classroom.

Criterion-Referenced Test development, standards-based report card, reliability and validity measures, promising practices.

Many districts seek additional assistance in analyzing and using student assessment data.

Another frequently mentioned area for additional professional development and other assistance was data collection, data management, and data analysis. Responses to the question, “What additional resources would best help your district to analyze student assessment data?” are shown in Figure 11.3. Adding technical staff and updating technology led the list: 67.7 percent of respondents checked “more staff with evaluation or statistical background,” and 64.7 percent checked “better technology and professional development to use the technology.” In addition, 62.4 percent checked “professional development,” and 50.4 percent checked “statewide student data system.” The latter was also high on the wish list of at least one large district that was visited, according to the district’s Assistant to the Superintendent.

Figure 11.3
District Reporting of Desired Additional Resources to
Help Analyze Student Assessment Data
(N = 133)



Moreover, the phrases “analyzing data” and “data analysis” appeared again and again in districts’ written survey comments about what types of professional development they would find helpful. Some of districts’ data-related requests were technical in nature, relating to systems for data management, statistical expertise, etc., such as:

Technical capacity for analyzing student assessment data.

Our assessment people average NPRs and all other kinds of inaccurate interpretation of data. This area needs major help.

Technology (equip. & software) and technical support to set up adequate data base and reporting system for a standards-based results-driven focus.

A statewide system for data management.

How to use technology to enhance implementation of SB Accountability System—“a program for data use and analysis.”

Districts not only seek assistance in collecting and analyzing data, but also in learning how to use data to improve instruction, as shown by the following survey comments:

(1) Use of data for program improvement. (2) Increasing skills in data analysis. (3) Ways to encourage/support teachers’ thoughtful use of data.

Staff development on a standards-based system, and on using student achievement data for teachers.

Analyzing SAT-9 data to plan student/program changes—establish goals—implementing changes.

Using data to improve school and student performance; identifying and selecting instructional and school improvement strategies based on the results of data analysis.

However, it appears that districts do get some support in the analysis of data from various agencies and organizations. Sixty-four percent of districts rated the support they had received in “analyzing assessment and other data” as good or very good. Outside consultants/organizations, county offices of education, and particular people were cited by the most districts as being particularly helpful in this area.

Improvement of school and student performance and “putting the pieces together” are other areas in which districts requested assistance, perhaps through networking with other districts.

As suggested by some of the comments about using data to improve performance, school and student improvement is another major area for which many districts would like professional development. As with “analyzing data,” phrases such as “improving school performance” and “ways to improve student performance” came up over and over again in written survey comments. In particular, districts are looking for concrete, specific, proven strategies, especially ones to use with low-performing schools and students:

School improvement issues and strategies; support and communications/information for staff and parents of low/non-performing schools.

More workshops highlighting best practices.

High quality intervention strategies for students behind in achievement; better strategies to teach higher level math to poorly prepared students from 8th grade; better understanding of cultural components of underachievement among Hispanics and Blacks.

SOLID RESEARCH ON WHAT REALLY WORKS for improvement.

How to implement true schoolwide reform in a district with very high transiency and poverty.

Interventions—contacts at schools with similar demographics but higher student performance.

As with this last comment, some people suggested that more opportunities to learn about the systems and strategies implemented by other districts and states would be helpful:

Models of systems employed by districts of a similar size and with limited district office staff.

High-stakes accountability state systems and results for the past 3 years from states such as Texas, Tennessee, Kentucky, etc. Also, district systems and how data are handled from collection to reporting and action plan development.

Increased networking, partnerships, consortia across districts and counties.

Putting-all-the-pieces-together ideas from successful systems.

Indeed, “putting all the pieces together” seemed to be another potential area for assistance to districts, as several survey comments mentioned. In an interview, an administrator from a district that is usually considered advanced in terms of accountability also emphasized the importance of a coordinated, integrated system. When asked what advice she had for other districts, one thing she mentioned was to “think about all the pieces and how they fit together, rather than rushing in with a piecemeal approach.”

Predictably, districts request increased resources—funding and time—to implement accountability systems and accountability-related changes.

In responding to the question of what types of support would help districts overcome some of the obstacles they had identified, many survey respondents, predictably, mentioned increased funding. For example:

Additional funding to support the huge demands that have been added.

Dollars! We have strong capacity within the district and county but need money to stipend professional time. You know, like real professionals do...

Additional funding to hire staff to do assessments, prepare reports, and assist schools with accountability.

Adequate state funds to increase teacher salaries to draw more qualified people into the profession.

The California governor and legislature need to ensure that all districts and schools receive the level of educational resources required to support the academic success of all students. Accountability is essential, but by itself will not bring about desired student outcomes.

Money for quality staff development [would be helpful].⁸

Some respondents forcefully expressed views that the number of accountability-related mandates should be reduced:

Limit initiatives; give districts time to implement new laws in a timely manner.

Reduced number of reports... (e.g., Con App, Part 2 has expanded exponentially in last two years, but still must be completed by one person in this district and in the same time frame of about six weeks; this is at least the fourth survey we have completed for a government agency since January; we are currently working on both CCR self study and WASC review, while we are administering STAR testing and preparing for Gold State exams... Need we go on?)

Time. We have a curriculum alignment process in place, but are constantly being bombarded with new initiatives, regulations, etc. Many of these legislative changes come with unrealistic timeframes and arrive at the district level with muddled directions for implementation.

Districts also want more stability and consistency in state policy.

Stability, consistency, and clarity from the state and from the federal government were also the subject of many district requests on the survey:

To have the state settle down and not try to implement any more pieces to the standards movement. We're headed in the right direction—let us reach consensus and implement the requirements thus far.

⁸ In keeping with this comment, some districts commented negatively in various places throughout the questionnaire on the loss of state-sponsored staff development days.

State and Fed call a moratorium on changes until they've tested them and examined the problems.

Clear direction from state that doesn't continue to change. We set systems in place that need to be redone each year with changing requirements.

Leave policies, expectations in place for a 5+ year period so what we learn can be used. Do not keep changing targets.

We [the state] need to institutionalize a process instead of changing every year.

Better coordination between USDOE, CDE, and state government.

Finally, as implied by some of the above comments, a few survey respondents did discuss some of the “political” factors that have affected educational decision-making at the state level. One person identified “truly informed legislature” as being something that would be helpful. Somewhat similarly, another complaint was, “Selected ‘experts’ and politicians are running the show and the involvement of practitioners is minimal. Hearings are not productive because minds are already made up.” Another respondent requested, “Resolve adversarial relationship between gov, SBE, CDE! Education by legislation is making us crazy!”

In the Next Chapter

As this chapter has shown, districts face many serious challenges in their implementation of standards-based accountability. The next chapter presents recommendations for improving accountability in ways that will help districts and schools enhance the achievement of California’s children.

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