

Chapter 12

Recommendations and Conclusions

Highlights of Recommendations

Overarching recommendation: Political leaders and educators need to step back, review where the California educational system is, align what already exists, and resist the temptation to move forward with new initiatives.

Recommendations on coherence and communication for accountability:

1. Alignment Inventory

An outside independent group should conduct a periodic “alignment inventory” of current state education policies.

2. Accountability Evaluation

The Governor and the Legislature should adequately fund the evaluation currently mandated by the PSAA in order to provide a comprehensive, rigorous look at the effects of the new accountability program.

3. Use of the World Wide Web

CDE and the State Board should continue to ramp up their use of the World Wide Web in communicating accountability policy to all stakeholders within the system, from district personnel to teachers to parents to the general public.

Recommendations on assessment for accountability:

4. Standards-Based Assessments

If content and performance standards are to be the drivers of the accountability system, standards-based assessments must be developed as quickly and carefully as possible.

5. Inclusion of Standards-Based Assessments in the Academic Performance Index

As soon as valid and reliable standards-based assessments are available, the Academic Performance Index (API) should include them.

6. Statewide Student Information System

The Governor and the Legislature should expedite and fully fund the development of the California School Information Services (CSIS) to facilitate the inclusion of reliable comprehensive measures, such as attendance and graduation rates, in the API.

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Highlights of Recommendations — continued

Recommendations on capacity building for accountability:

7. Professional Development for Teachers in Content Standards

Local school districts should ensure that professional development programs are aimed at building teacher knowledge and skills related to content standards.

8. Capacity Building for Accountability-Related Data Analysis

The Governor and the Legislature should fund capacity-building opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn about analyzing data to improve student achievement and school performance.

9. Clearinghouse of Exemplary Practices

The Governor and the Legislature should fund the development of a Clearinghouse of exemplary accountability practices developed by districts and schools for raising student achievement.

10. Inclusion of Accountability-Related Topics in Teacher Preparation Programs

The California State University and University of California teacher preparation programs should specifically address issues related to accountability.

The findings presented in this report indicate a high degree of buy-in and commitment to the concept of accountability up and down the educational ladder in California. District administrators, principals, and teachers know and accept the need to be accountable for improving student achievement, although they acknowledge that such a transition will be difficult. As one interviewed district official put it:

If we really believe we are a profession that can deliver the goods on student achievement, then we should be willing to accept rewards for success and consequences for failure. We should adopt a 'no excuses' philosophy. That will be difficult for a profession that has survived on excuses. We must be willing to accept responsibility regardless of the background of our students.

Moreover, the findings suggest that even in its early stages, standards-based accountability has strengthened the focus on student achievement, led to some improvement in curriculum and instructional practice, and enhanced the correspondence between curriculum and assessment — all of which are important components of efforts to improve student achievement. Overall, there is a sense of optimism about accountability's potential impact.

However, this optimism is a cautious one; despite the widespread support for the notion of accountability, many districts have experienced considerable frustration over various aspects of the implementation of a standards-based accountability system. In addition, while many of the essential pieces of a strong accountability system exist, they need to be tied together in a coherent, cohesive manner. This chapter discusses some of the ways in which the state accountability system could be strengthened to facilitate achievement of the ultimate goal — improved student performance.

Making the System More Coherent and Clearly Communicated at All Levels

For accountability to be effective, it must be systemic and coherent in nature. It is not enough for individual pieces of accountability to be present — they must reinforce and align with one another. Much more work is needed in California before such an accountability system is complete and leads to improved student performance in a way that is consistent with state academic standards.

The full-blown accountability system described by the study’s conceptual framework (see Chapter 3) requires a high degree of clarity and coordination of a large number of important components. All components are interrelated, reinforce each other, and are essential if accountability is to work. Only when they work in concert do they form a complete accountability system that is geared toward one end: improving student performance according to the state’s expectations of what students should know and be able to do.

To have such an effect, state content standards must be aligned with local standards, which must in turn be aligned with performance standards. Curriculum frameworks, assessments, instructional materials, professional development, and even teacher preparation programs all must be consistent with the standards. These and other components must be appropriately aligned throughout the system — all the way from the policymakers in Sacramento to each classroom teacher. In California, however, many of these elements have not as yet been fully developed, nor are they coordinated with one another. Furthermore, the loose coupling between state policy and local implementation by teachers poses a significant challenge to the effectiveness of the accountability system.

Clear communication and consistent messages about accountability at all levels of the educational system — from the state to the district to the school to the classroom — would increase the positive impact of accountability on student performance.

Critical to making the system more coherent at all levels is clear communication. The public and those at the local level would benefit from a clearer understanding of what accountability *is*, how it is supposed to work, what its components are, and how the components are interrelated. In particular, clear communications about what is expected must reach the level of the classroom for accountability to help raise student achievement.

Study findings, however, suggest that communication about accountability becomes increasingly diluted (or even worse, becomes increasingly muddled) from the pinnacle of the system (the state) to the foundation of the system (the classroom). In addition, very few districts appear to have a consistent local vision of accountability. In many cases, districts' notions of accountability had not filtered much beyond district staff. Principals often had different notions of what accountability required, and teachers either had no awareness or a different concept of the accountability process.

This disjuncture occurred not only vertically within the communication chain, i.e. between district personnel, the school principal, and teachers, but often horizontally, within the same schools. The end result of all this static in the system is that teachers, who bear the most responsibility for day-to-day implementation of accountability policies, are not getting the information they need. Or the information they receive about new policies appears contradictory to the purpose of existing reforms that they are still required to implement.

For example, local standards adopted at the encouragement of the state were subsequently supplanted by state-adopted standards a year later. Locally determined methods for combining multiple assessment measures that were mandated by the state one year were subjected to new state guidelines the following year. The standards-based accountability system that relied on multiple measures survived only one year before being superseded by the Academic Performance Index — an indicator currently based on a single norm-referenced test, the SAT-9, not as yet aligned with state content standards.

In short, those closest to the learners, teachers, need to *understand* the purpose and how to implement new policies. At the same time, they must have some degree of *confidence* that those at the top are carefully weighing and considering how well all these different policies work in tandem at the classroom level to improve standards-based student performance.

Greater stability in policy at the state level would facilitate the implementation of accountability at the local level. If policy changes are necessary, they should be based on evidence collected from those who are most affected, namely local administrators, educators, and students.

In an analysis of why North Carolina and Texas have shown the greatest sustained gains in student achievement this decade, Grissmer and Flanagan (1998) find that a central reason is

that both these states have maintained consistent, stable reform policies over time. California, on the other hand, has frequently changed direction, adopting one reform after the next without allowing sufficient time to fully implement or evaluate any — much to the frustration of district personnel.

As countless others have pointed out, education in California would benefit from the uniting of its current splintered accountability efforts; policy directives currently stem from the California Department of Education, the Governor’s office, the Legislature, and the State Board of Education. There needs to be a systematic review of existing policies and practices that have implications for accountability, and redundant and conflicting policies and procedures should be streamlined or eliminated. If California is to have an accountability system that enhances student achievement in the right direction, it must continue to strive for a standards-based, stable, and consistent approach, and send clear signals to districts and schools.

For the most part, California should “stay the course” with developing the existing components of its accountability infrastructure: standards, assessment, and a system of interventions, rewards, and sanctions. However, no approach is perfect from the start. Modifications may be necessary to rectify unintended consequences and ensure the system is meeting its primary objective. The caveat is that *any changes should be well-informed by systematically collected evidence from the local level about what is working or not working and why.*

Recommendations on Coherence and Communication for Accountability

1. Alignment Inventory

An outside independent group should conduct a periodic “alignment inventory” of current state education policies.

On a regular basis, although not necessarily annually, an outside independent group should examine the status of development and the degree of coherence among the several legislatively-mandated components of the current accountability system. This review would include a *horizontal* analysis of key state policies, such as PSAA (SB X1), STAR (AB 265), High School Exit Exam (SB X2), and the various other state curriculum and instruction and professional development initiatives. A *vertical* analysis, examining how well such policies are communicated and implemented from the state, to districts, to schools, to the classroom level should also be part of this inventory. Such an inventory should be informed through a combination of sources, including testimonials

at public hearings and evaluation data. The appointment of the outside body should be one of the first charges to the Accountability unit within CDE. The independent group should report its findings on an ongoing, regular basis to CDE and to the State Board of Education, the Legislature, and the Governor.

2. Accountability Evaluation

The Governor and the Legislature should adequately fund the evaluation currently mandated by the PSAA in order to provide a comprehensive, rigorous look at the effects of the new accountability program.

The evaluation of the PSAA would serve as an important source of information on how well accountability policies are understood, implemented, and used to facilitate change in classroom teaching and to improve student outcomes in directions that are desirable. Adequately funded, the evaluation could help ensure the availability of rigorous and generalizable information to inform policymakers about any modifications necessary to the existing accountability system. The evaluation should pay close attention to matters of equity, such as the impact of the accountability system on student subgroup populations and on schools in a wide range of settings.

3. Use of the World Wide Web

CDE and the State Board should continue to ramp up their use of the World Wide Web in communicating accountability policy to all stakeholders within the system, from district personnel to teachers to parents to the general public.

Since the enactment of the PSAA, the Web has served as an invaluable communication resource. Further development and resources should be spent on updating and making more comprehensive the PSAA and STAR portions of the CDE Web site. The “alignment inventory” could also be housed on the CDE Web site as a way of providing local districts and educators with the “big picture” perspective on the status, interrelationship, and alignment of various components of the state’s accountability, assessment, and standards policies. In addition, some state and district resources should be focused on ensuring that teachers are familiar with the Web site, have easy access to it, and use it routinely.

The Direction of Assessment Needs Immediate Attention

Assessments for accountability purposes should measure student progress toward content standards; if they do not, they will divert attention away from content standards.

Ideally, in a completely articulated standards-based accountability system, schools should focus on teaching curriculum based on content standards, and assessments should merely be a measure of how well students have mastered the standards. In reality, however, although many districts believe in their adopted content standards and want to be able to teach to them, their focus has moved to “teaching to the test” — specifically the state-mandated SAT-9 — rather than on teaching to the standards. The findings of this evaluation clearly demonstrate that, as a mandatory, high-stakes test, the SAT-9 exerts considerable influence at the school and classroom level, often driving curriculum and instruction practices to a much greater extent than the content standards *per se*.

This is not surprising, given the state’s emphasis on assessment. And were the SAT-9 fully aligned with the content standards, the emphasis on the test might help bring about the desired effect of student mastery of the standards. Yet there are serious concerns about the extent to which the SAT-9, even with its augmented sections, is aligned with the standards. Thus, as a measure of student progress toward mastery of standards, this instrument, at least in its current form, is incomplete. Even should scores on the SAT-9 rise significantly over the next few years, an important question would be whether the rise is truly indicative of the type of student improvement desired.

A standards-based accountability system must, by definition, be driven by content standards. Assessments for accountability purposes should be considered only as a means of ensuring that the content standards are the focus of instruction, and they can only do so if they are aligned with the content standards.

Recommendations on Assessment for Accountability

4. Standards-Based Assessments

If content and performance standards are to be the drivers of the accountability system, standards-based assessments must be developed as quickly and carefully as possible.

It is essential that assessments used for accountability purposes, whether the augmented SAT-9 or a matrix test, reflect the state standards. The Governor and the Legislature should provide adequate resources to develop such standards-based assessments as quickly as possible without jeopardizing their validity and reliability. The development of the standards-based assessments should include the input of educators, and, when completed, the assessments should be carefully field-tested.

5. Inclusion of Standards-Based Assessments in the Academic Performance Index

As soon as valid and reliable standards-based assessments are available, the Academic Performance Index (API) should include them.

As the development of the API proceeds, the addition of other valid and reliable measures will help ensure that schools are not being ranked based only on one, narrow indicator of performance — at present, the basic-skills test items of the SAT-9. As with other accountability components, the critical variable is resources; to do this quickly without compromising quality will be expensive. Cutting corners to limit the amount of money spent or extending the timeline risks having a state accountability system that is driven by an indicator of performance that is not consistent with state standards or a comprehensive definition of school performance.

6. Statewide Student Information System

The Governor and the Legislature should expedite and fully fund the development of the California School Information Services (CSIS) to facilitate the inclusion of reliable comprehensive measures, such as attendance and graduation rates, in the API.

Such a statewide student information system would benefit all districts, but smaller districts in particular, by providing the infrastructure necessary to collect reliable data on attendance and graduation rates, to track students who change schools, and so on. Although expensive initially, it is likely that a statewide data system would actually be more cost-effective than the current approach, in which individual districts struggle to design their own systems. In the short term, as the system is being developed, the state should provide additional support, such as an optional data service funded through a combination of state and local contributions, to small and medium-sized districts.

Capacity-Building is Critical to the Overall Success of Accountability

Accountability measures should be accompanied by capacity-building activities, such as professional development for teachers on teaching to content standards and for teachers and administrators on using data to improve instruction.

While a set of strong, standards-aligned assessments would go a long way toward improving instruction and student performance in the desired directions, they would be bolstered by additional capacity-building activities, such as the provision of substantive professional development opportunities. In order to successfully implement accountability, both principals and teachers need to understand how to teach to content standards and how to use assessment data to inform classroom practices. These skills are not traditionally taught in teacher certification programs, so many teachers and principals are forced to acquire them on the fly or not at all.

As reported in Chapter 6, a number of teachers are either unaware of district content standards or have not actively revised their teaching to incorporate them. Therefore, it is clear that extensive professional development on using content standards is necessary. While most districts do offer some professional development on content standards, the current offerings appear limited. For instance, the evaluation found that roughly 75 percent of surveyed districts require less than three days of professional development related to content standards in a given year, and about 20 percent require *less than one day*. For some teachers, incorporating content standards will necessitate a profound change in teaching. A day, or even three days, will not be sufficient to effect such an important transition. Current state-level efforts to link professional development to content standards are clearly needed, and their continued existence should be encouraged. Additional support and resources for this professional development would be invaluable in moving California toward high standards for all students.

In addition to knowledge and skills about aligning instruction with content standards, teachers also need appropriate tools and resources for their efforts to be successful. In particular, they need curriculum materials that are aligned with the content standards. Again, the importance of a system in which multiple components — content standards, professional development, assessment, and curriculum materials — are aligned in a coherent and cohesive fashion cannot be emphasized enough.

Another area requiring significant capacity-building attention is the analysis and use of data. (See Chapters 8 and 11.) Professional development around the use of data for people at every level of the system — district administrators, school administrators, and teachers — is necessary for accountability to have its maximal impact. Many district officials report that

they are not confident that their teachers or principals have the skills to use data, and many commented on a lack of resources (such as a statewide student data system) as well. The use of test results to modify instructional practices is rarely taught in great detail in current teacher and administrator certification programs, and existing professional development opportunities, again, appear limited. The use of data to improve instruction — and ultimately improve student achievement — is a resource of tremendous potential value that, as yet, has largely been untapped.

These issues will only become more prominent as the PSAA takes hold. In particular, the new, complex formulas used for the API will require unprecedented levels of understanding among multiple stakeholders if they are appropriately to employ the formulas and interpret their implications. Moreover, the implications of using test results to determine rewards and sanctions must be fully understood by state-, district-, and school-level personnel, as well as by the public.

Putting into place a high-stakes accountability system is an immensely complex process requiring sophisticated knowledge, skills, and resources at both the state and local levels. Moving from the state of knowledge and skills that now exists will require added emphasis on professional development and other capacity-building tools and resources, such as technical assistance and other forms of support.

Recommendations on Capacity Building for Accountability

7. Professional Development for Teachers in Content Standards

Local school districts should ensure that professional development programs are aimed at building teacher knowledge and skills related to content standards.

These programs should be adequately funded and sustained over time; district priorities for professional development might need to be examined. In addition, the Governor and the Legislature should ensure that existing professional development programs aimed at building teacher knowledge and skills around content standards are adequately funded. Finally, teachers must have adequate time to participate in these opportunities. Accountability will become an empty shell if teachers are unaware of how to use in their teaching the content standards that underlie it.

8. Capacity Building for Accountability-Related Data Analysis

The Governor and the Legislature should fund capacity-building opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn about analyzing data to improve student achievement and school performance.

CDE should serve as a broker for these services and provide statewide uniformity and quality control for them (which is mandatory for these efforts). The county offices and superintendents should serve as regional resources for this training.

9. Clearinghouse of Exemplary Practices

The Governor and the Legislature should fund the development of a Clearinghouse of exemplary accountability practices developed by districts and schools for raising student achievement.

The Clearinghouse, which would be accessible through the Web, would feature information about practices from districts that have shown a successful grasp of implementing accountability at the local level. Through the Clearinghouse, districts and schools would be able to find out about “best practices” that were successful in settings and with student populations similar to their own.

10. Inclusion of Accountability-Related Topics in Teacher Preparation Programs

The California State University and University of California teacher preparation programs should specifically address issues related to accountability.

These issues include teaching to content standards and using data from accountability mechanisms to improve instruction.

Conclusion

At its current stage of development, the concept of standards-based accountability enjoys considerable support in California as a reform strategy. However, the sense of optimism about its effectiveness is jarred by the reality of implementation. Accountability has proven to be a complicated task and that complexity is exacerbated by the compressed time frame in which it has been implemented. As one district Superintendent put it, “We are training for a marathon and asked to do 100-yard sprints!” The early timing of this evaluation in the long-term development process cannot be emphasized enough. It will be several years before a fully developed accountability system can be expected to have widespread, positive impact.

The recommendations generated from this evaluation are few in number, but all are important. They have implications and responsibilities for all the actors in education in California: the State Board of Education, the Governor, the Legislature, local districts, county offices of education, Superintendents, and the CSU and UC teacher education programs. Some of the activities mentioned in the recommendations are already underway, but accountability brings a heightened emphasis to them.

The overarching recommendation from this report is the following:

Step Back, Review, and Align

Political leaders and educators need to step back, review where the California educational system is, align what already exists, and resist the temptation to move forward with new initiatives.

The authors of this report believe that attention to the issues raised by this evaluation will help bring about a coherent, cohesive accountability system that can help improve the achievement of all of California’s children.