Chapter 2
Context for This Evaluation

Overview

California's evolution toward creating a standards-based accountability system is complex and ongoing. This complicated history, summarized in this chapter, provides a critical context for understanding the findings and perspectives presented in subsequent chapters.

Just as this evaluation was beginning, California was at the threshold of embarking on an ambitious accountability agenda. The call for greater accountability in education has been growing for several years, propelled by several overlapping and interrelated initiatives at federal, state, and local levels.

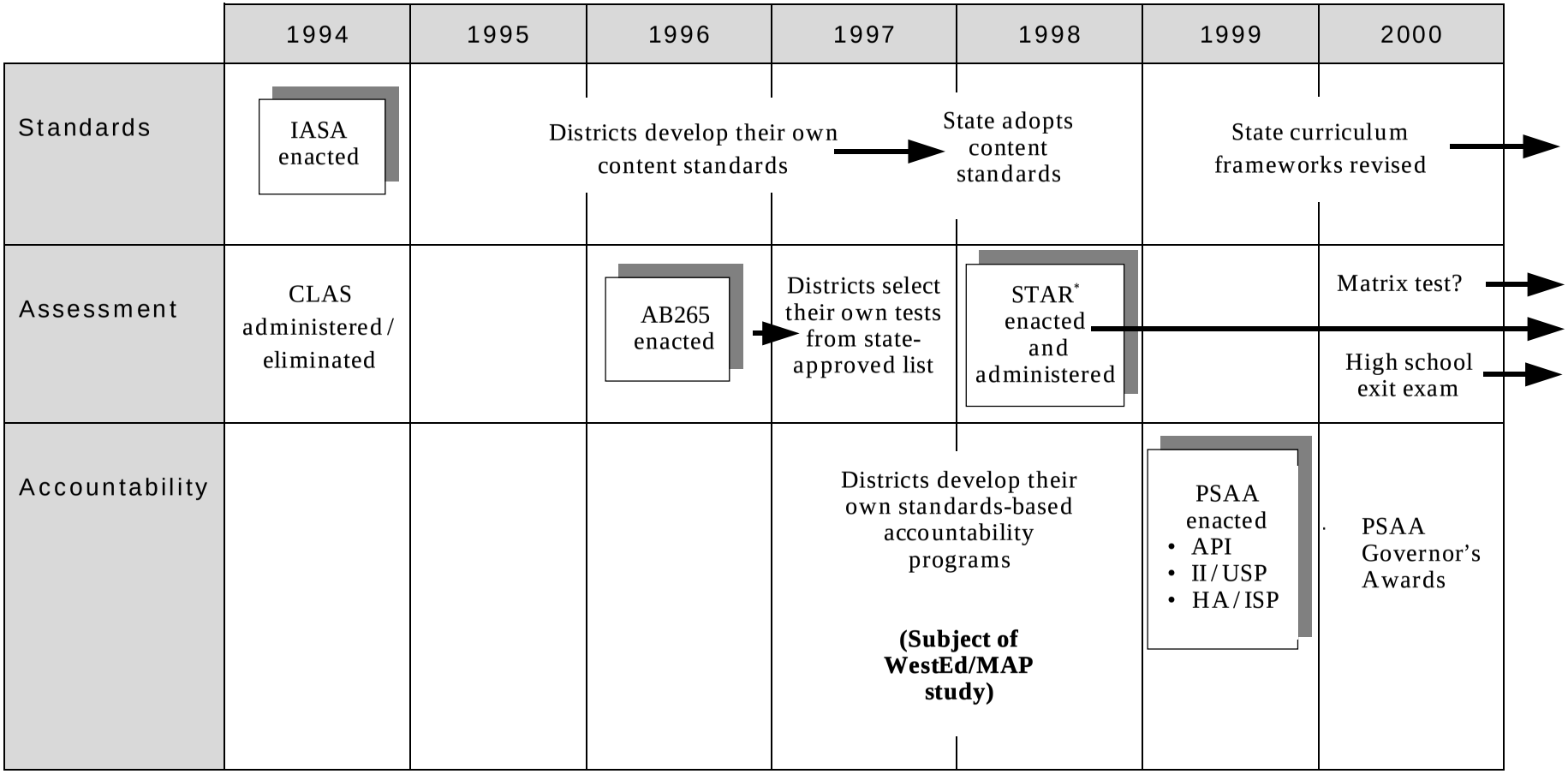
At the federal level, national leaders in the early 1990s called on states to create a voluntary system of standards. Laws passed by Congress, such as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, promoted the establishment of standards-based assistance and performance goals for schools serving low-income and other special-needs students. These federal initiatives encouraged states, including California, to continue their efforts to create statewide infrastructures of aligned standards and assessments to guide district and school improvement. This approach was commonly referred to as systemic reform (O'Day & Smith, 1993).

Some states went a few steps beyond creating state standards and assessments. Kentucky, Texas, North Carolina, and Maryland, for example, initiated high-stakes testing tied to rewards and sanctions programs designed to provide schools with incentives to improve performance results (Elmore, Abelmann, & Fuhrmann, 1996).

At the local level, large urban districts across the country, most notably Chicago and Philadelphia, pursued similar approaches to turning around chronically low-performing schools in the mid 1990s. Likewise, in the late 1990s, a handful of California districts, including some of its largest urban districts, were at varying stages of implementing incentive-based accountability plans that included sanctions.

In April of 1999, California legislators and Governor Gray Davis passed their version of a high-stakes, incentives-based accountability system, the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA). Unprecedented, the law signals the first time that schools will be publicly ranked based on a performance index with some schools facing serious consequences for continued poor performance and others receiving rewards for demonstrating progress.

Figure 2.1
Timeline of Accountability in California



* Single state test (SAT-9) for all school districts.

The Evolution of Standards and Accountability System at the State Level: 1994–1999

California's Early Experience Filled with False Starts. Nationwide, states have spent the latter half of the past decade constructing a state framework for improving schools: setting standards, establishing compatible tests, building educator capacity through professional development, and, in fewer instances, outlining a series of incentives for schools in reaching new standards (CCSSO, 1998; ECS, 1997). Similar to the experiences of other states, California's construction of such a standards-based accountability infrastructure has been slow, incremental, and non-sequential — that is, not all components are developed in concert with each other or in a logically linear way (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997; District & School Support Division, CDE, 1998). Competing or conflicting mandates, sometimes the result of turnover in gubernatorial and legislative leadership, have often thwarted coherent and continuous reform. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 11, this situation has led to mixed messages, frustrating and lowering the morale of districts and school personnel.

First Attempt at Performance-Based Testing Abandoned. In the early 1990s, California was championed by some as having a prototypical "systemic" or standards-driven education system (O'Day & Smith, 1993). But by the mid-90s, California's reputation as trailblazer in this area had suffered some serious setbacks. Most significant was the demise of the state's first performance-based assessment system, the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS), specifically designed to measure students' mastery of curriculum laid out in state frameworks. In 1994, after just one year, the test was abandoned for a combination of political, technical, and ideological reasons (Kirst & Mazzeo, 1996).

State Calls for Creation of State Standards and a Voluntary Assessment Program. In 1995, policymakers resumed efforts to create a statewide system of standards, curriculum, and assessments. During that year, the state enacted the California Assessment of Academic Achievement Act (AB 265). That law established the Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards, charged with developing "rigorous content and performance standards" for Kindergarten and grades 1–12.

AB 265 also provided districts with incentive funding to participate in a voluntary, locally administered testing program. Under this program, districts were eligible to receive funding for administering their own tests as long as the tests were selected from a state-approved list. Considered transitional in nature, this testing program was to operate until state content and performance standards were adopted and a standards-based test could be developed.

After extensive deliberation and debate, content standards were adopted by the State Board of Education close to schedule between November 1997 and July 1998. The extent to which

districts have adopted the state standards, or have developed their own local standards that are aligned with the state standards, is discussed in Chapter 6.

Status of Standards-Based Assessments in Flux. While progress has been made in the adoption of state content standards, progress on statewide performance standards and a standards-based test has been slow. Originally mandated for completion by this year, that target date for the development of state performance standards is currently being reconsidered by the legislature. Performance standards are viewed by some as critical to the development of a standards-based assessment system.

Also in flux is the development of the standards-based California Assessment of Applied Academic Skills (CAAAS), referred to as the "matrix test," authorized as part of AB 265. It is supposed to provide policymakers with an in-depth view of how well students perform across the breadth and depth of the state's academic standards. The test will not be administered to all students — only grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 will be tested in specified content areas.

A complicating factor in the development of this standards-based test was the somewhat sudden enactment of a new testing program (SB 376) in 1997, the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Concerned by the lack of a statewide, comparable measure of academic performance for schools and districts that could report individual scores for all students, former Governor Pete Wilson and legislators jumped ahead with STAR to address these issues.

New Statewide Assessment System Replaces Voluntary Local Testing Program. STAR, which replaced the transitional voluntary local testing program authorized under AB 265, requires all districts to administer the same nationally normed, "off-the-shelf," basic-skills, standardized test. The test selected as the centerpiece of the STAR program was the SAT-9 (Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition, Form T), published by Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement. Under the STAR program, virtually all students are tested every spring in grades 2–11, including students with limited English proficiency.

The program, now entering its third year of administration, has a second component — an augmentation that is designed to be keyed to the state standards with multiple-choice, standards-related items. However, the full augmentation for all grades in all subject matter areas may not be completed for several years.

STAR also has a third component, designed to address English language development issues. Although all students must take the SAT-9 regardless of their English-speaking ability, students who are non-English speaking must also be tested in their native language if they have been enrolled in California schools for up to a year and a test is available in that

language. Currently the Spanish Assessment of Basic Education, Second Edition (SABE/2) is the only non-English test authorized to be used for this purpose.

The norm-referenced SAT-9 portion of STAR is now the linchpin of the state's new accountability law, PSAA. Until other indicators of academic performance are deemed valid and reliable, the SAT-9 is the sole indicator currently being used in an index that will help to rank schools' performance and determine their eligibility for an intervention and rewards program.

Unclear is whether attaching high stakes to such a test may drive teachers to "drill and practice" techniques on a narrow subset of skills or eventually lead to a stronger focus on standards-based skill development. These fears were expressed by district and school personnel in surveys and interviews, as discussed in Chapter 7. Another concern is the future and role of the previously mandated (AB 265) standards-based matrix test. In October 1999, the State Board of Education voted to delay, perhaps indefinitely, the issuance of the contract to develop the assessment.

Evolution of Locally Developed, Standard-Based Accountability Program: 1995–1999

While California state policymakers spent the latter half of the 1990s deliberating over the direction and design of a standards-based accountability framework, many local districts had moved forward with the implementation of their own locally developed accountability plans. The impetus for these locally developed initiatives stemmed from several sources.

One push for standards came from districts and schools themselves. A handful of districts and schools created standards and aligned assessments from scratch. Throughout the mid-90s, a number of districts and schools joined increasingly popular reform networks (e.g., Coalition of Essential Schools, Success for All, and the New Standards Project), many of which promoted school improvement models that embraced elements of standards-based reform. Another set of districts in large urban areas, which faced a persistent achievement gap between high- and low-performing schools, went even further, creating accountability mechanisms tied to standards and assessments.

CDE-Led Initiatives. CDE also encouraged the development of a standards-based accountability program. In a program called the Challenge Initiative, initiated by the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Delaine Eastin, a network of districts was launched in 1995. In exchange for greater flexibility (e.g., CDE supported districts who asked for waivers), Challenge districts were supposed to implement a comprehensive program that included setting high standards, developing accountability systems to measure student

performance, and reporting district progress toward specific growth targets. As of November of 1997, 57 districts and 632 schools were part of the Challenge Initiative.

Federally Influenced Initiatives. Perhaps most influential in prompting standards-based accountability at the local level were the requirements associated with the federal government's largest K–12 education program, IASA. That law, passed in 1994, called on states to develop a standards-based approach to monitoring the performance of Title I schools and for identifying low-performing Title I schools in need of improvement.

Accordingly, CDE included in their IASA state plan to the U.S. Department of Education a new, locally developed, Standards-Based Accountability System. That program, which began in the 1997–98 school year, required participating districts to develop standards for all students, to use reliable and valid multiple measures of assessment, and to disaggregate results by student group.

The Standards-Based Accountability System was largely designed as a reporting mechanism for CDE. In short, districts with Title I schools had to submit in their Consolidated Application for Funding Categorical Aid Programs, Part II, information about the status of their standards-based accountability plans and school level reports of student achievement. (The relevant pages of the Consolidated Application are included in the Appendix.) Districts due to participate in the state's Coordinated Compliance Review (a program monitoring process) and schools applying for special Distinguished School or National Blue Ribbon awards status also were expected to submit this information to CDE. To support districts in their efforts to meet new requirements, CDE issued extensive memoranda and offered trainings on elements of standards-based accountability, with a special emphasis on how to combine multiple measures to determine student proficiency in meeting standards (McKenna, 1997 & 1998; Fausset, 1998).

The implementation and impact of this locally targeted, reporting-centered Standards-Based Accountability System were to constitute the primary focus of this evaluation. However, due to the passage of a sweeping new state accountability program (PSAA), districts were inclined to want to comment on the far-reaching implications of this new law on their local reform efforts.

The State Adds Interventions and Incentives in a New Statewide Accountability Program: 1999

Locally Developed Programs Were Already Underway When the State Passed Its Accountability Initiative. Chronologically, some districts' efforts preceded state efforts to create standards-based accountability systems. In particular, some districts were grappling with adopting

content and performance standards by the time the state adopted standards in late 1997/early 1998 and were experimenting with multiple assessment measures when STAR was administered for the first time in 1998.

Likewise, a handful of districts were already moving forward with incentives-based accountability plans, when a legislatively created (SB 1570), broad-based advisory committee was issuing recommendations to policymakers about the need for a state interventions and rewards system. The committee's report, *Steering By Results* (Office of Policy & Evaluation, CDE, 1997), then served as the basis for bills in the next two legislative sessions. The first legislative proposal was passed by the legislature in 1998, but was vetoed by then-Governor Pete Wilson because it was perceived as not having enough teeth.

New Elements Added to Complete California's Accountability System. In 1999, the legislature and newly elected Governor Gray Davis succeeded in the enactment of the second legislative proposal, SBX1, the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA). PSAA called for the creation of three basic components: 1) an index to rank the performance of schools, 2) an assistance and intervention program for schools who fall below expectations, and 3) a rewards program for schools who exceed them. The law also mandated the creation of a broad-based advisory group to guide implementation decisions and an ongoing evaluation of the law's impact.

With the passage of this new law, California followed the cue of a growing number of other states that are now using interventions and rewards programs for schools that fail, meet, or exceed performance expectations (Edwards, 1999). For the first time in the state's history, public schools are operating under a high-stakes testing and accountability system that defines a sequence of events and consequences for schools that continue to fall below expectations. The hope is that such a system will force schools to focus on improving academic results — thereby raising the performance of all students.

While the law is fairly specific about what happens to schools when they fail to meet expectations, many complicated implementation details are still undecided and are currently the source of deliberation and debate at the state level. Chief among them are issues pertaining to the design of the Academic Performance Index (API) — the primary mechanism to be used in ranking schools and measuring their performance growth over time.

Of particular uncertainty is the composition of the API. Initially the law called for multiple indicators including the results of the augmented portions of STAR, the "matrix" standards-based test, and student and school personnel attendance rates. However, such indicators are either still under development or have not demonstrated reliability or validity and are unlikely to be part of the index for at least a couple of years.

As such, the API currently consists of the norm-referenced STAR test as the sole criterion for performance. For districts, which have devoted the last few years to developing multiple-measures for performance, a narrowly based index seems to conflict with prior efforts. This issue was raised by many district and school personnel, as discussed in Chapter 7.

Another key part of the new system is a program designed to assist and intervene when schools fail to show improvement, called the Immediate Intervention / Underperforming Schools Program (II / USP). This program, which allows schools to volunteer (or in some cases, to be randomly selected) to participate, provides school improvement funds and the assistance of an external evaluator who works in concert with a community-school team. If growth targets are not met in twelve months following the implementation of a school improvement plan, local interventions, possibly including reassignment of school staff, will take place. If no substantial progress is made by the second year, state interventions including the takeover of the governance of the school by the state Superintendent of Instruction or some other entity may occur.

Accountability in California Still a Work in Progress — Impact May Not Be Seen for Several Years

In summary, California's experience with state-mandated accountability has just begun. Unclear is how the new state framework for accountability will work in relation to efforts already underway at the local level. Will it eclipse them? Will it complement them? Another uncertainty is whether a high-stakes testing and accountability system will bring about desired results. Are higher test scores on a basic-skills test all that is expected? What is an accurate measure or assessment of whether the state is making progress in teaching all students state content standards? How long will it take before the state has an aligned standards-based accountability system and what will happen in the interim?

Although the groundwork for a statewide system of standards has been laid, how well the state's assessment and accountability system will act as a lever for inducing districts and schools to implement such standards is still a question. Questions regarding the new state system were beyond the scope of this evaluation, whose primary subject was the previous system. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this report remain relevant even in the changing context of state accountability and can help to shed light on the successes and challenges encountered in the implementation of the new system.

In the Next Chapter

In this chapter, the recent historical background of educational accountability in California has been traced. The next chapter returns to the theme of standards-based accountability by outlining the research background and detailing a generalized conceptual framework for accountability systems.

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