

Chapter 5

The Status of Local Accountability Systems

Highlights of Findings

Most districts are still in the early stages of developing their local standards-based accountability systems.

School districts are in various stages of developing their systems. Most, however, have only recently begun to put elements of an accountability system in place. The most common elements implemented to date are content standards and assessments. Rewards and interventions have rarely been implemented. Even districts with good accountability designs often have only just begun in “cascading” their system to the school and classroom level.

Development of accountability mechanisms is a long, sometimes messy process.

Districts typically seek wide participation in developing an accountability system. Such a development process is seen as iterative and ongoing. Some more-sophisticated districts have had such systems longer. Smaller and medium-sized districts have a more difficult time in implementation.

People hold varying views on what constitutes accountability, but many equate it with assessment.

Conceptions of accountability are often not uniform—even within the same district or school. Interviews revealed that accountability means different things to different people. Yet many district and school staff view the SAT-9 as the embodiment of district accountability, frequently underemphasizing the other components of accountability.

There is strong support for the concept of accountability—less so for the details of its implementation.

Most people, particularly at the district level, believe in the potential of accountability systems to raise student achievement. However, many administrators are concerned about the specifics of accountability system implementation.

Less than three years ago, the California Department of Education first directed California school districts to begin work on local standards-based accountability systems. Since that directive, some districts have made remarkable progress in designing systems, while others are still struggling over the first hurdles. There is widespread variation in how districts across the state have approached accountability, and an equal degree of variability in how far they have progressed in design and implementation.

For the purposes of this study, the overarching research question on the topic of accountability in general was:

At what stage or level are districts in planning and implementing their standards-based accountability systems?

Status of Accountability System Development

Districts were still developing their local standards-based accountability systems in the spring of 1999. Some components, such as content standards and assessment systems, were in place, but others, such as interventions and rewards, were missing.

A standards-based accountability system is a complex entity with multiple components, each of which takes time to plan and implement. Unsurprisingly, a majority of districts reported on the survey that they are still working on the development of their systems. Whereas 40.3 percent of district survey respondents reported that their districts do have standards-based accountability systems, over half (56.6 percent) reported that their systems are still “in development.”

The survey also asked respondents to indicate the level of implementation in their district of various components of accountability systems including content standards in English/language arts and mathematics, multiple assessment measures, alignment of assessments with content standards, reviews of school performance, intervention strategies, and rewards or incentives. For each item, respondents could choose from “not implemented,” “partially implemented,” “fully implemented for less than 2 years,” “fully implemented for more than 2 years,” and “don’t know.”

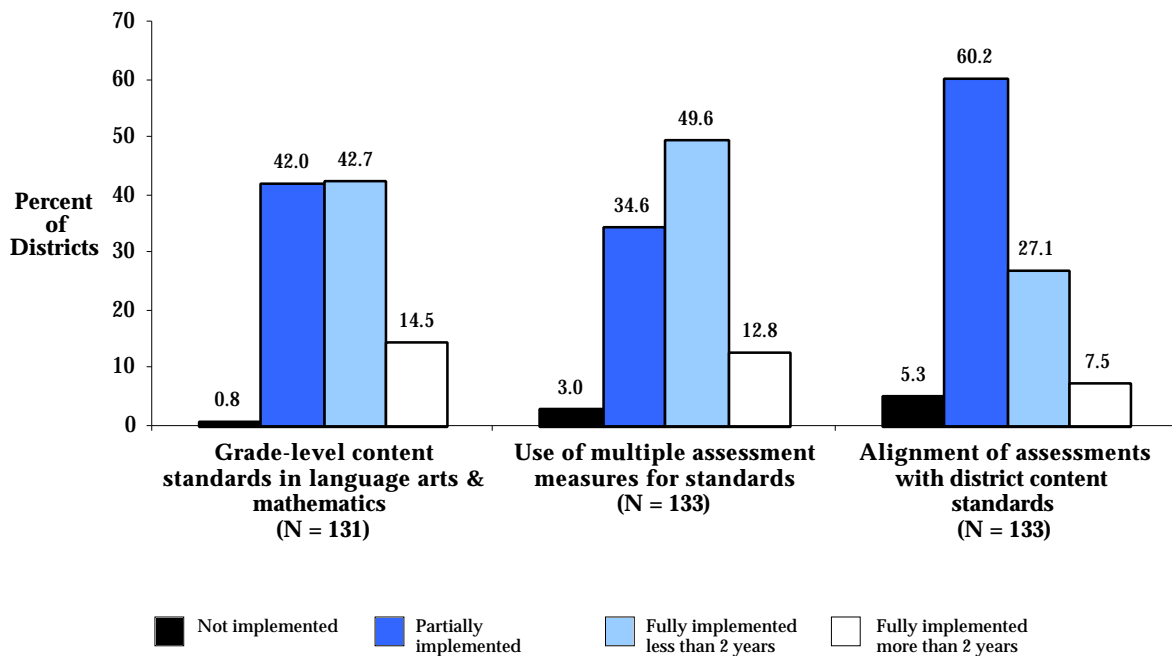
According to survey responses, as shown in Figure 5.1, two components that were most likely to have been “fully implemented” were grade-level content standards in English/language arts and mathematics (57.2 percent of districts) and the use of multiple assessment measures to determine whether students meet grade-level standards (62.4

percent of districts). As these were the two components most heavily emphasized by CDE for reporting on the Consolidated Application, it is probably not surprising that districts elected to begin with them.

Indeed, “begin with” is the appropriate phrasing: about three-quarters of the districts that reported that content standards and multiple measures were fully implemented said that the components had been fully implemented “for less than two years.”¹ Figure 5.1 shows that less than 15 percent of the responding districts had these two components in place for more than two years. Somewhat lagging behind these two components in implementation level was “alignment of assessments with district content standards,” which 60.2 percent of districts reported was “partially implemented.”

Figure 5.1

District Reporting of Implementation of Content Standards and Assessments



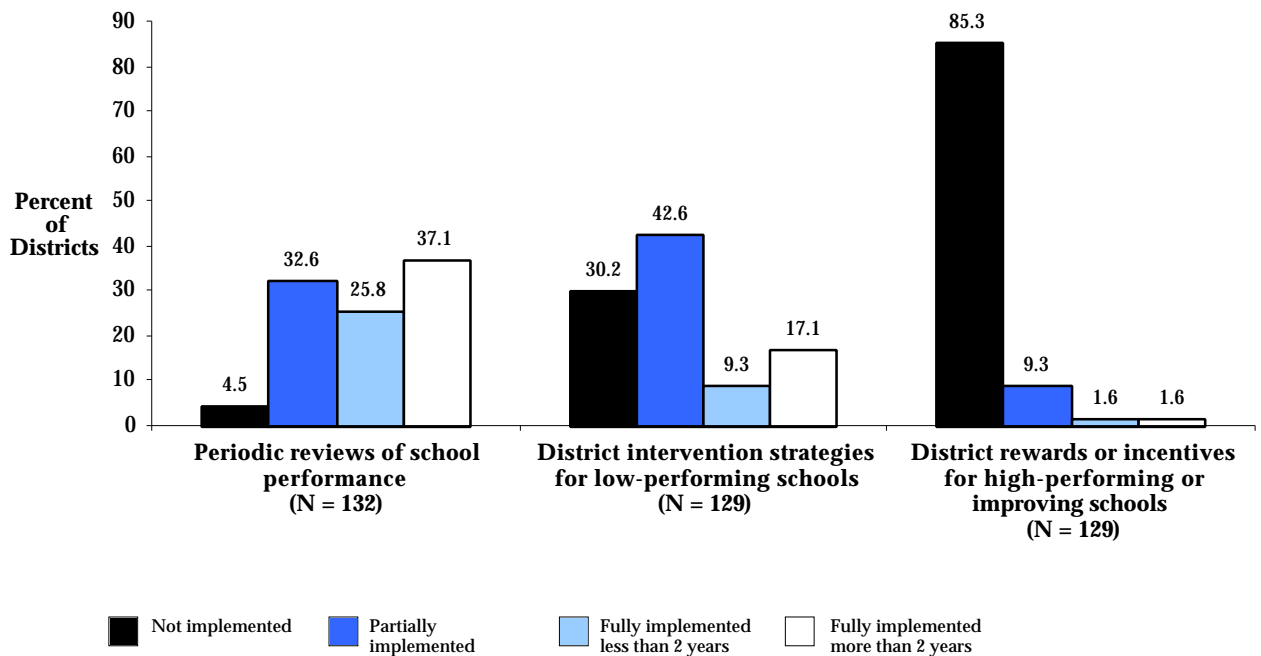
Other components of a local accountability system were less prevalent, as Figure 5.2 shows. For example, although a large number of districts reported having fully implemented periodic reviews of school performance (25.8 percent of districts for less than two years, and 37.1 percent for more than two years, for a total of 62.9 percent), districts do not appear to

¹ Content standards and assessment measures are further discussed in the following chapters.

have made use of these reviews for accountability purposes. For instance, about 30.2 percent of districts said that they had *not* implemented district intervention strategies for low-performing schools. Even more strikingly, 85.3 percent of districts said that they had not implemented district rewards or incentives for high-performing or improving schools.

Figure 5.2

District Reporting of Implementation of School Performance Accountability Components



NOTE: Additionally, "Don't know" was marked by 1 respondent for intervention strategies and by 3 respondents for rewards.

Thus, most districts do not appear to have in place a comprehensive system of interventions and rewards/incentives, often considered a key component of accountability. However, state-level directives in the standards-based accountability system did not focus on such a component, so districts' lack of attention to this area is unsurprising.² (See Chapter 9 for further discussion of consequences and incentives.)

² Even nationally, very few districts have their own interventions/rewards programs; where such programs exist, they are usually implemented at the state level, as California will now be doing under the Public Schools Accountability Act.

These data, taken as a whole, suggest that school districts in California were moving ahead in developing accountability systems.³ Over half of the districts had adopted content standards and implemented the use of multiple measures for grade-level standards. Most were still working on aligning assessments with content standards. This trend indicates that the instructional framework was in place for many districts. But the supporting structure to make the system work was not yet implemented: less than half of districts had interventions for low-performing schools or for students themselves. Only a small minority had district rewards for improving schools.

In sum, taking together the six data displays in Figures 5.1 and 5.2, researchers can almost pinpoint where California school districts were in terms of building accountability systems. They were aligning assessments with local content standards, having already adopted standards and developed a combination of assessments to measure student progress. In a number of senses, then, districts had “assessment systems.” But districts were only beginning to recognize as essential the school performance aspects of accountability systems. Although significant progress had been made, the survey results show that districts did not yet have standards-based “accountability systems” in the spring of 1999.

Interviews confirmed this impression. Administrators in several districts — even those considered “ahead of the curve” in terms of accountability — indicated in interviews that they did not think their districts have accountability *systems per se*, but only *pieces* of such systems. For most, the missing piece appears to be the consequences/rewards component — the “teeth” of accountability.

One Director of Research and Evaluation, for example, believes that his district has an assessment system, but not what he would consider to be an accountability system. The district has spent the past couple of years focusing on the development of assessments to measure achievement vis-à-vis district standards. Schools are given long-term goals and are provided with performance statistics and annual targets for improvement. However, there are no consequences for failing to meet targets and no “official” accountability system. The district did begin to talk about how to use the assessment system as part of a broader accountability system, but that conversation has mostly been tabled as new assessments are implemented and as new guidelines have been issued by the state.

In another district, a medium-sized district whose Accountability Plan in their Consolidated Application adhered closely to CDE guidelines, administrators who were interviewed said similarly that their district does not have an accountability system. They are developing pieces — an assessment system, a program to end social promotion — but they do not feel they have the staffing resources to implement “a true accountability system.”

³ The survey data are, of course, based on self-report, and they have not been systematically verified. Districts may have overestimated their accountability implementation.

Cross-District Snapshot: School-Level Descriptions of Accountability Systems

Interviews with school-level personnel — principals and teachers — did not focus on accountability *per se*. However, the principal interview protocol and the teacher interview protocol each contained one general question about accountability:

For principals: *These days there is a lot of emphasis placed on accountability. Have you felt that your school has been held accountable? If so, what have you been held accountable for and to whom? What impact, if any, has the state or district accountability system had on your school?*

For teachers: *These days there is a lot of talk about accountability. How would you describe your district's accountability system? Are there ways in which it influences your teaching?*

Accountability sometimes came up in other contexts as well during interviews. Although most responses focused on peoples' overall perceptions of and reactions to accountability policy, many straightforwardly described their district accountability systems — the measures used, the goals set, etc. — and the implications of these systems for their schools or themselves. Each of the following remarks (the first four from principals, the last two from teachers) originated in a different district:

The district holds us accountable because the state holds the district accountable. They check on us by surveying our scores on standardized tests. The central office staff comes and interviews us; the school district does the same. Teachers are asked to evaluate themselves. These are the various ways that we are held accountable.

The principal is accountable, and he should be. If our performance is not satisfactory I am the one who is held responsible. There are a number of accountability measures that are used by the district: portfolio products, parent surveys, tone on campus, and most notably the SAT-9. For those away from the classroom, the SAT-9 seems to carry the most weight. There is no articulated performance level, but the expectation is that scores will go up. I have a work plan for our school according to district needs and goals. In it I must project what I'm going to do to address those issues.

Our superintendent believes strongly in accountability. Our SAT-9 scores have been analyzed and, together with the standards, will drive the curriculum.

We are definitely held accountable by both the district and the state. The district expects our scores to go up. Next year we will use state standards and mesh them with the Standards 2000. The district does periodic school assessments, in SAT-9 format, based on the California standards. We score them here on campus and adjust our program according to the results.

I am held accountable through SAT-9 and district performance tasks that are given out once a year. Students have three practice performance tasks before the final.

[District accountability is based on] a triangulated assessment. Like, they have the performance assessment, and then they have, how they do in your class, and then there's the SAT-9. Those are the three accountability pieces, I think, that we're kind of held to. How they perform in the class, the SAT-9, and the performance assessment. And I think that's the way it's going; they want to have the three-piece type thing going on.

The Development and Implementation Process

The development of an accountability system can be a messy, lengthy process.

District interviews suggested that the process of developing an accountability system is far from quick and straightforward. In part, this may be because some districts are trying to use a community-based approach to development rather than a top-down approach. Districts report that various groups provide input, and much work is done by committees that have teachers, principals, and staff representatives. On the survey, 95.5 percent of districts indicated that teachers were involved in the development of the district accountability system, and 94 percent indicated that principals and other school administrators participated. 63.2 percent said that school board members had also been involved, and perhaps most strikingly of all, 58.6 percent said that parents had been involved. Nearly 25 percent indicated the involvement of business/community members. The extent of participation of any of these groups, however, is unknown, and it likely is highly variable from district to district.

The length of time that districts have been developing their accountability systems also seems quite variable, as does the amount of resources they have to work with. Interviews suggested that the more sophisticated districts tended to be “early adopters”; small rural districts tend to have the most difficult time developing full-blown accountability systems and have for the most part been late adopters. However, survey results indicate that it may be the medium-sized districts that have experienced the most difficulty in developing their accountability systems. Fifty percent of small-district respondents and 45 percent of large-district respondents reported that their district does have what they consider to be a standards-based accountability system, but only 27 percent of medium-sized districts gave this response.

Design of an accountability system is no guarantee of implementation, especially for districts with limited resources.

Interviews indicated that what an accountability system looks like on paper and what it looks like in practice may be radically different. Where there are wide disparities, it is usually because districts have been under immense time and personnel resource pressure. Again, this was particularly true of small, rural districts, which have extremely limited access to skilled personnel to implement complex accountability measures. It was also an issue for some medium-sized districts. The challenges districts face in implementing accountability systems will be discussed further in Chapter 11, “Challenges and Assistance.”

Changes within districts also sometimes interfere with implementation. This was particularly true in one district that was visited. This district, using a broad-based approach, designed a highly impressive accountability system, including consequences for schools. Just when the system's design had been finalized, top district leadership underwent a change; the new administration that came in had different priorities — and a different approach to accountability — than the previous one. Although the accountability system that was designed still exists on paper and may be implemented to some extent, its future is in question and it probably will not carry the force that was intended.

Title I schools are slightly ahead in implementing accountability measures.

About half of districts reported on the survey that the degree of accountability implementation was the same for Title I schools as for non-Title I schools. Approximately 18 percent of districts reported that Title I schools were “more advanced” or “ahead” of other schools in terms of accountability implementation. Very few districts reported the reverse. This is likely explainable by the longer existence of the requirements for Title I schools, as suggested by the following survey responses:

Title I schools are more sophisticated in their ability to analyze data for program evaluation due to a history of assessment being required. Subgroups within the Title I schools are better prepared to use data to drive program improvement than are non-Title I schools and subgroups unaccustomed to working with special programs.

In general, the Title I schools in our district have had experience in the implementation of student performance assessment for a longer period of time than most of the non-Title I schools. For this reason, although there is the same level of districtwide assessment at all schools, the Title I schools are probably more comfortable with the accountability process and have had a smoother transition into the state's accountability system.

Conceptions of Accountability

“Accountability” means different things to different people — even people in the same district or school.

The remarks of district staff, principals, and teachers about accountability reveal a wide variation in perceptions of and reactions to accountability. Within districts, and even within schools, there was often considerable inconsistency in interviewees' comments about accountability in their districts. At the district level, there were at least two districts in which administrators were clearly operating with different conceptions of “accountability.” In one

of these districts, the Director of Research and Evaluation said that the district had an assessment system but not an accountability system; a program specialist, on the other hand, seemed to feel that the district *does* have a functional accountability system.

In another district, the Superintendent's perception was that the district has a definite accountability plan and is ahead of most districts. The Director of Special Projects, however, implied that, although there is a lot going on in the district and many innovative improvements are taking place, the district does not really have an accountability system in place because there are no clear expectations for the actors and no consequences.

Interviewers found similar inconsistencies at the school level. For example, a principal in one school stated, "The factors that have the most influence over teacher practice are test scores and district accountability." A teacher in this school, however, replied, "There is none," when asked about accountability.

Even in districts that have well-articulated and well-thought-out accountability plans, awareness and understanding of these plans is highly variable. For example, in one district where interviews with district officials revealed an impressive accountability system, the principals and some teachers were clearly aware of this system, discussing it with depth and comprehension:

[From a principal] Accountability is in the principal's hands. The learning director and the vice-principal need to help. We'll divide up the faculty. We'll be in and out of their classrooms. We need to look at test scores and disaggregated data to determine the areas of need. Then teachers need to make a plan. The district is really into accountability. They have an accountability model. Every school has its own site plan and the accountability model is in it. The plan includes test scores and goals with plans for next year for raising scores and meeting goals. They'll have a lot of explaining to do if scores aren't raised.

[From a principal] Accountability begins with each teacher...Schoolwide we're accountable to the district with our school accountability program. The schools must submit accountability goals. We submitted five goals. Our goals included moving students from the 1st quartile to the 2nd quartile. I identified the target children and met with the teachers, the parents, and the students. We're waiting to see the effect it has had on the test scores.

[From a teacher] We have to have a site plan. In it, target students have been identified (students working below normed level, 40 something percent). The goal this year is to get them to within the national average. If we fail to meet our goal it will be higher next year...Our goal within the next 5-7 years is to have 90% on grade level based on the state test. We have no district assessment.

Other teachers in this district, however, seemed less aware of the system. "We don't really have accountability," commented one teacher. Another stated, "The principal puts it into

our hands to be accountable — to make sure [students are] learning. I don't know that the district holds us accountable. It's up to the teacher to hold the students accountable." A third teacher was aware that the district has an accountability plan but said that "there is no follow-through" — a possible explanation for the discrepancy between district views and teacher views.

Another possible explanation for discrepancies between various views of accountability is that "accountability" may have a different meaning for different people. This was clear in many teachers' responses to the general interview question about accountability. For example, many teachers interpreted "accountability" as being about holding *students* accountable — certainly one important aspect of accountability, but not generally the one considered primary in discussions of accountability *systems*. Each of the following comments comes from a teacher in a different district:

Social promotion is a lack of accountability. And having units count is a form of accountability.

I hold my students accountable for everything. And, you know, we have to work together as a team...I put in my half, they put in their half, and they know what's expected of them.

None [no accountability] — students with F's go on to high school anyway.

My first semester I was going strict 90, 80, 70...but the ESL woman flat out told me I was flunking too many kids. So I've incorporated more kinds of assessment. Things like participation and grades for their hands-on lessons.

It [accountability] is still unclear. Now summer school is voluntary and next year it will be mandatory. A lot is changing.

Like this last teacher, many other teachers admitted that they were unsure of what, exactly, their district's accountability policies were, especially given the changing or fragmented nature of accountability policy. One teacher talked about how accountability "is changing"; she mentioned that "The state, the district, and the teacher's union are all asking for some form of accountability." Another teacher commented, "The district is not clear on who is attributed with what accountability."

In addition, many people who were interviewed gave conflicting accounts of what the consequences for failing to show improvement would be; this will be further discussed in Chapter 9, "Consequences and Incentives."

Many people, especially teachers, equate accountability with assessment, particularly with the SAT-9.

Although, as discussed previously, accountability is a multifaceted concept involving such components as content standards; aligned curriculum, instruction, and professional development; and rewards and consequences, many people who were interviewed appear to interpret “accountability” as relating specifically to assessment, and particularly the SAT-9. This was especially true of teachers. Representative teacher responses to the general question about accountability included the following:

We are held accountable for our student scores on the SAT-9. The district expects scores to go up. It definitely influences my teaching. I make sure to cover everything on it before the test.

The district has given inservices about preparing our students with basic skills and test-taking strategies (for SAT-9 and [another district assessment]).

Don't know of one [an accountability system] other than test scores.

The SAT-9 test is our accountability system. They want to see the scores come up. We also have a district test that we give at the end of each year.

Well, throughout the year, we have some standardized tests...So, I think there's some accountability there, from the district's point of view.

I feel it [accountability] mainly through the district, when they see their test scores, whether or not they are at a certain percentile.

We've had many inservices here regarding testing: good job here or this is where we can improve. I went to an inservice last summer on improving and interpreting test scores.

We are accountable to the Stanford-9....There is a lot of encouragement to do well on the Stanford-9. I spent two whole weeks giving Stanford-9 practice tests. I was told we had to do it.

I know where we are, our scores are really low...

We have the SAT-9. We seem to base everything on it.

General Reactions to the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999

I'm aware of the changes the Governor has proposed. I like the accountability for schools and teachers. Who has a job that isn't accountable? We have to be careful how we measure though.

—Teacher in spring 1999

Although the main focus of this evaluation study was the Standards-Based Accountability System, some data were collected on the more recent Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999. The district-level interview protocol contained the question, “What concerns, if any, do you have about the new accountability system being implemented by the state?” Similarly, an open-ended survey question asked district administrators, “What is your opinion of the pending state legislation related to school accountability?” Responses are summarized below and in subsequent chapters where appropriate.

Districts’ overall reactions to the new accountability policy were varied. Most were quite positive; a few were very negative.

When the questionnaire was distributed, and when many districts completed it, the PSAA legislation had not yet been passed. Although some respondents did not appear to know exactly which legislation the question referred to or commented on various other pieces of legislation (e.g., High School Exit Exam, Peer Review), most did have comments on SB1X (now PSAA).

In general, respondents had some positive things to say about the new system. Some, in fact, were quite optimistic about its potential effects:

It's huge!...In the long run, it will be valuable and help our kids.

As the director of Categorical Programs, the accountability [of] SB1X is great! Educators need to see the relationship between teaching and learning. I hope that the Title I Reauthorization will accept California's accountability model.

In the long run, it should create more sense of responsibility for the staff, since they are being asked to be accountable for what is happening in the classroom.

We have more than 34 years of history with a standards-based accountability system which is very compatible with the direction the state is heading.

Mandated accountability will drive the district to review current programs and practices and make adjustments for improved student performance.

It would be feasible to implement the state model. Our local system will complement the state model and will also be an alternative stand-alone system to validate/verify findings based on the state model.

We support the move toward accountability and staff has participated on various committees on accountability.

This legislation should force some intensified efforts to provide greater support to the language development needs of our predominantly LEP population.

A small number of survey respondents, however, were extremely negative about the new accountability legislation. One person merely drew a “thumbs down” illustration; another wrote “awful, ill conceived, partly harmful.” Another respondent wrote only, “Very tired of being micromanaged,” and a respondent from a small, rural district said, “The plan does not work for us.”

Many district administrators support the philosophy behind the PSAA but have concerns about the details of implementation.

Many people suggested that they supported the philosophy behind the new legislation, but were concerned about some of the specifics or about how exactly it would be implemented. Some district administrators who were interviewed expressed comments along these lines. One Director of Research and Evaluation, for example, said that he sees a lot of good aspects in the new legislation and thinks that the state does need an accountability system. However, he continued, the system must be fair and that ultimately it has to make a difference at the site level, in the classroom. The Director of State and Federal Programs in a different district commented that he has no problem being held accountable as long as the system makes sense and is fair.

Several survey respondents voiced similar “conditionally positive” sentiments. For example:

Accountability is good — the way you achieve it is the question in the new accountability law.

State legislation has admirable goals, but is written with varying degrees of vagueness that make it difficult to plan and implement in ways that are not disruptive to schools. I feel we need to have goals and policies established and let districts be responsible for their accomplishment and have more local control. Our district is moving ahead in a professional manner and has no problem with being held accountable.

In favor of accountability but needs to be aligned to curriculum standards.

Pending state legislation regarding the use of SAT-9 data along with other performance indicators to rank California schools can make a positive difference for low-performing schools and students if sufficient support and appropriate interventions are provided for these sites and students.

Accountability is a positive direction for public education. Legislature must develop the API in such a manner that it can inform instructional practices and not be reduced to a compliance item!

We support State's fast-track actions, but would like to see multi-choice tests replaced somewhat by more performance-based assessments. Vermont's systems are intriguing.

It should be phased [in] for the students who have been in the system. Ultimately, if done well, using criterion versus normed assessments, it should be positive for all students.

Once the augmented test is improved, the pending legislation will be positive. It will drive change. ... However, the augmented test in its current configuration will not give us meaningful information.

Numerous districts offered more specificity about their concerns with the new legislation. Sections in subsequent chapters discuss the concerns that were raised most frequently.

In the Next Chapter

As the comments above indicate, most districts were cautiously optimistic about the PSAA. One reason for this optimism, as shown in the next chapter, was that most districts had experience with rigorous content standards for their students, one of the six key elements of accountability systems.