

Chapter 9

Consequences and Incentives

Highlights of Findings

Most districts established performance targets for schools, but their use and approach varied considerably by district.

Prior to the passage of the PSAA, districts were largely free to establish their own performance targets. Because Title I schools were required to do so, most did: 61.1 percent of district survey respondents reported having Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for Title I schools. The numbers of non-Title I schools with targets were, unsurprisingly, lower.

Only a few districts offered rewards for good performance, and most districts were only at the beginning stages of thinking through consequences for low performance.

Only 5.3 percent of districts said that they offered some form of incentives for high student performance or for improving performance. Among the few districts that were considering the use of consequences for low performance, there were different perspectives about their scope and implementation. Districts were more likely to report using some form of supportive intervention (e.g., assign experts to develop improvement plans) than they were to report implementing sanctions. In fact, only 1 respondent out of 127 indicated school reconstitution as an important district policy for schools with low performance.

Principals are more likely than teachers to be held accountable for performance at the school level.

State policymaker and district interviews both pointed to the principal as the primary person at the school level whose job was on the line for student performance. Holding teachers accountable was viewed as legally problematic or too complicated. Teachers interviewed were also unclear about whether they were subject to any consequences for low student performance. Students are being held increasingly accountable through policies against social promotion. Parents can be held accountable for student attendance but not for student achievement. If schools, teachers, and students are going to be held accountable, both districts and policymakers agree that they must be provided with certain levels of support.

(continues)

Highlights of Findings — continued

- **When given the opportunity, districts raised many concerns about the state’s new Academic Performance Index ranking system.**
Some districts believe rankings will be counterproductive, leading to lower teacher morale and an overreliance on STAR testing. They also believe that only schools with similar student populations should be compared. There was an overall concern that rankings and subsequent sanctions may exacerbate already-difficult conditions for the lowest performing schools, which also have the highest minority and low-SES populations. Finally, districts are concerned that the 5 percent growth rate per year is unrealistic and unfair.

By some definitions, the very heart of an educational accountability system is *consequences* (frequently referred to as “teeth”). Indeed, the very notion of educational “accountability” implies that someone, somewhere is being held accountable, or responsible, for student achievement and will face consequences if achievement does not rise. Thus, any discussion of accountability is incomplete if it does not include some mention of (a) performance targets for schools, the specific goals that are set for increased achievement, and (b) the consequences for reaching — or not reaching — these performance targets. This chapter discusses the types of performance targets that districts set (if any) and the consequences and incentives districts provide to encourage schools to reach targets.

For the purposes of this study, the overarching research questions on the topic of consequences and incentives were:

What types of performance targets do districts set for schools?

What types of incentives do districts provide for schools to meet their targets? What consequences do schools face if they do not meet the targets?

Performance Targets

Performance targets can take several forms. State policymakers believe the focus should be on student achievement and its growth over time.

Performance targets can be of numerous types. For example, performance targets can depend on a single measure (e.g., standardized test scores), or they can be composed of a

combination of multiple measures or indicators. The measures need not necessarily all be directly related to student achievement: measures such as attendance rates, graduation or drop-out rates, or LEP redesignation rates can also be included. State policymakers who were interviewed, however, concurred with one another that student achievement should be the primary focus, and they suggested that indicators of student achievement should include multiple measures of academic performance that are directly related to standards.

Performance targets can differ in other ways as well. For instance, all schools in a district can have the same target, or schools may have different targets depending on their baseline performance; targets can also be set for particular student subgroups within schools or within districts. In addition, targets can be an absolute standard of achievement, a goal for growth over time, or both (e.g., amount of growth needed each year to reach an absolute target in five years). State policymakers expressed the view that the main focus should be on growth (“value added” or change in scores), though they said that absolute scores also are important.

Under the Standards-Based Accountability System, districts were largely free to set their own performance targets, especially for non-Title I schools. A majority of districts did set targets, but a considerable minority did not.

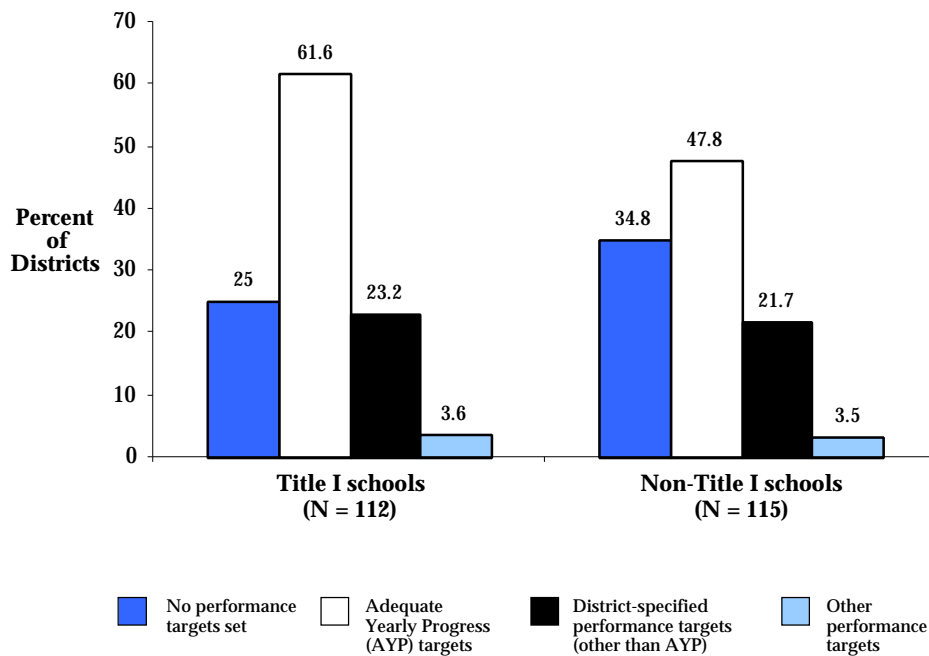
Prior to the passage of the Public Schools Accountability Act (1999), districts were largely free to set their own performance targets. Although the Standards-Based Accountability System instituted detailed student achievement reporting requirements for districts, the state was largely silent on the question of the level of student achievement to which schools should aspire in any given year. The exception was Title I schools, which, in order to meet federal IASA Title I requirements, were required to have some type of target or minimum level of achievement. For 1996–97 and 1997–98, this target was 40 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards in reading/language arts and mathematics. Districts were to identify Title I schools for Program Improvement if they did not meet this goal. (See Consolidated Application, p. 35, in Appendix.)

Moreover, the state set a general goal of at least 90 percent of students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards by the 2006–2007 school year. Schools identified for Program Improvement were required to remain in Program Improvement until they demonstrated “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward this 90 percent goal for two of three consecutive years. Most state documents on the topic, however, did not define “adequate yearly progress.” They also did not discuss interim performance targets for *non*-Title I schools.

Nevertheless, district survey responses indicated that the majority of districts did set some type of performance targets for their schools, as Figure 9.1 shows. For Title I schools, 61.6 percent of respondents said districts set AYP targets, and 23.2 percent of respondents reported other district-specified performance targets. For non-Title I schools, unsurprisingly

(given the lack of official requirements), the numbers were somewhat smaller; 47.8 percent of respondents reported AYP targets, and 21.7 percent reported district-specified performance targets (other than AYP). However, one-quarter of respondents said that their districts set no performance targets even for their Title I schools, and over one third of respondents (34.8%) reported no performance targets for non-Title I schools. Without performance goals, the concept of accountability has little meaning, as there is nothing to be held accountable *for*.

Figure 9.1
District Reporting of Performance Targets for Schools



The types of performance targets set by districts are highly variable.

As for the types of performance targets in use, 43.4 percent of district survey respondents checked “targets rise over time”; 38.5 percent checked “targets set for more than one measure or for a combination of measures (e.g., an index).”¹ In addition, 29.5 percent of

¹ On a different survey item, only 28.6 percent of respondents (36 of 126) reported that their district uses “an index or formula to rate the performance of schools in the district.” However, 97 districts then went on to answer the follow-up question, “If yes, what measures are part of this index?” This indicates some confusion over the use of the term “index.” As “standardized test scores,” “report card grades,” and “other student academic performance measures” were the items most frequently checked in the follow-up question, it seems likely that

respondents indicated “targets set for student subgroups (as well as for schools),” and 28.7 indicated “targets tailored to individual schools.”

District interviews yielded greater information about the types of performance targets some districts designate. Information from four districts, current as of when the interviews were conducted in the spring of 1999, is detailed here.

District A

In this small district, the state’s goal of 90 percent of students performing at grade level in 10 years became the district’s long-range goal. The district then calculated that meeting this long-range goal would necessitate an improvement of 8 percent per year in test scores. To try to make this level of improvement a reality, the district set up a system of standing committees for strategic planning, responsible for developing curriculum, assessment tools, and innovative programs. If the target is not met in any given year, the amount of improvement required the next year is increased.

District B

In District B, each school is given a data sheet containing its performance standards. With help from the district office, each school develops an individual school plan to help them focus on areas where they need improvement. Each school has individual annual performance targets, and there is an absolute standard of 90 percent mastery. To help schools, school plans are developed with goals and objectives laid out; district staff are assigned to help particular schools, and professional development is offered.

District C

Like District B, District C judged that it was important to develop reasonable, achievable goals tailored to individual school sites. They reasoned that, if they required the same achievement benchmarks for all schools, the ones close to the benchmarks would feel complacent and thus would not make changes, while the ones at the bottom would feel incapable of reaching the goals and also would not implement changes.

The district therefore requires each school to do a needs assessment based on a review of data and then to set three to five goals, at least one of which is related to academic achievement. The goals have to be measurable, and the schools also must develop an instructional plan for how to meet them. Ideally, the goals and the plan are developed collaboratively by the principal, teachers, and site council rather than by the principal in isolation, but this varies by site. Part of the idea behind the goals plan is to have all of the requirements a school faces (local, state, and federal) combined into one plan, so that the school doesn’t feel like it has to juggle multiple (and possibly conflicting) requirements.

many districts interpreted this item as being about what multiple measures their districts were employing to gauge *student* mastery of standards, not school performance.

The goals and plan are reviewed by the principal's supervisor, who must agree with them. Schools are given a three-year timeline for improvement, although progress is monitored each year. There are three ways to be successful in this system. One is to set goals and meet them. A second is to set goals, fully implement the methods agreed to and approved by management, but not reach the goals. (If the supervisor has agreed to the goals and methods, and agrees that there was full implementation, then the school is not considered responsible for failure and a different approach is tried.) A third way is if environmental factors out of the school's control interfere with the methods or make the initial goals unrealistic (such as a major change in a school's population).

At the time of the interviews with District C staff, the program was in its first year, and staff indicated that it was not yet clear how well it would work. The district was planning to look at how the schools did on the 1999 SAT-9 with regard to meeting their goals. (The SAT-9 scores had not yet been released when the interviews were conducted.) In future years, they plan to expand the range of measures they look at in evaluating the schools.

District D

District D designed an elaborate system of performance goals based on multiple indicators including standardized test scores, portfolio assessments, report card grades (soon to be standards-based), English language learner redesignation rates, and advanced course completion. The results for measures (e.g., subtests) within each indicator are designated as "above target," "meets target," or "below target," and are assigned numerical values accordingly. These values are then averaged to create a general rating for the indicator; for example, schools that have a high mean rating for any given indicator are considered to be "exemplary in meeting targets for the indicator." Finally, these ratings are used to determine performance for each school as a whole and for student subgroups. For instance, schools or subgroups that are "exemplary" on a majority of indicators and "successful" on the others are considered to have been "exemplary in meeting schoolwide/subgroup targets."

In addition, long-range district-wide goals are set for each indicator (10 years for some, 6 years for others). Interim (two-year) targets are then calculated for each school and subgroup by (a) determining the gap between the district goal and the school's or subgroup's baseline data and (b) calculating how much improvement will be needed every two years in order to reach the long-term goals.

The district is still in the early stages of implementing this system. In 1998, schools received their baseline data and set their targets. In the summer of 1999, schools were scheduled to receive "midpoint" data, showing how they were progressing toward their first two-year targets. Next year, in 2000, the plan was to look at whether schools met their targets. However, changes in state accountability (with the passage of the PSAA), as well as changes

within the district, cast some doubt on the future continuation of the system as designed. Nevertheless, district administrators who were interviewed did mention that this system was developed collaboratively by many stakeholders and had a high degree of buy-in, and thus that there was much reluctance to discard it or even to change it.

Incentives for Meeting Targets and Consequences for Not Meeting Them

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.

—District Administrator

Once performance targets are set, the question arises as to whether there will be any rewards for meeting or exceeding them and any consequences for failing to meet them. If so, what will the nature of these rewards or consequences be? Will consequences be supportive interventions to raise achievement or punitive actions to penalize insufficient or unsuccessful efforts? And who is the appropriate audience for the rewards and consequences? The district? Schools as a whole? Individual principals? Teachers? Students? This section and the following section discuss some of the ways that state policymakers and districts have addressed these questions.

Only a few districts offer rewards to schools for high or improved student performance.

On the matter of incentives, state policymakers who were interviewed were not particularly sanguine about the power of rewards (although the Legislature added significantly to rewards after interviews were completed). At the district level, only 7 out of 131 survey respondents (5.3%) said that their districts offer incentives or rewards to individual schools for high student performance or for improving performance.

Similarly, district interviews found little evidence that most districts were currently including incentives in their accountability plans, although a few districts were thinking about or planning the development of incentives systems. How these nascent rewards systems will be affected by the PSAA is an interesting question for further research.

In one district that was visited, none of the administrators who were interviewed discussed incentives for schools, but the district’s survey response and its accountability literature suggest that the district does, in fact, offer rewards to schools that have been “exemplary” or “successful” in meeting their targets. These rewards take such forms as money (raised by the district through contributions), recognition, and increased autonomy for the schools.

Administrators, principals, and teachers did not seem to have a common understanding of the consequences for low student performance — even within the same district.

The matter of consequences appears somewhat more complex. This complexity may stem, at least in part, from different people envisioning different things when they hear the word “consequences.” For example, some conjure up dire images of reconstitution and other punitive measures, whereas others may think of intervention strategies as being a type of consequence. As such, interviews yielded conflicting information over the extent to which districts have instituted consequences and the nature of these consequences.

In particular, district and school site visits revealed a lack of common understanding about the consequences of success or failure among teachers, principals, and even among district administrators. In one district, for example, two district administrators separately reported a different series of consequences that would likely occur if schools failed to meet their goals.

In another district, a district administrator reported that there were currently no consequences for not meeting targets, although she said that the district is planning to devise a system of interventions for low-performing schools. Principals in this district, however, believed that there were already consequences in place, although they had different perceptions about what these consequences entailed. One principal was not sure what the response would be to dropping scores, but she suspected that it would lead to “unwanted scrutiny from the district office.” She did not, however, think that the district would fire her or teachers. Another principal in the same district, on the other hand, thought she probably *would* be removed from her position if scores at her school did not rise.

In yet another district, a teacher suggested that the district was planning to implement a “big accountability program” in which “teachers’ jobs will be tied to student performance on the standardized test.” The principal at this teacher’s school, however, did not mention this; in fact, the principal stated that *he* would be the one held responsible if performance was not satisfactory. Interviews with district officials and reviews of district accountability documents also did not suggest that teachers would lose their jobs as a result of low student performance. Another teacher in the district had this to say about consequences:

If a school doesn't meet the standards there will be assistance. The district will come on-site to train teachers in order to improve student performance. If it still doesn't improve there will be changes imposed (administration, teaching assignments, closing of the site).

Districts that were instituting consequences for low performance were still in the very early stages of doing so.

At least part of the confusion may have been due to the fact that the implementation of consequences was still a very new thing or, in some cases, had not yet even officially begun. In all of these districts, the design stage (for consequences) was still underway at the time of the interviews, so the differing perceptions were not surprising. These cases do, however, highlight the need for explicitly stated, well-publicized, consistently applied consequences.

In another district that was still in the early stages of designing and implementing consequences, the adopted system proposes progressive consequences for schools with persistently low achievement; these consequences begin with intensive assistance and progress to reconstitution. District administrators who were interviewed, however, suggested that it was too soon to determine whether the district was committed to following through with the full range of proposed interventions.

In yet another district, administrators who were interviewed said that there were no formal or “direct” consequences for failure to meet the district’s annual improvement target, but, last year when the goal was not met, some changes were instituted. For one thing, schools scrambled to get the curriculum and assessments in line. District innovations also were implemented in response. These included intense tutoring programs, a twilight school (in which parents and children come together to an evening program so that children can see that adults continue to learn), and use of special education teachers as resource consultants to classroom teachers. In addition, the district invested heavily in technology and also instituted a training program to have 90 percent of teachers certified to teach LEP students.

Who Should Be Held Accountable and How?

We need to discuss what accountability really means. People do not lose jobs. Scores do get published. Accountability comes at the end, when students leave and go out into the world and the community. Not much impact in terms of teachers being fired and replaced. State or district — little to none.

—Principal

The complexity surrounding consequences can also be attributed to confusion or lack of agreement about the appropriate target of consequences. Even at the state level, although all policymakers who were interviewed agreed that an accountability system without consequences is “an empty shell,” they held differing views on who should be accountable.² Some, for example, emphasized holding districts accountable for the performance of their schools, while others wanted to hold schools — and principals, in particular — responsible for the performance of their students. Still others viewed accountability as a way of ultimately holding teachers accountable for the performance of their students, and several also discussed holding students and parents accountable. Further discussion of each of these groups follows.

Based on district interviews, many districts appear to hold the superintendent accountable at least to some degree.

Districts and Superintendents. Among state policymakers who viewed the district as the center of the accountability mechanism, districts were seen as directly responsible for the score of each and every school in their jurisdictions. Consequently, the ultimate sanction is to remove schools from their jurisdiction.

District administrators who were interviewed did not discuss the removal of schools from district jurisdiction as a possible consequence for low performance, but several did mention formal or informal consequences for district superintendents and their staff. Here are examples from five districts:

District A: The district superintendent holds himself personally responsible; consequences could entail replacement.

District B: Goals are written into the annual evaluation of the superintendent, and at the end of the year he submits a progress report to the School Board. District staff are similarly evaluated against agreed-upon goals. Consequences: the superintendent’s contract might not be renewed.

District C: The superintendent is held accountable for district effectiveness, measured by School Board perception, newspaper coverage, and parent complaints.

District D: The superintendent is accountable to the School Board for meeting objectives jointly developed with the Board. Consequences include loss of job.

² These interviews were conducted in early 1999, prior to the passage of the PSAA.

District E: The superintendent’s annual evaluation is tied to school performance. This filters down to the people supervised by the superintendent.

Although state policymakers stressed sanctions such as negative publicity and reconstitution for low-performing schools, districts were more likely to focus on supportive interventions.

Schools. Several state policymakers suggested that the school should be the center of the accountability mechanism. Among these individuals, there was wide agreement that consequences should vary based on the severity of the problem and the lack of progress in meeting goals. Appropriate sanctions, according to policymakers, range from negative publicity to the “death penalty,” i.e., reconstitution.

Reconstitution, however, was seldom mentioned by district administrators, either in interviews or on the survey. One district administrator who was interviewed did mention that the district could take over a site’s budgeting as an interim intervention, and that schools could face intervention teams, fiscal audits, budget control, or reconstitution. On the survey, only 1 respondent out of 127 checked “District reconstitutes schools (particularly if schools do not improve over time)” as one of the three most important policies or intervention strategies employed by the district with schools that demonstrate low academic performance. More frequent responses were:

- “Schools are assisted by district-appointed experts in formulating an improvement plan and goals.” (48.8 percent of respondents)
- “District tailors interventions to particular schools.” (38.6 percent of respondents)
- “Schools receive additional professional development opportunities.” (35.4 percent of respondents)
- “Schools consult with school community (e.g., teachers, parents, students).” (33.1 percent of respondents.)

It would appear, then, that most districts’ consequences for schools are not punitive in nature but rather are aimed at providing schools with support to improve student performance.

Districts are starting to hold principals accountable for student performance, although in many cases, this accountability remains somewhat informal or even hypothetical.

Principals. State policymakers who were interviewed said that sanctions for principals should range from publicity to loss of job. Some expressed concern that accountability may

be setting up principals as scapegoats for failure. Most agreed that additional rewards are needed to encourage productive principals to remain in their posts.

District administrators who were interviewed suggested that districts are just starting to hold principals accountable for school performance. As demonstrated by the following examples, nearly every district said that principals could, in theory, be removed from their positions for accountability reasons *per se*, but none actually had been removed as of the time of the interviews:

District A: Principals have goals and objectives set out in their individual school plans and could be moved or replaced, although this has not yet happened.

District B: Principals are accountable to the assistant superintendent of their division for meeting their school goals. The consequences of not meeting goals are still to be seen, according to one administrator who was interviewed. There is a three-year timeline for improvement, after which a principal would be transferred back to teaching if the goals are not met.

District C: Principals are accountable for ensuring that the district-adopted curriculum and standards are in place and taught in all classrooms. (It seemed, however, that this was mostly reviewed in an informal way.) Principals can be terminated, and one recently was, though not only for accountability reasons.

District D: Principals are accountable to grade level directors. Chronic underperformance could end in demotion of the principal.

District E: “There’s a great deal of principal accountability,” reported one administrator in this district. “Basically, it’s the principal’s head on the line,” she continued, although she also said that this is not a “formalized” system. Another administrator interviewed in this district also mentioned “high stakes” and “personal accountability” for principals, based on their personnel evaluations. However, it appeared that principals in this district were not being held accountable for student *achievement*, but rather for how effectively their schools were moving toward implementation of certain types of instructional *practices*. No principals had yet lost their jobs at the time of the interviews, but it was anticipated that some probably would in the summer of 1999.

At the school level, some principals who were interviewed indicated that they felt that they were being held accountable for school performance. For many, this seemed to be a general impression of an informal process, rather than concrete knowledge of an official district policy. A few, though, did mention formal processes for holding principals accountable.

One principal, for example, said that starting with the 1999–2000 school year, the extent to which schools meet projections of achievement in different areas — “everything from attendance to achievement in math and language arts to our redesignation rates of our ESL kids” — will be part of principals’ official evaluations. This principal, who was not from any of the five districts mentioned above, admitted to having somewhat mixed reactions about the new policy. “It’s kind of interesting,” she said, “I’m excited about looking at what the results are going to be, and I’m a little bit fearful at the same time.”

For most districts, holding teachers accountable for student performance is legally problematic or otherwise murky.

Teachers. Among state policymakers who were interviewed, teachers were widely seen as the most important component in a successful accountability system. Holding teachers formally accountable, however, appeared at least somewhat problematic from the point of view of most district administrators who were interviewed, largely for legal reasons.

For example, in one district, when the administrator being interviewed was asked about teacher accountability, he replied, “They have tenure.” Similarly, in another district, an administrator who was interviewed said that the district’s ability to use student performance in the evaluation of teachers is mostly precluded by law. Both of these administrators indicated that, as a result of these restrictions, teachers are not held responsible for the achievement of their students. However, one of them did go on to mention that persistent low achievement of students could lead to unsatisfactory employee appraisal ratings which over time could lead to discipline. The other administrator said that teachers are responsible for implementing the curriculum, although he did not know if there were any consequences for failing to do so.

In two other districts where district interviews occurred, administrators indicated that teachers are held accountable on an informal basis. In one of these districts, principals are held accountable, and a district official suggested that principal accountability filtered down to teacher accountability; when principals are accountable, she postulated, they will hold their teachers accountable. In the other district, administrators mentioned that principals are not “individually accountable”; there are consequences for school sites, but not for teachers specifically. However, teachers are accountable in a more informal sense, both “above to their principals” and “below to their students and parents,” to help attain school goals. In some district schools, one administrators reported, principals require teachers to set classroom goals.

In only one district did there appear to be well-defined accountability for teachers. One administrator in this district said that teacher evaluations are tied to standards, with classroom scores being compared across teachers. In theory, consequences could include dismissal, but this has not yet happened.

Among teachers who were interviewed, as discussed above, there were differing perceptions, even within districts, about the extent to which they would be held accountable. Several teachers admitted that they were uncertain about the extent to which they themselves, as teachers, were or would be held accountable for student performance. One teacher, when asked if there were “consequences” if students did not show mastery of standards, replied, “Well, I want to say yes, but I don’t know. I mean, I haven’t heard what they are.” Another teacher, when discussing accountability with regard to the SAT-9, stated, “I’m not very clear about how much I’m held accountable for that....I don’t know how much *I’m* held accountable for the SAT-9 scores.”

Some teachers suggested that in fact, there were no consequences tied to accountability. Both of the following remarks were made by teachers in one district about accountability in general:

Nothing is being done....There’s a greater awareness of what the [test] scores mean, but as far as accountability at a personal level, I don’t think there is any.

I think the accountability system is weak, talk is cheap, I really don’t know what the district’s accountability system is....I don’t see any accountability — it just sounds like there is.

Other teachers in this district, however, suggested that they did feel that they would personally be held accountable. One teacher, for example, stated, “ They put the blame on teachers. If someone scores poorly, it’s the teacher’s fault. So you be as thorough as you can.” Yet another teacher in this district said that she wasn’t aware of the district’s accountability structure at all.

Students are being held increasingly accountable for their performance, as policies designed to end social promotion gain force and summer school programs become more common.

Students. Many state policymakers who were interviewed suggested that unless there are consequences for students, little can be expected in terms of performance on tests. Ending social promotion, as legislated in 1998, was seen as a powerful incentive for students.

Somewhat surprisingly, only a few district administrators who were interviewed discussed the state’s social promotion legislation when talking about consequences for students. Others reported consequences for students that were similar to those contained in the legislation, but not in the context of the legislation. For example, administrators in one district said that students are accountable for meeting grade level standards. Possible consequences students face include summer programs, retention, transition programs

before high school, and no work permits granted. One administrator in this district, however, said that it was not yet clear how consistently these consequences would be applied. Another administrator reported that the district could end up retaining almost 50 percent of the district's students for not meeting standards.

Other districts' student accountability policies included the following:

District A: Students must meet proficiency requirements in math, reading, and writing in order to graduate. There may soon be promotion requirements from middle school to high school, and summer school programs have become "more intense."

District B: Students are accountable for meeting teachers' expectations for academic and behavioral performance. Consequences could include retention and discipline (ranging from suspension to expulsion).

District C: There are no student consequences yet. The district does, however, plan to determine a method for ending social promotion based on standards-based report cards. In addition, the district is just beginning to use scores to identify students in need of summer remediation or retention.

Parents can be held legally accountable for student attendance but not for student achievement. Districts are experimenting with ways to increase parental involvement.

Parents. Although state policymakers concurred that parents are an important unit of accountability, there was little agreement about the effectiveness or appropriateness of consequences for parents. Parents were regarded as "the hardest group to get at," and, while ending social promotion may be a lever for increasing parental involvement, policymakers were doubtful about its effectiveness in doing so.

Similar sentiments were expressed by district administrators who were interviewed. According to an administrator in one district, for example, a district committee felt there needed to be parental accountability, but they did not know how to attain it. The district concluded that there were few legal avenues available for holding parents accountable. They do have leverage over parents on welfare, in that welfare benefits can be reduced or eliminated altogether for parents with truant students. Enforcing this policy resulted in an unexpected additional 1,600 children attending district schools in 1998–99. However, there did not seem to be any similar policies or sanctions related to low student achievement. Moreover, since not all parents receive welfare benefits, the equity of such policies is somewhat suspect.

An almost identical policy was reported by officials in a different district. They said that parents are not directly accountable except for compliance with attendance laws. Parents of students who are chronically absent are subject to legal action, but there are no consequences for parents of students who fail academically.

In a third district, a district administrator mentioned that the district has a parent involvement office that helps schools design information and training for parents. Also, home-school compacts encourage parent participation. But, said this administrator, “there’s a limit to what you can do” where parents are concerned. She felt that the district accountability system tried to set a tone of valuing parent participation and accountability. At the same time, though, she warned against using parents as an excuse for low achievement.

If schools, teachers, and students are going to be held accountable for reaching certain goals, they must be provided with the levels of support necessary to achieve those goals.

Many discussions about accountability discuss the consequences that people will face if they do not achieve the goals that have been set. All too often, however, such discussions make little or no mention of what types of support and resources will be necessary to reach those goals. This issue came up in several interviews (both state and district) with respect to almost all of the different groups discussed above.

For example, some state policymakers who voiced a desire to hold schools accountable expressed concern that schools do not have sufficient control over resources to be held accountable appropriately. Several policymakers expressed agreement with the principle that schools should be allowed greater flexibility and freedom than currently exists from the constraints of federal, state, and even district policies. This sentiment was echoed by an administrator in one district where the accountability system puts principals’ jobs “on the line.” “Your head’s on the line,” she said, referring to principals, “but as a district we have to provide you with the support and the authority you need to do what we’re asking the principal to do.”

Moreover, some policymakers emphasized that the degree of support, including financial support, that schools receive from districts varies considerably. Even when schools are the focus of the accountability system, these policymakers suggested, districts must at least be held accountable for providing equal opportunity to learn to all students. Some felt that not enough attention is currently being given to this.

At the other end of the spectrum, several people who were interviewed discussed the need to provide support for *students*, particularly if students are going to be held accountable through social promotion policies. Some policymakers, for instance, were concerned that,

unless there is a strong commitment to intervention strategies, ending social promotion will not serve its intended purpose of improving student achievement.

Similarly, at the district level, one administrator commented, “The notion that we’re going to punish kids, and hold them over, when they haven’t had access to quality instruction, isn’t right.” She then mentioned that a district committee has been looking at ways to set up support systems for kids; last year they had an after-school reading program for grades 3 and 8 to support students who were not being successful. Another administrator in this same district also mentioned that students would not be held accountable for failing to meet achievement criteria if their school never offered the necessary support.

Rewards and Consequences in the Public Schools Accountability Act

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 (PSAA) introduced a statewide system of interventions and incentives for schools. All schools in the state are to be ranked based on the Academic Performance Index (API). Growth targets are then set using the 1999 value of the API as a baseline; for most schools, these targets are to be at least 5 percent growth annually.

Depending on where schools fall in the API ranking and on how their achievement changes from year to year, they may receive rewards or face interventions and sanctions. In the High Achieving/Improving Schools Program, monetary and non-monetary rewards (such as waivers) are to be given to schools showing high achievement or meeting or exceeding growth targets as measured by the API.

For low-performing schools, the PSAA created the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). In the first year of the program, 430 low-performing schools (as indicated by 1998 and 1999 STAR results) volunteered to take part in this program. In subsequent years, schools that fail to meet growth targets may volunteer or may be selected to participate in the II/USP, subject to funding.

In 1999–2000, 353 II/USP schools received planning grants of \$50,000 each to develop school action plans. These schools must hire external evaluators to coordinate the plans’ development. After the action plans are approved by local governing boards, reviewed by CDE, and approved by the State Board of Education, participating schools receive additional funding to implement the plans in the subsequent year. The implementation grants for these schools will be a minimum of \$50,000 for each school, up to approximately \$168 per pupil.

The other 77 II/USP schools in 1999–2000 are schools that have already completed the planning process and received federal grants of up to \$200 per pupil to implement improvement activities over the next three years.

Participating schools that do not meet their targets within 12 months after implementation will be subject to local sanctions, such as the removal of the principal. Those that do not meet their targets within two years after implementation will be subject to state interventions such as takeover by the state Superintendent of Instruction.

Although the details of all of these programs were just starting to emerge at the time the surveys and interviews for this study were conducted, many people did comment on them. Reactions are summarized below.

Some districts oppose the idea of ranking schools. They think it will be counterproductive, particularly given the basis for the ranking.

Many survey respondents expressed the view that ranking schools is of limited usefulness. One person wrote that “comparing schools seems counterproductive” but also acknowledged that “it is getting attention from educators.” Other survey comments echoed the concern about ranking:

Rank ordering of “ok to bad” will further damage morale and hinder progress.

Misleading to community members to see a “list” that might be misinterpreted to mean an absolute measure of quality; such comparisons in our small area will cause conflicts.

I feel ranking schools is defeating the goal to improve.

Ranking schools does not solve our problems with low-performing schools.

A couple of respondents indicated that their primary objection to the ranking was its reliance (at least in the early years) on SAT-9 scores³:

I think there is limited value in ranking schools when I believe those rankings will ultimately and perhaps exclusively depend on SAT-9 scores.

I am concerned with the state’s intention to rank schools based on STAR testing.

³ See also Chapter 7, “Assessment Measures.”

Many districts believe that the ranking should take into account schools' differing circumstances, particularly as related to socioeconomic status and language-minority populations.

Many survey respondents did not object to ranking schools *per se* but felt that it was important to take schools' circumstances into account in the ranking and to compare only similar schools. Numerous survey respondents made remarks about this:

No problem being accountable — just don't compare schools of high and low SES and high and low LEP counts.

Our lowest achieving schools are also our lowest socioeconomic. I hope bands for comparison of similar schools are developed.

Schools that have low SES (socioeconomic status) should not be compared with high SES when evaluating test scores.

Until the playing field is entirely even — funding (revenue limit vs. basic aid) I think the development of a performance index is not fair.

As a result of this district being in a low-income, high-poverty area, in the short term the district will compare very poorly with other areas of the state.

We are concerned that important factors (poverty, transiency, LEP numbers) will not be taken into account. We will be hoping that schools below 50th percentile (a terrible way to measure school success, by the way) are looked at for their growth.

In school-level interviews, a few principals also suggested that schools' circumstances should be taken into account in discussions of accountability and achievement (not necessarily with specific regard to the PS AA). For example, one principal of a low-performing school objected to blame being placed on the school for problems she felt were beyond the school's control, and she resented the expectation that the school could "fix" the problems. She commented, "The pressure is on the teachers and the schools, regardless of the circumstances these students and families are facing" (e.g., poverty, low parent education levels, limited English proficiency). She also stated, "These political pressures serve to make these families and students feel inadequate."

Disproportionate impact on schools with large language-minority or low-SES populations is another area of concern for districts. Some indicated that sanctions may even exacerbate existing problems for low-performing schools by increasing instability.

Another equity-related concern about the new legislation is about its effects on schools with low-SES or high-LEP populations. Several survey respondents expressed the view that these schools will be disproportionately affected by the PSAA:

One school (low SES) is affected more than other four (high SES)... LEP students disproportionately impacted.

The issue is resource allocation. With over 1,000,000 ELL students and over 25% of students in poverty, new legislation will disproportionately impact minority and poor students. CA needs to at least reach nationwide average on per pupil expenditures.

Some suggested that the impact of the PSAA on certain schools may not only be disproportionate, but could be adverse. In particular, some districts were extremely concerned that the sanctions for low-performing schools may actually exacerbate existing problems by causing staffing changes when what is most needed is stability:

I agree with the intent but the playing field is not level. We anticipate changes in administration at schools with high ELL populations due to schools not showing necessary growth. Thus, schools most needing stability will likely go through greatest change.

I have grave concerns about sanctions for low-performing schools. Our lowest performing schools tend to have the highest poverty rate, youngest least-experienced staff, etc. Sanctions will encourage the dedicated experienced teachers to transfer to higher-performing (higher socioeconomic) schools.

It [new legislation] will cause difficulties for low performing schools to keep effective teachers and administrators.

A district administrator who was interviewed also said she was concerned about “state sanctions for low-performing schools that don’t meet their target.”

Some districts object to the rewards and sanctions that are part of the new accountability policy.

Even apart from equity issues, a few survey respondents seemed to object to the inclusion of rewards and sanctions in the new system, as indicated by the following comments:

Sanctions and rewards should not be part of the picture.

The one [piece of legislation] of most concern relates to Rewards and Sanctions.

The sanctions and rewards will not bring out the best in people. They will manipulate the system.

Other survey respondents did not necessarily object to rewards and sanctions per se, but indicated concerns about the particular nature of some of the rewards and sanctions specified in the new legislation. Some, for example, took issue with the relative weight given to sanctions versus rewards:

The most recent legislation is draconian since the punitive measures far outweigh the positive reinforcement strategies.

I feel [the new accountability legislation] is misguided and overly punitive.

Funding for intervention (promotion/retention) will be helpful. Cash incentives detrimental.

Other comments were more general. For example, one person wrote, “Great concern about performance index and treatment of principals.”

The goal of five percent growth per year strikes some people as being unrealistic or unfair.

Sanctions for failing to meet targets appear even more threatening when the targets do not seem achievable — another concern held by many districts. In both interviews and survey comments, several people raised questions about the goal of raising achievement by five percent each year. The Assistant to the Superintendent in one district mentioned in an interview that the district thinks they will be unable to reach what they see as the state’s “unrealistically high goals.” They expect that improvement will not be constant, but instead will come in spurts, and that requiring something like five percent improvement each year is not feasible.

Similarly, a Program Specialist in a different district expressed concerns about “unrealistic timelines” for improvement; she said her experience had been that improvement is not linear and that “you have to leave room for plateaus in achievement.” A different administrator in this same district acknowledged that, for political reasons, the state needs to set high standards, but he felt that the standards needed to be reachable. He said that the “five percent rule” in the new legislation could cause as many as 70 percent of the district’s schools to fail, depending on how it is interpreted. He does not want to see 60 to 70 percent of schools failing to meet the standards, and he is worried that the new system will be unfair to children.

The five percent growth goal even worries schools that already have high achievement. One principal of a high-performing school commented in an interview, “If you’re high achieving, how much growth are you going to show?” Similarly, one survey respondent felt that the new legislation was “poorly crafted.” The comment continued, “We have schools at the 85th percentile who will be designated as ‘poor performing’ if they do not go up 5 percent a year.”

In the Next Chapter

Prior to the PSAA, districts' practices related to using consequences and incentives as a part of an accountability system were varied. But this does not mean that accountability was without impact at the local level. The impact of standards-based accountability systems in California school districts is discussed in the next chapter.