

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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### **State Accountability Policy and Our Special Focus on High Schools**

American public education faces increasing pressure to demonstrate the competence of all of its students as they progress through the grades and, especially, as students exit their high schools. In response, policymakers are developing sophisticated accountability and support systems in efforts to steer schools toward improved performance. These systems, as illustrated in Figure 1, combine a set of academic goals and standards with a battery of incentives to focus and motivate organizational and curricular change. In addition, these systems often provide resources to support local reform efforts. Although accountability systems such as these are not new to the educational policy environment, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in January, 2002, ensures that accountability systems focused on academic outcomes will continue for some time to come. This report shines a spotlight on high schools, which bring students to the last benchmarks in the K–12 system, and analyzes the response of teachers, school administrators, and the district administrators to these policies.

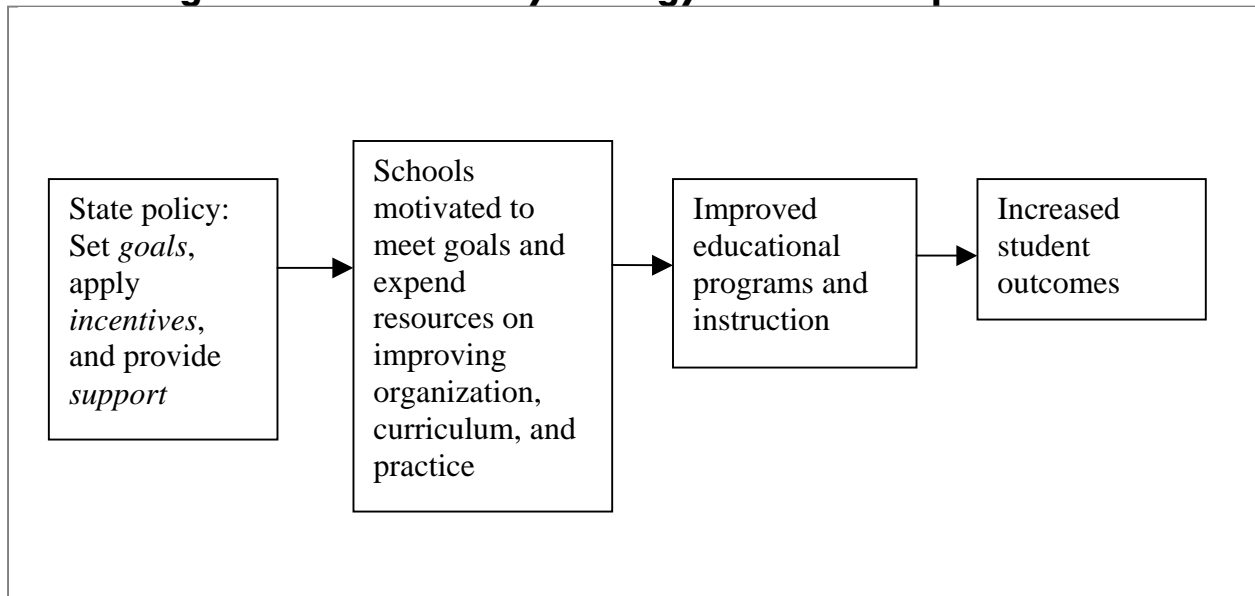
The importance of accountability in local, state and national policy over the past 15 years has led researchers to examine the impact of accountability on student achievement in a variety of contexts.

Although not all studies prove gains in student performance due to accountability (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000), many studies suggest that these policies can and often do have an impact on the performance of students. For example, a RAND study analyzed National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gains of fourth and eighth graders attributed the performance gains to the states' high-stakes accountability systems (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). In another example, a recent Consortium for Policy

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**Figure 1. Accountability Strategy for School Improvement**



These studies, and other studies of effects, can only infer that changes have been made to the educational program within these schools. Many policy researchers argue that we must pay careful attention to the instructional and organizational changes that occur with accountability, as some logical consequences of the policy such as teaching to the test, strategic targeting of students, cheating on assessments, and narrowing curriculum potentially compromise the benefits of the policy (Darling-Hammond & Ascher, 1991; Education Commission of the States, 1998; Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Linn, 2000; McNeil, 2000). In this study we respond to these concerns by looking inside schools to see how accountability shaped the goals and improvement efforts described in high schools.

In this study we also give attention to the high school organization which, due to the age of the students served and to organizational complexity, is often viewed as more challenging to study than the elementary school. High schools confront

the challenge of working with adolescent students who express a great deal of agency in their schooling, which makes it difficult to separate the effect of students from the effect of their teachers or school. In addition, high schools tend to be larger organizations with many complex layers due to the specialized content focus and deeply held sense of professional autonomy held by high school teachers, making high schools very difficult to understand as a single organization. For these and other reasons, high schools have received less attention in the research community. However, high schools are of particular interest today in light of the emphasis accountability places on benchmarks and exit exams.

This report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) focuses squarely on strategies for instructional improvement in American high schools. Specifically, this study examines how high schools that perform below average incorporate their state's accountability goals into their own goals, identify their challenges, and search for strategies for instructional improvement. We

focus on how high schools of differing performance levels and contexts, residing in states with different forms of high-stakes accountability and support systems, identify, understand, and respond to the gap between their current levels of performance and external expectations for their performance.

## **Interpreting and Implementing: A Conceptual Framework of Accountability and School Context**

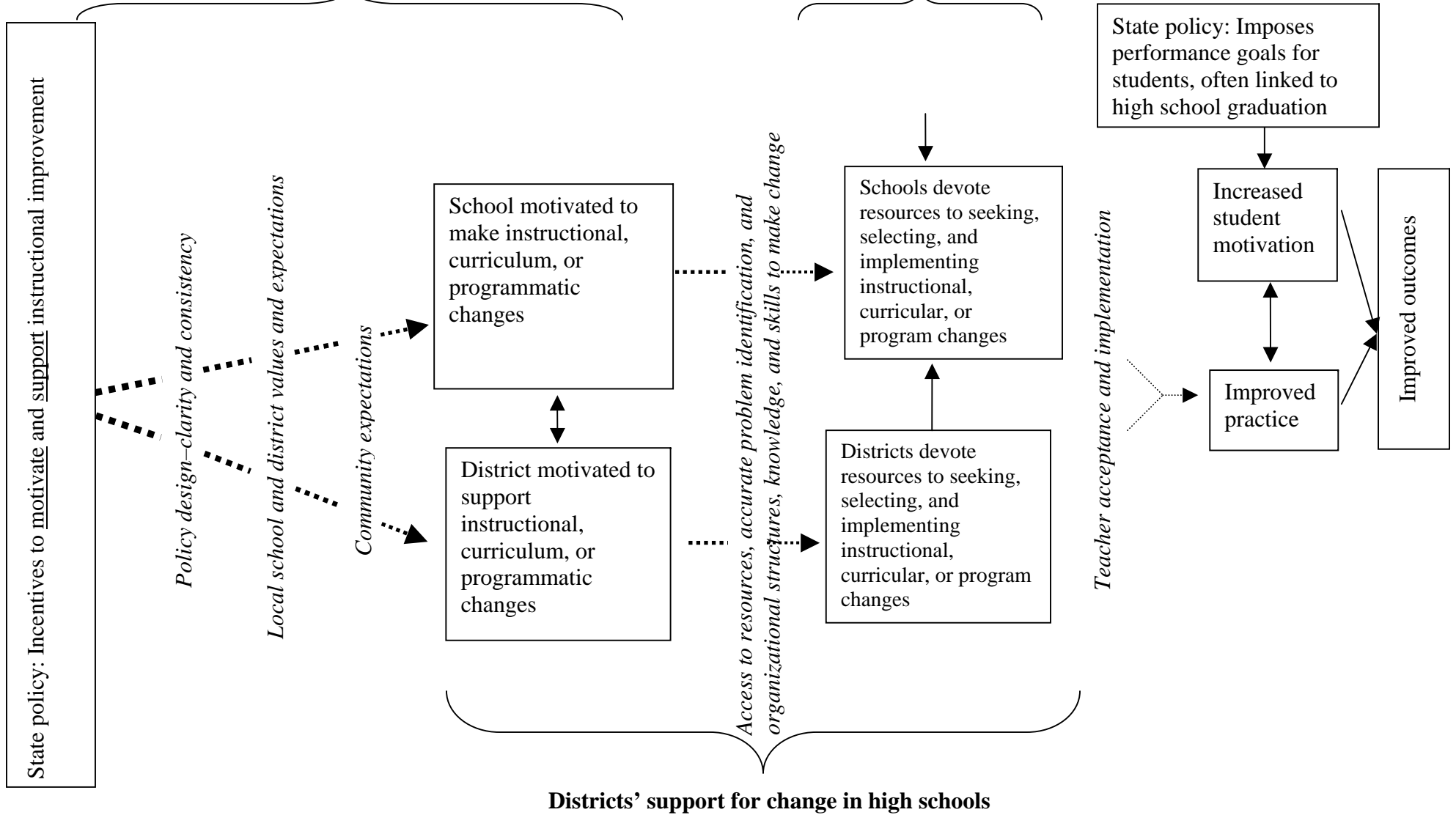
The theory of outcomes accountability and the assumptions embedded within accountability policies, like many state administered policies, faces considerable challenges in practice. The reality that carries these policies from paper into the schools is a complicated picture in which the state's message is interpreted through local values and expectations (McLaughlin, 1987). The school's response is then shaped by local interests and constrained by the school's ability to make change (Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Finally, as happens often in policy implementation, we can expect teachers and students to accept, challenge, and/or alter programmatic changes on the basis of their own expectation and motivation (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). The chapters in this report and the discussion of the framework, diagramed in Figure 2, of school response to accountability policy focus on the first two stages of policy implementation in which schools *interpret the state policy and become motivated* (or not motivated) to focus on the policy's goals and standards and when they focus their resources and

other support to *generate a response to the policy*. These chapters do not attempt to evaluate the impact of accountability on student outcomes. Instead we discuss the implementation of state accountability policies and the impact of these policies on the goals and activities of teachers, school administrators, and district administrators. As Hargrove (1983) explains, implementation is the extent to which the target of the policy "goes beyond compliance to incorporate the required action into the organizational routines of the implementing agencies" (p. 281).

**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of School Response to Accountability Policy**

**State policy is interpreted by local actors (school and district level)**

**School Response: Search, decision making, and strategy selection**



## The Acceptance and Interpretation of the Policy

The acceptance of the policy and appropriate interpretation of the policy by those at the school and district level is an important condition for the implementation of the policy at the local level. However, obtaining this condition is not a simple matter of announcing the goals and articulating sanctions. This process may take time and may not happen at all. Individuals in schools must hear and be compelled to acknowledge the policy and the expectations laid out in the policy at least amid, if not above, the chatter generated by the schools many stakeholders inside and outside the school. Teachers and administrators must then interpret, hopefully in concert, the policy and its components as intended by the state policy designers. While a great many issues influence the acceptance and interpretation of policies by policy targets, in the chapters that follow, the authors focus on two influences on policy interpretation: (a) elements of the policy design to make the policy clear, reliable, and stable and (b) the filtering of varied interests in the local context in interpreting the state's intentions and accommodating local interests.

Of the many aspects of the policy's design, clarity and stability of policy are of particular importance to the acceptance and interpretation of state accountability policy. Researchers of policy and policy implementation have continuously argued that policy clarity is very important in that it reduces the likelihood that policies will be

misinterpreted or that the policy targets will fail to implement the policy out of confusion (Baier, March, & Saetren, 1988; Hargrove, 1983; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Odden, 1991). Given that focusing educators' attention on specific performance targets and accountability standards is the centerpiece of this policy, clarity is of critical importance to accountability policies. Since the early days of outcomes accountability, states have had to negotiate the trade-off between varied and multiple assessment and measurement with the transparency of accountability. Many educators argue in favor of using multiple assessments that recognize multiple outcomes (e.g. achievement, discipline, and dropout) as well as accounting for growth and student subgroup performance. However, incorporating each of these elements into a performance measure leads to a complicated rubric for evaluating schools. Such a scaling technique that evaluates a set of outcomes and creates a composite score that makes statistical adjustments for reliability generates scores that are difficult for schools to predict on the basis of the performance reports they have at hand. In addition to clarity of performance goals, the policy must also demonstrate consistency and predictability in its incentive structure. Schools cannot be expected to respond to incentives if they do not know or understand the basis on which they will be delivered (Brooks, 2000). For example, we found that the performance bonuses offered to Pennsylvania schools were generally not a salient component of the accountability system. Few Pennsylvania teachers we spoke with commented on these rewards or

understood how they received these rewards.

Researchers observing accountability policy argue that alignment to standards with performance targets presents a significant change for schools (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), especially high schools, which have offered differentiated curriculum and whose teachers have exercised considerable autonomy for decades (Siskin, 2003). For schools to embark on the change expected by these policies, schools must be assured that the policy will last. The stability of policies and administrators' commitment to policies over time give the policy targets time to learn about and understand the policy and thereby increase the likelihood that the policy targets will see value in responding to the policy and engaging in the goals of the policy (Hargrove, 1983). The six states in our sample have had their policies in place for different lengths of time and have had different degrees of the change over the years. In this report, researchers comment on how the maturity of the state policy seemed to impact the response of schools we visited.

Beyond the elements of policy design, the goals and practices articulated by the school respondents reflected the influence of the local context including the values, beliefs, and expectations of local teachers and administrators as well as external expectations placed on schools. While the policy administrators may have control over the design of the policy and to some extent the stability of the policy over time, these policies enter local environments that vary across the region in which the policy is applied and that the policy administrators often have little control over (McLaughlin, 1987). These

local environments are vitally important to the acceptance and interpretation of the policy. The motivation of policy targets to accept the policy and its goals depends on how well their own assessment of what should be accomplished aligns with the expectations embedded in the policy's goals (Hatch, 1998; McLaughlin). Teachers who do not believe that the state assessment accurately reflects their students' skills or who do not think the standards reflect appropriate material for their students will be less motivated to adjust their lessons or curriculum to align with the assessment or standards. Even though the incentive structures built into accountability policies intend to force local interests into alignment with the policy goals, McLaughlin argues that these incentive structures confront very powerful local norms and values that can pose a substantial challenge to the policy when they do not align. These situations require a strong and long-term commitment by the state to the policy.

The local context, however, includes much more than the values and beliefs of individuals inside the school. A great number of educational stakeholders such as parents, local community members, business members, and educational organizations outside the school compete with each other and the states to influence local schools toward their agendas. Schools then filter these external interests through the values, expectations, and goals of teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. They also prioritize their goals and interests on the basis of the relative authority and influence of each of their stakeholders. Local agents position the goals embedded in the state accountability policy among the various

goals, according to the alignment of state the state board of education, and the influence gained through an incentive structure. The chapters that follow illustrate the competing interests present in the schools and the extent to which states' accountability goals and expectations focused attention in schools.

## Generating a Response

For accountability to impact the practice of teachers and the organization of schools, the policy must do more than focus teachers' and administrators' attention on the policy's goals. People in schools must now respond by devoting their own resources, pulling in outside resources, drawing from their districts, and utilizing any assistance offered through the state policy to seek, select, and implement changes in the school. The ability to generate a change response by organizations as well as the nature of change in schools is central to understanding the impact of accountability in schools. Of particular concern is the extent to which the pressure and focus provided by the policy combined with the local resources and interests lead to instructional and organizational changes that hold the potential to create long-term improvement in schools.

Unfortunately, a response that leads to long-term, consistent improvement is not automatic, even in cases in which the local teachers and administrators have acknowledged and incorporated the policy's goals into their own goals. Actions taken (or not taken) by schools in response to accountability will be shaped by the interests of teachers and administrators, and perhaps more importantly, the changes pursued will be

goals with local goals, the authority of shaped by the resources, knowledge, and skills (often referred to as capacity) available to schools attempting change. As Hargrove (1983) points out in a discussion of regulatory policy, the capacity of the policy targets is a critical issue determining policy implementation. The ability to make change is of particular importance in the context of accountability in high schools because, as mentioned before, these policies expect substantial change from many high schools but the policy rests on the notion that schools should be free to select and enact their own strategies for improvement.

Although it may be argued that the sanctions should compel capacity development, many policy researchers and educational researchers question if spontaneous development of resources, knowledge, and skills is possible without substantial support from outside the organization. McLaughlin (1987) argues that pressure from policy alone does not necessarily imply a change in fundamental values and practice. For example, Newmann, King, and Rigdon (1997) found that prior capacity and capacity development in the school determined the extent to which a restructuring school improved under the context of high-stakes accountability. In another example, a study of high schools found that the internal coordination and coherence of the staff along with the alignment of these teachers' beliefs with the policy's goals predicted how well the schools' response actually aligned with the intentions behind the accountability policy (Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003).

For these reasons, researchers observing and commenting on accountability have called on states enacting accountability to support

schools with programs and resources to & Elmore, 1999) or for the broader educational environment including districts and external providers to step in and provide support to schools in need of organization, curriculum, or instructional change (Brooks, 2000). As the authors of this report discuss the change and reform efforts seen in high schools, they discuss the support offered as part of the state accountability policy, the support offered by other external agents, particularly districts, and the resources and information both within and outside the school that were available for schools' decision making.

## Methodology

The results reported in this study are based on a nested sample of 48 schools in 36 districts in six states. Our sampling strategy and methodological approach was designed to confront a couple of important data collection issues. First, we wanted to focus on relatively low-performing schools, believing that these schools would be most affected by the state accountability policy. We also wanted a variety of school contexts to be represented in our sample. To meet these concerns we developed a sampling strategy—described in more detail below—that differentiated schools along both performance level and social context. Second, we wanted to include a

assist in their change efforts (Abelmann relatively large sample of schools in states across the country, which introduced complications for data collection and analysis. To do so, we used techniques that would allow multiple researchers to visit schools, analyze transcript data for the schools they visit, and provide materials for a cross-case analysis. The details regarding our sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analysis methods are given below.

## Sample

We started by identifying six states within which we planned to conduct our fieldwork. Using discussions of the strength of state accountability systems conducted by Goertz and Duffy (2001) and Carnoy and Loeb (2004), we identified four strong accountability states and two weak accountability states, listed in Table 1. Our definition of a strong accountability state was one that had sanctions in place for schools and students during the 2002–2003 school year. A weak accountability state had no sanctions (but possibly rewards) at the local level for either schools or students. The state sample consisted of the following (a more detailed description of the accountability systems in these states can be found in Chapter 2 of this report).

**Table 1. Sample of Six State Accountability Systems**

State	Student Accountability	School Accountability
California	Strong in 2005	Strong
Florida	Strong	Strong
North Carolina	Strong	Strong
New York	Strong	Strong
Michigan	Weak	Weak
Pennsylvania	Weak	Weak

Within each of these six states, our sampling strategy was designed to produce eight schools with varying school performance and context. Our school selection process was deliberately developed to obtain a range in student achievement and context in order to examine the conditions under which a range of schools search for responses to their performance problem.

To develop a sampling frame we collected school-level mathematics and English language arts achievement data and school context indicators for 1999–2000 for the population of high schools in each of the six states in our study. After observing a high correlation between the two subject-matter tests, we decided to use the mathematics assessment as the measure of school achievement, because this measure is often thought to be more sensitive to differences in schools’ instructional programs than is the measure of reading performance. In addition to math achievement scores, we collected all publicly available school context indicators including percentage of free and reduced-price lunch, percentage minority, percentage English language learners, and teachers’ years of

experience. Because states collect and report different statistics on their schools, the number and nature of context indicators varied across the states in our study.

Using only the below-average half of the sampling frame, we developed a regression model that predicted 2000 school-level achievement, controlling for the available school context indicators in that state. We then produced a residual for each school to determine which schools performed better than, worse than, or as would be expected given their context. We examined the residuals for each school and placed each of the schools on a 9-cell matrix of predicted achievement relative to context reflected in Table 2. We focused this study on school in the highlighted cells because they represent a range of predicted performance and context. We selected eight schools that fit into the following categories:

- *one* school that was underachieving given a relatively high context,
- *one* school that was underachieving given an average context,

- *one* school that was performing as expected given a relatively low context,
- *one* school that was overachieving given a relatively high context,
- *two* schools that were overachieving given a relatively low context, and
- *two* schools that were overachieving given an average context.

As we selected schools for our sample in accordance with the rubric given above, we made efforts to select more than one school from some districts in order to examine the differential impact of accountability in similar district contexts. We selected multiple schools from one district when two of the district’s schools fell into one of the six desired cells in the achievement/context

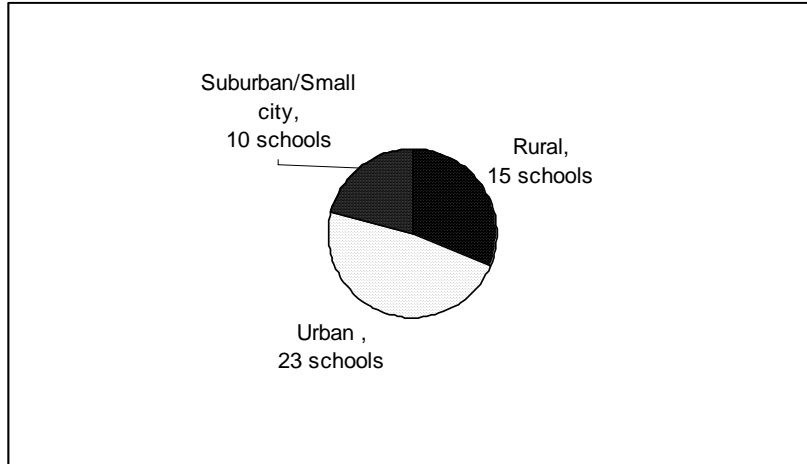
matrix. Due to difficulties in obtaining permission from schools to visit, our sample included a handful of schools that fell on the borders of these categories. In addition, we only visited seven schools in New York because of access issues. We visited nine schools in Michigan to accommodate district nesting. For the most part, however, our sample remained true to our intended sampling frame.

The final sample consisted of 48 schools nested within 34 districts representing a range of contexts. Figure 3 shows that urban schools made up almost half of our sample, but rural and suburban schools were well represented in the sample. In addition, our sample included many different-sized schools as illustrated in Figure 4. Figures 5 and 6 show that our sample included schools serving varied concentrations of free- or reduced-price lunch students and varied concentrations of ethnic groups.

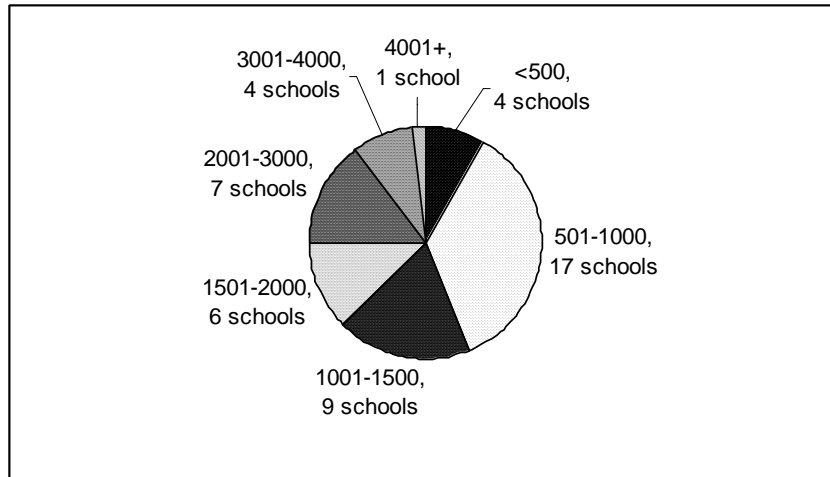
**Table 2. Achievement/Context Matrix**

	<b>Under Predicted achievement</b>	<b>Predicted Achievement</b>	<b>Over Predicted Achievement</b>
Low Context	Underachieving given a relatively low context	Expected achievement given a relatively low context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Overachieving given a relatively low context <i>(2 schools per state)</i>
Average Context	Underachieving given a relatively average context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Expected achievement given an average context	Overachieving given a relatively average context <i>(2 schools per state)</i>
High Context	Underachieving given a relatively high context <i>(1 school per state)</i>	Expected achievement given a relatively high context	Overachieving given a relatively high context <i>(1 school per state)</i>

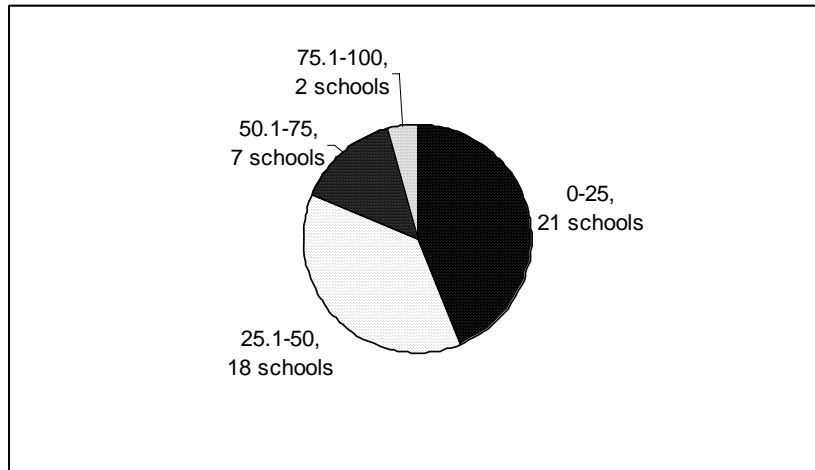
**Figure 3. Geographic Locale of Visited Schools**



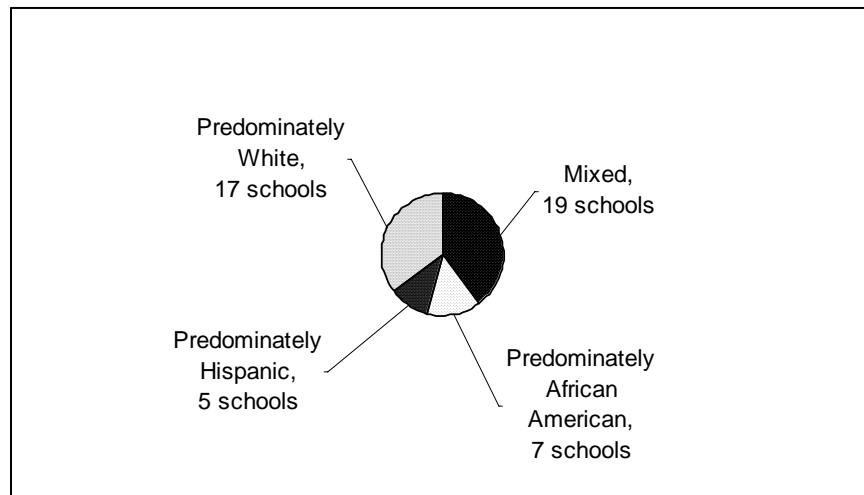
**Figure 4. Enrollment Numbers in Visited Schools**



**Figure 5. Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch in Sample Schools**



**Figure 6. Ethnic Composition of Visited Schools**



## Data Collection

Fieldwork in each of the 48 high schools was carried out during the 2002–2003 school year and involved structured interviews with a set of school and district representatives. As with most studies of policy it is important to take note of the year in which the data was collected with respect to the policy context. The 2002–2003 school year is significant in that each of the states had implemented their current form of accountability prior to our visit, and all were just beginning to respond to the accountability provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The structured interviews were carried out with district administrators (directors of secondary education, directors of assessment, curriculum specialists in English and mathematics, and the superintendent), school leaders (principals and assistant principals), department leaders in both English and mathematics, and English and mathematics teachers. We also interviewed the foreign language department chair to get a different perspective on the school and the perspective of a nontested subject. Because the question of who was searching for new instructional strategies was critical to our data collection efforts, we employed a *sliding emphasis* strategy in which the emphasis of our data collection efforts was adjusted to match our identification of the key individuals or groups who sought new strategies in that particular school. For example, although the core data collection always included interviews with district administrators, school leaders, departmental chairs and teachers, our protocols included auxiliary questions and probes to go deeper into the search

process as we identified the locus of the search. These data collection efforts involved two researchers for two days in each school.

## Data Analysis

On the basis of the framework developed for this phase of the study, using ATLAS.ti qualitative research software, researchers coded the interview transcripts using a coding system related to the interview protocols used in the field. The coding scheme was designed to highlight interview responses related to teachers' goals and challenges, teachers' understanding of accountability, the response of teachers to accountability, teachers' perceptions of their school's response to accountability, the process through which instructional and organizational changes were sought and implemented, and the nature of improvement strategies attempted in the school. The coding allowed the research teams to investigate patterns in the data they collected, and case reports facilitated cross-case analysis.

Each of the research teams that visited a school used the coded transcripts to complete an internal case report for each of the schools and districts they visited. These case reports focused on the articulation of accountability, goals, challenges, searches for improvement strategies, and improvement strategies currently in the school. These case reports also described the patterns of response within schools and included extensive data extracted from the field transcripts. Researchers investigating the issues in this report—accountability press, decision making in schools, strategies employed by schools, and the response of districts—used the

data assembled into case reports to develop data matrices with focus areas relevant for their studies. These matrices, which compiled information from each of the 48 schools arranged by state, aided researchers as they looked for patterns across schools and states to inform cross-case discussions.

## Reading Across the Chapters

The chapters that follow examine issues related to the interpretation of accountability policy and the response of high schools and districts. While the next four chapters draw from the same sources of data, each one brings a different perspective to these data. The chapter by Diane Massell, Margaret E. Goertz, Gayle Christensen, and Matthew Goldwasser and the chapter by Elliot Weinbaum discuss how school and district agents have interpreted the various components of their states' accountability systems, while the chapter by Betheny Gross, Michael Kirst, Dana Holland, and Tom Luschei, that by Weinbaum, and especially that by Donna M. Harris, Melissa Prosky, Amy Bach, Karen Hussar, and Julian Vasquez Heilig highlight the local improvement response made by the high schools in this study. The chapters also differ in the level of the educational establishment they bring into focus. While Massell et al., Gross et al., and Harris et al. take a school-level perspective, Weinbaum discusses the interpretation and response of districts, which in many ways face a different set of incentives and sanctions

from both the policy and their local contexts than their schools face.

Chapters 2 through 5 are presented in an effort to show how the policy has unfolded for schools by beginning with a discussion of schools' interpretation of the policy and continuing with discussions of the schools' response to the press they experience. In chapter two, Massell et al. begin the conversation with their school-level analysis of the press teachers and administrators feel and attribute to their state's accountability policy. This study of the press shows how school-level agents are interpreting and incorporating the goals and sanctions their states have put in place. Gross et al. follow in chapter 3 with a discussion of how local agents' interpretation of their states' policy shaped their prioritization of goals and challenges. This chapter also begins to discuss the nature of schools' response to accountability by showing the influence of accountability on the decision-making process and a general picture of the range of strategies adopted by high schools in recent years. The work by Harris et al. in chapter 4 shows the types of strategies adopted by high schools in response to accountability pressure. The fifth chapter offers a different but very relevant perspective with Weinbaum's discussion of the accountability story as experienced by districts. We conclude the report with a discussion that looks across each of the papers to discuss the themes of states' influence on local agents through accountability policy, the consequences of this influence, and policy directions states should consider as this policy is further developed.

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