

Chapter 3

Got You Under My Spell?

How Accountability Policy Is Changing and Not Changing Decision Making in High Schools

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Introduction

The success of the current accountability movement, unlike many policies in the past that have mandated the use of specific materials, distribution of resources, or specific programs for improvement, relies almost entirely on the policy's ability to prompt a response from schools and school's ability to generate an effective response. Given the limitations on capacity building at the state level, states are relying heavily on the knowledge, skills, resources, and initiative of local agents for the desired improvement. State accountability policy will necessarily fail if local agents such as teachers and administrators are not compelled to acknowledge the state's performance targets. The policy will also fail if local agents do not select and effectively implement strategies to improve student performance in both the short and long term. Given this reality for the state accountability policy, the process of decision making in schools characterized by the goals and problems around which individuals in schools focus their improvement efforts, the information they use in addressing these problems, and the nature of the strategies that they ultimately select are of critical importance to the extent of and nature of improvement schools will see in student performance.

In this chapter we feature two goals (a) to reveal the influence states are having in the decision-making process of high schools through their accountability policies and (b) to give a general sense of the range of strategies selected by high schools under accountability. We pursue these goals with interview data collected from teachers in 48 schools across six states; California, Florida, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. These six states reflect variation in their accountability policies across the country before the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). As raised in the introduction, this study focused on high schools because little work to date has been devoted to reform in high schools and because the era of accountability and standards calls for a significant departure for this institution, which has historically been noted for resisting change. The attention to decision making in this chapter, however, offers yet one more reason to examine high schools. Unlike elementary and middle school leaders, for whose institutions countless reform models have been designed and subsequently employed in efforts to meet accountability demands, high school leaders have relatively few models or school designs to which they can turn for guidance. High school leaders are very much left to their own experiences, knowledge, and resources to change organizations that have struggled with change. Given this limited guidance, this question about how accountability

policies focus attention and motivate change is all the more interesting in the high school context. Can accountability policy move people when resistance has been the history and guidance is limited?

We begin the discussion of accountability and decision making in high schools with a theoretical discussion of the decision-making process, which we define as consisting of the five components introduced by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). These components include (a) the decision situation, (b) participants in decision making, (c) the decision maker's goals and the problems addressed, (d) the information used in decision making, and (e) the solutions selected by schools. We follow this theoretical overview with an analysis of the data from our sample of 48 schools. This analysis is broken into two parts: (a) an examination of the context of decision making in high schools and (b) a look at the extent to which the decision process of schools seemed to introduce strategies that moved schools away from their traditional mode of operation toward approaches that could potentially change the educational experience of students in the school. For the latter discussion we turn to models of information, search, and selection found in organizational literature to learn what strategies might be predicted relative to what high schools seem to be doing.

In our discussion of the decision process and the nature of solutions we show how the states we visited seemed to be playing a relatively important role in the schools we visited, particularly in creating a focus on goals. With only a few exceptions, the states have managed to influence the goals and sense of accountability felt by teachers and administrators. Schools also seem to be responding to their state's pressure with a battery of improvement strategies that focus on reaching the performance targets. Despite this clear push

toward the state's goals and active response by schools, we found that schools by and large did not engage in reforms that represented the coordinated efforts of their staff, take advantage of common organizational structures such as departments and planning teams, or encourage extensive use of external assistance (even when external assistance was required by the state). We also found that the search for solutions in schools remained largely local, with the vast majority of information applied to decision-making efforts coming from within the school and most strategies offering very little challenge to the fundamental curriculum or practice of the schools. While our data revealed that local information and strategies dominated the decision-making scene in schools, our data also showed a handful of relatively effective avenues through which new ideas entered the schools and through which external change agents—particularly districts—may attempt to access schools. In addition, we found some situations in which these avenues of new information, particularly through districts, generated increasingly deep challenges to the traditional practices and curriculum in some schools, suggesting that high schools may not be as intransigent as commonly thought.

Theoretical Framework of Decision Making

The elements of decision making listed above—decision situations, participants, problems, and information—break down into two primary phases of decision making. The first phase in decision making sets the stage for the decision making and includes descriptions of the decision situations,

participants, and problems. These elements reveal how the process will engage, who will be involved, and what they will address. The second stage, which involves the search and selection of solutions, features the information used in decision making and the solutions that result. Here the decision maker seeks and scans information about possible solutions and selects a strategy expected to address the problem or problems identified. Examinations of decision making in organizations have illuminated a number of issues that decision makers both confront and create in these phases of decision making. This section offers a brief description and theoretical considerations of the decision-making components, which we have organized into the phases of setting the scene and search and selection. Instead of offering a complete review of this extensive literature, the sections that follow discuss a framework that has a specific focus on schools.

Elements That Set the Scene for Decision Making

*Decision Situations*⁷

Decision situations are the time and place for decision makers to engage in the process of finding a solution. Organizations reveal a relatively constant flow of opportunities for decisions to be made by the organizations, groups within

⁷ Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) use the term “choice opportunity” to identify the forum in which decision makers are expected to produce some solution for a specified problem. However, the term “choice opportunity” suggests that the decision makers will most likely select a solution among alternatives, a process that is not always apparent. We have chosen to use the term “decision opportunity” to emphasize the decision being made over the process of weighing alternatives and making a choice.

organizations, or individuals. Some of the decision opportunities recur at regular intervals, such as annual school plans, while other opportunities occur as a response to current circumstances. Decision opportunities need not involve a committee at all but, instead, may be informal as would be the case when an individual confronts an issue and finds a solution independently.

Participants

Participants or participant groups include standing committees and ad hoc committees as well as informal groups or individuals with authority over some aspect of the organization. A number of conditions determine who will participate in decisions. Certainly the amount of nonteaching time available to teachers limits their participation in decision situations. The physical proximity of teachers to each other during their occasional free time along with the personal relationships teachers share determines which teachers cluster for impromptu and informal decision situations. Policy mandates that require participation of teachers, community members, or administration purposely select participants for decision situations. There are likely dozens of conditions unique to each school that shape the participant list in any decision situation. However, organizational structures related to the organization of teachers, the distribution of power implied by hierarchy, and norms of teacher autonomy are worth noting specifically because of their commonality across schools.

Subject departmentalization is one of the most common organizational features of American high schools and gives rise to the image of high schools as collections of intellectual “silos.” Teacher specialization and structural organization by departments proves useful for creating subcommunities with common focus, which has been found

in organizational science to be an effective organizational strategy for organizations that are comprised of groups with specialized knowledge (Bolman, 1997). However, this partitioning of teachers has led to organizations in which teachers have few opportunities to participate in decisions related to other departments in their school or coordinate schoolwide decisions. While the schools in our sample occasionally supplemented the traditional structure with cross-department teams or within-department subteams, only one school organized teachers into interdepartmental teams, and only one school that disbanded departments to discourage the balkanization of teachers deviated from the traditional department structure.

The *hierarchy of educational institutions* offers a second structure that determines the participants in decision situations. The educational bureaucracy that exists today dates back to the professionalization of education in the early 1900s (Tyack, 1974). This movement established a hierarchy of schools nested within districts and districts nested within state departments of education as well as the hierarchy of administrators governing over teachers. Due to the ties districts have to schools, district officials can and do participate in decisions by sending representatives to decision situations or simply operating through the influence their authority grants them. While it is rare for state department officials to sit on local committees through a decision process, the power states exert through the provision of funding and directives makes the state's policies and preferences strong players in decisions at the local level.

At the school level the *power structure* of administrators over teachers, coupled with the well-documented *norm of teachers' professional autonomy*, creates a situation in which administrative staff assume

considerable authority over schoolwide decisions while teachers enjoy relative freedom to make choices concerning their classroom and instructional practice. While efforts to standardize curriculum and guide curriculum goals through testing have limited some of the authority teachers held over their course content, and teachers in many cases reported their loss of influence, the teachers in our sample still reported control over some aspects of their instructional practice and approaches.

Problems

Problems are the issues and challenges that become the focus of the decision situations and represent the point in the decision process at which states aim with accountability policies. Problems are constructed by members of the organization and are a function of the organization's goals, the goals of those in the organization, external expectations, and the local conditions that are perceived as impeding progress toward these goals (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). States' main objective with accountability policies is to directly influence schools' goals and the prioritization of their goals. Each of the states had established both assessment targets and content standards that the states accompanied with a battery of rewards and sanctions. States expected schools to incorporate these targets and sanctions into their articulated goals and thus shape the problems they attempted to address.

It is important to note the complexity of goals in organizations created because the many and varied school-level decision makers operate with somewhat different or even conflicting goals. The variability and incongruity of goals and identified problems often lead to fragmented and inconsistent strategies in organizations (Locke & Latham, 1990). While we recognize the

complexity of goals and problem identification as important to an analysis of solutions, we, unfortunately, could not explore the consequences of this complexity with much depth in this broad look at decision making.

Searching and Selecting Solutions: The Use of Information⁸ in Decision Making

The heart of decision making occurs when decision makers bring information to bear on problems and select solutions. Information, the search for information, and the range of information used in the decision process reveal the potential for change. Because we are particularly interested in change and the potential for change, we focus on the source of information, the potential for new ideas to enter the school and introduce variation (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000), and the extent to which the solutions impact the dominant structure and practice in the school, referred to in this chapter as the core technology of the school. Fortunately, literature on decision making offers useful guidance in considering the nature of information sought by and brought to decision makers as well as the relationships between the solutions that result from the search of information and current practice.

Authors of decision-making theory explain that information exists within

⁸ Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) use the term “solutions” to refer to the ideas that potentially address the issues considered in a decision situation. We have changed the term “information” to create a distinction between the ideas that are possible. In addition, because I refer to information rather than solutions, this discussion can include information that is used to evaluate and assess a problem and possible solutions.

organizations and enters the organization through a variety of sources (Brown, 1993; Huber, 1996; March, 1994). The members of an organization collect a great deal of information through professional development opportunities, their experiences, and their history of conversations with those in and outside the organization. As a result, organizations typically hold a vast array of information that rests latent in the organization and, therefore, hold the potential to assess or resolve problems. Information that is not held within the organization can be actively sought by looking outside the organization, soliciting information from external agents, passively receiving information from active information providers, or discovering information through research and development (March, 1994).

Models of decision making take what is known about the sources of information and offer a picture of the process through which decision makers put information to use and select strategies. The model of decision making we find particularly relevant given the context of schools and the context of accountability is a model described as a bounded rationality model (March, 1994; Simon, 1986). This model, unlike traditional models of decision making, assumes that decision makers face significant limitations in (a) their opportunity to access or acquire information, particularly the wealth of information outside the organization, and (b) the extent to which reliable strategies exist and can be identified by the decision maker.

Authors in the tradition of bounded rationality argue that information is not as easy to obtain as often thought. Information can be very expensive to obtain or difficult to locate. Information also takes time to locate, recognize, and process. Seeking information may simply take more time than decision makers have or allocate to the decision process. The conditions of resource

limitations constraining access reflect common situations in schools where access to information often requires that staff and substitutes be paid to give teachers and administrators leave to attend conferences or professional training. Many rural educators describe the lack of regional resources. In addition, the rapid nature of decision making in schools, a point that will be discussed in more detail later, leaves little time to explore the landscape of potential solutions.

Constraints, however, are not only imposed by resource limitations. Decision makers can intentionally or unintentionally put up their own barriers to information. Teachers can actively resist or mistrust a certain set of ideas, particularly external ideas, and therefore not seek ideas outside the organization, block efforts to bring ideas into the school, or simply deny their use in their classrooms. Larry Cuban (Cuban, 1993), in a study of teachers' practice from 1880 to 1990, argues that teachers, particularly high school teachers, appear very selective in their adoption of new strategies, selecting only a small set of the reforms proposed over the years. This selectivity has led to a relatively constant form of instruction in schools over this period, with norms of practice set firmly around traditional practice. Although Cuban does not argue that teachers staunchly defend their current practice and organization of their work, this scenario seems plausible given the resiliency of traditional practice. In more resistant contexts there is little incentive for school leaders to seek ideas outside the school or consider new ideas that approach or even enter the school. In addition to this intended resistance, teachers or administrators may not be "tuned into" ideas outside the school and, therefore, never realize that such an effort can be made. Each of these examples shows that (because of a variety of barriers internal and external to the school) access to

information can be, and often is, very constrained.

In addition to constraints on the access of available information, there is also the question of whether information on potential strategies even exists. The process of teaching and learning is commonly thought to be what organizational theorists refer to as "complex technology" with unclear and unreliable strategies as hallmarks of complex technologies. For example, several teachers we spoke with challenged the notion that we know how to effectively teach adolescents how to read. Educators, perhaps partly in response to inconsistent evidence from research, are often skeptical that good strategies exist or that strategies used elsewhere can work in their unique context. In research by Corcoran (Corcoran, 2003) on the use of research-based practices in schools, he found that district-level decision makers, who ostensibly have more opportunity and time to seek strategies than the typical high school teacher or principal, expressed frustration with the level and quality of research done on the issues that pressed their schools the most. Furthermore, the research that was available to these district officials often confused the issue with conflicting results. Perceptions that little information exists to be found may very well reduce the likelihood that information will be sought and that new strategies will be found.

Given the constraints on access and the perception that only a few or no reliable strategies can be sought, proponents of bounded rationality argue that it simply makes no sense for decision makers to engage in a wide search of all, or most, possible strategies then select the best among them.⁹ These authors instead suggest

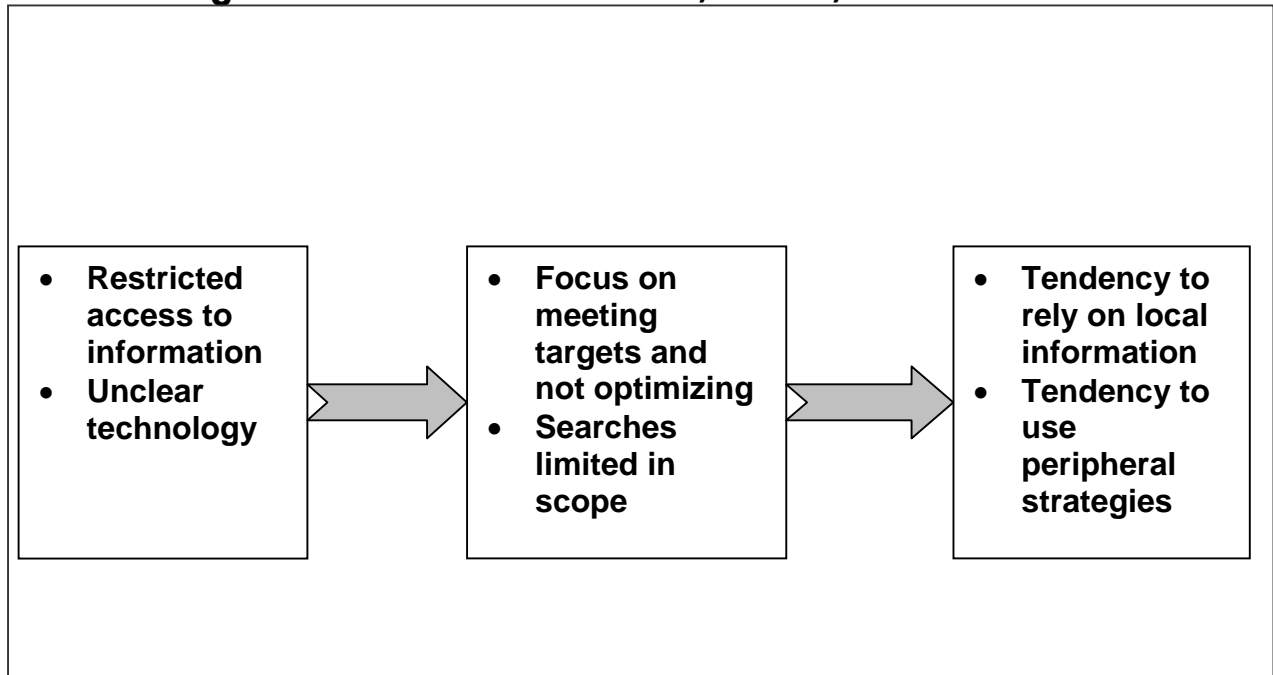
⁹ Scanning all possible strategies and then selecting the best among the possibilities is known as optimizing, the decision rule found in rational theories of decision making (March, 1994).

that decision makers under these contexts identify a target and seek only to meet the target with searches that are relatively limited in scope (March, 1994; Simon, 1986), a condition often referred to as *geographically local search* (Rosenkopf & Almeida, 2003). The limited searches serve to save resources and reflect the constraints on access due the many reasons stated above. In addition, this limited search reflects the reality that unreliable technology leads decision makers to privilege strategies already used in the organization, use the existing structure of the organization, and leave the work of the organization intact, a well-documented condition referred to as *technologically local search* in studies of the private sector (Rosenkopf & Almeida,

2003). Consequently, decision makers who focus on targets and limit their range of search tend to rely heavily on local information and select strategies that maintain the core technology of the organization. This model of search and selection is reflected in Figure 1.

While this model of information, search, and selection is common across organizations and seems relevant for the school setting, some researchers have shown that organizations will reach beyond their borders and pull in strategies that change the fundamental practices and structure of the organization. In the rest of this chapter, we explore the extent to which schools' responses seem to parallel this model or deviate from this model.

Figure 1. Model of Information, Search, and Solutions



Setting the Scene for Decision Making: The Context of Decisions in Schools

We begin our discussion of decision making in high schools with the elements of decision making that set the stage for decisions. Even though all three of the components—decision situations, participants, and problems—are important to understanding the context of decision making, we found accountability’s influence most clearly in the respondent’s identification of problems. We, therefore, begin this section with an extensive discussion of the goals and problems identified by individuals in the schools. In this discussion we show that in many ways people in schools are responding to their state accountability systems. However, as our discussion of decision situations and participants explains, we found that the dependence on ad hoc, individual, and uncoordinated decision situations suggests that schools in large part have not generated a truly organizational response to their state accountability systems. This relatively informal and independent nature of most decisions being made in high schools continues, despite the growing interest in schoolwide reforms that attempt to coordinate decision making and state efforts to require lower performing schools to work with teams or partners to coordinate school planning.

Problems

While a great many experiences and context conditions influence the construction of problems in organizations, goals theoretically play a central role in

determining when and how problems are identified (Scott, 1998). These goals help organizations target their attention by clarifying what should be accomplished and highlighting the issues that impede progress toward the goals (March, 1994; Simon, 1986) and signaling when the organization needs to make changes. Thus, goals help determine *when* problems need to be addressed and help to clarify *what* those problems must be. It is precisely at this point in the decision-making process that states exert their most direct influence with accountability policies. Although states seemed to modestly influence the mechanics of decision making by requiring decision situations and participants in low-performing schools and indirectly influencing district involvement in schools, goal setting, backed by incentives, is the central means through which states attempt to influence the decision-making process in schools.

During our visits, we engaged respondents in two sets of questions related to goals. First, we asked respondents to give us their goals, the goals for their departments. Second, we asked for what and to whom they feel accountable. Together these questions revealed the goals they most immediately identified with and those goals they felt responsible for meeting. The teachers’ and administrators’ aims revealed that school-level respondents consider a variety of goals. Among the most common goals across the schools we visited were goals for student attainment (high school diplomas and postsecondary education), advancement in learning, and social and intellectual development of students. Of particular importance to this study, however, is the extent to which the state’s goals—set by performance targets and sanctions— influenced teachers’ construction of goals and accountability.

To a large extent states seemed to be effective at capturing schools' attention and focusing teachers and administrators on their performance goals. Respondents in most schools in our sample incorporated state goals into their goals and sense of accountability, but these goals did not push out all of the traditional goals typically offered by teachers or based on teachers' own work and experiences. Across all six states, at least some teachers in 35 of the 48 schools in our sample described goals or accountability responsibilities in terms of their state's standards and/or assessment (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, respondents in 15 of the 16 schools in our sample from the two of the highest accountability states, North Carolina and Florida, mentioned their state standards or assessment when articulating their goals and accountability. Interestingly, however, stakes are not everything in determining the influence of the state's policy. Despite very low stakes in Pennsylvania and Michigan, district or school leadership in six of eight schools in the former state and six of nine schools in

the latter state pushed their schools to focus on the state's goals and standards, which teachers and administrators in some schools indicated was a response to public reporting and the competitiveness with regional schools. This overall influence of states in shaping school goals and potentially influencing the work of schools is particularly interesting considering that state departments of education have historically failed to influence the instructional program of schools due to their weak position relative to local agents and their role as administrators of federal policy and funding (Timar, 1997).

Although we found that the states' standards and assessment targets contributed significantly to the goals articulated by respondents in the schools, as stated earlier, respondents also discussed other objectives including the advancement of students' social and emotional health, higher graduation rates and college attendance rates, and mastery of course content and skills both covered and not covered by the state's assessments.

Table 1. Number of Schools in the Sample That Incorporated State Standard and/or Assessment Targets in Their Local Goals

| State | Number of schools that incorporated state standards or assessment targets in goals | State stakes |
|----------------|--|--------------|
| California | 5 of 8 | High |
| Florida | 7 of 8 | High |
| Michigan | 6 ^a of 9 | Low |
| New York | 5 of 7 | High |
| North Carolina | 8 of 8 | High |
| Pennsylvania | 6 of 8 | Low |
| Total | 37 of 48 | — |

^aIn three of these six schools, the state accountability goals were only incorporated into the math or the English department, not both departments. In all other cases, respondents reported on the role of state accountability standards and assessments across both the math and English departments.

Accordingly, the challenges and problems addressed by school respondents not only refer to issues that interfere with the school's ability to improve student performance in mastering standards and with scoring better on state assessments, but challenges to broader academic development, student attainment, and student social and emotional development also appeared in our collection of responses.

The challenges described by our respondents fell into two main categories: (a) problems embedded within the school and (b) problems embedded within students. The problems embedded within the school are those that are most within the control of the teachers and/or administrators. The problems embedded within students are those that from the perspective of teachers and administrators are carried into the school by the students and, therefore, problems that high school teachers and administrators can only ameliorate rather than prevent. The discussions we had in our sample schools revealed that by setting performance targets linked to a specific set of curriculum standards, accountability has highlighted problems (some new and some old) they are now compelled to address. Most of these new concerns appear among the problems embedded in schools. However, it can be argued that these policies have also highlighted and created a greater sense of urgency around some of the challenges that have been persistent in high schools over time and not directly linked to new requirements of the state policy. In the following discussion we describe the challenges teachers and administrators raised in our interviews. This description reveals not only the range of challenges teachers feel they contend with but also how the policy's success in focusing attention on performance targets and state curriculum standards has influenced the matters that surfaced most frequently for our respondents.

Problems Embedded Within the School

We begin our discussion with problems embedded within schools because these were the issues that seemed most strongly influenced by the state policy. Issues related to curriculum and instruction as well as many of the concerns over school organization relate to the testing and curriculum requirements written into the state policies. In addition, several of the concerns related to teachers' skill and commitment specifically refer to the new standards and expectations.

Issues of Curriculum and Instruction

As observers of accountability policies predicted, many schools found that the new standards and assessments required significant changes to what they taught and how they taught. Both administrators and teachers remarked on the weaknesses in their curriculum and teachers' ability to teach the new curriculum. Respondents in 11 schools described impediments related to curriculum and instruction and often drew the connection between these weaknesses and their state's standards or assessments. Five of those 11 schools specifically indicated that some part of their curriculum or their entire curriculum did not align with the standards set by their state. Others attributed poor test performance by a subgroup of students or in a specific subject area to inadequate programs or programs that matched poorly with the assessments. The only curriculum-related concern raised by our respondents that did not directly relate to the state accountability system was an interest in providing a more rigorous curriculum schoolwide.

Table 2. Schools Reporting Curriculum and Instruction Problems

| State | Number of schools with curriculum concerns related to standards and assessment | Number of schools with curriculum concerns related to overall academic rigor | Level of stakes | Level of specificity of standards | First full school year of standards implementation after legislative act or major policy revision |
|----------------|--|--|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| California | 1 | 0 | High | High | 1999–2000 ^b |
| Florida | 0 | 2 | High | High | 1998–1999 ^c |
| Michigan | 3 | 1 ^a | Low | Low | unclear ^d |
| New York | 2 | 0 | High | High | 1999–2000 ^e |
| North Carolina | 0 | 0 | High | High | 1996–1997 ^f |
| Pennsylvania | 3 | 0 | Low | Low | 1999–2000 ^g |

^aThis school is also one of the three Michigan schools that reported concerns related to standards and assessment.

^bAs reported by the California Department of Education Web site.

^cAs reported by members of the Florida Department of Education.

^dDue to several revisions in the state standards, the time at which the most significant change took place is unclear.

^eAs reported by the New York State Education Department.

^fAs reported by the Public Schools of North Carolina Web site.

^gAs reported by Goertz and Duffy (2000).

While it was notable that most curriculum issues raised by our school respondents could be linked to their state accountability systems, it is also interesting to note where curriculum issues *did not* arise. The combination of stability, maturity, and specificity of the state accountability policy seems to predict the extent to which schools continue to wrestle with curriculum. North Carolina was the only state in which the teachers and administrators *did not* discuss any challenges related to curriculum. Only two schools in Florida raised curriculum related issues, neither of which referred to their accountability system. Instead, both schools discussed the challenge of providing a rigorous academic program. Table 2 shows that of the six states in our study, North Carolina's standards and

assessment program has been in place the longest and ranks among the highest in the specificity of its standards and overall stability. Florida's system, despite starting a few years after North Carolina's, is also a relatively mature and stable policy with very specific standards. In contrast, schools in both Michigan and Pennsylvania with weak systems and low standards specificity seem to be still working out the curricular alignment and change expected under these accountability systems.

School Organizational Issues

Teachers raised a variety of issues related to the structure or operation of the school organization. The range of issues mentioned by teachers and administrators include the following:

- inadequate resources,
- not enough time to cover the required curriculum,
- excessive time requirements of standardized testing,
- no time for teachers to meet or poor teacher collaboration,
- school safety and discipline,
- correctly categorizing English language learner (ELL) students,
- large class size,
- organization of school day that is not adequate—a block schedule is needed, and
- rapid growth in student population.

Of the various organizational issues, respondents most often identified resources as a challenge to improving students' performance. In all, respondents in 22 schools identified resource needs. The second most common issue related to the organization was related to time allocation. Issues related to time also dominated the organizational challenges. Teachers in seven schools found it difficult to deliver the required curriculum in the time allocated for their courses. Finally, teachers and administrators in nine schools raised issues of safety and discipline. All other organizational challenges listed in Table 3 represent issues specific to only one school in our study.

Teachers rarely drew the connection between organizational problems and the specific goals affected by these problems. These identified challenges most likely

related to the tacit goal of operating a well-functioning organization characterized by a safe and orderly environment, by resources to provide teachers and students with adequate instructional materials and instructional time, and by competency in the important services provided by schools.

Issues Related to Teachers

The issues related to teachers fall into two constructs: (a) weaknesses in teachers' skills and (b) unhelpful attitudinal positions such as resistance to change, low expectations, or overall weak commitment to their work or students. The range of concerns related to teachers' skills include these:

- teachers' skills in general,
- teachers' ability to teach ELL students,
- teachers' ability to teach reading and writing,
- teachers' ability to teach in the block schedule,
- new or out-of-field teachers,
- limited opportunity to improve skills and perfect courses, and
- ensuring that teachers teach what they report in lesson plans.

The range of concerns related to teachers' attitudes include these:

- teachers' resistance to change in curriculum,

- teachers' resistance to change in practice,
- teachers' resistance to professional development (especially among veteran teachers),
- teachers' resistance to reading initiatives,
- resistance of vocational teachers on academic performance,
- teacher resistance to technology,
- low teacher expectations for students' success, and
- teacher commitment.

The identification of teacher-related challenges occurred in all states, with no state notably reporting more or fewer challenges in this area than the other states. Respondents in 17 of 48 schools identified weaknesses in teachers' skills. Respondents that included a mix of teachers and administrators in 15 schools indicated that teachers in their school displayed resistance, lack of commitment, or low expectations, with teacher resistance to curricular changes and standards accounting for the concerns in 10 of these 15 schools. This list made it clear that the requirement to change curriculum to match standards has in many places hit a sensitive spot with teachers. The instances of teacher resistance discussed in schools show teachers' resistance to adopting the changes and training necessary to meet the demands of the state accountability curriculum as understood by people in the schools.

Problems Embedded in the Students

Lack of Student Motivation

Concern over poor student motivation ranks as the most widely cited problem across respondents and schools in our sample and is not an uncommon issue among high school teachers (Siskin, 2003). Respondents in 41 of the 48 schools we visited explicitly remarked on the difficulty of working with students who lacked sufficient motivation to participate effectively in their education. In addition to general disinterest in class, respondents indicated that the lack of student motivation was manifested by poor attendance, poor preparation for class, or lack of effort on state assessments. This timeless issue should not be considered trivial, as many recognize that the sanctions and rewards often directed at adults in schools depend on the performance of students. Teachers directly mentioned the impact of students' attitudes on their school's performance outcomes and often viewed the students' lack of interest in classroom work, test preparation, and the test itself as having direct consequences on their professional experiences.

Weaknesses in Student Background

Student background, which was linked to student motivation, represents another concern respondents felt affected them greatly but over which they felt only limited control. Respondents in 23 of the 48 schools remarked, in vague terms, that the students' economic background, lack of parental support for education, or value structures that did not prioritize education impeded their efforts with students. In addition to comments on the students' economic

background, respondents also raised the issue of students' language background. Respondents in 10 schools indicated that students' language proficiency was a serious issue with which they regularly contended. This issue posed a somewhat different challenge qualitatively than the background issues described above in that teachers recognized their own lack of training and skills to work with ELL students.

Deficits in Students' Skills

Responses from the teachers and administrators in our sample made the point that high school teachers faced an uphill battle to get their students to proficient levels in time for the state assessments or simply to perform high-school-level work. Respondents in 41 schools described the difficulty they faced in offering a high school curriculum to students who displayed significant deficits in fundamental skills or with classrooms of students who exhibited a broad range of skills. Our high school respondents also did not shy away from attributing these deficits to their feeder school programs. Teachers in 30 schools explicitly commented on the poor preparation of students entering the school or the failed efforts to teach students fundamental reading and math skills in elementary and middle school. Interestingly, the schools expressing concern over the preparation of students spread over all of the states and, therefore, did not appear to be associated with level of stakes or the structure of testing (end-of-course exams versus one general assessment).

Of the skills identified specifically, respondents most often cited their students' deficits in the components of literacy—reading and writing. Teachers in 20 schools specifically discussed their students' challenges with literacy. While the emphasis

on literacy may have been an artifact of our interview strategy, which focused on the English and math departments, it may also reflect some important tensions between what high school teachers are “supposed to do” and what they are now expected to do. Teachers in several high schools we visited felt ill-equipped to teach adolescents reading, but four of the six states in our study assessed their high school students with a general reading comprehension exam.¹⁰ It is important to note that teachers across all six states in our sample described the challenge of weak literacy skills in students. Although concern over deficits in math preparation did not receive the schoolwide attention of reading or writing skills, math teachers also raised the issue of student preparation. This issue was of particular concern in the districts and states that required all students to pass Algebra I.

Summarizing Challenges

Data on the reported challenges and impediments revealed that, for the most part, schools across all six of these states faced very similar issues and identified a broad range of challenges. (See Table 3 for a summary of the challenges raised by school respondents.) The most direct link between the accountability requirements and the challenges articulated by schools can be seen in the concerns over schools' curriculum. However, it can be argued that the state policies have led to instances of teacher resistance as schools change their curriculum to match standards and meet the assessment expectations and that the state policies have intensified schools' concern

¹⁰ Pennsylvania, Florida, California, and Michigan assessed high school students with a test of reading comprehension and/or writing. New York and North Carolina required students to take assessments related to specific courses. They did not assess reading comprehension explicitly.

Table 3. Summary of Challenges

| Challenges | Share of schools in sample identifying the challenge |
|--|---|
| Problems embedded within students | |
| Student skill deficits | 85% |
| Low student motivation | 85% |
| Student background | 48% |
| Problems embedded within the school | |
| Weaknesses in curriculum | 27% |
| Problematic teacher attitudes | 31% |
| Weaknesses in teachers' skill | 35% |
| Problems with school organization | 71% |

over student skill deficits and motivation. It is important to remember that accountability must compel action as well as concern. Not all of the problems and challenges identified actually make it to the table. What ends up in decision situations is the topic of the next section

Linking Solutions to Problems in Recent School Decisions

The question of what problems were acted upon in decision situations completes the story of how accountability shaped the process of decision making. To what extent did accountability policy seem to influence an improvement response from schools, and to what extent did the policy shape what schools focused on in their improvement efforts? In this section we look at the new policies and programs described in the schools we visited in order to give the reader a sense of the issues that people in schools carried into decision situations. As we stated in the discussion of participants in decision making, individual teachers by themselves made a substantial share of the

improvements targeting student performance in their daily efforts to confront challenges in their classrooms. They addressed these problems with the tools they controlled, including materials, instructional practices, the content of lessons, and their own time. Individual teacher decisions are critical to the schools we visited; however, the scope of an individual teacher's influence is constrained. Policies and programs with the most substantial scope, attention, and resources are those made at higher levels of the organization such as the department or school level. Therefore, we only focus on the larger policies and programs adopted at the department and school level in this section.

To get a full sense of the programs pursued by the schools, we concluded our interviews by asking for a comprehensive list of strategies employed by the school to address matters of student achievement. In an effort to get a sense of the academic and instructional problems that were addressed (by means other than individual teachers' classroom efforts) we matched the strategies discussed by respondents at the school with the challenges identified by respondents in the school. For example, we matched a

school’s initiative to promote face-to-face conferences with parents programs with their articulated challenge of low parent involvement and challenges with student background. We matched a program to provide incentives for student test taking to the articulated challenge of low student motivation. Note that the matching reflects *our evaluation* of the strategy discussed and the challenges identified. The individuals at the school may not necessarily have matched the strategies with the challenges as we did, but nonetheless we feel that this is a reasonable approach to seeing what issues schools addressed.

Overall, we found that schools tended to focus most significantly on issues related to student skills and curriculum, two challenges with relatively clear linkages to the state accountability system. Table 4 shows that 85% of schools that identified student deficits as a problem described some program to address student deficits.

Similarly, 69% of schools that identified curriculum weaknesses as a problem described their efforts to address the curriculum issues. Certainly, it may be argued that it is simple to add a remedial program like after-school tutoring in an attempt to address skill deficits and that is why such a high share of schools showed programs to address skill deficits. However, our data suggest that schools did not always take the easy way out in designing remedial programs, a point that will be addressed with more detail in the following sections. Furthermore, easy ways to address a problem would not necessarily account for the high share of schools addressing curriculum weaknesses. Not only does standards alignment take time and energy on the part of teachers, we also learned that several administrations and other school leaders faced significant challenges to the process of standards alignment from members of their staff.

Table 4. The Challenges Identified and the Challenges Addressed

| Challenges | Share of schools in sample identifying the challenge | Share of those schools that identified the challenge that also had a program to address the challenge |
|--|---|--|
| Problems embedded within students | | |
| Student skill deficits | 85% | 85% |
| Low student motivation | 85% | 59% |
| Student background | 48% | 17% |
| Problems embedded within the school | | |
| Weaknesses in curriculum | 27% | 69% |
| Weaknesses in teacher skill and commitment | 58% | 36% |
| Problems with school structure | 71% | 24% |

While it was interesting to see the response to skill and curriculum weaknesses in the high schools, it is also interesting to take note of those problems that schools address the least. We might expect that those problems positioned outside the school would be considered the most difficult for schools to confront and, therefore, least often addressed. As we can see from Table 4, schools that identified students' backgrounds as a problem rarely implemented programs to confront this problem. However, a surprising share of schools seemed to take on the issue of student motivation, with more than half of the schools that identified motivation as a problem implementing some program to engage students. Although the skills and commitment of teachers seem like problems within the control of those in the school, only 10 of the 28 schools in which respondents articulated problems with teachers' skills or commitment described any schoolwide or departmental effort to address their concerns. Importantly, only one of the schools in which respondents discussed the problem of teacher resistance had any effort to address this issue. In this one school the principal was pursuing a "reconstitution by attrition" in which she welcomed retirements and unhappy transfers as an opportunity to recruit like-minded teachers.

Through this analysis, we learned that schools overall addressed a wide range of strategies, but not surprisingly, they did not address all the problems identified by the respondents. The fact that schools did not address all the problems they identified for us likely reflects the fact that the schools could not address everything at once. However, this result also reflects the fact that our interviews sought information on efforts to improve student performance. We simply did not pursue at much length schools' efforts to deal with some of the

more procedural or administrative problems discussed by respondents. In addition, schools appeared to select strategies that did not necessarily correspond with the problems identified by the respondents. A variety of explanations possibly explain why schools might be implementing strategies for unarticulated problems. Some problems such as low student scores may be so fundamental to the school and its goals that teachers did not specifically articulate them. In addition, agents external to the school such as districts, external partners, or state departments of education may require programs that may or may not correspond with the problems identified by local teachers.

Decision Situations and Their Participants

The nature of decision situations gives some indication of the formality of the decision process used to address the problems outlined above, while the range of participants illustrates the different levels of decision makers at work in schools. Although the success of the policy relies on good decision making by local schools, the states offer little guidance or support to schools that would encourage or facilitate formal or coordinated schoolwide needs assessment and decision-making processes. Only two of the states we visited, California and North Carolina, included a system for supporting school improvement decision making in the body of the policy. Both of these states introduce external participants in the decision-making scene. North Carolina required its lowest performing schools to work with a state-designated team for school improvement, and California required schools participating in the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) to engage with an external partner to evaluate the school's need.

Because these states only offered this support to its lowest performing schools, these efforts were not widely represented in our sample, and we see no evidence that the support offered to the states' lowest performing schools served as a model for other schools attempting improvement.

The picture of decision situations related to improving student achievement¹¹ and their participants in the 48 schools showed a blend of formal and informal decision situations with informal and ad hoc efforts by individual teachers, administrators, or other groups in the school occurring most often. As might be expected with informal decision making, the decision process did not always flow, as logic would predict, with the identification of need preceding the selection of strategies for improvement, and the participants in decision making were often not organized in accordance with the organizational structure of the school. Decision situations in the schools we visited seemed to arise from three scenarios: (a) a problem was recognized, (b) a solution was identified, or (c) a cycle required a decision. We found several decision situations that formed because individuals or groups of individuals identified a problem in the school that they wanted to address. For example, a math department in a school had been struggling with inappropriate placement of students in classes. They decided to use their department meeting time to discuss and resolve this issue. These types of decision situations took advantage of existing structures such as departmental meetings or planning team meetings but also led to

¹¹ While we tried to focus discussion on decisions intended to improve student achievement, our queries into the most recent departmental decisions or recent schoolwide decisions often yielded information on decisions that seemed unrelated to improving student achievement. For example, members of one department described a recent decision to move the refrigerator in the faculty lounge.

decision situations using less formal or ad hoc arrangements of people.

While the practice of identifying a need then creating an opportunity to resolve the need appeals to logic, we learned about a number of decisions in which the identified need seemed to follow the identification of a solution. In these cases a solution seemed to catch someone's attention and this solution was later matched to a problem, common practice that appears in Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) description of "garbage can decision making." These authors explain that this practice often occurs when decision makers have unclear preferences, unclear technology, and continuously changing participants in the decision situation, however, the cases we observed are more aptly described as decision makers with unclear needs. In most cases where solutions led decision situations, the individuals in the decision situation had never made a thorough evaluation of their needs or the types of strategies that may ameliorate this need. In one illustrative case, an assistant principal learned about the "middle school" model, which offers a school design that addresses the developmental needs of students in the middle school years. He thought this model would be appropriate in his school, which housed grades six through twelve. He raised the idea with his principal, and together they decided that this program would help their younger students to transition to the high school. From our interviews with the principal and assistant principal it was clear that they had not discussed a problem with the younger grades prior to this proposition, but nonetheless they identified some problems that matched the identified strategy. In this case and with similar cases in other schools, the desire to implement these specific solutions drove the entire decision process.

Respondents in a handful of schools mentioned their engagement in cyclical or

required decision situations. Of the three decision-making prompts discussed in this section, these events made most consistent use of formal organizational forms and appeared the most structured. Interestingly, few schools mentioned the regular development of school improvement plans, one of the most common recurrent decision situations in schools because districts and states often require the annual development of plans (O'Day, 1999). State accreditation and evaluation processes, which recurred on regular intervals, required four of those schools (three in Michigan and one in Pennsylvania) to convene a team and develop a school plan. Two schools discussed their district's curriculum renewal cycle in which each subject area, in its own turn, engaged in evaluation, revision, and implementation phases. Finally, three schools in our California sample participated in the II/USP program and were required to develop an assessment and improvement plan with the help of an external consultant. This requirement led to decision situations related to the development of a school action plan. Interestingly, these were the only decision situations that directly resulted from the state accountability policy. The role of II/USP and work of external consultants in California's schools will be discussed in more detail in later sections.

Given the both formal and ad hoc decision events in the schools we visited, it should not be surprising to learn that the participants in the decision situations ranged widely. The decision-making groups included formally specified departments and planning teams. However, consistent with the large share of informal decision situations, but perhaps inconsistent with prior research on the importance of departments in high schools, we found a relatively weak effort to exploit these organizational structures. Instead, we found that individuals and self-formed groups—

groups not designated by an organizational structure—were the most common participants and participant groups in decision making. As per the fundamental principle of limited mandates inherent in outcomes accountability, states took little direct role in determining participants in decision situations. States generally did not require that schools demonstrate schoolwide participation in decisions and did not require schools to involve their districts in decisions. As stated above, only California's and North Carolina's policies required certain participants be brought to the table, but this was only required of their lowest performing schools. Our data, however, show that state accountability may have indirectly influenced the participants in school decisions by prompting more involvement from their districts. While most of our schools had multiple types of decision makers and decision-making groups working with different issues, certain groups clearly dominated the scene in some of the schools we visited. Overall, we found a surprisingly strong role by districts and a relatively weak effort to exploit organizational structures such as departments and schoolwide planning teams.

Although the state accountability policy does not attempt to play a strong role in decision making, it is important to understand the range of decision makers in schools and the prevalence of each for decisions. Different types of decision makers have different levels of authority and influence in schools, and the scope of issues addressed in schools depends greatly on the types of participants attending to decision situations. For example, individual teachers, though they have significant impact on students, have only limited scope of influence. If one teacher changes her materials, only her classroom will be affected. However, if the department collectively makes a decision to change

materials, all students taking courses in the department will be affected. Below we outline the different participants in decision making including *individuals*, *groups*, and *external agents* in decision making in the high schools we visited.

Independent/Individual Decision Makers

Individual teachers and administrators making decisions independently represent the most consistent decision makers across the high schools we visited. The norm of teacher autonomy, described in the theoretic section above, was evident in the regularity with which teachers took independent initiative to make adjustments in their practice, curriculum, or materials. In every school we visited, we heard testimonials of teachers seeking solutions to daily concerns about students or lessons as well as broad concerns regarding practice, assessment, curricular approaches, and student academic performance. However, the domain of a teacher's decisions only extended to the teacher's classroom and, at times, only affected individual students. His or her individual initiative, while significant and at times constituting the major improvement efforts being made in a school, does not imply a school reform effort.

Principals in our sample described making decisions regarding schoolwide improvement strategies independently of the faculty or even other administrative staff. Unlike teachers, principals' independent decisions reflected school-level decisions and they generally affected many individuals across the organization and touched the instructional work of teachers. In our sample, principals took this centralized approach because this approach aligned with the historical role of administrators in the school or in order to wrest control of a school with substantial

needs. The authority vested in principals was particularly clear in our sample, where teachers in 13 of 48 schools described significant instructional improvement decisions in which the principal did not involve the staff in the decision-making process.¹²

Decision-Making Groups

Departmental decision makers. The department structure, which is one of the most widespread organizational forms in high schools, offers a logical decision-making body for schools. Members of subject-based departments share common academic expertise, participate in common courses or a sequence of courses, share many instructional practices, and, importantly, share students (a commonality even in interdepartmental teams). During our field study, we focused heavily on the role of English and math departments in the school improvement process because previous research on high schools has emphasized the importance of departments in teachers' professional lives. In each of the schools we visited, we specifically queried teachers on the decision-making role of subject-based departments and other teacher groups that exist in the school. All but two of the schools we visited recognized subject-based departments. Of the two schools that did not recognize subject based departments, one recognized interdepartmental teacher teams, and the other recognized no teacher teams.¹³ Schools supported departmental and team structures by formally recognizing

¹² It is interesting to note that the centralized decision making was not necessarily contested by teachers in these schools. Most of the teachers who commented on the centralization of decision making seemed to accept this arrangement as the role of the principal and the norm for the school.

¹³ Despite having no formal departments, these teachers continued to identify professionally and informally with their subject-level colleagues.

the groups with designated leaders (department chairs/team leaders), responsibilities, requirements to meet as a group, and, in many cases, supply budgets. Departments or teams held meetings in nearly every school we visited. However, the frequency and regularity of those meetings varied significantly across schools. Teachers in most departments described meeting infrequently (once a month or less) or meeting on an “as needed” basis, while some met as frequently as once a week. Overall, the departments in this study did not come across as strong decision-making units.

Looking across our sample, we rarely discerned a specific role expected of the departments. Informational interaction dominated as the style of interaction for department members. Administrations rarely distributed decision-making authority to their departments, and teachers did not describe their departments as key decision makers in their schools. On the whole, departments served as a central decision-making authority in their schools most frequently in California ($n = 4$) and New York ($n = 3$). In Florida and especially North Carolina, among the strongest accountability states in our sample, teachers in only 1 of the sixteen schools identified departments as key decision-making units in the school. Instead, teachers indicated that the principals and/or central offices wielded substantial authority, and any distributed authority resided at the teacher level. In addition, teachers in 30 of the 48 schools did not report on any significant school improvement strategies selected, in part or entirely, by either their English or math department. Among the 18 schools where teachers reported that departments made at least some important decisions, we found considerable variation in the types of decisions and the regularity with which the departments were brought into the decision

process. While we cannot conclude that accountability policies or the level of stakes impeded the use of organizational structures such as departments for decision making, it is clear that the press of these policies did not compel schools to take advantage of these forms to help decision making.

The conclusion that departments played a relatively limited role in decision making, however, seems to contradict a substantial body of work demonstrating the importance of departments in schools. McLaughlin and Talbert (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and Siskin (Siskin, 2003) described departments as the center of professional life for teachers and an important source of intellectual, professional, and social development for teachers. We do not deny that the departments in most of the schools we visited played a vital role in the social and professional lives of teachers. As McLaughlin & Talbert and Siskin have reported, the departments provided teachers with informed colleagues who dealt with similar topics and student issues to which they could turn for ideas. However, department meetings typically provided a forum for conversation from which individual teachers would acquire information for their independent decision situations or learn about administrative issues such as new or proposed school and district policies or time and dates for professional development opportunities. We saw only rare cases in which administrations or districts mobilized their departments to make decisions about school improvement. By and large, the departments served as salient social and professional units for teachers but they did not serve as important units for organizational decision making.

Schoolwide committees or faculty senates. Policy designers often tout the advantages of schoolwide committees in decision making, citing the benefits of using the broader base of knowledge and

promoting teacher buy-in for the strategies selected. In the schools we visited, requirements to produce school improvement plans as well as state accreditation and evaluation procedures prompted schools to create schoolwide committees for needs analysis and planning. In other cases, standing committees, such as committees of department chairs or occasional committees convened to deal with specific issues, served as forums for discussing and selecting programs or addressing concerns. Despite the purported advantages of schoolwide committees, only 13 of the 48 schools we visited discussed using schoolwide teams as decision-making bodies, and teachers in one of these schools explicitly stated that the team did not do much for the school.

Participants External to the School

Countless educational providers including districts, universities, and private educational consultants stand at the ready to assist high schools in their improvement efforts. Several schools in our sample drew from districts, schoolwide model providers, and hired evaluators or school planning specialists in making instructional improvement decisions.

Districts. The district (represented by curriculum coordinators, directors of school improvement, and directors of secondary education) were, by far, the most influential external agents in the schools we visited. Teachers and administrators in 18 of the schools we visited reported that their district selected significant strategies that the school was either required or strongly encouraged to use. In four more schools, members of the district central office worked collaboratively with administrators, leadership teams, or, in one district, departments to help strategies for improvement. Literature on decision making and the application of information in

organizations recognizes that power structures play important roles in determining the outcomes of decision situations (Brown, 1993). The districts in our sample enjoyed the benefit of authority they received as knowledgeable, trusted, and respected information providers as well as the benefit of power bestowed by the hierarchical nature of the educational institution. With this authority districts selected and implemented improvement strategies in the schools we visited. Although we saw several instances in which schools appreciated the suggestions and support of their districts, we also saw instances in which schools grudgingly implemented the district's programs or even resisted, intentionally failed to implement, or weakly implemented the district's strategy.

As stated earlier, a link between district involvement and the design of accountability policies seems likely but is still unclear from these data. Only Pennsylvania's accountability system made districts their primary target for sanctions,¹⁴ but even Pennsylvania exercised its authority to sanction districts in relatively few cases.¹⁵ Though the state has exercised its authority sparingly, the superintendent from one district in our sample indicated that he feared the sanctions that other districts in the state had received. Though no other district administrators directly stated that their intervention was a result of the

¹⁴ California and Michigan had each taken over districts in their states, but these takeovers were in response to extreme cases or were a result of fiscal crisis in districts and not linked to the state's current accountability policy.

¹⁵ At the time of data collection, Pennsylvania had listed 10 districts on its "empowerment list," which makes the district eligible for state intervention. The state had only identified two districts as "empowerment districts," which indicates that the state could exercise even more authority than with the schools on the list.

state's accountability pressure, six of the eight schools in our Pennsylvania sample reported a strong district role. In the rest of our data, however, the involvement of the district did not seem to be related to the strength of the state's accountability system. Five of the eight schools we visited in North Carolina, a high-accountability state, reported strong district roles, while no more than three schools in New York and California, the other two strong accountability states, reported the district making important programmatic decisions for the school. This result suggested that the level of district involvement did not depend on the level of stakes created by the accountability system but on other factors at the district and school level.¹⁶

Status in the state's accountability system seemed to play a role in determining which schools received special attention from the districts, but even this link is not perfect. Florida, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania each had one school in which the district took a strong role because the school had been classified as low-performing by the state or was among the districts' lowest performing schools. However, a school's accountability status did not *necessarily* imply strong district intervention. Our sample also included a handful of schools that were among their districts' lowest performing or had received low marks in their states' accountability system and that did not receive strong intervention.

The role of districts in California showed the most direct link between district intervention and accountability. Districts in our sample actually seemed to co-opt the state's policy mechanisms to intervene with their own low-performing schools. Our sample included three schools from two

different districts that had been identified as in need of improvement and participated in the state's II/USP and, therefore, were required by the state to hire an external evaluator. In each case, the districts selected their schools' external evaluators. Clearly, these schools received support from the district because they had been identified as low-performing and received support that was prescribed by the accountability policy. (More details on II/USP follow.)

External providers and state policy: The case of California's II/USP. The structure of the accountability system and a school's experience with accountability, however, seemed to play a part in the extent to which schools accessed nondistrict forms of external assistance in making school plans and selecting strategies. Five schools described involvement of external assistors in their search for strategies. The most prominent use of external assistance across the states we visited was in California, where three schools in our sample participated in the state's II/USP. The California case provides the most direct link between decision making and the state's accountability policy and, therefore, merits a detailed discussion in this chapter. California identified each of these three schools as in need of improvement and, therefore, eligible for participation in the II/USP, which is voluntary. As participants in the program, schools were required by the state to hire an external evaluator from a state-approved list of assistors to plan the school's improvement strategies, for which the state provides funding for 2 years. The intended impact of this program on decision making is to force schools to include evaluators and an assistance team in the decision-making process and to increase the quantity and quality of information used in the decision-making process.

Although II/USP nominally identifies schools as the locus of decision making and

¹⁶ Weinbaum (in this publication) explores in more detail the conditions that may be leading to district involvement.

change, the selection of external evaluators becomes yet another point at which districts often exploit the power vested in them by the hierarchy of educational institutions. Districts often take the lead in identifying external evaluators and matching them with schools. As cases in point, both of the California districts with II/USP schools in our sample selected the participating schools and chose the external evaluators to work with those schools. Each district selected a single external evaluator to work with all of its II/USP high schools. Our sample included two schools in each district, but only one of the high schools in the first district participated in II/USP. In the second district, both of our sample schools participated in II/USP.

Our sample revealed that the interaction between external evaluators and schools varied across schools. Although the state must approve the external evaluator, it was clear from comments made by our respondents that these providers offer different types of services to the schools that hire them. Just as local context and acts of resistance constrained districts' efforts in schools, local conditions affected the impact of external evaluators. The school with the most successful II/USP experience demonstrated a collaborative arrangement with its external evaluator. While the school had already begun to search for solutions to the many problems of an urban high school with a large immigrant student population, assistance by the external evaluator appeared to direct the search toward a coherent set of solutions. Two factors seemed important in this successful II/USP experience: (a) the school's strong leadership and communal culture and (b) the school's strong commitment to the ongoing implementation and improvement of the action plan developed during the II/USP process, a condition also found in a recent comprehensive examination of II/USP by

the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (O'Day & Bitter, 2003).

Other external providers. Two additional schools, one in North Carolina and one in Florida, received external assistance in their search for improvement. However, the assistance received by each of these schools was very different. The school in North Carolina received attention from a local university that "adopted" the school. The university did not require any payment from the school or the district for their assistance. They collaborated with the district and school to locate resources and plan an improvement strategy for the school. The school in Florida, by adopting a schoolwide model, purchased a plan for school improvement. The school model included a prescribed program for curriculum and school organization. Although research on external partners suggests that schools maintain some control over the plan to be implemented (Finnigan, O'Day, & Wakelyn, 2002), the model essentially made a number of decisions about school change and what it would look like in this school. Interestingly, both of the schools using these external providers hailed from high-accountability states and had earned the lowest or next to lowest ranking in their respective accountability systems.¹⁷ While the use of external assistance in only two schools certainly cannot confirm that high stakes compels schools to seek external assistance in planning school improvement, this may be an interesting question to pursue in larger samples.

¹⁷ The two schools referred to in this statement came from Florida and North Carolina. The school from Florida was labeled a D school (the second to lowest ranking) by the state. The school from North Carolina was identified as a priority school.

Making the Decisions: Information and Solutions

The discussion to this point has focused on the ways in which the states, through their application of goals and sanctions, have influenced the process of decision making in schools. However, both advocates and critics of accountability say that focusing goals and improvement efforts is not enough to ensure the success of the policy. These policies, which require that schools teach *all* students to the *same* standards in a growing number of academic subjects, represents a substantial shift in the purpose of high schools (Siskin, 2003), and, therefore, high schools must select and carry out strategies that produce a shift in instructional programs and practices that will match the shift inherent to this policy. Furthermore, critics of accountability argue that the changes in programs' curriculum and practice must do more than strategically target students, narrow curriculum, and focus on test preparation skills, activities some researchers argue have happened under accountability conditions (McNeil, 2000). In the discussion that follows we explore to what extent schools seek out and select strategies to represent the shift in practice Siskin (2003) argues may be necessary and avoid the strategic but only surface strategies of which McNeil warns.

In this section, we take a look at the information that is used to select strategies for reform and a range of solutions chosen by high schools in their efforts to improve students' performance. We frame this discussion around the model of search and selection proposed in the literature on bounded rationality, a model we earlier argued relates to the conditions of educational organizations in the context of

accountability. Bounded rationality predicts (a) that schools will turn most frequently to ideas that are already held within the school or are very close to the school and (b) that schools will favor strategies that maintain their current practice by adding onto the core program or targeting students within the core program. This model, therefore, predicts what many accountability critics argue is the policy's weakness—the incentive to engage in short-sighted strategies that are peripheral to the core technology of schools.

Our examination of schools' search and strategy selection confirmed this prediction in many ways. Schools by and large relied on local information and adopted strategies that “tweaked” their current program or dealt with issues by having splinter programs that did not disrupt the traditional program. However, we also found ways in which barriers to new information were overcome and situations in which schools pursued strategies that changed their core technology. We found that districts provided a dominant force leading to the use of new information and strategies. The sections that follow describe the ways in which schools revealed the predictions of bounded rationality. However, in these sections, we also provide an extensive discussion of how schools *did not* conform to the model's predictions in an effort to illustrate for district leaders and policymakers the role districts can play in providing schools with new ideas and supporting reform.

The Conditions for Finding New Ideas: The Search for Information in Schools

Our data offer additional support to the existing literature supporting the basic premise of the bounded rationality theory. Teachers in some rural areas described their

professional development options as limited. Teachers across our sample often described their professional development opportunities as too general to be put to use. Several teachers discussed the impact their tight schedules had on their ability to go outside the school for information; meanwhile, few schools described coherent efforts to bring new ideas or information on curriculum or instructional practice to teachers. Principals also described their own time constraints and the budget constraints that restricted the opportunities that could be made available to teachers. Contributing to the constraints imposed by time and resources were the circumstances under which most decisions in the schools we visited were made. Recall from the sections on decision situations and participants that most of the decisions described for us were made by individuals or ad hoc groups that had no formal recognition by the school's organizational structure. These individuals or groups rarely had resources backing their decision-making efforts. Furthermore, many of the decisions, even in the relatively rare cases in which departments were making decisions, were carrying out relatively informal and quick searches on an "as needed" basis. In many of these cases, decision makers attempted to address the problems relatively quickly with one or two meetings.

Resources were not the only culprits in limiting access; our research team found that in several cases teachers and administrators showed a "benign neglect" of ideas outside the school. Teachers and administrators often showed almost no awareness that they could or should look beyond their experience or their colleagues for information on new strategies, and they showed little knowledge of how to do so. While this failure to consider outside information was not explicitly mentioned by the originators of bounded rationality, this behavior seems a logical consequence of

working in contexts with what is perceived to be unclear, inconsistent, or unreliable information. While teachers' perception that strategies were not available to be found was less obvious in our data than the constraints on access to information, teachers in one school commented explicitly on the lack of good programs on adolescent literacy.

Given the constraints described above and as predicted by the model, teachers' and administrators' reliance on information, knowledge, and skills that teachers and administrators already possessed appeared overwhelming in our initial impressions of the schools we visited. Much as with Huberman's (1983) conclusion that teachers generally view valid information as information received from local colleagues, we found that teachers seemed most confident with the resources they had at hand in their schools. Researchers visiting schools often remarked on the lack of search anywhere outside the school. Reports by researchers from the field on each school were filled with descriptions of teachers' efforts to learn from their colleagues and to resolve issues by calling on their own experience or the experience of their colleagues, typically departmental colleagues. At the departmental level, respondents reported that they often arrived at decisions by pooling the information of the department members and drawing from the collective knowledge and experience of the departmental members. Teachers described their departments' decision making as a process that could be characterized as "putting heads together" to come up with a strategy or running with an idea one member brought to the table. Schoolwide teams described efforts much like the departmental efforts to draw on the collective knowledge and skills of the team members. Finally, principals described using their own experiences to select strategies or programs for the school.

Organizations, however, rarely represent just one style of search and selection, and our sample of schools was no exception. While the vast majority of decision making in schools relied on internal information when making decisions at every level of the organization, the schools in our sample challenged the model's predictions and revealed a variety of avenues through which information from outside the school entered the organization. Schools in our sample benefited from instances when information was actively brought to the schools as well as instances in which individuals inside the school sought out information.

Interestingly, districts in our sample appeared to provide the most common avenue along which information about strategies or approaches reached into schools. This is possibly one of the most significant findings in this examination of the decision and search process of high schools. Respondents in more than half (26) of the schools in our sample explicitly commented that they learned about one or more of the improvement strategies they used in the school when their district either suggested or required the strategy. Districts in our sample introduced a wide variety of strategies to their schools, including new curriculum programs, new assessment tools, new remedial classes and/or curriculum, and new school schedules or organization. As explained in the earlier discussion of participants in decision making, the districts played an active and valuable role in the work of schools. With authority and resources behind them, districts used a variety of approaches to bring new ideas into schools. At times the district introduced a strategy by requiring all schools or schools in a subgroup such as low-performing schools to implement a specific strategy. For example, one district in our study required all of its schools to implement a package of

grade and course make-up programs, a strategy that had not been used in the district's high schools. When districts required all of their schools to implement a strategy, they typically had little discussion with school administrators or teachers about the design of the specific strategy. Districts also offered unsolicited suggestions of what schools could do. For example, several schools in Florida described developing an intensive reading course that targeted ninth-grade students who performed poorly on the eighth-grade assessment. Teachers and administrators in these schools explained that the idea of an intensive reading course came from their districts and was presented as a possibility for their school and others that struggled with weak readers.

In several cases, schools actually solicited information from their districts and turned to their district administrators for help in resolving issues in their school or worked collaboratively with schools. An example of this collaboration was seen in a Florida district that assembled a team of content area specialists to work with each of the schools that the district identified as its greatest need schools. This team met regularly with the administration and members of the departments with which the members shared a specialty, and together they developed a plan for improvement and decided on strategies to address the school's needs. Teachers and administrators in this school explained that the district's team members often presented them with ideas that they would consider and often implement.

Our sample also showed a situation in which the district planted administrative and consultant personnel into a school and charged these individuals with carrying out a specific school improvement plan designed by the district and based on new curriculum standards. In fact, at this school the principal admitted that he was brought into the school

because he was trusted by the district to implement the district's plan, and because he planned to retire he had no need to make friends with the staff. He only aimed to implement the plan. While not common in our sample, this method of "grafting" (Huber, 1995, p 136) individuals with specific skills or ideas often appears in literature on organizational learning.

Professional development by teachers represents one more means through which districts, as regular providers of professional development, brought information into schools, but it also represents an important means through which information from a variety of sources spanned the boundaries of the organization. This chapter emphasizes the importance of teachers' daily decisions for understanding the scope of the efforts being made in schools. The discussion just above reported that teachers based the vast majority of their decisions on their own knowledge and skills or that of their colleagues. Many teachers, however, are continually updating their repertoire of knowledge and skills through regular participation in professional development on a variety of topics. Although teachers who have taken a professional development course on integrating writing in their classes may not immediately introduce new writing assignments, they may do so as the demand to improving reading and writing increases. Professional development serves as an important means through which teachers become exposed to new practices and curriculum.

Teachers in this study described a wide range of professional development topics, with some of the most common including classroom management, test preparation, coping with weak readers, writing across the curriculum, understanding and adopting standards, and curriculum alignment. While professional development on classroom management has been a part of professional

development, topics such as standards alignment as well as reading and writing across curriculum areas represent topics receiving new emphasis in light of state assessments on reading and writing. The one-shot or short series workshop format dominated the type of professional development described by the teachers in our study. However, teachers also described professional learning through communication with teachers outside of their school, independent research, or accessing the Internet.¹⁸ Teachers' own professional development and, because teachers drew heavily from each other, the professional development of their colleagues introduced variation into the existing knowledge and skills of the teaching staff. Although teachers rarely mentioned situations in which they sought professional development in response to a specific immediate concern, they mentioned that they had, at times, drawn from the information they received at prior professional development sessions and, no doubt, received the benefit of their colleagues' professional growth when turning to their colleagues for assistance.

Teacher professional development as pursued in most schools, however, is not the most efficient way to get information into schools, because teacher selectively obtained and retained the information they received through their professional development experiences. The professional development of teachers in our sample was largely teacher-driven and almost completely dependent on the initiative of the teachers. Consequently, the information introduced to teachers was highly

¹⁸ The use of the Internet was mentioned enough that it may be worth an independent investigation that examines what teachers search for on the Internet, the quality of the materials they receive from the Internet, and how communities of teachers on the Web might influence how we think about teachers' professional community.

unsystematic and varied widely with on the teachers' own initiative, interests, assessment of their professional learning needs, and professional requirements. In addition, because teachers fulfilled an interest or a requirement with their professional development without necessarily identifying a need to update or change their instructional practice, what teachers retained was also highly unreliable. If the teacher finds the content of the workshop compelling enough, she might retain the information but a considerable amount of information is simply lost because the teacher has not found the workshop compelling, or the ideas conveyed are not met with support or follow-up after the workshop.

Another significant means through which information entered the decision-making arena from outside the organization was through the principal. That is, the principal served as the boundary spanner for the organization. Thirteen principals in our sample described their efforts to attend conferences, attend workshops, read trade journals, and/or engage in principal networks intending to learn about new strategies or approaches that could be used in the school. Like the teacher professional development, this form of search had limitations. Principals generally engaged in these activities independently or shared the experiences with only closely situated assistant administrators. This information typically reached teachers only when the principal acted on this information to create school policy. Interestingly, most of the principals who described these independent search efforts were also principals who played dominant decision-making roles according to their schools' respondents.

Other sources of external information entered through external agents working with the school or educational vendors. External assistants worked with schools

through highly formalized relationships with comprehensive school reform agents by one school in Florida or with educational evaluation teams by II/USP schools in California. Schools also worked with external agents informally. Schools in Michigan described receiving information from less formalized relationships with their regional education centers, and one school in California learned about a strategy when a vendor approached the school directly.

When we typically think about individuals searching for solutions, we think about individuals engaging in research efforts, attending trade conferences, or talking with people who are doing different things. However, decision makers bring information into decision situations from sources both close and far. In this discussion we have differentiated between information within the school and outside the school because information from outside the organization has the potential to bring variation to the ideas discussed inside the school. We have explained how information gathered from within the organization might possibly offer variation when these ideas remain latent. While ideas from outside the organization offer great potential for introducing variation, it should be noted that those seeking information are often drawn to familiar and comfortable ideas (Rosenkopf & Almeida, 2003). For example, principals may be drawn to literature or conferences on after-school programs to remediate students instead of new remedial curriculum because they are already familiar with or have already implemented some form of tutoring program in the school. Therefore, external information does not always imply novel information.

This discussion shows that, despite the continued reliance on local information for decisions being made in schools, the bounded rationality model is not purely playing out in the high schools we visited.

The constraints in accessing information are being overcome by active districts and, at times, the initiative of people inside schools. Since the model for search and selection suggests that constrained access to reliable information is a primary reason organizations focus on locally known strategies, the fact that many of the schools in our sample acknowledged a need to meet the state's goals and showed channels of information coming into the schools suggests that they might also be willing at times to select strategies that deviate from the model's second prediction and challenge the technological core of their school. We might expect that the avenues to new ideas would introduce strategies that offered a departure from the technical core of the school and that these ideas would occasionally be incorporated into their change effort.

The Selection of Strategies: A Range of Possibilities

The extent to which strategies deviate from the school's traditional practice shows the potential the reform has to significantly change the educational experience of students in the school. While change is not necessarily good, it is probably fair to suggest that improvement in low-performing schools will be limited unless these schools change the way they work with students. In this chapter we cannot evaluate the impact of changes on student achievement, but we can comment on the extent to which we saw schools making changes to improve student performance. In the discussion above we suggested that the new information may introduce strategies that would change the work of the school. It is important to remember, however, that the model of bounded rationality does not account for the fact that in many schools new information that was used to make decisions was highly

unsystematic, hurried, unfocused, and often pursued by individuals or small groups in the school. These issues, no doubt, lessened the impact information might have in the organization by limiting the scope of individuals processing the new ideas, hindering a clear direction for the information, and relying heavily on the fortunate coincidence of ideas and decision instead of more deliberate efforts to identify a need and seek a solution. These limitations notwithstanding, we found instances in which schools stepped away from the peripheral changes that dominated the reform efforts we saw in our sample. These cases, though not common, are significant in that they show the reform possibilities that can be realized in supported high schools with a motivated staff. In this section, we focus on the extent to which the strategies described by our respondents hold some potential to change the core technology of the school. Because this chapter focuses on instructional change, we define the core technology of the school as the curriculum (what is taught), instructional practice (how curriculum is taught), and organizational structure. In this section we intend to provide a sense of the range seen across schools and within schools. To do so, we focus on four strategy types that together reflect the vast majority of strategies described by respondents in our study: (a) remedial strategies, (b) curriculum strategies, (c) instructional practice, and (d) organizational strategies. Our discussion does not provide a complete breakdown of the strategies used in the schools we visited. A more thorough analysis of the specific approaches used in our sample schools can be found in Harris, Prosky, Bach, Heilig, and Hussar (in this publication). The most important point to take away from this discussion is that, despite theory that suggests that targets drive decision makers to select strategies that aim just to meet the

target, schools across all of our accountability contexts showed a range of responses that go from the “quick fix” or minimal-impact approach, which we call peripheral, to strategies that in modest ways change the educational experience of some students, which we call moderate changes, to more fundamental change in the educational program brought to students, which we consider significant changes to the core.

Remedial Strategies

The many add-on programs used in schools to remediate students operate on the periphery of the school’s core technology, anchor one end of the continuum of impact on the schools’ core technology, and represent more than half of all the remedial approaches pursued by the schools in our sample. For the most part, these programs did not interrupt the curriculum used by teachers or affect the instructional practice of teachers. These programs include before- or after-school tutoring programs or teachers’ efforts to meet students outside of the regular school day. While these programs generally offered students the opportunity to receive additional instruction from teachers (few schools used outside tutors or peer volunteers), schools usually did not or could not require students to participate in the programs.

Schools also used remedial strategies that involved a new curriculum for the schools’ lowest performing students, and these efforts represent approximately 40% of the remedial strategies in our sample. In these cases, schools created remedial classes for their weakest students. Schools often created these courses for their 9th grade students, but in some cases these classes included students through the 12th grade. Schools typically assigned students to these programs on the basis of their test

performance, but some schools used traditional student tracking mechanisms such as teacher evaluation. Schools intended most of the remedial courses recently introduced to provide an additional class for students to take before beginning the high school curriculum. While their impact on the school’s core technology overall was very limited, in these courses students experienced a specialized curriculum. In contrast with the add-on classes, one school in our sample rewrote the regular curriculum for its lowest level 10th-grade English class to include a new chronology of information and new information. While still targeting only a set of students, this effort shows an even deeper impact on the core technology for these students. Only three schools in our sample went so far as to completely rethink the educational program they offered to their lower level students.

Curriculum Strategies

Peripheral strategies predominated the activities described for us, but unlike the remedial approach where we saw few instances of schools moving beyond moderately deep strategies, the focus on standards and standards alignment in the policy seems to have prompted several efforts to create deeper change in the curriculum. Well over half of the curriculum strategies were very peripheral or only moderate changes, which included the many ways teachers added test prep activities to their lessons individually or as part of department and schoolwide efforts, programs that added new advanced courses to the school’s curriculum, and efforts to introduce or expand advanced placement programs. However, almost a third of the strategies related to curriculum provided deeper curriculum change that involved efforts to rewrite curriculum and align the school’s curriculum to the state’s standards.

In some cases, the curriculum revision, initiated at both the school and district levels, resulted in significant changes to the timing and coverage of courses.¹⁹ Finally, the most substantial effort to alter the core technology of a school was one school's decision to adopt an entirely new math curriculum for grades 9–12 based on principles of integrated math, previously not a the central approach used by the school's math department. This change came with not only a new philosophy of teaching math but also new materials, intensive and long-term professional development for teachers, and a battery of benchmark assessments. Students in this school after the implementation of the new curriculum experienced courses that were radically different from their predecessors.

Instructional Practice

The range of efforts to change instructional practice had individual self-initiated professional development by teachers, which accounted for two thirds of the instructional strategies in our sample, at one end of the spectrum, with schoolwide efforts to educate the entire staff in a specific instructional style on the other end. In between these examples of very peripheral and very substantial change efforts, popular efforts included attempts to provide professional development on teaching to standards as well as incorporating reading strategies and writing

activities schoolwide. Both of these efforts, if enacted, challenge traditional norms of teacher autonomy and norms of differentiation in content, goals, and practices for different subjects. In addition, schools showed concerted efforts to introduce teachers to technology they can use in the classroom as well new approaches to engaging students. To varying degrees we found that these efforts did impact teachers' practice. For example, teachers described changes they made in presenting material to students based on training from a district-sponsored consultant, teachers discussed instruction with literacy coaches, and teachers worked in clusters to jointly plan curriculum and lessons.

Organizational Changes

Organizational changes that affected the instructional program represent another class of strategies adopted across the schools we visited, though they were by far the least discussed by our respondents. Most of the attempted strategies included schedule changes or minor changes to the school day. The most peripheral changes to organization we found included efforts to build in 15 minutes for silent reading or test prep. Changes to the school day, typically to the block schedule, represented change that had the *potential* to significantly change the way teachers present the curriculum to students. That potential is more likely to be realized if teachers received training for such change and were willing to make the change. As it turned out, the impact of this policy on the core tended to be limited. The institution of a ninth-grade academy represented another popular organizational change made in the schools we visited. The ninth-grade academy shows some effort to change the educational experience for students, but this effort was limited in the total number of students impacted and had relatively modest

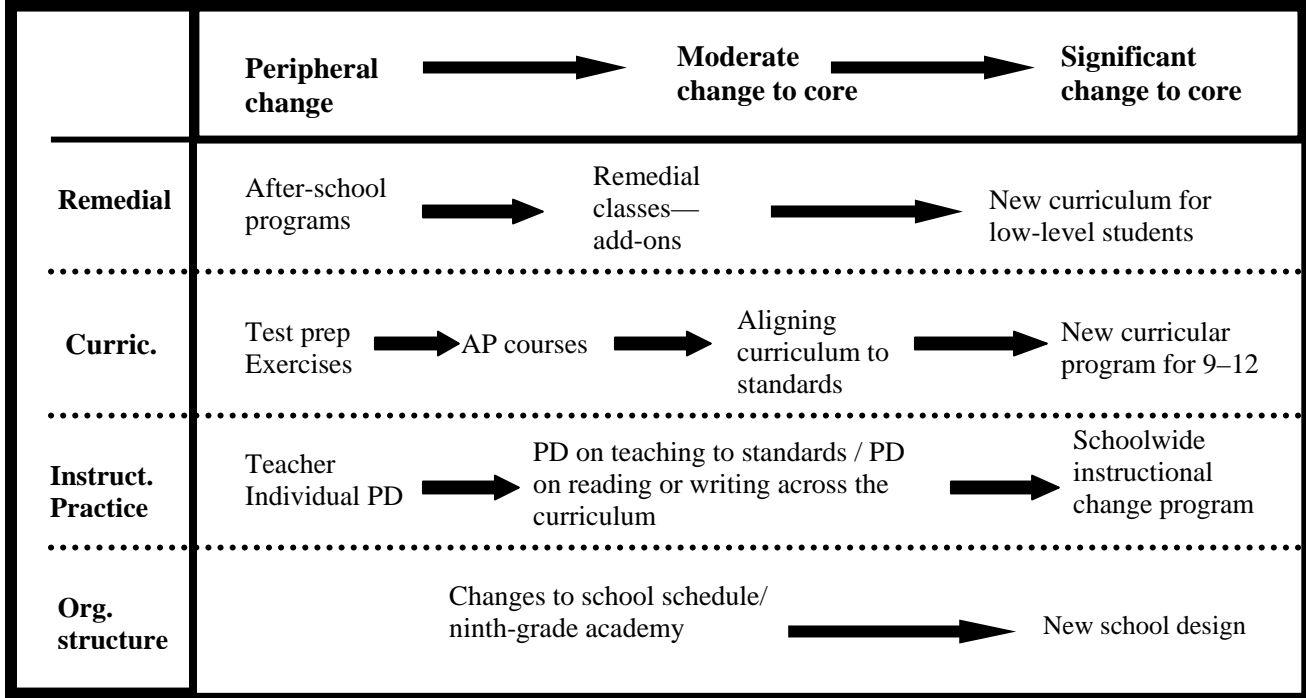
¹⁹ The efforts to rewrite curriculum show one way in which accountability may well have mitigated some of the information constraints faced by schools. Many respondents indicated that the standards to which they aligned their curriculum helped reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding what they should teach. In doing so, standards to some extent reduced the uncertainty associated with teaching and the educational process, which is one of the factors leading to a satisficing response, a response in which the decision making only aims to satisfy the targets.

implications for the instructional program. We did, however, visit a school that used a new organizational structure to support an instructional approach and thus offered an example of an organizational change that challenged the core technology of the school. This school, which had previously operated as a technical high school and had recently become a comprehensive high school with traditional academic disciplines, adopted a schoolwide model that complemented the vocational tracks with a restructuring of the academic program into interdepartmental teams. In addition, the school design introduced a curricular package intended to operate with the interdepartmental and the vocational orientation of the school. Although the design is still being implemented and will likely face some challenges as it rolls out, in many ways this school looked and acted very differently than the traditional high school.

Looking across the schools we see a range of activities that show the need for immediate gains, possibly as a response to the press of accountability, as well as deeper efforts to improve the instructional program for their students. It is interesting to note that we saw this variation within schools as well, indicating that schools realize that they must show gains immediately to avoid the consequences of public reporting and possible sanctions but also realize the need for long-term improvement. Even sites that engaged in the most substantial change efforts described activities expected to achieve immediate gains by targeting low-scoring students with additional assistance and providing all students with test preparation activities while they simultaneously pursued curriculum alignment, writing across the curriculum, new instructional approaches or new organizational structures. A school in Florida provided an example of this blended

approach to meet immediate testing needs by implementing programs to tutor low-performing students after school and new courses for ninth-grade students who scored below grade level in reading and math while simultaneously pursuing longer term improvement with a schoolwide effort to vertically align curriculum to ensure less overlap in course content and establish a track through which more students can reach honors-level courses. Although few schools ventured to the far right of the continuum shown in Figure 2, most of the schools in our sample showed blending of very peripheral strategies with strategies that made moderate changes to the core technology.

Figure 2. A Continuum of Change



Conclusions

The goal of state accountability policy is to capture schools’ attention, direct schools’ focus, and motivate action. To a large extent our visits to 48 schools shows that the states have, in fact, succeeded in these goals and in so doing have an important presence in the decision making of schools. Though we saw exceptions in each state, teachers and administrators have incorporated the state’s goals into their own articulation of goals or sense of accountability. The problems and challenges identified by our respondents clearly reflect their concern over the state’s performance goals, and a high share of the problems highlighted by the states accountability reporting and sanctions were addressed in some way by the schools. While we do not have the longitudinal view that would allow us to say whether schools are engaged in more improvement than prior to the

implementation of accountability, teachers and administrators in many of the schools we visited were engaged in efforts to improve student achievement.

The success of these policies, however, also relies on the ability of schools to seek and select appropriate strategies for their schools. Accountability policies, by design, leave most of the decision making regarding reform initiatives to agents in the local schools and districts, who presumably have unique knowledge of their schools’ needs and strengths. States, by consequence, had little direct influence over who was making decisions in schools, over how schools organized to select strategies for improvement, or over the information used to make decisions. In the two states that did play a direct role, this support was reserved for a small number of the state’s lowest performing schools. As it turns out, in most of our schools the press generated by the state accountability systems seemed to do

little to prompt schools toward more coordinated or systematic decision-making efforts. Few schools engaged in deep needs analysis, few schools described thorough efforts to analyze current or potential programs, and schools did not consistently seek information on strategies or use research-based evidence in support of their decisions, a continuing hope in the Department of Education. In addition, schools only rarely made use of already existing structures to coordinate the search and selection of strategies. Only a few schools discussed the use of schoolwide planning teams for decision making. Departments, despite their importance in organizing teachers, provided the forum for significant decision-making efforts in only a few occasions. By and large, the departmental structure offered individual teachers a professional group within which they engaged in social and professional conversation, but the departmental structure did not represent an organizational form in which information was collected, discussed, and then decided upon. Schools often overcame the burden of seeking strategies by relying heavily on information already known in the school from prior professional development or professional experience and often selected strategies that did not radically change the way they had always worked.

Given this final assumption, it was not surprising to learn that cases showing a high level of sophistication and coordination of the decision process also seemed to be places that had a history of such efforts, described as a “legacy” in one school we visited. We found that districts succeeded in introducing new ideas to schools and helping to facilitate more coordinated and deeper reforms in schools. While the instances in which the districts’ support led to comprehensive change that challenged the technical core of schools were in the

minority of cases in our sample, the impact of districts in these instances was very promising, suggesting that the district may be the most effective support provider to schools that states may want to facilitate. We suggest that states think seriously about how to mobilize districts and facilitate district efforts to assist their schools.

It is important, however, to remember that not all school districts have the resources to be active support providers. Many of the nation’s smallest districts have little more than a superintendent and administrative assistant occupying the district office. In these cases the most logical support structure to assist the schools are the regional educational centers which existed in some form in each of the six states we visited. These centers with pooled resources can serve as clearinghouses for information on new approaches, can coordinate evaluation efforts, and can house coaches and reform facilitators that serve several regional schools. Unfortunately, not all states use these organizations in the effort of schools reform. In a few states these organizations had unclear mandates regarding their role in supporting school reform, and in others the funding for these organizations had been so drastically cut that centers that districts did not financially support had been closed. Therefore, we suggest that states consider these regional centers as potential support structures for school reform in regions with small districts. We suggest that the state reconsider the mission of these centers to focus their resources around school and instructional reform and provide resources to these centers to effectively provide this support.

In this chapter we described the ways in which state accountability policies shaped or did not shape the schools decision making with regard to improving student performance. We learned that that accountability policy has to a large extent

shaped the focus of decision making but “leaving the specifics to the locals” is not ideal when local conditions such as the quantity and quality of information about new strategies and the degree of communication and coordination in schools do not lead to effective decision making. This work certainly identifies weaknesses at the local level that hinder efforts to adopt and implement improvement strategies. However, this work also shows that high schools will make changes to their academic program and practice when the information about strategies is brought to them and they are supported through the change. Accompanying accountability policies with policies to improve information availability as well as mobilizing support structures such as districts or regional centers offers the chance to improve decisions and implementation in schools while remaining faithful to the spirit of outcomes accountability.

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