

# CHAPTER 6

## Summary

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### Introduction

American public education faces increasing pressure to carry out its mission of preparing youths with the skills to compete in today's global economy and to participate constructively in a democratic society. As part of this pressure, policymakers have developed increasingly sophisticated accountability and support systems in efforts to steer schools towards improved performance. These "new accountability" approaches emphasize student performance over system inputs, focus on schools rather than school districts as units of improvement, and use public reporting of student outcomes and rewards and sanctions as ways to motivate schools to alter their curriculum and instructional practices (Fuhrman, 1999). These strategies embody two key assumptions: (a) that accountability systems can be made powerful enough to influence the behavior of schools and (b) that schools have or will develop the capacity to identify, select, and implement policies and practices that will improve their performance.

State and national assessment results show that many elementary schools have grown in educational performance over the last decade. Some researchers have argued that a portion of these gains can be attributed to state accountability systems that have set standards, focused attention, and created

incentives for improved performance (Carnoy & Loeb, 2004; Grissmer & Flanagan, 1998; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; Hanushek & Raymond, 2002). High schools, however, have not experienced the same positive effects, and we know little about how high schools respond to external accountability pressures. The preceding chapters provided insight into how teachers and administrators in American public high schools are influenced by and attempt to address the problems posed by the new accountability. Our analysis of 48 high schools in six states builds upon earlier studies with smaller and less representative samples of secondary schools, sometimes agreeing with and sometimes challenging their conclusions about accountability. In this final chapter, we review several of our key points, and discuss their implications for policymakers.

### Accountability—A Stimulus for Action

This first phase of our study confirmed the point made by others that state accountability systems can focus educators on reform, and motivate them to address content standards and measured student performance. State accountability policies clearly shaped the goals and many of the challenges that high school staff identified, and influenced the actions that they undertook. To be sure, educators had

goals and initiatives not related to accountability. For instance, teachers and administrators were concerned about keeping students in school through graduation, student success in postsecondary education, student motivation and social/emotional needs, and academics beyond those measured by state tests. But schools, departments, or individual teachers also adopted a plethora of accountability-related initiatives, from voluntary tutoring sessions or test preparation activities to more comprehensive overhauls of curriculum and instruction.

In general, we found greater levels of response in California, Florida, New York, and North Carolina, states whose strong accountability systems had major consequences for both students and high schools. Intriguingly, however, we also found substantial responses from many high schools in Pennsylvania and some in Michigan, although these states had no sanctions for poorly performing students or schools at the time of our study. Indeed, state accountability drew attention even when educators were not held directly responsible for student performance. For instance, although high school teachers did not think their job was at risk if students earned poor test results, professional pride and concern about their students, their administrators, and/or the reputation of their school motivated many to address aspects of accountability.

Furthermore, we were also surprised to discover high levels of response even when educators expressed strong criticisms of their state accountability systems, a finding which in some ways contradicts previous implementation literatures. Educators in many of our schools questioned the operational and technical aspects of their state's testing

and accountability programs, such as the infrequency of test results, late reporting, the way progress was measured, whether expectations for students were reasonable, and the like. They also worried about negative impacts of the system on students' motivation to stay in school, staff morale, and the high school curriculum. For instance, a number of educators feared that the focus on state accountability had narrowed the curricula that they could offer, and poorly served students whose interests were traditionally accommodated by high school programs that helped keep them interested in school. In addition to concerns that vocational, arts, and other kinds of coursework were being squeezed by the new accountability programs, some educators worried that tests had narrowed the content of English and mathematics courses, rigidified instructional routines, and reduced the academic experiences for low-performing students. A recent article about a persistently failing high school in California observed that low-performing students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade were placed in intensive basic skills classes, leaving them little time to pursue other academic subjects like science or social studies. This strategy, prescribed by a state intervention team, is similar to that being implemented in about two dozen other California high schools that have failed to meet achievement goals (Munzo, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite these fears and problems, the pressures thrust upon high schools by the accountability system generated concerted action. Staff in two of the Michigan schools that expressed the most criticism of testing and accountability were, in fact, more active than staff in the other schools we studied there. Part of the explanation lies in our

parallel finding that educators across the states had come to accept the fundamental premise of standards, and saw the aim of common, strong academic goals as compatible with good educational practice. They also had come to accept the idea of performance-based accountability. We heard praise for common measures to calibrate teachers' expectations, and educators agreed that the public should hold students and educators to account for meeting certain outcomes. In addition, many believed that, at least in one form or another, these public policy objectives were here to stay. In the end, pressure and acceptance of the intent of reform contributed to a substantial amount of response across the six states in our study.

Yet while we found a substantial amount of accountability-related action across the states, it is also crucial to recognize marked variations in both the *level* and the *nature* of schools' responses within any particular state.

## Level of Response

While we found a generally higher level of response in high-stakes systems, consequences were not sufficient in and of themselves to motivate action consistently across districts or schools. Even the lowest performing schools in these states sometimes felt little press, and reacted only minimally. We also encountered both strong and weak responses among high schools with different performance records in the low-stakes accountability systems of Pennsylvania and Michigan. Our analysis found that an extremely important factor in whether or not high schools were active was whether they were located in a district that took a

strong stand on accountability, mandating or in other ways encouraging their schools to act on its behalf. While a few schools still resisted these pressures, district advocacy was crucial across all of our sample states.

## Nature of Response

Level of response does not reveal anything about the nature or quality of the actions that high schools selected, or whether the efforts were likely to have significant effects on teaching and learning. While we did not observe instruction or attempt to evaluate implementation in any way, we analyzed whether the adopted initiatives intended to change teaching and curriculum, and whether they were designed to reach a broad or narrow group of students, under the assumption that efforts targeted on teaching and curriculum for broader groups of students would hold greater potential for improvement.

A majority of the accountability-related actions undertaken in these high schools, in fact, did target changes in curriculum and instruction, such as aligning the curriculum to state standards or adding new basic skills and advanced academic courses. Efforts to improve students' ability to read appeared across the majority of our schools. Of course, reading is prerequisite for high school academic courses, and reading problems are highlighted by state tests, even in fields like mathematics. Action in this realm ranged from special reading courses or remedial reading programs to the creation of a reading department in one California high school. Another major area of activity was remediation efforts like tutoring and test preparation. Finally, schools adopted many

organizational changes, such as block scheduling and daily, sustained silent reading time.

However, the reported actions ranged from “quick fixes” that were marginal to classroom practice and of limited impact, to more fundamental efforts to improve the core technology of what is taught in schools and how for a broad group of students. For example, before- or after-school tutoring programs did not challenge regular instructional practice, and typically were not required for students. The ubiquitous test preparation activities usually did not make major changes in curriculum or instruction; test prep was often portrayed as an insert into regular lessons. Teachers typically selected their own professional development activities, driven by their own particular interests or perceptions of need rather than by any common, schoolwide goals or vision of instruction. Similarly, organizational changes like sustained silent reading time were peripheral to regular instruction. Some schools adopted block scheduling in an effort to change teachers’ instructional practices, but others used it to find time for additional services, like counseling.

These kinds of incremental or marginal efforts stand in stark contrast to the more comprehensive initiatives we found in some high schools. For example, one school rewrote the regular curriculum for its lowest level 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English class. Deeper curriculum changes could also be seen in some efforts to rewrite and align curricula to state standards, and to alter the pacing and coverage of courses. One school adopted an entirely new integrated math curriculum for grades 9–12. In the organizational realm, one of our schools adopted a comprehensive school reform

model with organizational changes intended to complement new instructional strategies. Ninth-grade academies or teams were introduced in some schools in an effort to improve the academic and social experiences for this segment of the high school population. Unfortunately, however, we found that these more far-reaching change initiatives were rare occurrences; incremental and marginal efforts dominated how high schools addressed the problems they faced.

So, if accountability design alone is not sufficient to drive consistent, comprehensive action across high schools, we must ask: What is the mix of factors that leads them to respond with more promising actions? A partial answer lies in how schools did or did not organize themselves to search for improvement ideas.

## Searching for Solutions

We found that the search and decision-making process in a majority of our sample of high schools was often haphazard and left up to individual teachers acting on their own initiative—in other words, not well organized. This finding ran contrary to our expectations; the literature on high schools engaged in reform suggests that departments play a major role in the school improvement process (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Little, 1995). This was clearly not the case in most of our high schools. While departments sometimes played a vital role in the social and professional lives of teachers, administrators rarely distributed decision-making authority to their departments, and teachers rarely

described their departments as the locus of power in their schools. Teachers in many schools reported meeting infrequently or on an “as needed” basis. Rather than providing a forum for collective decision making about instruction and instructional change, most department meetings focused on administrative matters and the distribution of information about school and district policies and professional development opportunities. Similarly, while many of the schools in our study created schoolwide committees to develop state-mandated school improvement plans or to conduct needs analysis and planning as part of the accreditation process, these committees rarely played a major role in school decision-making and improvement processes.

By and large, teachers in these high schools decided independently whether to make changes in their practice, curriculum, and materials. When teachers acted on their own, however, they tended to meet accountability demands with basic test prep strategies. In a few cases, groups of teachers, such as those who taught Algebra 1 or ninth-grade English, worked together to align their materials and instruction with state standards and assessments and/or with each other. But most often, a teacher’s actions impacted only her classroom and, at times, only individual students. These individual decisions, while significant and at times constituting the major improvement efforts being made in a school, did not add up to a schoolwide reform effort.

In addition to the individualistic nature of decision making, questions arose about whether teachers had the capacity to develop an effective response to the external demands of

accountability, and whether schools addressed these issues. For example, teachers and administrators in 28 of our schools identified teacher skill or commitment as problem. High school teachers’ ability to develop students’ reading skills was of particular concern, given that many students entered the ninth grade with an elementary-level reading ability and were expected to perform at high levels on state exams. High school teachers typically are not trained to teach basic reading skills, and this may explain why several high schools created separate remedial reading classes for students.

But while a majority of our schools recognized these problems, only 10 described any schoolwide or departmental effort to address them. For instance, in many schools, administrators’ management of instruction was quite distant. While some instructional concerns received a lot of attention, such as student course failure rates in schools with severe dropout problems, veteran teachers said that administrators rarely interacted with them about their practice. In addition, most department chairs felt powerless to make decisions about curriculum and instruction, or were uncomfortable critiquing their peers and trying to exert an influence. Classroom teachers did share ideas with their colleagues, activities that were often facilitated by physical proximity in the school building or by a common lunch period (rather than department meetings). But it was extremely rare to find high school teachers visiting each other’s classrooms or modeling instruction.

Accountability policies theorize that once schools have identified their needs, they will organize themselves to search for new strategies to improve student

performance. Since current accountability expectations challenge the traditional missions of the comprehensive high school and their expectations for students (Siskin, 2004), we anticipated that staff would seek information from outsiders who could share new strategies for meeting these targets. We found, however, that while the press from state accountability focused schools on student achievement, it did not lead them to look beyond schoolhouse doors for information. Rather, teachers drew heavily on their own experience or the experience of their colleagues to solve a problem. Schools and teachers faced both external and internal barriers to access information. Teachers in rural areas did not have physical access to professional development opportunities outside their district. Teachers and principals reported that time constraints and tight budgets limited their ability to attend conferences and workshops. And many teachers and administrators did not seem aware that they should, or could, look beyond themselves or their colleagues for help. In some cases, educators did not know other ways to search for new information.

Another premise of the new accountability, that schools would use data to guide change, often did not materialize. We found some consistent use of data, particularly in North Carolina, where the assessments directly linked to high school course content and results were returned to teachers in a very timely fashion. But in other states, like Michigan, some teachers had never even seen their students' test results. The lack of data use we found in many states stemmed in part from the infrequency of tests at the high school level—state tests were administered once per year, and

often only once in the high school years. The lack of teacher training in the use of test data to analyze and address weaknesses in individual student performance is also a frequently missing link in transforming the theory of data use in standards-based reform into practice.

In the end, few schools described coherent efforts to bring new ideas or information on curriculum and instruction to their teachers. Those that did seemed to have a history of such efforts, appearing to confirm earlier research that it takes capacity to build capacity in high schools (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Debray, Parson, & Avila, 2003; Hatch, 2002).

## **External Information and Support**

While the vast majority of actions in our high schools were based on internally generated decision making, our study did reveal a few avenues through which outside information entered into the process. Of course, teachers brought information to the table from their professional development experiences, as did principals who attended workshops and conferences. It is likely that these experiences informed the choices they made during internal discussions.

Some schools did work more directly with outside assistance providers. For example, a few states like California and North Carolina created external support structures directed at their lowest performing schools. North Carolina hired, trained, and assigned school support teams composed of veteran administrators and subject matter specialists to work with low-performing

high schools for an academic year. California gave struggling high schools grants to hire external evaluators to help develop and implement the schools' improvement plans, under a program known as the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). A few of our study schools developed relationships with local universities, regional education centers, comprehensive school reform providers, or other vendors.

School districts, however, were the most prominent as well as influential external agents in our study sites. They not only stimulated high schools to act on behalf of accountability, but also guided the kinds of actions schools took. Teachers and administrators in more than half of our high schools reported that districts either suggested or required the use of one or more of the improvement strategies in place in their schools. Some districts mandated the use of programs, instructional strategies, or curriculum by all, or by low-performing, high schools, or they offered unsolicited suggestions of what schools could do. Other times, schools requested help from their central office staff, who drew from their knowledge base or sought out new ideas to help the schools.

Active districts tended to be more prescriptive, directing high schools to adopt specific strategies and monitoring the implementation of these practices. Active districts also focused their actions on the goal of higher student performance, generally on the state assessment. Central offices developed curriculum and pacing guides to align school-level instruction to state standards. A few districts initiated quarterly benchmark examinations to provide feedback on student performance on the standards. Some

assigned instructional coaches or content area specialists to develop strategies to address their schools' needs.

However, many districts in our study were not proactive on behalf of accountability for high schools. For some, elementary and middle schools took priority, and high schools were left to operate quite autonomously. Other districts viewed themselves as one of a variety of external resources available whenever schools requested help. But since these districts responded to what schools perceived as their own needs, district programs addressed a wide range of goals, of which student performance was only one. Just as with schools, we encountered active and more passive districts within high and low stakes environments. Little academic research has explored what motivates and helps district organizations intervene on behalf of state accountability goals, particularly at the high school level. Our study sheds some light on this question.

## **Active District Intervention**

Three factors appear to be related to whether districts pressed their high schools to adopt actions on behalf of accountability. One was the prior performance of the high school. Those districts that had particularly low-performing high schools as measured by their state accountability system were more likely to take action with those schools, especially in states that had sanctions for low-performing high schools or students.

However, a second factor interacted with school performance to influence district response: the size of the district central office. (See also, for example,

Hannaway & Kimball, 2001.) Did the district have sufficient human resources to work with its high schools on an ongoing basis? For example, in one study district with a low-performing school, the small size of the central office made it difficult for staff to provide the school with a high level of support. The few staff members were consumed with providing schools with the basics of school operation— personnel, finance, materials, and information—and with responding to the testing and data requirements of the state accountability system. Yet even large districts did not always have sufficient resources to work with all of their schools. In Florida, for example, county districts with large staffs but also large numbers of high schools targeted their assistance to their lowest performing ones, those that received state accountability grades of D and F, because they were subject to state sanctions. Middle-performing high schools received limited support, although they may soon be designated as in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

A third factor, district leadership was also critical, particularly the existence of a few key administrators who established school improvement as a goal, identified a set of improvement strategies, and saw the district’s role as one of directing schools to embrace these strategies. Districts with leaders that were actively supportive of their state accountability system, regardless of the strength of that system, the size of the district office, or the relative performance of their high schools, often stimulated more active responses in their schools as well. Renaissance City, a small district in Pennsylvania, illustrates the point. When it was placed on the

state warning list for poor performance, the long-time superintendent there decided that his earlier approach of delegating school improvement initiatives to the schools had failed. He started to recentralize control over the schools, and held them accountable for raising scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). This led the high school principal to do the same and to implement strategies and discussions centered around improving student achievement on PSSA. Similarly, a small district in North Carolina set high expectations for its schools, used test score data to focus teachers and schools on student performance, and directed its limited resources to areas with the greatest need. Another district in that same state pushed even its highest performing schools to raise the percentage of students meeting state standards. Superintendents in these small districts use their “bully pulpit” to focus attention on issues.

## School Resistance

A high level of district activity was not in and of itself sufficient to trigger change initiatives in high schools. Some study schools grudgingly adopted district improvement efforts, while others resisted them outright. Some schools at the higher ends of the accountability spectrum in our sample felt they could afford to ignore the press of external accountability. For example, Medal County, North Carolina, undertook a series of actions to improve high school instruction. One school was very responsive to district initiatives, but staff in the second high school felt that since they had performed well on state exams, they could afford to ignore these efforts.

They also thought that they held higher goals and standards than the state, and had a forceful principal who enabled them to operate more independently. At the other end of the spectrum, two low-performing California schools did little to respond to district pressure and support in part because of low staff morale, a cynical view of state policy expectations, and the feeling that consequences would never really befall their students or themselves.

## Conclusions

One can draw several conclusions from our research in these 48 underperforming high schools. One is that accountability can be a powerful force for change in high schools, despite the conventional image of high schools as recalcitrant organizations. But the potential of high schools' response to external accountability depends in part on their ability and willingness to bring in fresh ideas to the challenges posed by policies that ask them to educate *all* students to high levels of academic achievement. As one scholar wrote:

*High schools . . . are being asked to take on a new task—something they were not designed to do—to prepare students for a defined minimum academic standard, and to get all students to graduate by achieving that standard. We have certainly not organized high schools so that all students would take the same content, or meet the same standards to graduate. In fact, comprehensive high schools were historically designed to do precisely the opposite; since highly influential midcentury Conant report, their design imperative has been to serve democratic purposes*

*and accommodate diverse student populations by creating a wide range of programs, and a differentiated curriculum. (Siskin, 2003, pp. 176–177)*

This agenda poses new challenges for high schools, and demands new solutions that reach outside of teachers' and administrators' current capacities, such as in teaching basic reading skills.

Further, although research on well-functioning high schools shows, as indicated previously, that departments can play an important role in change processes, the high schools in our study, performing below expectations, did not have strong departments or many other formal mechanisms for discussing or intervening in instructional practice. Finding ways to build organizational authority and structures, and/or a culture of communication around instructional issues, needs priority. Just as landscape architects will follow trampled grass by public buildings to determine where to install sidewalks, developing capacity in these kinds of schools may require mapping and using more informal channels of communication while more formal mechanisms are strengthened.

Districts, certainly, were the most important external organization influencing these high schools. While in recent years questions have arisen about the efficacy of district administration, our work on this sample of below-average high schools concluded that parent districts were vital in whether or not state policy goals were transmitted into school-level action. Moreover, districts were the main source of guidance and support for high schools, far outdistancing third-party providers in helping high schools search for solutions. While third-party providers

are extremely common at the elementary and middle school level, we found this “supply” of support was surprisingly thin across our sample of schools. Who can these schools turn to for new ideas and support to handle the challenges they face?

While one reasonable solution may be expanding the numbers of third-party providers, districts are already ubiquitous, and have significant institutional power and authority over schools. Building district capacity, and finding effective incentives for their intervention in high schools, is critical to school improvement. In addition to its focus on schools, NCLB holds districts accountable for the performance of their students and responsible for assisting schools that do not meet state standards. Districts must provide ongoing technical assistance as schools develop and implement school improvement plans. They are to help schools analyze student achievement data, implement professional development, and put in place a new curriculum or instructional practices that have shown evidence of effectiveness. Districts that do not themselves meet performance expectations can be subject to state intervention.

But will these mandates and incentives be sufficient to stimulate more, and more effective, district guidance to high schools? Our research here suggests, at least, that stakes alone will be insufficient to spur consistent action across districts (or schools, for that matter); activism is more than a matter of mandate—it is deeply intertwined with the capabilities of people and their organizations to respond, their knowledge, their resources, and their motivation. Motivation to respond is influenced in

part by how districts and schools perceive where they “fit” in the accountability ratings and by whether accountability is viewed as too demanding or sufficiently demanding or not demanding enough. Response is also influenced by capacity. Districts need strong and stable leadership, accompanied by staff who are knowledgeable about high schools and improvement strategies in those particular institutions. Leadership turnover is one problem, particularly in big cities. For instance, Michigan recently reported that in 2003–2004, the rate of retirement of superintendents was double that of the previous year. Fewer people are applying for these positions, citing in part the pressures under NCLB (MacDonald, 2004). Accountability policies often ignore or give minimal attention to these district issues, and NCLB is no exception. States must attend to the capacity of school districts, just as they expect districts to attend to the capacity of their low-performing schools.

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