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Pain and Gain

Implementing No Child Left Behind
in Three States, 2004–2006

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Summary

NCLB, perhaps the most significant federal policy relating to K–12 public education, requires each state to create a standards-based accountability system that includes three components: (1) academic standards, (2) assessments to measure student mastery of the standards, and (3) consequences to encourage improved performance. NCLB makes significant demands on states, districts, and schools. However, the law also gives educators a great deal of flexibility in how they reach NCLB goals. The success of NCLB is therefore partially dependent on how districts and schools implement the law and what policies and strategies these entities rely on to improve student achievement.

The ISBA study was designed to examine what strategies states, districts, and schools are using to implement SBA and how these strategies are associated with classroom practices and student achievement in mathematics and science. The ISBA study was structured as a set of three state-specific case studies; we collected longitudinal data from California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania each year for three years from the 2003–2004 school year through the 2005–2006 school year. This monograph is an update of *Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind* (Hamilton et al., 2007), which was based on data from the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years of data collection.

The companion monograph contained detailed information about the attitudes and actions of superintendents, principals, and teachers in each of the states, and it drew a number of general conclusions. In that monograph, we found that the accountability systems enacted in response to NCLB differed in important ways across the three states, including the content of their academic standards, the difficulty of their performance standards, and their systems for support and technical assistance. Despite these differences, districts and schools responded to the accountability systems in broadly similar ways. For example, principals reported similar school improvement efforts focusing on aligning standards, curriculum, and assessments; providing extra instruction to low-performing students; and using test results for instructional planning. Teachers enacted these initiatives in their classrooms and generally felt the changes benefited students. However, teachers also reported narrowing the curriculum toward tested topics and focusing on students near the proficient cutoff score, and some complained of lowered morale among their peers and lack of alignment between tested

goals and their local curriculum materials. Administrators were generally more positive toward the reform than teachers, but both identified similar factors that hindered their efforts to improve student performance. These hindrances included inadequate resources and lack of instructional time, but they also included students' lack of basic skills and inadequate support from parents. We recommended strengthened efforts to align system components, development of teacher and administrator capacities for improvement, and the development of better methods for measuring school and student performance.

For the most part, those findings and recommendations still hold. However, the additional year of data collected in 2006 enabled us to refine the analyses, particularly examining more carefully state-to-state variations and multiyear trends. In this monograph, we draw upon superintendent, principal, and teacher survey data from all three years of our data collection to explore the further development of policies and practices in each of the three states. For each state, we address the following four basic research questions:

1. How did districts, schools, and teachers respond to state accountability efforts, including state standards and state tests?
2. What school improvement strategies were used and which were perceived to be most useful?
3. What was the impact of accountability on curriculum, teacher practice, and student learning?
4. What conditions hindered district, school, and teacher improvement efforts?

Study Methods

We chose California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania because of their diversity in terms of geography, demography, and their approaches to implementing NCLB. The study used a combination of large-scale, quantitative data collection and small-scale case study methods to examine NCLB implementation at the state, district, school, and classroom levels. At the state level, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders and collected relevant documents. District-level data were collected from superintendents through paper-and-pencil surveys in each year and through semistructured telephone interviews in the first and third years. School-level data were gathered each year through principal and teacher surveys and through annual case studies in a small subsample of schools.

We selected a random sample of districts stratified by size, and we randomly selected “regular” elementary and middle schools (excluding charter schools, alternative schools, and the like) from the districts that agreed to cooperate. In participating elementary schools, we administered surveys to all teachers who taught math and sci-

ence in grades three, four, and five, and in participating middle schools, we administered surveys to all teachers who taught these subjects in grades seven and eight.

Response rates were quite high for each of the three surveys (superintendent, principal, and teacher) each year (see Tables A.5 and A.6). To analyze survey responses, we generated sampling and nonresponse weights for each state. Using these weights, we are able to report statewide estimates of the responses of superintendents, principals, and teachers from regular public schools and districts.

Findings

We structured the ISBA study as a set of three parallel case studies in different contexts, and we found that state context affected the implementation of NCLB. As a result, we report findings in separate chapters for each state. Nevertheless, there were some common themes across the three states, and these findings are largely consistent with large-scale studies of the implementation of NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a and 2007b; Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2006, 2007a, 2007b, and 2008).

Common Themes Across States

By the end of this study, all three states had constructed most of the infrastructure needed to support standards-based accountability (standards, assessments, reporting structures), and most educators understood the reforms. At all levels of the education hierarchy, alignment among standards, assessments, and curriculum was a major focus of NCLB implementation. However, despite these efforts, there were still concerns about misalignment, especially among teachers.

Educators generally reported that they found test data useful for teaching, particularly data from progress tests that were an increasingly widespread tool in the three states.¹ Educators reported a variety of positive effects of accountability, including improvements in academic rigor, instruction, and focus on student learning. Administrators were generally more positive about the effects of NCLB than teachers. Despite the fact that many teachers reported that accountability had improved learning, they were more likely to question the validity of state test results, and a majority of teachers did not believe the system was beneficial for students. Teachers were concerned with many aspects of NCLB. Some teachers were worried that the standards were too difficult for certain students, and at the same time some teachers were concerned that the curriculum was not challenging enough for high-achieving students.

Districts and schools engaged in a wide variety of reforms, including improving alignment of curriculum and instruction to standards and assessments, using data

¹ Progress tests are formal assessments given periodically during the year to measure student progress in mastering state standards. They are also called interim tests, formative tests, and benchmark tests. To our knowledge, the outcomes of these exams do not result in any consequences for teachers in the districts we studied.

to improve instruction, and focusing on low-performing students. Some changes in practice, such as the adoption of progress tests, have occurred more rapidly or more completely in elementary schools than in middle schools. As expected, given NCLB's focus on math and reading, far more effort has been made to implement standards-based accountability in mathematics than in science. Many administrators indicated that their efforts to improve school performance were hindered by lack of funding and lack of time. Many teachers said their efforts to improve student performance were hindered by lack of time, large and heterogeneous classes, and poor student preparation.

Trends

Over the three years, each of the states made progress ironing out the kinks in its accountability systems. For example, test results were provided more quickly or in more diverse ways. Also, during this time period, educators' responses about the effects of NCLB became more positive; greater proportions of educators reported that accountability had improved academic rigor and focus on student learning. Concerns about the effects of NCLB on teacher morale continued, but the prevalence of these concerns decreased over time.

State-Specific Findings

Generally, educators in Georgia reported more-positive attitudes toward SBA than educators in California and Pennsylvania. This difference could be due to lower proficiency standards in the state that make it easier for students to reach proficiency and for schools to make AYP and avoid NCLB interventions, better implementation, or other state contextual factors, such as the lack of a strong union presence in Georgia. Pennsylvania educators generally had more negative attitudes toward SBA, perhaps because of the state's long tradition of local control over schools, or perhaps because of more-limited capacity on the part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education to offer support and assistance.

The Future of NCLB

This study suggests that NCLB has led to distinctive accountability systems in each state—different standards, different assessments, different support and assistance strategies—although each was derived from the same federal legislation and has the same set of consequences. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should recognize that this variation exists and develop policies accordingly. In

some cases, new regulations may be needed to reduce or eliminate differences—e.g., to make proficiency in reading and mathematics similar across states. This study found a number of attitudes and behaviors associated with the overall level of student proficiency in the states. In other cases, it may be appropriate to relax rules to give states additional flexibility. This study suggests that school improvement efforts might be more effective if they were responsive to local conditions. Rather than imposing a fixed set of choices that apply when schools fail to achieve AYP for a given number of years, improvement efforts should be customized to address the specific causes of the failure and the capacity that exists locally.

There is also a lesson for SBA in general. Educators have become comfortable with the underlying SBA theory of action—set clear goals, develop measures, and establish consequences to encourage educators to achieve them. They are not comfortable when the implementation of that theory seems inconsistent with their local situation—e.g., when the standards do not match their local curriculum, when the proficient level seems unattainable for many of their students, or when their school is judged against targets that feel unattainable. It would seem that engaging educators in the development or refinement of the SBA framework (e.g., the reauthorization of NCLB) would be a good way to attempt to bridge this gap.