It has been three years since states began to implement the accountability and program improvement provisions of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 (Perkins II), and policymakers are asking whether these provisions are working. We know, from previous National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) research, that states adopted systems of measures and standards as prescribed by federal law (Rahn et al., 1992), but we do not know whether, or how well, these systems were implemented, or whether they are leading to program improvement. These two questions are particularly relevant at present, because it is time for the reauthorization of federal vocational education legislation. Policymakers are looking for information about the success of these locally focused, outcome-based systems of program improvement and about ways to improve the federal rules that govern them.

This study examines the implementation of Perkins II performance measures and standards to date and, based on this interim review, recommends actions the federal government can take to improve these systems. Ultimately, Perkins II should be judged in terms of outcomes: Has the legislation established and/or strengthened local systems of outcome-based program review and improvement, and have these systems led to improved workforce outcomes at the local level?

However, it may be too soon to make these judgments. States are only now entering the first program improvement cycle, and widespread data on outcomes are at least one to two years away.
Consequently, we framed our research in terms of two more immediate questions:

- Are states implementing their systems of measures and standards as envisioned in the federal legislation?
- What factors have affected their progress, and can progress be enhanced through federal action?

Before presenting our results, we provide some background on the requirements of Perkins II and on relevant NCRVE research.

**LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS**

Perkins II called for the creation of performance-based state accountability systems for improving vocational programs. One of the most dramatic changes in Perkins II was the addition of outcome-based performance measures and standards in these accountability systems, particularly the inclusion of learning outcomes that were seldom specified in previous evaluations of vocational programs.

Perkins II required each state to “develop and implement a statewide system of core standards and measures of performance” by September 1992 (Public Law 101-392, Section 115(a)). The mandate has three key distinguishing features: (1) It emphasizes the use of outcomes to monitor program success; (2) it gives states considerable flexibility in creating systems; and (3) it assigns primary responsibility for program improvement to local programs.

At minimum, each state was required to include in its system at least two sets of measures. The first must be a measure of “learning and competency gains, including student progress in achieving basic and more advanced academic skills.” The other set must include any one of the following four measures: (1) competency attainment; (2) job or work skill attainment; (3) retention or completion in school; or (4) placement in further education, the military, or employment.

Although Perkins II prescribes the basic guidelines that states must follow in designing accountability systems, it also provides each state considerable discretion in developing and implementing a system that fits its individual situation and needs. For example, some states have taken a centralized approach to designing their measures, pre-
scribing specific assessment instruments or data collection procedures to be used by local recipients, while others have taken a decentralized approach, charging local recipients to develop their own instruments or procedures. At the time of our research, states had not all reached the same stage of implementation of their selected systems of measures and standards.

PRIOR NCRVE RESEARCH

Since Perkins II was enacted, NCRVE has been actively involved in providing technical assistance to state-level administrators to assist them in developing and implementing systems of performance measures and standards. NCRVE researchers wrote a guidebook, Accountability for Vocational Education: A Practitioner’s Guide (Hoachlander, Levesque, and Rahn, 1992), which was distributed at regional workshops and has been widely used by state-level administrators to explore key issues in designing an accountability system.

NCRVE researchers also examined several local vocational education accountability systems to gather information that might help improve the implementation of Perkins II. Beyond Vocational Education Standards and Measures: Strengthening Local Accountability Systems for Program Improvement (Stecher and Hanser, 1993) described local accountability systems that already existed for many vocational programs and showed how those systems could be used for program improvement. The authors suggested ways that states and local programs might improve the functioning of local accountability systems.

Continuing interest in obtaining information about state responses to the performance measures and standards requirements led NCRVE to compile State Systems for Accountability in Vocational Education (Rahn, Hoachlander, and Levesque, 1992). This report contains a summary of the performance measures and standards implemented by states in the fall of 1992 and provides examples of clearly defined measures and standards. The appendix briefly describes each state’s system of performance measures and standards at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. The report is based not only on information gathered through workshops and telephone interviews but also on analysis of documentation submitted to NCRVE.
OVERVIEW

This study examines how some states are progressing in achieving the accountability goals outlined in Perkins II. It focuses on the process of implementing performance measures and standards for vocational education at the state and local levels. It is too soon to tell how the implementation will work out in these states, let alone to know whether the systems will have the desired effects of institutionalizing local outcome-based program improvement systems. Nevertheless, results to date can be used to judge the degree to which states are succeeding in achieving the vision embodied in Perkins II, what factors affected their progress, and how federal legislation might promote greater success in the future.

In this study, no attempt was made to judge whether the states were in compliance with the legislation. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) is the agency responsible for determining compliance, not NCRVE. Moreover, no formal assessment was made of the quality of the measures and standards themselves in these states. Perkins II requires the Secretary of Education to submit a report to Congress that assesses “the validity, predictiveness, and reliability” of standards and measures. The secretary’s report may include some measures of quality.

Our report is organized as follows. Chapter Two briefly describes the research procedures. Chapter Three presents findings regarding state implementation and includes brief summaries of the evolution of performance measures and standards at the secondary and post-secondary levels in each state. Chapter Four discusses the factors that affected states’ actions, including both conditions that may be subject to federal actions and local and state contextual factors that are within the domain of state policy. The discussion also identifies emerging conditions that are likely to affect the implementation of Perkins II in the near future. The final chapter recommends actions to enhance the implementation of these systems.