EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

States have had three years to implement the accountability and program improvement provisions of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 (Perkins II). This study examined progress in implementing statewide systems of performance measures and standards, the effects of these systems on state agencies and local vocational programs, and the factors that influenced state and local actions.\(^1\) We offer recommendations for changes in federal policy to promote the goals of local accountability and program improvement embodied in the original legislation.

PROCEDURES

We selected four states that were “early adopters” of measures and standards for study. In each state, we interviewed staff in the state agency (or agencies) that administered secondary and postsecondary vocational education and visited secondary and postsecondary vocational institutions in two geographically separated regions. Each institution was visited twice, once in the fall of 1993 and again in the spring of 1994. During the site visits, we interviewed administrators and instructors in each institution.

\(^1\)No formal attempt was made to determine whether states were in compliance with Perkins II or to judge the quality of the measures and standards states had chosen to implement.
WHAT WE FOUND

Substantial progress has been made in implementing measures and standards in the states that were visited, although much work remains to be done to make the systems function as envisioned in the law. By 1994, little attention had been paid to building state- or local-level capacity for translating the measures and standards data into actions at the local level for program improvement. These “leading edge” states were still largely engaged in developing and implementing their systems.

Furthermore, wide variation was found in the states’ approaches to the development and implementation of measures and standards. This variation was evident in almost every aspect of program implementation, including how the process was managed, who participated, and the level of resources devoted to it. These differences appeared to be jointly a function of the states’ individuality and the flexibility inherent in Perkins II.

WHAT EXPLAINS PROGRESS TO DATE?

We identified several factors that contributed to the variation in state responses to performance measures and standards. Some of these explanatory factors are within the sphere of influence of federal policy, including:

• **Flexibility provided to the states in the law itself.** The flexibility of the Perkins II mandate for measures and standards had mixed effects. It permitted states to create systems that were responsive to local conditions, but it also increased the influence of state and local contextual factors on implementation, which slowed and limited the process in some cases.

• **Unclear integration and coordination of Perkins II provisions.** In the states we visited, the Perkins II priorities—measures and standards, integration, tech-prep education,2 and service to

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2“The term ‘tech-prep education program’ means a combined secondary and post-secondary program which leads to an associate degree or 2-year certificate; provides technical preparation in at least 1 field of engineering technology, applied science, mechanical, industrial, or practical art or trade, or agriculture, health, or business;
special populations—were treated as separate activities. They were not seen as a coordinated system at either the state or local level, and performance measures and standards were not being used comprehensively to evaluate the other Perkins initiatives.

- **Lack of models or incentives for state and local implementation.** Perkins II contains an explicit framework for structuring systems and federal agency checks for compliance at the adoption stage, but there are neither models nor incentives for ensuring that performance measures and standards are used to improve programs.

- **Limited expertise and resources at the state level.** Perkins II created new responsibilities for state staff while reducing the set-aside for state administration. This presented a dilemma for some states that lacked both the expertise and the resources to address these new demands.

- **Mandated measurement of learning outcomes.** The scarcity of valid assessment tools for measuring selected learning outcomes led states to adopt alternatives that were less than optimal. States are still struggling with how to measure important student outcomes, such as academic skill gains at the postsecondary level.

The second set of factors flows from state and local context, and hence, these factors are less directly subject to federal policy intervention. These included the choice between a centralized and a local implementation strategy, the existence of statewide data systems, the availability of state-level assessment tools, the nature of ongoing educational accountability and program review mechanisms, historical relationships among state and local educational and employment agencies, attempts to reduce the burden on local administrators, and the influence of key administrators.
Finally, there are issues on the horizon that will affect the implementation of measures and standards and should be considered in planning the reauthorization of Perkins:

- **Skill standards and curriculum standards.** The Departments of Education and Labor are funding the development of industry skill standards in more than 20 occupational areas and curriculum standards in six educational fields. There should be some coordination between these efforts and the systems of measures and standards developed under Perkins II.

- **Data quality.** States have not yet addressed the questions of reliability and validity of the measurement tools they have selected. Data quality questions will become more important as states begin the accountability and program improvement cycle, which will add high stakes to the performance measures and standards.

- **Integration of academic and vocational education.** The integration of academic and vocational education raises a host of problems for defining, measuring, and attributing outcomes and therefore threatens the validity of existing systems of measures and standards.

- **Consistency in federal vocational education policy.** Some state vocational educators believe new laws will supplant many of the initiatives contained in Perkins II; as a result, they make only halfhearted efforts at implementation. In this way, the volatility of federal vocational education policy discourages rapid and effective response to federal initiatives.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Federal policymakers may take several actions to enhance the future success of performance-based accountability in vocational education and promote the goals of Perkins II:

- **Clarify the interrelationships among Perkins II mandates and the coordination of Perkins II initiatives.** Perkins II contains four major priorities: integrating vocational and academic education, providing service to special populations, creating tech-prep education programs, and establishing systems of measures and standards. Two of these are primarily curricular changes;
one relates to the selection of students; and one relates to accountability and program improvement. In theory, these efforts should complement one another, and states’ efforts to address the priorities should be coordinated. In fact, none of the four states coordinated their efforts to address these mandates, and there was wide variation in the relative priority assigned to these four critical initiatives. Policymakers should clarify the interrelationships among systems of measures and standards, the integration of academic and vocational education, tech-prep education programs, and service to special populations and offer additional guidance about coordinating states’ efforts in these areas.

- **Create models for outcome-based program improvement.** In 1994, most state action was still driven by the mandate to develop a structure for accountability, i.e., the system of measures and standards. Little had been done to use that structure to make programs better. State and local agencies need assistance in translating outcome deficiencies into action plans. One approach might be to require states to develop program improvement models that illustrate how outcome-based information can be used for local program reform. The alternative we suggest would be to commission an agency other than the states themselves to collect examples of effective outcome-based local improvement practices and disseminate them widely for states and local programs to use.

- **Provide focused technical assistance regarding choices and resources.** The “flexible mandates” of Perkins II place greater demands on state agencies yet restrict the use of funds for state-level services. These fiscal restrictions come at a time when many state administrative budgets are also being reduced. Under these circumstances, federal actions that help states respond to their choices and make better use of resources might significantly improve implementation of the act. We also suggest increasing the funds available for state administration during the start-up phase, so states can meet initial demands and develop some of the expertise they will need to operate a reformed vocational education system.

- **Address common measurement problems.** The technology to measure learning and occupational performance gains in reli-
able, valid, and efficient ways is not widely available. Most states are not equipped with either the resources or expertise to develop tools for measuring learning and occupational outcomes, and it is unfair to require them to accomplish this difficult task. The federal government needs to assume leadership in addressing these problems, since they are best solved nationally and are largely the result of the provisions of Perkins II.

Incorporating these changes into the reauthorization of federal vocational education legislation will increase the efficacy of statewide systems of measures and standards. Legislators also should anticipate difficulties and conflicts that may be created by pending reforms of education, training, and workforce preparedness programs and should work to coordinate the accountability requirements of all these initiatives.