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Corporate Headquarters
 1776 Main Street
 P.O. Box 2138
 Santa Monica, California
 90407-2138
 TEL 310.393.0411
 FAX 310.393.4818

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How Educators in Three States Are Responding to Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind

For decades, parents, educators, and policy-makers across the country have been concerned about the effectiveness of U.S. schools. In 2001, the U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), designed to improve schools through a system of standards-based accountability (SBA). NCLB's accountability provisions require each state to develop content and achievement standards, measure student progress through tests, and intervene in schools and districts that do not meet the targets. Since NCLB went into effect, its accountability provisions have affected every public school and district in the nation.

In 2002, the RAND Corporation launched a project to understand how educators are responding to the new accountability requirements in California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania—three states that represent a range of approaches, regions, and student populations. The researchers aimed to identify the factors that enhance the implementation of SBA systems, encourage positive changes in teaching practices, and improve student achievement. Through surveys, interviews, and visits to schools in these three states, they found that NCLB is affecting the work of superintendents, principals, and teachers both positively and negatively. Although the three states developed different accountability systems, school and district administrators are engaged in similar school improvement activities.

Educators Adopted Similar Improvement Strategies

Despite differences among the three states' accountability systems, majorities of school and district administrators in the three states described similar types of school improvement activities. Superintendents generally ranked three activities as most important: aligning curriculum with state standards and assessments, using data for decision-

Key findings:

- Most superintendents considered three improvement strategies most important: using data for decisionmaking, aligning curriculum with state standards, and focusing on low-performing students.
- Teachers changed their instruction in both desirable and undesirable ways.
- Most educators felt challenged by insufficient alignment among state standards, curriculum, and tests.
- The researchers recommend improving alignment among standards, tests, and curriculum; providing educators with professional development assistance; and exploring ways to measure performance more accurately.

making, and providing extra support to low-performing students. Many superintendents also reported providing technical assistance to schools and offering a variety of professional development opportunities for principals and teachers. Other improvement strategies were more prevalent in some states than in others, including using student tests for instructional planning, implementing test preparation activities, and adopting interim tests to gather more frequent progress reports. Use of data and supplemental testing was especially prevalent in Georgia. Relatively few schools increased instructional time on reading and mathematics or decreased time spent on nontested subjects.

Educators' Views Were Mixed

Although most superintendents, principals, and teachers supported the *idea* of SBA, the groups held different opinions about its specific features. Most administrators thought that state test scores accu-

rately reflected student achievement, but only a small minority of teachers thought so. The majority of teachers noted the lack of consistency between state standards and local curriculum materials. Majorities also reported that the accountability system led to reduced morale and negatively affected teaching. For example, many teachers reported narrowing curriculum to focus on tested topics and even certain styles of test questions or formats. Some teachers reported focusing more on students near the proficiency cutoff score and expressed concerns about the accountability system's negative effects on the curriculum and instruction provided to high-achieving students. However, most teachers also noted some beneficial outcomes, such as increased focus on student achievement and more rigorous curricula.

Educators Found Implementation Difficult

Teachers and administrators identified factors that they believed hindered them in meeting NCLB goals. More than three-quarters of superintendents cited inadequate funding as a hindrance, while principals were most likely to cite insufficient staff time to meet administrative responsibilities. Teachers tended to report feeling thwarted by insufficient time for instruction and planning. In addition, large majorities of teachers, particularly middle school teachers, reported that the wide range of student abilities in their classes, students' lack of basic skills, inadequate parental support, and absenteeism and tardiness hampered them. While NCLB implicitly challenges teachers to promote high achievement despite these conditions, most teachers in this study considered the expectation unrealistic.

NCLB-Mandated Accountability Can Be Improved

Improve alignment among standards, assessments, and curriculum. Many teachers expressed concerns about misalignment among state standards, assessments, and the local curriculum. Although all states have taken steps to align their tests and standards, teachers noted that the tests often miss the mark by including content that is not part of the curriculum but omitting content that is. States and districts might need to assist teachers in their efforts to match instruction to the standards while avoiding excessive emphasis on the specific content and format of the state tests.

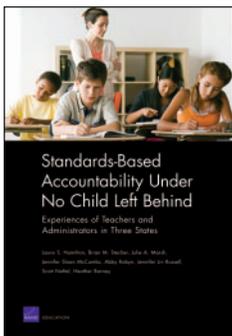
Provide educators with related professional development assistance. Superintendents, principals and teachers

noted several areas in which they needed additional assistance. In particular, about half of the California teachers expressed a need for guidance to improve their instruction of English language learners and students with special needs. Most educators also indicated that they would benefit from assistance in improving their skills in using data for decision-making, identifying effective instructional practices, and teaching low-performing students. In addition, the growing use of interim assessment systems suggests a need to help principals and teachers use the information from these systems effectively.

Explore better methods for measuring school and student performance. Teachers and principals in the study echoed familiar criticisms of NCLB's targets for success as well as its method for measuring progress. Most educators at all levels doubted their ability to meet the escalating targets over the next five years. Many teachers are dissatisfied with adequate yearly progress being defined primarily in terms of status (proficient or not proficient) rather than by progress over time. Furthermore, as noted, the focus on proficiency status indirectly encourages undesirable teaching practices—for example, focusing more on students near the proficiency cutoff and less on students performing below or above that level. As an alternative, states could be permitted to explore options that base accountability on student progress at all levels of performance. These efforts should be examined to ensure the quality of the measures and to ensure that incentives support improved student learning.

Moving Forward

This study identified reasons for both optimism and concern. Although NCLB's SBA is leading to a laudable emphasis on student achievement, educators are clearly concerned about the negative consequences of a single-minded focus on state accountability tests. Because NCLB's effects depend on what happens in schools, it is important to take these concerns seriously. One of the key challenges facing those designing, implementing, or responding to SBA systems is to identify ways to increase desirable educational practices and minimize undesirable ones. RAND continues to study these issues to help policymakers and educators make well-informed decisions about accountability systems and their implementation. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Standards-Based Accountability Under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of Teachers and Administrators in Three States* (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG589/>), by Laura S. Hamilton, Brian M. Stecher, Julie A. Marsh, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Abby Robyn, Jennifer Lin Russell, Scott Naftel, and Heather Barney, MG-589-NSF, 2007, 302 pp., \$32.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4149-4. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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