



Guiding IMPROVEMENT

Efforts to improve instruction and inform decision-making can be strengthened with access to better data and analysis.

What guides most school improvement efforts in California? Are they guided by a real understanding of student achievement, based on high-quality data? Or are they based too frequently on intuitive assumptions about what is and is not working in classrooms?

Many educators feel that their best efforts to improve instruction and inform decision-making on behalf of children would be significantly stronger if they had access to better data and analysis — if they had much better information on which children were succeeding in which areas, and why. Given the changes and challenges facing the state, these concerns are particularly prominent in California.

California is at an educational crossroads. Exploding demographic changes exacerbate the challenges facing the schools. These challenges include alarming economic disparities within and between communities, dramatic enrollment growth and rapidly increasing student diversity. The combined thrust of the state's class size reduction initiative and a wave of retirements has left many districts with a turnover of 50 percent or more in the teaching force. Overall, per-pupil spending is significantly lower than the national average. Throughout the state, districts are forced to find new ways to use scant resources. This is a challenging time in California.

The very definition of high-performing schools is on the verge of changing in some districts during the coming decade.

High-performing schools may increasingly become the schools whose rate of decline is slower than in neighboring schools. To reverse this trend, districts need a way to understand the impact of all these changes and challenges on student, teacher and school success. Further, they need to understand how to adapt their educational strategies to be effective for new populations under new circumstances.

What school districts need and what the public is clamoring for, in short, is a systematic approach to district management that is based on data and focused on student achievement. Right

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now, many districts are data rich but information poor — they have compiled enormous quantities of data, but often lack the capacity to learn from it.

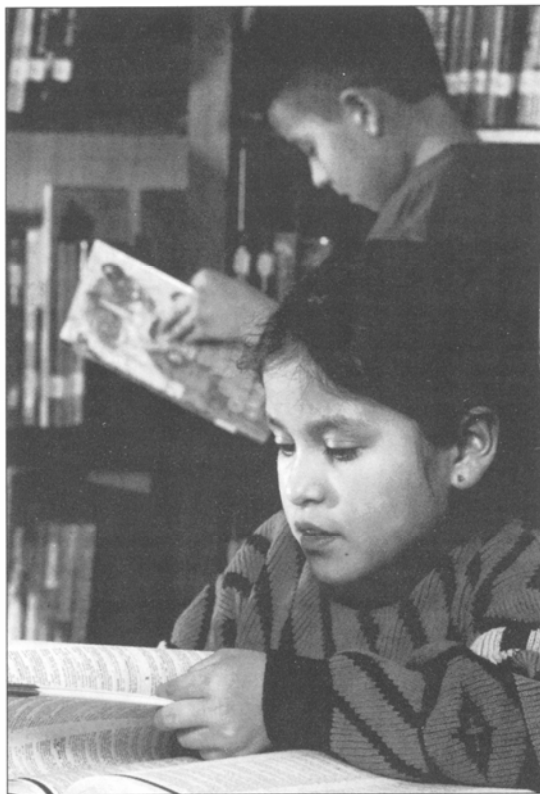
Instead, districts need the ability to turn vast amounts of existing data on student performance into information that can be used to help teachers and improve classrooms. They need the capacity to understand student results — school by school, program by program and student by student — to determine what works, what needs changing, and where they can best direct their resources. Most importantly, they need the capacity to realign the activities, standards and resources of the entire district based on the needs of children at each individual school site.

CAP: A direct response

The California Accountability Project is a direct response to these needs and issues. The project focuses on helping school districts to function more systematically on behalf of children — all children, at every grade level, at every school. This is a dramatic departure from reform efforts that rush to adopt the latest trend or program. In addition, the project focuses on creating a new culture based on real accountability and demonstrable results for children. This is a major departure from business as usual in education.

The project is being led by the Accountability Consortium, a partnership of Campbell Union School District, Fremont Union High School District, Moreland School District, the Santa Clara County Office of Education and the Boston-based Community Training and Assistance Center. Soon, two districts from Los Angeles County and the Los Angeles County Office of Education will join the Consortium.

The goal of the project is to dramatically increase the capacity of school districts to be accountable, but to use accountability as a tool for improving student achievement rather than to punish schools or students perceived as under-performing.



To accomplish this goal, the project begins with a focus on understanding the performance of every child in every school, and identifying the factors that most contribute to or inhibit student learning. This provides the critical information to determine — in every school and every classroom — what is working and what is not. Each of the districts is committed to gathering high quality data on students, analyzing the conditions at the schools and using this information to inform and guide school improvement efforts.

“The project is specifically designed to help districts understand both their pockets of success and under-performance,” notes Joe Hamilton, superintendent of Fremont Union. “Just because our district is performing well does not mean it can’t do better. We want to use data better to keep getting better.”

“The fact of the matter is, this will point very clearly to where the job is getting done and where it’s not,” adds Jim Ritchie, superintendent of the Moreland School District. “And we’ll do what we have to do to respond to that.”

The starting point is to focus on the question: Accountability for what? In

recent years, accountability has become a political term. It has become synonymous with efforts to ridicule and punish under-performing schools and districts. By contrast, accountability should be the vehicle for understanding student and adult performance, improving practices at the school sites, and increasing student achievement. Accountability needs to be more than just an education term; it needs to be the foundation of educational improvement efforts.

To address this need, the California Accountability Project helps districts to better understand their current results, to identify the causes of these results and to base school and district planning on addressing these root causes. When a district undertakes these critical tasks, it is moving closer to true accountability.

“When you can really pinpoint which programs or practices are working and which are not, you are in a position to make changes that really benefit children,” comments Marcia Plumleigh, the superintendent of Campbell Union Elementary School District. “In education, this has always been difficult.”

Using data to explore success

The approach being taken, known as Comprehensive District Accountability, uses district data to explore student success, and the factors that most closely correlate with that success, at a much greater level of detail than in the past. With the assistance of CTAC, each district is engaged in determining the success of individual schools and programs. They are looking at success not just for the district overall, but according to the specific performance of different groups of children throughout the district.

By carefully analyzing data on student achievement and examining the factors that are most closely associated with that achievement, the consortium partners are examining such questions as: How do we determine the effectiveness of our schools? How are our districts

and schools currently performing? How do we know what we are really accomplishing? What conditions in the schools are leading to success? What is the relationship of poverty and mobility to student achievement? Which schools and which classrooms are reaching which students?

We are also able to look at: What factors and conditions contribute to school and student success? What factors most contribute to under-performance? Are high achievement results for a school overall masking the lower achievement of specific children, or groups of children, that are not being reached? If the data shows a popular program is not working, what changes do we need to make? How can we educate the public about what is working and why, and what is not working and what we will do about it?

Getting there from here

Through the California Accountability Project, the districts are developing the capacity to:

- Identify actual and relative district performance. Each district is identifying and analyzing the indicators that can be used to assess student progress.
- Disaggregate the district performance indicators by various student-related groups. This involves probing for the correlation to student achievement of such factors as the students' respective socioeconomic status, ethnicity, native language and mobility. The goal is to understand which students are being reached in specific schools and to identify pockets of success. This also helps ensure that these student-related factors are used as a guide for improvement, rather than an excuse for not helping each student to learn.
- Identify the students, and groupings of students, that have the greatest needs and represent the greatest opportunity for improvement. This helps ensure that the students with the greatest needs will receive appropriate support.
- Compare the performance of the various groups of children at each school against the district norm for that group. This identifies which schools are getting which results with which groups of children.

- Analyze the similarities among the high-performing schools and the differences between the high- and low-performing schools, especially where there are significant differences between the schools with the best performance and those with the weakest performance with particular groups of children. This broadens the understanding of trends in student and school achievement.

- Develop profiles for each school based on the factors identified by the

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analysis as having the most influence on student achievement. This provides a starting point for school improvement efforts.

- At the school sites, engage the administrators, teachers, parents and students in probing for the causes of the conditions that are most affecting student achievement. The goal is to identify the conditions within the schools that need to change. This helps ensure that school improvement plans address the causes, rather than the symptoms, of problems. Engaging school communities moves school improvement planning from an exercise in compliance to a pivotal vehicle for school change.

- Develop additional levels of data analysis based on issues and questions that emerge at the school sites and the district.

- Identify the problematic conditions that recur across multiple school sites.

These form the basis for district-level action. As addressing these recurring issues comes to drive decision-making in such areas as professional development, program evaluation and resource allocation, districts know that they are directing their limited resources into the areas most likely to improve school performance and student achievement.

By taking these steps, each district is developing the ability to fully understand both overall and specific levels of student achievement. With this information, school improvement efforts can be guided by real data on what factors are most influencing achievement for different groups of students.

"We are quite excited about the ways in which this project addresses accountability," says Colleen Wilcox, superintendent of the Santa Clara County Office of Education. "These districts are using the concepts of accountability to increase the success of all of the children in their classrooms. That's the way it should be."

Developing these capacities, and then acting responsively based on findings — school by school and districtwide — is the foundation of true accountability. Such a system of assessment and accountability has never previously been available to school districts. ■

Founded in 1979, the Community Training & Assistance Center provides support to more than 90 community-based organizations, coalitions, public institutions, and school systems every year. CTAC is made possible by support from the Hewlett Foundation, the Stuart Foundation and district contributions.

William J. Slotnik, executive director, founded the center in 1979 and has been executive director ever since. Donald B. Gratz, coordinator of national school reform, oversees all of the programs and activities of the center related to education.