

How State and Federal Accountability Policies Have Influenced Curriculum and Instruction in Three States

COMMON FINDINGS FROM RHODE ISLAND,
ILLINOIS, AND WASHINGTON



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To learn more about the impact of state and federal accountability systems on curriculum, instruction, and student achievement, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) conducted case studies of schools in Illinois, Rhode Island, and Washington State. From the winter of 2007 to the spring of 2009, we studied a total of 18 schools in 16 school districts in the three states, including elementary, middle, and high schools, and both Title I and non-Title I schools.¹ To conduct the case studies, we interviewed scores of district superintendents, principals, teachers, instructional specialists, parents, and students in each state.² We also conducted in-depth, formal observations in 105 classrooms to understand the amount of time teachers and students spent on various types of instructional practices and interactions.

Across the three states we found that state and federal accountability policies are having a significant impact on curriculum and instruction. The detailed results of these case studies are described in individual reports for Illinois, Rhode Island, and Washington, available on CEP's Web site (www.cep-dc.org). This shorter report summarizes our research findings across the three states.

Key Findings

Our district and school studies of Illinois, Rhode Island, and Washington State yielded the following four key findings that are representative of the majority of schools we visited.

1. **Alignment of curriculum to standards.** Educators have made greater efforts to align district and school curricula to their state's standards for content to be taught in various subjects.

2. **A focus on test preparation in classroom instruction.** Teachers mentioned that although state standards drive curriculum, they generally focus their instruction on material that is likely to be covered on the state test. We observed first hand this type of emphasis on test-related content, particularly in the elementary classrooms we visited.

3. **Narrowing of the curriculum.** Many educators reported that their efforts to align curriculum to standards and focus on tested material in reading and mathematics have diminished the class time available for social studies, science, and other subjects or activities. Our observations of the use of classroom time supported this point.

4. **A need to use data better to inform instruction.** Although all study participants said their schools and districts were data-driven, teachers pointed out that state test data were mainly used to make broad district or school policy decisions and were not as helpful in informing instruction. Many teachers also wanted additional professional development about the use of data to inform instruction.

These common changes in educational practices have occurred in response to increased accountability from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and from state accountability and testing systems, which differ somewhat among the three states. In response to NCLB, Illinois developed the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) for grades 3-8 and used its existing 11th grade test for purposes of federal high school accountability. Rhode Island switched from using an off-the-shelf test to participating in the New England Common Assessments Program (NECAP), along with

¹ In Rhode Island, we studied three elementary schools, one middle school, and two high schools, including schools that received federal Title I funding for low-achieving students in low-income areas and schools that did not. In Illinois, we studied four elementary schools and two high schools, all Title I schools. In Washington State, we studied six high schools, including some Title I schools. The schools chosen for this study do not constitute a representative sample; therefore, the findings from each state can not be generalized to every school in the state. We did take steps, however, to choose schools that represented different characteristics and would help us gain a more nuanced understanding of state and federal accountability systems in different public school settings.

² 49 district superintendents and principals, 199 teachers, 160 students, 95 parents, and 19 other school representatives (librarians, reading and math specialists, administrative interns, and Reading First coaches) were interviewed for this study.

New Hampshire and Vermont. However, Rhode Island adapted the NECAP tests to tie them more closely to its own standards. To fulfill the NCLB requirements, Washington State adjusted elements of its well-established standards-based accountability system and its Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

Alignment of Curriculum to Standards

CEP’s earlier comprehensive study of NCLB (2006) found that schools are investing more time and attention to state standards. In this current study, we reached a similar finding. Standards-based accountability has affected curriculum in several ways.

The majority of district and state superintendents and teachers we spoke with discussed aligning curriculum to state standards. In addition, in most of the schools and classrooms we visited, we observed teachers teaching to the state standards; in fact, the standards were displayed in many of these classrooms. In some cases, we saw that the process of alignment led to increased professional development and greater collaboration among teachers, which in turn produced better horizontal alignment among teachers in the same grade and better vertical alignment across grade levels.

Many teachers added that aligning standards to the curriculum created a sense of consistency among the classrooms in their district, as shown by this comment from a math teacher in Washington State:

[B]efore, I was designing my curriculum based on what I felt the kids needed to know. And now, I have someone else not dictating to me but justifying what I’m teaching in a way. So I’m not alone. This is what the state department of education has determined that the kids need to know. . . . And so I feel more confident that I’m giving the kids what they need.

Still, some study participants expressed concerns about how well the curriculum is aligned with the test and standards at different levels, and some study participants discussed challenges they experienced in implementing state standards and aligning the school curriculum with these standards. This was particularly evident in high schools we visited in Rhode Island and Illinois.

In Rhode Island, the schools that were most successful in aligning state standards to the curriculum were those that used traditional approaches—such as using a uniform

curriculum across the district and focusing instruction and curriculum on material likely to be tested—and that had district support for and teacher “buy-in” of state standards. For instance, staff at two of the elementary schools we visited mentioned that they were involved in the development of the state’s grade-level expectations and the state version of the NECAP, which seems to have given them an advantage when aligning state standards to their school’s curriculum. At one of the elementary schools, teachers mentioned that this knowledge helped them design instructional pacing guides.

A few schools that struggled with aligning their curriculum to standards—including one elementary and two high schools in Rhode Island—did not have uniform districtwide curriculum or had atypical instruction. For example, one high school we visited did not assign traditional grades to students and used a project-based, interdisciplinary curriculum. Staff at this school found it difficult to follow state standards and have their students perform well on the state test.

In Illinois, high school students performed poorly on state tests, which study participants attributed to the test the state had chosen. Study participants told us that, as a result, they did not know whether to teach to the test or the standards. In addition, they mentioned that teaching to the standards does not cover everything on the test and that test-driven accountability has stifled innovative approaches to schooling and curriculum. For instance, interviewees at the two Illinois high schools in our study described their state’s standards as very broad and somewhat vague, which made it easy to “fit” curriculum with the standards. Their main concern was that the state test did not align with the state standards, particularly the parts of the test that incorporated sections of the ACT English and Work Keys exams. “The standards definitely did not drive the test because the state purchased the test,” said one administrator. “ACT is a national organization. Their test is used nationwide, so they’re certainly not considerate of the Illinois standards.” The curricula of the elementary schools we studied in Illinois were well-aligned with state standards, and teachers reported that standards dictated their curriculum.

In Washington State, study participants said there have been frequent changes in state standards, particularly in math and science. This has created stress and confusion between versions of the standards and has resulted in some inconsistency in curriculum and instruction across the state.

A Focus on Test Preparation in Classroom Instruction

Several teachers reported that although state standards drove their curriculum, state tests do not cover all content in the standards, so they generally focused their instruction on material likely to be assessed on state tests. We heard these comments in all three states studied. We also observed this type of test preparation first hand in the elementary school classrooms we visited in Rhode Island and Illinois, but saw it to a much lesser extent in the high schools studied. (All of the schools visited in Washington were high schools.)

In Rhode Island and Illinois, teachers in the schools studied reported that they drilled students on skills that are likely to be tested and mentioned that they use items from the state test as practice questions with their students. For instance, in Illinois, teachers reported having students write essays in a format similar to the writing prompts on the test, giving students practice with “extended-response” questions, and directly teaching a few hundred vocabulary words that students may need to know to pass the test.

One of the elementary schools we visited in Rhode Island, which was in NCLB improvement at the time of our visit, described the most extensive, systematic preparation of the NECAP among the elementary schools we studied. Study participants described how they had developed test preparation units with sample questions, practiced multiple-choice responses, and engaged in other test-taking strategies. These test preparation activities began when students came back to school in September and continued until the assessment was over in October. One administrator commented that everyone in the school was involved in test preparation—an “all hands on the deck” approach that included resource teachers and the school psychologist.

Several teachers from the Rhode Island and Illinois schools also mentioned that they felt pressure to meet state test score targets and therefore focused mainly on teacher-led discussions, use closed questions (those with just one or two correct answers) in their classes, and instruction in the tested subjects (mathematics and English language arts). In Illinois, many teachers in the schools studied noted that they could not teach more creative, broader-themed, or project-oriented lessons until after the state test was given. In Rhode Island, we saw classrooms teachers also devote a sizeable portion of class time to lecturing and leading the

class in discussion. However, some teachers did use higher-level, problem-solving approaches.

In Washington State, many teachers also said they focused on tested material and used the language of the test in their instruction. For instance, English teachers in many of the schools we studied reported using released writing prompts from the state test as practice questions or warm-ups in their classes. However, these teachers said the state test did not stifle creative instruction. Teachers were observed using open-ended discussions, Socratic-type dialogues, inferential and evaluative thinking, and inquiry approaches to science teaching, despite the pressure to teach material that would be tested. In addition, many of the teachers we spoke to in Washington said that the inclusion of extended-response questions on the state test has encouraged teachers to emphasize student reasoning and writing skills.

An English teacher in Washington State described the process of preparing students for the test in this way:

I do sort of a WASL Wednesday...where [students] take one of the reading tests, and then one other day in the week we do either the expository or the persuasive prompt, and then half the period for another day we'll talk about the elements, and then the other half we'll talk about what could you have improved on.

Another teacher pointed out that teaching the material students will be tested on is not a negative thing:

I thought it was, like, the biggest sin ever you could ever possibly say to a teacher, is to teach the test...[But] if you have a test that says, “Here are the skills you need to know,” and you teach those skills, I don't see a problem with that. It makes more sense than, “Here's a bunch of random skills, and we're going to pick and choose some random skills to test you on.

Some high school teachers in Washington also mentioned that it was unrealistic to expect students to build continuously on what they had learned in previous grades because students do not always remember what they learned in elementary school. For that reason, teachers admitted they felt the need to spend instructional time on topics outside the regular 10th grade curriculum. For example, math teachers in Washington said they needed to re-teach basic skills and concepts, such as decimals, negative numbers, and fractions, to prepare students for state tests. Teachers in Rhode Island and Illinois reported using similar practices.

Narrowing of the Curriculum

Recent studies have noted a narrowing of the curriculum to accommodate the increased emphasis on tested subjects (Hamilton et al., 2008; CEP, 2008). This phenomenon was seen in our study of the three states.

In most of our case study districts and schools, the people we interviewed reported that the curriculum has narrowed as a result of standards- and test-driven accountability. They noted that the emphasis on teaching tested content has diminished time available for other subjects or activities. Some also discussed the limited time available to teach the full range of knowledge and skills in their subjects or other skills they feel are important to a complete education. One science teacher in Washington State expressed this concern:

I don't think you're able to really go in depth as you'd like to go. I don't think you're able to expand in some areas...because you've got to get through some of that material so that [students] have a chance to be successful at it and so they're not just going [into the test] blindsided...

In Rhode Island, many teachers reported that the pressure to teach the skills stressed on a single measure of achievement, the state test, has led to cuts in what they felt was a rich curriculum. Several teachers expressed frustration that in order to align their instruction to standards and accommodate the testing schedule, they were forced to eliminate content they considered worthwhile or to explore certain topics in less depth. In two of the elementary schools we visited, an increase in instructional time for reading, writing, and mathematics has left less time for social studies and science. For example, history and science are taught through reading or writing lessons that do not develop knowledge of history or science content in much depth.

In Illinois, an elementary school teacher of English language arts noted that her instruction changes throughout the year and focuses on material that will be covered by the state test:

For me, September through December, the first half of the year, I'm really working on good reading strategies. Maybe if the students have to take a test with me, I might go over the answers in a way that would help them have strategies for multiple-choice tests. In January, I start getting nervous, and then I really kind of go—February, I feel like I'm doing a lot more direct instruction, and students are doing a lot less independent work just so they can get that practice and see those

kinds of tests. So I really spend a lot of my time in late January and February, and then by March it's done.

A Need to Use Data Better to Improve Instruction

Study participants from all three states indicated that, due to increased federal and state accountability, their schools were data-driven and made decisions based on state test data. Upon further discussion during interviews and classroom observations, however, teachers admitted that state test data was mainly used to make broad district or school policy decisions and was not helpful in informing instruction. For instance, several participants in Rhode Island indicated that data-based decisions are generally oriented towards test preparation and test-driven accountability, such as ensuring students meet grade-level requirements. A high school teacher in Washington State noted the need for more professional development about using data to inform instruction:

I think the professional development...for using data as a guide to instruction is a huge gap. There's been a lot of focus on getting data...But there's never really been a focus for everybody of, "What do you do with that? And how do you use it? And how does that change what I'm doing day to day in the classroom? There [are] people who do that very well, but there hasn't been a districtwide focus on doing that. I'll bet you when you talk to teachers...they don't buy some of the data, or they don't really get it, and it's because they don't use it day to day.

In addition, teachers in our study mentioned that professional development about data use was not helpful because it did not focus on classroom instruction. As many teachers in Illinois noted, it is difficult extracting useful data from state tests. Study participants also indicated that data arrives too late for effective analysis and cannot be used with current students. Many teachers we spoke with said they mainly relied on formative assessments, such as quizzes, interim tests, or classroom questioning techniques, to see how students had progressed, diagnose students' learning needs, and determine adjustments to their own instruction. For example, in many of the classrooms we visited, we observed teachers using closure practices, such as exit slips, to check whether students learned what was taught during the class and make adjustments to the next day's instruction.

In addition to better professional development, teachers also said they wanted screening measures, diagnos-

tic tools, and program assessments that would produce data they could use more effectively in instruction.

In all three states, teachers also reported the need for measures other than achievement tests for accountability purposes. For instance, study participants in Illinois wanted better accountability and test requirements for English language learners and other students with special needs. Teachers in Washington State suggested revising the adequate yearly progress requirements of NCLB to counteract the demoralizing effect they have on teachers and students in schools with high poverty and inadequate resources. In Rhode Island, teachers and administrators pointed to negative impacts of testing on teacher morale, development of the whole child, and depth of the curriculum. This was especially true in the schools that had large numbers of English language learners and high rates of poverty and were under intense pressure to meet state test score targets. Furthermore, staff in schools with atypical teaching and curriculum structures reported feeling, in the words of one teacher, like “square pegs in a round hole.”

Recommendations:

Our data clearly show that state and federal accountability policies are having an impact on curriculum and instruction across the three states we studied. Teachers and administrators want a sensible approach to accountability, one that does not force schools to make undesirable choices such as having to narrow the curriculum or engage in excessive test preparation. Based on the data collected, we offer the following recommendations for educators:

1. **Improve state standards.** The attention being paid to aligning curriculum to state standards indicates that standards are powerful tools for shaping instruction and making the content taught in classrooms more consistent across the state. Some schools are struggling, however, with aligning their curriculum to state standards, which leads to inconsistent implementation of standards-based reform within a state. We recommend that states continue to evaluate their standards to ensure they are consistently implemented across school districts.
2. **Align state tests to match state standards.** We observed some inconsistency in the alignment of standards to tests and in the ways teachers were using standards to prepare their students for the test. When state tests are designed to test the standards, it can increase consistency of instruction in a state and better measure student achievement.
3. **Improve professional development on using data to improve instruction.** Many of the schools we studied used state test data for broad policy decisions or district-level purposes rather than to inform instruction. In addition, several teachers mentioned that they prepare their students for the state test, but test scores come back too late for them to help the students who took the test. We recommend better professional development for teachers to help them use data to inform classroom instruction. We also suggest that states make efforts to provide test results not only to students’ current teachers but also to teachers who will be instructing the students the following year.
4. **Encourage multiple measures of student achievement.** As presented in the findings, teachers are asking for measures other than just achievement tests for accountability purposes. Using multiple measures to determine student achievement may paint a more complete picture of student learning thereby making the accountability system fairer.
5. **Increase resources.** Study participants from all three states said they lacked sufficient resources, including funding, staff, and materials, to prepare students to learn the content embodied in the state standards. They said if resources were available they would be better able to meet accountability requirements.

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