

Chapter 10

Impact of Standards-Based Accountability Systems

Highlights of Findings

Districts and schools report that accountability has had some positive effects, especially on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

Both survey results and interviews reveal that districts and schools express a cautious optimism about the positive impact of accountability. Many believe that greater accountability has led to a stronger focus on student achievement, even raising test scores. Moreover, the majority of districts — over 80 percent — believe that accountability has improved curriculum and instruction practices, making them more rigorous and tied to assessment. Over 70 percent of districts surveyed also said that accountability had a positive effect on classroom assessments.

At the same time, districts and schools report that accountability has lowered teacher morale.

While most districts surveyed reported a positive effect of accountability on most educational areas, over 40 percent of districts reported that teacher morale was adversely affected. Teachers are reporting frustration, powerlessness, and anxiety over changing state directives and the heightened pressure on them to raise test scores.

Because most districts' standards-based accountability systems have been in place for less than two years, it is too early to know for sure what effects, if any, these systems are having on student achievement. Even where evidence of improvement — or, in some cases, decline — exists, so many different reforms and initiatives have been undertaken simultaneously that one can only speculate about whether the observed changes are attributable to accountability measures.

Although improved student achievement is the most important goal, other outcomes, such as teacher morale, also are important because ultimately they affect student achievement. For these types of outcomes, it may not be too early to expect effects or to infer causality.

For the purposes of this study, the overarching research question on the topic of early impact of standards-based accountability systems was:

What practices or features of a district’s standards and accountability system are associated with particular educational outcomes?

General Effects of Accountability

[Accountability] has had a positive impact on achievement already, and I think it has the potential to have a lot more....You can really make a change and show growth in achievement of students if you know what you’re working toward, and you do some assessments or checks along the way to see how you’re doing. It creates higher achievement; it creates also success among the staff, so that there’s likelihood that that kind of thing is going to continue.

—Principal

Most district and school personnel believe that accountability has had or will have an overall positive impact.

In general, districts seem to view accountability favorably, at least in the abstract, and think that, if done right, it will improve their students’ education. Many district and school staff remarked positively on the effects of their accountability systems. Survey comments about the positive effects of accountability included:

Has everyone focused on student learnings and student outcomes.

Has given positive motivation for change and upgrade of district curriculum.

Accountability is beginning to raise expectations and achievement.

Accountability has brought increased focus on achievement.

Accountability has positively impacted how we teach and assess.

Raises level of concern for ALL parties; focuses discussion and improvement efforts.

At the school level, too, most people, particularly principals, do not seem to object to the concept of accountability or even to being held accountable personally. Several felt that

accountability either had already had positive effects or would have positive effects in the future. For example, one principal said that the state accountability thrust had had a huge impact on his whole school and that most of that impact had been positive. He explained that the focus had now shifted to student outcomes and he felt that was good, bringing a focus to instruction that in the past had been “sadly lacking.” He also discussed how the focus on standards and outcomes meant “no more closed door” for teachers, which he felt was a change for the better.

Other principals, meanwhile, made statements to the effect of “we know we can do better,” implying support for and responsiveness to new accountability measures:

Testing this year, with the push for accountability through SAT-9, has been an influence [over instruction]... We all are [held accountable]. We have standardized testing. We're accountable to parents, our grade-level colleagues, each other, our students. The district is reviewing the test scores, but we're not getting punished for it. There is a push from the district to get our scores up — only because they know we can do it. There is room for growth.

I think the school, the staff feels that they are being held accountable, to the district standards, and also the state of California. Looking at the results, we know that we need to show improvement. ... In the end, I think the results are just a general recognition that they want to do better. If we have x percent of our kids reading on grade level, then we know that the same amount of kids could be performing math on grade level.

We were just going along fat, dumb, and happy, and suddenly [as a result of the STAR test and accountability] someone is taking notice. It's a very public announcement of where we are, and an embarrassment. Our kids could be doing better.

Effects on Policy, Practice, and Achievement

Districts reported that accountability had exercised a positive effect on curriculum and instruction, but not yet as much on student achievement.

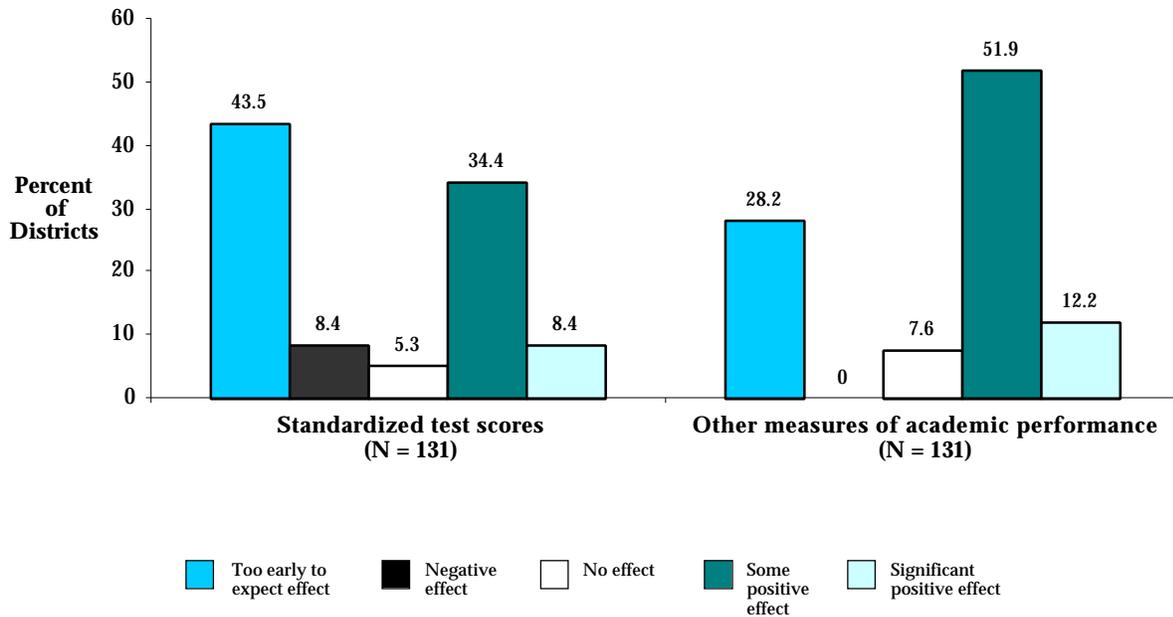
The survey asked districts about some of the specific effects of the accountability system. Overall, respondents were cautiously optimistic about most of these effects.

For example, as Figure 10.1 shows, in the opinion of 42.8 percent of survey respondents, their district accountability system or particular accountability components had exercised a positive effect on standardized test scores. Even more powerfully, 64.1 percent of the districts postulated a positive effect on student achievement on other measures of academic performance, possibly because of their closer alignment with curriculum. Interestingly, 8.4

percent of districts reported a *negative* effect on standardized test scores.¹ In contrast, not a single district noted a negative effect on student achievement on other measures of academic performance.

Figure 10.1

District Opinion About the Effects of Accountability on Measures of Student Achievement



Nevertheless, a large percentage of respondents thought that it was too early to expect an effect on student achievement (43.5 percent for standardized test scores, and 28.2 percent for other achievement measures). Student achievement, of course, is affected by many intervening factors, so it is not surprising that administrators are reluctant to attribute changes to accountability systems.

Survey respondents were more willing to indicate a positive effect on things that are more directly and easily controlled. As Figure 10.2 shows, over 80 percent of districts reported a positive effect on district-level curriculum and instruction policies and on district-level assessments; 88.6 percent said that the accountability system had had a positive effect on

¹ These results may be a function of the lack of alignment between content standards and the SAT-9. Districts that have fully adopted content standards and have aligned curriculum and instruction with these standards may well have faced a drop in standardized test scores, as the test was not aligned with standards. The paradoxical result is that districts that are advanced in implementing a standards-based accountability system may be getting penalized by a state assessment system that focuses on unaligned standardized tests.

curriculum and instruction practices in schools. District comments along these lines included:

District has become more involved in curriculum and instruction as result of having to address state mandated system.

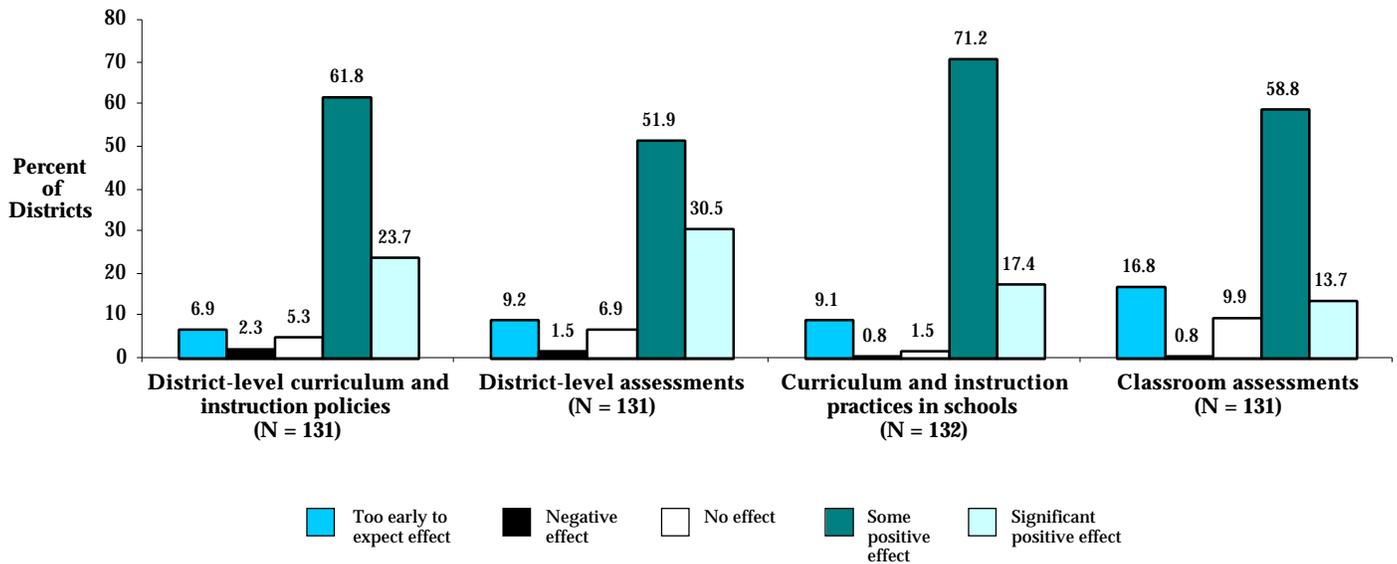
Our accountability system is being revised in order to better measure student performance on content standards and also serve as useful information in guiding instruction.

More rigorous curriculum and instruction are being implemented.

Instruction gets focused on areas of the curriculum that are being assessed.

In addition, 72.5 percent of survey respondents said that accountability had had a positive effect on classroom assessments. “Assessment is becoming an integral part of teacher practice,” wrote one respondent.

Figure 10.2
District Opinion About the Effects of Accountability on Curriculum and Instruction and Assessment



Effects on Teacher Morale

All the principals are feeling it [accountability]; the teachers are starting to grasp it. The test scores are on the Internet, and in print. There's a lot inherent in raising test scores — it's tied to raising expectations. The bottom line is, we were doing our own thing. But now that people are looking — I don't mind it, if it's going to mean good things. I am afraid, though, that the fear will lead to paralysis.

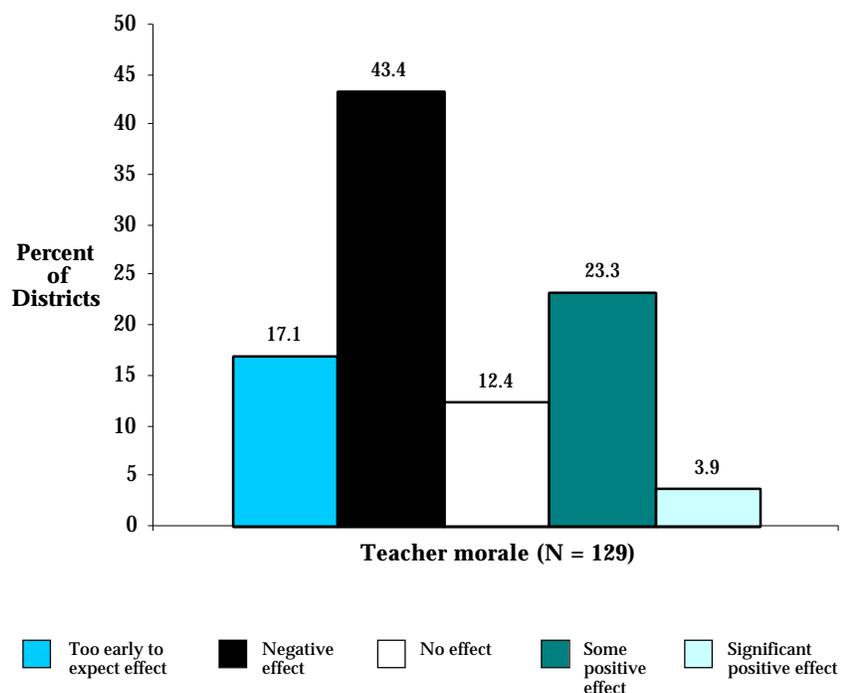
—Principal

Teacher morale has been a casualty of increased accountability, according to many districts and school staff.

In contrast to the positive tone for many educational areas, the one area for which many respondents reported a *negative* effect was teacher morale. Over 40 percent of survey respondents said that the accountability system or particular accountability components had exercised a negative effect on teacher morale. (See Figure 10.3 and compare with Figures 10.1 and 10.2.)

Figure 10.3

District Opinion About the Effects of Accountability on Teacher Morale



Many survey respondents commented that teachers are feeling considerable stress and frustration as a result of accountability requirements:

The high stakes of this system has negatively impacted the morale of teachers and the climate at schools.

Teachers are anxious about how they will be evaluated and possible job termination if their students' scores are low or do not show growth.

The pressure to improve test scores has increased while teacher support has not, [leading to] increased anxiety level and low morale.

Teachers are feeling tremendous pressure to succeed with every student even though many factors of student performance are not in their control.

Being held accountable and all the testing time has made teachers very nervous and skittish.

Teachers are feeling overwhelmed by the number of changes which have contributed to some expressions of frustration and inability to feel they are keeping up with expectations.

The MANY different accountability systems have teachers concerned. They are frustrated that the systems do not address children who come to school unprepared. The current models do not show individual pupil growth, but rather only look at the end results.

The changing nature of the state assessment, the proposed and potentially real "sanctions" contained in legislation create a sense of powerlessness and frustration — people are "living in fear" to a degree and see questionable to bad policy which they can't affect.

The teacher morale and school climate is obviously negative. Continuation of such pressure will cause many qualified teachers and administrators to abandon the profession.

Extremely stressful for teachers.

Several principals also expressed concerns about what effect accountability would have on school staff — not only on teachers, but also on administrators. One principal mentioned that both teachers and administrators “are very fearful” and “somewhat resistant” to accountability measures; another principal indicated that there was a great deal of “self-induced paranoia and internal pressure” on the part of schools as a result of the new emphasis on accountability.

Interviews with teachers themselves did, indeed, reveal that many are frustrated with or skeptical about local accountability systems and measures. For many teachers, the greatest source of concern was the SAT-9, as discussed in Chapter 7, “Assessment Measures.” Other teacher comments included:

I am really frustrated by it all. Politicians want to evaluate me based on how well my students do on an exam. That isn't fair, when we're lucky if 50% of the class does homework. There is no way that they are going to pass and it's not my fault. The district accountability is a joke. The content is not necessarily coordinated across the district. I know that the SAT-9 is the way of the future.

Most accountability is aimed at the teachers. We're being held accountable by the district for making sure students are at performance level in the standards and in all areas on the SAT-9. It's a lot of pressure and stress. What they are doing is an excellent goal, it's just too fast without enough training time for teachers. It feels top-down.

I don't believe that it [accountability] has influenced my teaching in a positive way, but there is more of an evaluation process...I don't believe that the system has been particularly effective.

Accountability need not necessarily affect teachers negatively.

Some teachers did, however, make positive remarks about accountability and even about being held accountable. Moreover, 27.2 percent of district survey respondents (see Figure 10.3) indicated that accountability had had a positive effect on teacher morale, and several respondents wrote comments about positive effects for teachers or for classroom instruction:

This [the accountability system] has given the teacher a more structured format from which to teach and evaluate student progress.

Teachers always enjoy meeting to set directions in their subject area. Assessing these areas of direction gives them feedback that they haven't had in the past — they like knowing how their efforts are paying off.

The system has helped the district's teachers and staff to focus on student learning.

Teachers understand the target and can now make sure students are prepared.

Greater emphasis on and awareness of our accountability system. Teachers are changing their focus in the classroom.

Accountability is a role that the teachers and administration welcome — creating a positive direction for all staff, parents, and students.

And one survey respondent who indicated a negative effect noted that “Teacher morale — high stress level, concern about low scores — should change with increase in scores.” Thus, it would appear that under the right circumstances, accountability can have a positive effect on morale. Identifying the right circumstances and achieving them may, however, prove difficult.

Effects on Other Factors

Opinions of districts about the effects of accountability on other factors were mixed.

Opinions on the effects of accountability on a wide variety of other factors — student attendance rates, drop-out rates, school climate, parent/community satisfaction, and parent involvement — were mixed. (See Figure 10.4.) Respondents were divided on whether it was too early to expect an effect on these factors, there was no effect, or there was a positive effect. For example, for parent involvement, 29 percent of respondents reported “too early to expect effect” in their districts, 35.1 percent reported “No effect,” and another 35.1 percent reported a positive effect. (See the second part of Figure 10.4.)

Figure 10.4

District Opinion About the Effects of Accountability on Other Factors

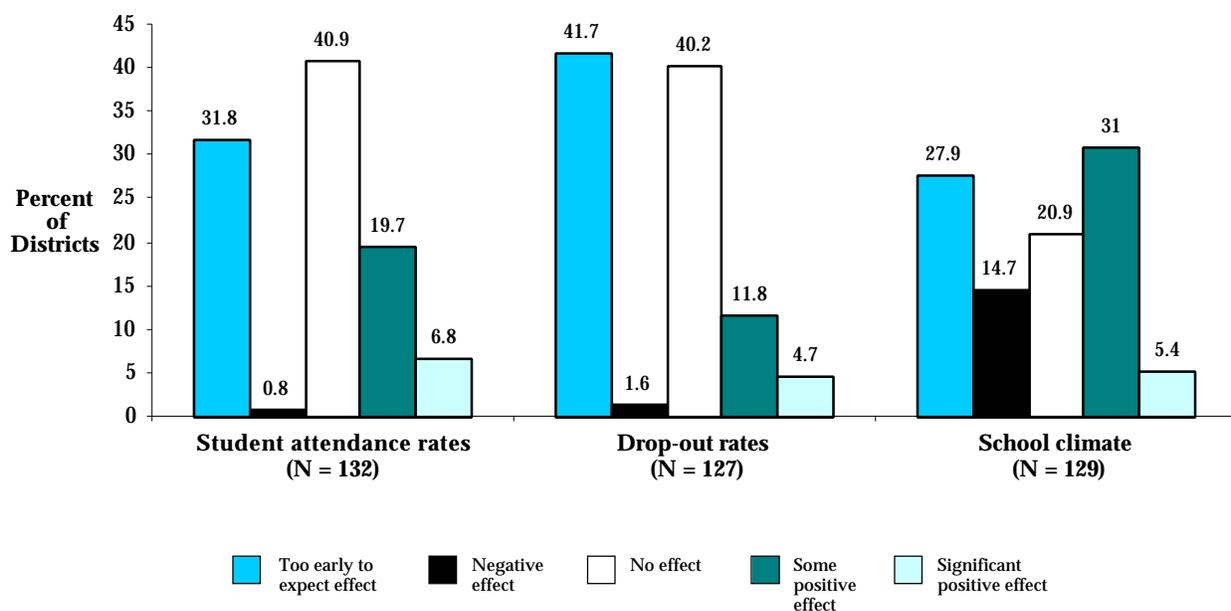
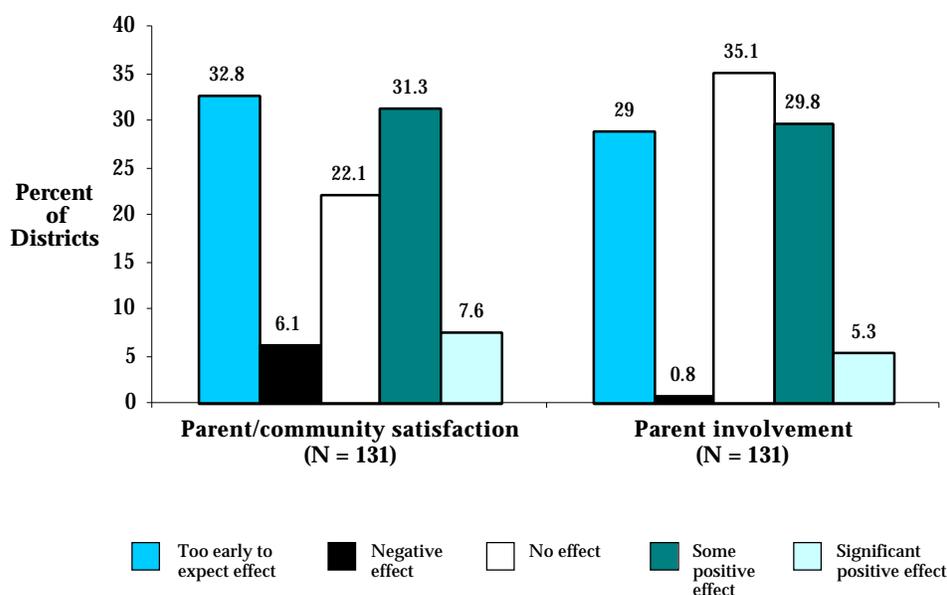


Figure 10.4 (continued)



In the Next Chapter

As this chapter has shown, local accountability systems had generated cautiously optimistic attitudes among both district- and school-level personnel, positive impact on consequences and incentives, and anxiety among teachers. Student achievement had not yet been significantly affected, in the opinion of most school districts. This mixed picture appears to be due, in part, to the significant challenges faced by districts, schools, and teachers in implementing accountability systems and raising student achievement. Districts' perceptions of these challenges and the forms of assistance that would help them are topics discussed in the next chapter.