

High Standards: A Challenge Not Only for Students

Standards made us, as a profession, step up to the plate, analyze what we're doing, and share that information with our customers, which is very, very different than before standards.

— **Superintendent of a middle-class suburban district**

Academic standards that established the skills and knowledge California's 6.3 million public school students are expected to master at each grade level have been a fact of life in the state for a decade. Although the implementation of these standards, from 1995 through 1998, took place as part of a broader national focus on academic accountability, California's adoption is unique in several ways. One is its scale: California has more public school students than any other state. Another is the fact that its standards are among the highest in the nation: All California schools are expected to progress toward and eventually attain an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 800—roughly equal to having 70 percent of each school's students perform above the national median.

In *School Resources and Academic Standards in California: Lessons from the Schoolhouse*, PPIC researchers Heather Rose, Jon Sonstelie, and Ray Reinhard examine a representative group of individual schools and school districts in the state to understand how those working in the schools on a daily basis are managing the challenge of meeting the new standards. Through in-depth interviews with school district superintendents and a survey of teachers, they found general support—mixed with relief, anxiety, and, in some cases, grudging assent—for this new way of California school life. A financial analysis they also conducted tends to confirm past findings that although the goals California has set for student achievement are high, the resources being provided to meet those goals are not. The analysis also indicates that although schools who serve low socioeconomic groups are receiving additional funds to compensate them, those schools' API scores remain farthest from the state's 800-API goal.

School Resources and Academic Standards in California: Lessons from the Schoolhouse is the third in a series of PPIC

reports, all funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, examining the links among school resources, academic standards, and student outcomes. The first, *High Expectations, Modest Means: The Challenge Facing California's Public Schools*, examined in detail the interactions among standards, funding mechanisms, and results. The second, *School Budgets and Student Achievement in California: The Principal's Perspective*, showed the various ways school principals would allocate resources to maximize API scores within a variety of budgetary and school simulations.

In this third report, the authors focus on a group of 49 selected schools from around the state, of various sizes, socioeconomic status, and grade levels. They visited the schools over several months in 2003 and 2004, conducting interviews, researching financial data, and administering surveys, all with the goal of understanding how schools are implementing standards and how they are managing the necessary resources.

Superintendents Support Standards

A fundamental tension in the new standards-based era infuses all discussion of its implementation: Standards are imposed from Sacramento on a uniform, statewide basis, but California's public schools are not uniform. Rather, each is very much a local, even neighborhood, institution. School districts have locally elected boards, local chapters of employee unions, and students and parents whose concerns are most closely focused on local problems and issues, even as they struggle to meet the new academic standards imposed by the state. Working between these two competing interests are school district superintendents, accountable both to their local boards and to Sacramento.

The authors found that superintendents strongly support the new standards-based regimen, chiefly because it gives them more direct authority over what actually goes on in their classrooms. Many superintendents share a vision of how those standards should be implemented: first, through adoption of the best textbooks and teaching schedules, then

through use of the best tools to evaluate students, and, last, through adoption of the most effective intervention strategies to help with students who are not meeting standards. Although some superintendents criticized the inconsistent way the state has imposed rules and mandates for implementation of standards—for example, by delaying the initiation of the high-school exit exam—all supported standards generally.

One of the major inefficiencies in school district budgeting and financing is you've got 1,000 districts negotiating salaries. It is a ridiculous waste of everybody's time. . . . The obvious alternative is you do a statewide salary schedule, you adjust for regional cost of living, and you let the state bargain with the union statewide.

— **Superintendent in a small Central Valley city**

Teacher Concerns

The authors found in their survey of more than 2,000 teachers that they also generally supported standards, but they were also more ambivalent than superintendents. Twelve percent considered them too ambitious and therefore unachievable, while 39 percent characterized them as “lofty” and therefore very difficult to achieve. Elementary school teachers appeared to be more optimistic than their colleagues in middle and high schools.

Teachers also voiced concern about the gap between the ideal of high state standards and the reality of low, present-day achievement levels at many schools. A significant percentage of teachers pointed to lack of student motivation, lack of parental support, inadequate English-language skills, and irregular student attendance as serious impediments to

We meet together to work on assessments that meet the state standards. The key is that the teachers work together to reach the goals. We are given the time and materials necessary. . . . When the teachers are happy and feel like they are appreciated they pass this feeling on to the students who then feel more encouraged to achieve.

— **Teacher in a suburban middle school**

student achievement. These barriers to learning, and therefore to attainment of academic standards, intensified at schools with students from lower socioeconomic levels, even though many of these schools are allocated additional funding.

Teachers also were asked their opinions of the physical condition of the schools where they taught. The authors found that teachers seem generally satisfied, although there was concern expressed about excessive noise levels and unstable classroom temperatures at some schools.

Resource Priorities

Although California's standards envision its students achieving better than 70 percent of students in the rest of the nation, the authors posed questions to teachers and superintendents about whether they thought that the resources provided in California were sufficient to meet the state's goals. The consensus was that they are not.

We've got kids whose parents are professors at the university in town, and we've got kids who were just evicted from a motel. They were living in absolute filth, two families to a motel room. So I think that society is going to have to recognize that without some kind of major league help for these kids to overcome these obstacles, we're going to have a major schism in California education that is going to be pretty much down that line of poverty.

— **Superintendent of a large, diverse suburban district**

The two groups offered different suggestions for how additional resources might be used. Many superintendents indicated that they would use extra funds for additional time for teacher professional development and for teachers and administrators to meet and strategize about the best ways to achieve standards. In the teacher survey, a primary concern of respondents was staffing shortages. Forty percent and more of the teacher respondents, for example, said that they considered student counseling and student health services to be important activities with particularly inadequate staffing. Elementary school teachers were especially concerned about what they viewed as insufficient staffing to teach art, music, and drama, and for English-language support.

This research brief summarizes a report by Heather Rose, Jon Sonstelie, and Ray Reinhard, School Resources and Academic Standards in California: Lessons from the Schoolhouse. (2006, 118 pp. \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-121-X). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This study was supported with funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.