



NEWS RELEASE

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**Elementary Schools Impacted More by NCLB and Illinois
Accountability Than High Schools**

***Study finds narrowing curriculum, more test preparation in elementary
schools; better data and parental involvement in elementary and high
schools***

WASHINGTON—Dec. 22, 2008— A new report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) takes an in-depth look at how classroom practices in Illinois have been influenced by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related state accountability policies. Using findings from formal classroom observations and more than 150 interviews in a sample of six different schools, the report sheds new light on how teachers and administrators have responded to federal and state education policies.

The report, *Lessons from the Classroom Level: Federal and State Accountability in Illinois*, shows that at the high school level the Illinois state content standards are broad and vague, making it easier for high schools to fit their curriculum to the standards. However, teachers and administrators noted a lack of alignment between the state's high school standards and high school exam, which draws much of its content from the ACT, a national college entrance exam. The state exam was seen as particularly troublesome for students who were not college-bound and may not have been motivated to perform well on the test.

In most schools, elementary as well as high schools, teachers also attributed improvements in student achievement to strong parental involvement and grant funding, which has expanded resources for professional development and school reform.

Under NCLB, in Illinois 62.5% of students must meet or exceed the proficiency level on the reading and math tests for schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). The report found that, to raise student achievement and make AYP, math and reading teachers at both higher- and lower-achieving schools spent more class time asking questions with one or a few right answers than they spent on other instructional practices, such as leading class discussion or overseeing students working in small groups.

The study also found that teachers in schools identified for improvement under NCLB were less likely than those in higher-achieving schools to use a wider range of instructional practices, such as hands-on activities, student seat work, reading aloud, and

learning centers. However, teachers in these identified schools were more likely than those in higher-achieving schools to model how to solve problems and oversee small-group instruction.

Some teachers and administrators interviewed for the study expressed disappointment that the state had to stop administering the IMAGE, a simplified English assessment for English Language Learners (ELLs), after the U.S. Department of Education determined the test did not meet NCLB requirements. For 2008, the state required ELLs to take the regular state tests with accommodations, which several study participants felt did not appropriately or accurately measure these students' learning.

Illinois is one of three states participating in a larger study by CEP on the classroom impact of federal and state accountability. Last month, CEP issued a report on Rhode Island, and in early 2009 will begin studying schools in Washington State. Although there are similar findings between Rhode Island and Illinois, such as study participants using data more effectively and teachers teaching to the test, CEP found differences between the two states in the impacts of federal and state accountability on curriculum and instruction. In Rhode Island, for example, both elementary and high schools exhibited more alignment between curriculum and state standards.

"In Illinois, we found greater differences between high schools and elementary schools in curriculum alignment than we had in other places," said Jack Jennings, CEP president and CEO. "It was also striking how often the people we interviewed in Illinois cited strong parent involvement as a key factor in their schools' success."

This new report includes case studies of six Illinois schools and their efforts to prepare students for the assessments used for federal and state accountability. The report focuses on curriculum and instructional practices in reading and math, the only two subjects tested for NCLB accountability before 2008.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

More information on CEP and its research is available online at www.cep-dc.org.