Lessons from the classroom level about federal and state accountability in Rhode Island and Illinois

Focus

Examines the impact of NCLB and related state accountability policies on curriculum, instruction, and student achievement in several schools and classrooms in Rhode Island and Illinois.

Methodology

Conducted case studies of 12 schools in Rhode Island and Illinois in the winter and spring of 2007-08. In each state, interviewed dozens of district- and school-level administrators, instructional specialists, and instructional coaches, and held focus groups with scores of teachers, students, and parents. Also conducted formal “time-sampling” observations in several classrooms within these schools to document the time spent on various types of instructional practices and interactions.

Major Findings

Common findings from both Rhode Island and Illinois:

- **Time for test preparation.** In both states, many administrators and teachers reported using various forms of test preparation to familiarize students with the content and format of the tests used for NCLB accountability.

- **Greater emphasis on teacher-led instruction.** In most of the classrooms that were the subject of time-sampling observations, teachers in both states spent a considerable portion of class time asking “closed questions”—those with just one or a few correct answers. Other types of more independent learning activities, such as students working in learning centers, were used somewhat less frequently.

- **More time on tested subjects.** Study participants reported focusing more instructional time on the tested subjects of English language arts and mathematics at the expense of other subject areas.

- **Greater use of data.** In both states, administrators and teachers interviewed reported making greater use of test data to reach decisions about curriculum, instruction, teacher professional development, and other areas.

Where to Obtain

www.cep-dc.org
Instructional time in elementary schools: A closer look at changes for specific subjects*

Focus

Takes a closer look at the magnitude of the shifts in instructional time that school districts made between 2001-02 (the year NCLB was enacted) and 2006-07.

Methodology

Based on a nationally representative survey of 349 responding school districts conducted during school year 2006-07. This analysis focuses on districts that reported in this survey that they had increased instructional time for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

Major Findings

- **Magnitude of changes.** The shifts in instructional time toward ELA and math and away from other subjects were relatively large in a majority of school districts that made these types of increases and decreases. Districts that increased instructional time for ELA and/or math did so by 43%, on average. Districts that also reduced instructional time in other subjects reported total reductions of 32%, on average.

- **Minutes per week.** Eight out of ten districts that reported increasing time for ELA did so by at least 75 minutes per week, and more than half (54%) did so by 150 minutes or more per week. Among districts that reported adding time for math, 63% added at least 75 minutes per week, and 19% added 150 minutes or more per week.

- **Cuts in other subjects.** Most districts that increased time for ELA or math also reported substantial cuts in time for other subjects or activities, including social studies, science, art and music, physical education, recess, or lunch. Seventy-two percent of the districts with increases in ELA or math reported that they had reduced time by a total of at least 75 minutes per week for one or more of these other subjects. For example, more than half (53%) of these districts cut instructional time by at least 75 minutes per week in social studies, and the same percentage (53%) cut time by at least 75 minutes per week in science.

Where to Obtain

www.cep-dc.org

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*This is a follow-up report to the 2007 CEP report, *Choices, changes, and challenges: Curriculum and instruction in the NCLB era* (see summary below).
Focus

Examines changes in curriculum and instructional time made by school districts between 2001-02 (the year NCLB was enacted) and 2006-07.

Methodology

Based on a nationally representative survey of 349 school districts conducted during 2006-07 and interviews with district- and school-level leaders and staff in 13 districts.

Major Findings

- **More time for tested subjects.** About 62% of districts reported they had increased time for English language arts and/or math in elementary schools since 2001-02, and more than 20% reported increasing time for these subjects in middle school. Since 2001-02, those districts with increases reported a 47% increase in minutes per week for ELA, a 37% increase in math, and a 43% increase for both subjects combined.

- **Less time for other subjects.** To accommodate the increased time for ELA and math, 44% of districts reported cutting time from one or more other subjects or activities (social studies, science, art and music, physical education, lunch and/or recess) at the elementary level.

- **Schools in improvement.** Shifts in instructional time are more common in districts with at least one school identified for improvement than in with districts with no schools in improvement.

- **More emphasis on tested content and skills.** Since 2001-02, most districts have changed their ELA and math curricula to put greater emphasis on the content and skills covered on state tests used for NCLB. In elementary level reading, 84% of districts reported that they had changed their curriculum "somewhat" or "to a great extent" to emphasize tested content. In middle school ELA, 79% reported making this change, and in high school ELA, 76%. In math, 81% of districts reported that they had changed their elementary and middle level curricula to emphasize tested content and skills, and 78% reported having done so at the high school level.

Where to Obtain

[www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)

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*For a more detailed analysis, see the summary for the CEP report, *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects.*
Focus

Comprehensive study that describes the federal, state, and local implementation and impact of various provisions of NCLB during school years 2004-05 and 2005-06. Summarized below are the study’s findings about impact on curriculum and instruction.

Methodology

Collected data through a survey of all 50 states, a nationally representative survey of 299 school districts, case studies of 38 geographically diverse districts and 42 schools, three national forums, and six special analyses of critical issues in implementing NCLB.

Major Findings

- **Curriculum alignment and data use.** Case study data indicated that administrators and teachers had made a concerted effort to align curriculum and instruction with state academic standards and assessments. Principals and teachers also reported they were making better use of test data to adjust teaching to address students’ individual and group needs.

- **Required time for reading and math.** Of the districts surveyed, 60% had policies that required teachers to devote a specific amount of time to reading in elementary schools, and 50% had policies that required a specific amount of time for math. Nearly all (97%) of the highest-poverty districts had policies specifying the amount of time to be spent on reading, compared with 55% of the lowest-poverty districts.

- **Narrower curriculum.** Seventy-one percent of the school districts surveyed reported in 2005-06 that they had reduced elementary school instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and mathematics. In some case study districts, struggling students received double periods of reading or math or both—sometimes missing certain subjects altogether. Some officials in case study districts viewed this extra time for reading and math as necessary to help low-achieving students catch up. Others felt that this practice shortchanged students from learning important subjects, squelched creativity in teaching and learning, or diminished activities that might keep children interested in school.

- **Greater direction about teaching.** Many case study districts had become more prescriptive about what and how teachers were supposed to teach. Some districts encouraged teachers to follow pacing guides that outlined the material to be covered at different points in the school year, while others hired instructional coaches to observe teachers teaching, demonstrate model lessons, and give teachers feedback on ways to improve.

Where to Obtain

[www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)
**Focus**

Comprehensive study that describes the federal, state, and local implementation and impact of various provisions of NCLB during school years 2003-04 and 2004-05. Summarized below are the study’s findings about impact on curriculum and instruction.

**Methodology**

Collected data through a survey of 49 states, a nationally representative survey of 314 school districts, case studies of 36 geographically diverse districts and 37 schools, three national forums, and four special analyses of critical issues in implementing NCLB.

**Major Findings**

- **Instructional time.** About one-fifth of the districts surveyed reported in 2004 that they had changed their policies as a result of NCLB to require more instructional time in reading and mathematics. But 27% of districts said they had reduced the time devoted to social studies somewhat or to a great extent, 22% reported reducing time for science, and 20% reported reducing time for art and music.

**Where to Obtain**

[www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)
Government Accountability Office, 2009

Access to arts education: Inclusion of additional questions in Education’s planned research would help explain why instruction time has decreased for some students

Focus

Assesses whether the amount of instructional time for arts education changed since enactment of NCLB, and, if so, whether certain groups have been affected more than others. Also examines whether state requirements and funding for arts education have changed and what school officials are doing to provide arts education since NCLB.

Methodology

Analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Education, surveyed 50 state arts officials, interviewed officials in 8 school districts and 19 schools, and reviewed existing research.

Major Findings

- **No change in most classrooms.** About 90% of elementary school teachers reported that instructional time for arts education stayed the same between school years 2004-and 2006-07, according to data from an ED survey. This percentage was similarly high across schools with a range of characteristics, including the schools’ percentages of low-income, minority, or English language learner students or the schools’ improvement state under NCLB.

- **Reductions and increases in some classrooms.** About 7% of teachers reported a decrease in instructional time for arts education, while about 4% reported an increase. Teachers at schools identified for NCLB improvement or with higher low-income or minority enrollments reported larger average reductions in time for the arts. Among the 7% of teachers reporting decreases, those at schools with high percentages of low-income students reported greater reductions in time for arts education (an average decrease of 49 minutes per week) than those at schools with smaller low-income enrollments (an average decrease of 31 minutes per week). The ED survey did not include questions about the reasons for these changes.

- **Little change in state requirements but some changes in state funding.** While basic state requirements for arts education in schools have remained unchanged in most states, state funding levels for arts education increased in some states and decreased in others, according to GAO’s survey of state arts officials. Arts education officials attributed the funding changes to state budget changes more often than they did to NCLB.

- **School strategies and competing demands for time.** School principals have used several strategies to provide arts education, including seeking funding and collaborative arrangements in the arts community. Some principals reported that they struggled with competing demands on instructional time due to state or district actions taken to meet NCLB proficiency standards.

Where to Obtain

The Urban Institute and RAND, 2008

Performance-based accountability policies: Implications for school and classroom practices

Focus

Describes school and classroom-level responses to performance-based accountability, especially how curriculum and instructional practices are aligned with standards. Examines the costs and benefits of performance-based accountability and its intermediate outcomes.

Methodology

Reviewed evidence from dozens of studies of performance-based accountability, including survey results from teachers and administrators in states that instituted this type of accountability; national survey data from teachers and administrators; student performance information by subject; and qualitative findings and insights from small case studies.

Major Findings

- **Impact on instruction.** In performance-based accountability systems, instructional time for tested content has increased, sometimes at the expense of other subjects, which has resulted in curriculum narrowing. For example, time spent on math instruction in elementary schools increased by 40% between school years 1999-2000 and 2003-04, as state and federal accountability plans were implemented. Some evidence suggests that the magnitude of the shifts among subjects varies according to school achievement, with greater shifts in lower-performing schools. Decisions of schools and districts, as well as teachers, play a role in how teachers allocate time and what content is covered. Test format also affects the skills and content emphasized in instruction. Some evidence suggests that state tests have led teachers to teach in ways that run counter to their ideas of good practice.

- **Behaviors intended to increase test scores.** Teachers reported spending a significant amount of time developing students’ test-taking skills, a practice often reinforced by administrators. However, the distinction is not necessarily clear between teaching that improves students’ knowledge and skills and teaching that artificially inflates test scores. There are indicators that outright cheating is occurring. In several studies, teachers have reported focusing more attention on students who were close to meeting proficiency targets. Other studies provided evidence that some students’ test results were excluded from accountability or that students were assigned to special education to influence testing outcomes.

- **Benefits.** Accountability policies produce information that can inform instruction and make teaching more efficient and effective. Teachers have reported responding to accountability by focusing more strongly on achievement than previously, working harder, and seeking to improve their own practices in tested subjects. The ways teachers use data are likely to be affected by such factors as school capacity and resources related to data, opportunities for interactions with colleagues, and timeliness and accessibility of data.

- **Infrastructure.** Under some conditions, accountability systems affect resource allocation and staffing patterns in ways likely to support instructional practice.

Where to Obtain

http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411779_accountability_policies.pdf
Focus

Comprehensive study that describes the progress of states, districts, and schools through school year 2004–05 in implementing key provisions of Title I. Summarized below are the study’s findings about curriculum and instruction.

Methodology

Drew on data from a set of implementation studies by the U.S. Department of Education. Data for these studies came from surveys conducted in a nationally representative sample of school districts, other state and local surveys, state performance reports, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Major Findings

- **Increases in instructional time within schools in improvement.** Nearly one-third (30%) of elementary schools identified for improvement reported increasing the amount of instructional time in reading by more than 30 minutes per day in 2004-05, and 17% reported a similar increase in instructional time for mathematics. Schools not identified for improvement less frequently reported these types of increases. Identified secondary schools also more commonly reported increasing instructional time for low-achieving students in reading (55% compared with 36% of non-identified schools).

- **Extended learning time.** Almost three-fourths of all schools offered extended-time instructional programs, and the percentage of students served through after-school programs doubled from 1997-98 to 2004-05 (from 5% to 10%). In schools that implemented after-school programs, the programs provided an additional 134 hours of instruction annually, on average, or about a 12% increase in instructional time for participating students.

Where to Obtain