



Assessment of Administrator Perceptions of Content Standards Implementation

by

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The issuance of content or learning standards continues to be a major thrust of state educational policy initiatives. Although there have been numerous studies and evaluations of these policies, little of this research has focused on the influence of administrators in implementation efforts. While change may indeed be the problem of the smallest unit, that is, the classroom (McLaughlin, 1991), school administrators clearly play a significant role in implementing change efforts (Bay, Reys, & Reys, 1999; Spillane, 1994; Spillane & Jennings, 1997). School reformers who have considered administrator either as inconsequential or as obstacles usually have later had to right this wrong and redesign their initiatives to take these individuals into account (see, for example, Sizer, 1996).

While promulgation of state content or learning standards aims at significant classroom changes, it is important to keep in mind that teaching is embedded or nested (Rosenholtz, 1991) in multiple contexts. Any policy initiative directed toward teaching and learning must reach through these multiple contexts. Collectively, administrators act as gatekeepers for reform policies, and their translation and interpretation, support or neglect of these policies can make a crucial difference in implementation efforts (Elmore, 1995; Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994; Massell & Goertz, 1999; Spillane, 1994).

The primary objective of the study described here was to identify and comprehend the factors that influence administrator understandings of, perceptions about, and responses to the implementation of state learning standards. The findings centered on three major themes that emerged from the data: perceptions of the content standards and their impact on districts, potential difficulties and concerns confronting districts and schools in implementing standards, and means of gauging outcomes of standards implementation.

Methodology

A total of 32 administrators, including superintendents, building principals, associate superintendents, and curriculum coordinators from Pennsylvania districts, were interviewed or participated in focus groups as part of data collection. The districts these individuals represented varied in student enrollment and demographic patterns, in community size and type (rural, urban, suburban), and in geographic location. The administrators were distributed about as expected across positions, with 6 superintendents, 4 central office personnel (associate superintendents or curriculum coordinators), and 22 building principals.

Preliminary data analysis was first completed across all data sources in searching for commonalities and complementary factors. This allowed im-

portant themes and categories significant to the respondents' observations about the implementation process to emerge from the data. Through triangulation of data, potential problems of construct validity were addressed. From this analysis, an understanding of administrator perceptions of content or learning standards implementation was developed.

Perceptions of Content Standards

One important theme that emerged from data analysis concerned the near unanimity of opinion on what the content standards (Pennsylvania Academic Standards) are intended to achieve. Respondents consistently identified two intended outcomes. The content standards are meant to (a) achieve consistent expectations for the content knowledge students are to master and (b) raise significantly the expectations for student learning. Respondents were less sure about the ramifications these outcomes had for their districts and schools. As one respondent candidly noted, "I know *what* they [the standards] are. I just don't know *how*." A high-school principal commented, "So what does it mean for us? Nobody's really told us that. And teachers here . . . think they are all experts in their own content area, and no one's going to tell them what to teach. So right now, the standards are just 'there.'"

Respondents saw some potential for the state academic standards to

allow schools to focus on instruction rather than curriculum writing. As one respondent noted, “What teachers do best, what they are trained to do, is instruction. Most aren’t curriculum specialists. They don’t have curriculum theories at their fingertips. What they are really good at is finding ways to help kids learn. So this [the content standards] takes all those curriculum concerns off their plate.” In addition, the content standards may serve as a means of leveraging change. Several respondents noted that it is not always easy to move teachers in new and different directions and that they are reluctant to do so, especially when those changes involve teaching practices. One superintendent noted that the standards have “forced us to look at what we do and when we do it and how well we do it. When the PSSA [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, the state accountability testing] results come out, there’s nowhere to hide. The old excuse, ‘But I already do that,’ won’t hold water anymore.”

Standards Implementation Versus Assessment

While respondents were uncertain as to the ramifications and importance of standards for districts, they were clear on what was important: scores from the PSSA. There was solid agreement among respondents that while content standards may not be matters of pressing concern, test scores clearly are. A principal noted, “I have no problem with standards. Standards are fine. They’re there, but what we need to attend to are assessment issues. Bottom line in this district is how well you do, and the pressure really comes down on schools that don’t perform as well as the others.” These administrators perceived that test scores serve as a surrogate for any serious work on implementing the standards. As one respondent noted, “I think you can . . . omit the issue of standards. We are not driven so much by the standards as by test-score improvement. . . . I think standards can have a place in that process, but standards aren’t part of the conversation in a systematic way at the district or building level.”

Gauging Outcomes of Standards Implementation

Respondents elaborated on the theme of talk or discourse as a valid means of measuring implementation. Teacher discourse was seen as a primary indicator of the level of implementation of learning standards. Teachers are the final link in the policy-implementation chain that begins with state-issued academic standards, moves through district and school levels, and ends in classroom instruction. They are thus *the* critical element in determining what gets implemented and how. Yet despite the value of discourse, teachers’ understanding and integration of the standards into their practice is difficult for anyone to gauge meaningfully.

Clearly, the respondents in this study were aware of this and gauged teacher knowledge of content standards at least informally through actions as well as words. As one associate superintendent noted, “It’s like anything else. Teachers and administrators get good at spouting the company line. They know what you want to hear, and so you hear it. It’s what you see happening in classrooms and schools—that’s what really counts.” One principal commented, “If you walked down the hall here and polled the teachers one after another and asked them, ‘Are you implementing the academic standards in your classroom?’ I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone said, ‘Yes, of course.’ Reality is a bit different. It’s what happens in those classrooms that really counts as implementation.”

While changes in teachers’ classroom instruction are an important outcome indicator, the ultimate outcome indicator is student learning. While multiple instruments are obviously available for assessing student learning, respondents again suggested that a more informal approach might be more telling for gauging implementation. An elementary principal of a school serving primarily low-income children illustrated such an approach, noting, “All the walls in the hall have examples of student work, and all the assignments are posted with the corresponding standard. In everything we do, we are always striving to

connect it to an academic standard. We want the kids to know that the work we demand from them is not frivolous, not haphazard. We are doing this for a purpose.”

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