Making the Grade: The Intentions, Interpretations, and Implications of Delaware's School Accountability System

REPORT CARD
☐ Superior
☐ Commendable
☐ Under Review

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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2001, most of the schools in Delaware received their first school rating generated by the school accountability system. The purpose of the current study was to examine schools' responses to the rating system by conducting a cross-case analysis of two elementary, two middle, and two high schools. Among the six participating schools, three received superior ratings, one received a commendable rating, and two were classified as under review. Individual sites were studied to inform and support the ongoing efforts to improve student achievement in schools throughout the state.

In the first phase of the study, the intentions of Delaware's School Accountability System were investigated to provide a context for examining schools' responses. Researchers explored the intentions of the school accountability system as they attended state board of education meetings, curriculum cadre meetings, site review team training meetings, and analyzed DOE documentation related to the school accountability system.

An exploration of the intentions revealed that the system was designed to grade schools (summative intentions), motivate schools (formative intentions), and provide guidance in terms of the characteristics of quality schools. These themes played a central role in shaping the data collection and analysis of the second phase of this study, which investigated how schools were interpreting the system and the implications of these interpretations. Researchers explored schools' responses by observing school improvement team meetings and conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with school principals, school improvement team members, and district personnel. A summary of the system's intentions and schools' interpretations are presented below.

The Summative Intentions of the School Accountability System	Schools' Interpretations of the Summative Intentions
To provide an objective means for classifying and reclassifying schools based on a longitudinal record of school performance.	Schools viewed the rating they received as an objective and credible measure of student performance on the DSTP, but questioned the use of a single indicator in determining the school's performance. They also recognized that the rating system placed an emphasis on improvement over time but reported that the cross-sectional approach to measuring performance did not provide a complete picture of the school's influence on student learning.
To identify schools that are doing well, as well as those that need additional support, or need to improve.	Many schools expressed the belief that the rating system identified schools with less challenging and more challenging student populations. Educators emphasized the additional capacities and resources required to meet the educational needs of challenging student populations.

The Summative Intentions of the School Accountability System	Schools' Interpretations of the Summative Intentions
To validate hard work and effort on the part of schools and teachers and to provide a means for determining eligibility for additional funds provided by the DOE.	Higher performing schools viewed their rating as a validation of hard work but questioned the fairness of a system that provided less monetary assistance to under review and commendable schools.
Formative Intentions of the School Accountability System	**Schools' Interpretations of the Formative Intentions**
The school accountability system encourages and supports on-going improvement in schools throughout the state of Delaware regardless of school performance rating or type of school. This system provides guidance and focus for schools as they work towards improving the achievement of their students.	Each of the schools viewed the data available from the DOE website as a useful tool for planning and decision-making. Under review schools found that the School Review instrument provided helpful guidance in their efforts to improve. *An examination of the nature of the school improvement process and sources of support available to schools revealed that …* High performing schools evidenced higher levels of efficacy, generative problem-solving, and fine-tuning of their school improvement plans. These schools drew upon resources internal to their school and district for support. Their district offices served as an important source of support with data analysis and research dissemination. Low performing reported more uncertainty with respect to their ability to improve student learning. They viewed themselves as dependent on outside sources to improve their rating and were adopting multiple changes simultaneously which tended to result in turmoil. They expressed concern over the timeliness of the feedback and assistance they received from the DOE and were concerned about the amount of time it would take to implement change. They also indicated that the support they received from their district was limited by district level capacities and resources.

Assumptions about the Characteristics of Quality Schools	Schools' Interpretations of Quality
The school accountability system recognizes that there are central elements of quality schools related to effective planning and implementation. These include: data driven decision-making, research-based practice, alignment of curriculum, instruction and state standards, professional development, appropriate allocation of resources, a positive school climate, and; an on-going process of school improvement that is developed and implemented by the whole school community.	Schools varied in their approach to improving student achievement such that generalized assumptions about superior, commendable, or under review schools were not warranted. However, superior schools did appear more likely to manifest characteristics of effective planning and implementation. They appeared to be further along in alignment of curriculum and instruction, commitment to professional development needs, allocating resources based on identified needs, and using data in the decision-making process. Regardless of the rating, all schools reported difficulties engaging community members in the school improvement process. Across all schools, principals reported additional responsibilities associated with data use and leading school improvement efforts. They expressed concern that their expanded role compromised their ability to serve as an instructional leader.

"But we must be wise enough to measure. See, we must incorporate accountability, and then be quick enough to change when we find failure."

Remarks by President Bush at Vandenberg
Elementary School in Southfield, Michigan
May 6, 2002

Introduction

The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 has ushered in a new era of Federal involvement in monitoring and assessing educational progress. This law requires states requesting Federal education aide to monitor and report the extent to which schools are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) toward statewide measurable objectives. The AYP measure would then be used to identify schools that are in need of improvement.

Delaware policymakers have implemented a school accountability system that in many ways reflects the NCLB legislation. The current study was designed to provide insight into schools' responses to and interpretations of the system with an emphasis on issues that need to be addressed for school improvement to occur. In addition, because the NCLB legislation has the potential to shift the current trajectory of the school accountability system in the state, the findings of this study should serve to increase awareness of the potential effects of the Federal legislation on Delaware schools.

Background of the Study

The current study represents the third and final year of a case study conducted at the request of the Delaware State Board of Education to monitor the impact of accountability on Delaware schools. The first year of study focused on the changes in schools resulting from the introduction of the student accountability system in light of the original intentions of the plan (Banicky, Noble, & Siach-Bar, 2000). The second year of study extended the findings from year 1 by taking a classroom view of Delaware's reform and comparing it to the ideals of standards-based reform (Banicky & Noble, 2001).

This year's study shifted the focus of examination from student accountability to school accountability. The intent of this report was to present a description of the interplay between policy and practice in six schools throughout the state. The goal was to provide insight into some of the ways that schools in the state have responded to recent reform initiatives. This study was not intended as a comprehensive overview of how all schools responded, nor was it intended to provide comparisons between high and low performing schools. Instead, individual sites were studied to inform and support the ongoing efforts to improve student achievement in schools throughout the state.

Context of the Study

Delaware's current accountability system was established in 1997 with the passage of Senate Bill 250. This law created a system of school accountability based on student performance on the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP). Beginning in the spring of 1998 students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 were tested in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing. Assessments of science and social studies for grades 4, 6, 8, and 11 began in 2000.

The method for determining a school's accountability rating is based on a legislative formula.[i] In this formula, a composite measure of student performance is calculated based on student performance in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing.[ii] The composite scores use two consecutive years worth of test data therefore schools are scheduled to receive ratings every two years. In calculating the composite score for a school, care is taken to track and mathematically attribute student test scores to the schools at which students received at least 91 days of instruction.

An amendment to the original legislation required the Delaware Department of Education to create a program for classifying schools based on their overall level of

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[i] For additional information concerning Delaware's School Accountability system and the process used to calculate the ratings see: Delaware School Accountability: Establishing Targets and School Performance Ratings. A report and recommendations to the Delaware State Board of Education. Available online at http://www.doe.state.de.us/aab/DSTP_School_Accountability.html
[ii] According to the school accountability regulations, student performance in the areas of science and social studies are to be added after 2003.

performance (absolute performance), the amount of overall improvement over time (improvement performance), and the extent to which the number of students performing at the lowest performance levels decreased over time (distributional performance). Advisory groups were convened to determine the targets for performance in each of these areas and final recommendations were presented to the State Board of Education for approval in the spring of 2001. A school's performance relative to each of these targets determined whether the school received a rating of superior, commendable, or under review.

Schools received their first ratings in the fall of 2001. Shortly thereafter, reward money was made available to schools performing above the target for any of the three targets. Schools receiving the under review rating had the option of submitting additional documentation to qualify for a site review. Both the document analysis and site reviews were guided by a rubric referred to as the School Review Instrument (SRI). This rubric was designed by the Delaware Department of Education and based on assumptions about the characteristics of quality schools. Based on the site review, a number of schools were re-classified as commendable in the spring of 2002. Any school whose classification did not change from under review was eventually re-designated as "under school improvement".

Methods[iii] and Data Sources of the Study

The current study was guided by the following question: How are schools responding to the school accountability system? Examining schools' responses in light of the intentions of Delaware's School Accountability policy further narrowed the research question. Researchers explored the intentions of the system as they attended state board of education meetings, curriculum cadre meetings, site review team training meetings, and analyzed DOE documentation related to the school accountability system.

These findings then provided the research lens for the second phase of the study, which entailed site-based research in six schools throughout the state. Each school's

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[iii] For a more comprehensive discussion of the research methodology, refer to Appendix A.

response to the performance ratings and the policy initiatives was examined through researcher observation at school improvement team meetings and in-depth semi-structured interviews with district administrators, school principals, and school improvement team teachers and staff members. The policy intentions uncovered in the first phase of the study played a central role in shaping the data collection and analysis of the second phase of this study.

Phase 1: Policy Intentions of the School Accountability System

Data concerning the original intentions of the school accountability system was gathered through researchers' attendance at a variety of meetings where the school accountability plan was introduced and discussed by members of the Delaware Department of Education. In addition a thorough document analysis was also conducted on school accountability related materials disseminated by the Delaware Department of Education. Feedback solicited from members of the Delaware Department of Education most responsible for the creation and implementation of the plan indicated that the themes that follow were consistent with their view of the system.

Summative Intentions of the School Accountability System

One of the major themes to emerge from the data collection and coding process of phase 1 was the summative nature of Delaware's school accountability system. Just as grades reflect an evaluation of performance and signify a judgment of worth, the rating assigned through the school accountability system also provided a statement of value. Under this system, a grade (rating) was assigned to a school and served as an evaluative statement of the achievements of that school.

According to the plan's creators, Delaware's system of evaluating schools was designed to provide an objective means of classifying and reclassifying schools.

> *Beginning in the fall of 2001, all public schools, including charter schools that have administered the DSTP for four years are classified in one of three categories: Superior, Commendable, and Under School Review. Schools under review will be reclassified as Under School Improvement or Commendable after further examination.*

Such classifications are determined through a formula-based calculation using absolute, distributional and improvement DSTP data.[iv]

A school review committee will analyze the additional indicators and make a recommendation to the Secretary of Education regarding the performance rating for the school. The Secretary, with the approval of the State Board of Education, will make the final determination of whether the school should remain under school improvement or be reclassified as a commendable performing school.[v]

Much in the same way that grades serve to inform students and others about their achievement over a pre-determined period, the school accountability system was designed to evaluate school performance longitudinally. The intention to examine school performance over time was reflected in the two-year measurement cycles and the biennial reporting timeline.

According to members of the Delaware Department of Education, the school accountability system was designed to identify schools that are doing well, as well as those that need additional support, or need to improve. Much of the documentation and public statements about the school accountability system emphasized "schools under improvement" and finding ways to help them improve.

Just as students who do not meet the standard on the DSTP are not bad students, schools with the "under school improvement" rating are not bad schools. This rating tells us that the school needs to find out why its students performed as they did. The review process will suggest which areas need help and a direction that the school can take to improve performance.[vi]

In addition to identifying schools needing assistance, the rating system is believed to validate the hard work and effort on the part of schools and teachers. The rating system also validates hard work by awarding financial rewards to schools performing above the accountability targets.

[iv] Source: Assessment and Analysis Group, Assessment and Accountability Branch: Delaware DOE. (2001). *Delaware school accountability: Establishing targets and school performance ratings. A report and recommendations to the Delaware State Board of Education*. [On-line]. Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/aab/DSTP_School_Accountability.html
[v] *Source:* Delaware DOE*, 2001, School accountability targets document, p. 2.*
[vi] Source: Secretary Woodruff as cited in DE DOE. (2001). An interview with Valerie Woodruff. *School accountability brochure*. [On-line] Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/aab/Accountability_Brochure.pdf

I am pleased with the number of schools rates superior and commendable. This is validation of all the hard work being done by administrators, teachers parents, and students to provide every child with a quality education.[vii]

Annual monetary awards in the amount of $10,000 per school shall be made available to those schools which demonstrate superior absolute performance, superior improvement performance or superior distributional performance. A school shall receive a monetary award for each category in which it demonstrates superior performance.[viii]

Formative Intentions of the School Accountability System

The grading metaphor introduced in the previous section also captured the second major theme that emerged from the data analysis, which involved the formative intentions of the system. Grades can serve as an evaluative tool, but they can also be used to motivate recipients (Guskey, 1994). In much the same way, the rating received by schools was intended to motivate them to improve their performance.

According to its creators, the school accountability system encourages and supports on-going improvement in schools throughout the state regardless of school performance rating or type of school.

It is important to note that Delaware's School Accountability system is based on continuous improvement, not only for the schools that are rated "Under School Review" but for those schools rated as "Commendable" and "Superior" as well. Every school must continue to improve their students' achievement over the next two years.[ix]

The system was also designed to provide guidance and focus for schools as they work towards improving the achievement of their students. Much of the guidance and focus comes from the data available from DOE and the School Review Instrument developed by the department. In field notes from the October 18, 2001 State Board meeting, the researchers noted Secretary Woodruff as saying:

[vii] Source: Secretary Woodruff as cited in DE DOE. (2001). DOE releases public school performance ratings. DOE Press Release, October 18. [On-line]. Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/press_release/043DOE01.htm

[viii] Source: House Bill No. 220, Section 5. Amend 154(c), Title 14 as cited in Assessment and Analysis Group, Assessment and Accountability Branch: Delaware Department of Education. (2001). *Delaware school accountability: Establishing targets and school performance ratings. A report and recommendations to the Delaware State Board of Education*. [On-line]. Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/aab/DSTP_School_Accountability.html , p. 26.

[ix] Source: DE DOE. (2001). DOE releases public school performance ratings. DOE Press Release, October 18. Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/press_release/043DOE01.htm

We have developed the DOE web site. This will allow schools to look at all 4 years of data and look at the trends down to the individual.... DOE will be offering training and support for folks who want to use the web site. You can use the web to see many things about the school.

Nancy Wilson, Associate Secretary of Curriculum and Instructional Improvement, spoke to the role of the School Review instrument in providing schools with support for improvement. In field notes from the October 18, 2001 State Board meeting, the researchers noted Dr. Wilson as saying:

The department will never have all the capacity that we feel will be needed, but we feel that we have created an instrument that schools can use to carefully look at their programs and therefore bring about improvement.

Additional support for improvement was offered to under review schools qualifying for a site visit. Teams conducting site visits were to provide under review schools with guidance for improving.

The teams will also help a school look at itself and assist in developing a school improvement plan. This plan must be approved at a local board of education at a public meeting and will help guide the school as it takes action to improve. DOE will also work with the local districts and schools to provide support based upon the school's needs. This could include funds to help with curriculum development or training from the school staff as well as providing experts who can help schools work towards improvement.[x]

Characteristics of Quality Schools

Most of the dialogue and documentation concerning the school accountability system focused on the review process for schools classified as under school review. This process was guided by the School Review Instrument (SRI). The SRI contained items reflecting additional indicators that could serve as evidence that the school demonstrated commendable performance.

The SRI drew on effective schools research (Wilson, N. & J. Crossen, School review team training session, November 27, 2001) and delineated specific school

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[x] Source: DE DOE. (2001). DOE releases public school performance ratings. DOE Press Release, October 18. Available: http://www.doe.state.de.us/press_release/043DOE01.htm

characteristics associated with effective planning and implementation. The characteristics of quality schools on the rubric included:

> data driven decision-making;
> research-based practice;
> alignment of curriculum, instruction and state standards;
> professional development based on student/teacher identified needs;
> appropriate allocation of resources;
> a positive school climate; and,
> an on-going process of school improvement that is developed and implemented by the whole school community.

These characteristics were elements of the rubric used for grading schools. The rubric was only formally applied to schools under review. Schools that scored high according to the rubric became eligible for reclassification to a commendable rating. In this way, the rubric served as a system of "extra credit" applied to schools under review to consider a change to their rating.

> *The primary purpose of the School Review Process is to determine if there are additional indicators to provide evidence that a school has demonstrated Commendable Performance.[xi]*
>
> *Upon the recommendations of the School Review Committee, The Secretary of Education may reclassify a school to Commendable Performance subject to the consent of the State Board of Education. Schools not demonstrating Commendable Performance using other evidence shall remain classified as Under School Improvement and shall be required to develop a school improvement plan which must be approved by the local board of education at a public meeting.[xii]*

Phase 2: Policy Interpretations and Implications of the School Accountability System

In Phase 2 of the current study, site-based research was conducted in six schools throughout the state to determine how schools were interpreting and responding to the intentions of the school accountability system. These schools, which included two

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[xi] Source: Wilson, N. (October 18, 2001). School review process presentation slides/handouts, State Board of Education meeting.
[xii] Source: House Bill No. 220, Section 9. Amend 154(d)(2), Title 14 2as cited in Assessment and Analysis Group, Assessment and Accountability Branch: DE DOE. (2001). *Delaware school accountability: Establishing targets and school performance ratings. A report and recommendations to the Delaware State Board of Education*. [On-line]. Available:
http://www.doe.state.de.us/aab/DSTP_School_Accountability.html

elementary, two middle, and two high schools, have participated in the case study for a number of years. Three of the participating schools received superior ratings, one received a commendable rating, and two were rated as under review.[xiii]

The researchers chose to examine the school improvement process within each site to more fully address schools' responses to the system because Delaware's School Accountability system "includes all schools and all students and is focused on continuous improvement" (Assessment and Analysis Group, 2001, p. 6). Therefore, school improvement team meetings were observed and in-depth semi-structured interviews with school principals, school improvement team members, and district personnel were conducted at each school site. The data were analyzed using a cross-case analytic approach in which the data from each school were examined in isolation for major themes, patterns, and assertions.

On many occasions the cross-cutting themes emerged in such a way that high performing schools were noticeably different than low performing schools. It was found that the commendable school participating in the study shared characteristics of both superior and under review schools.[xiv] The following sections present the schools' responses to the summative and formative intentions of the system as well as the manner in which the participating schools manifested the characteristics of quality schools outlined in the School Review Instrument.

Schools' Interpretations of the System's Summative Intentions

In October 2001, Delaware schools received their first rating under the school accountability system. Just like students' responses at report card time, the ratings generated a great deal of affect among the case study schools. Not surprisingly, higher accountability ratings were associated with more positive affect while lower ratings were met with more negative emotional responses.

[xiii] For more information concerning the basis for selecting the schools in this case study see Appendix A.
[xiv] The findings that speak to superior and under review schools will be designated specifically as such. References to high performing schools include both superior schools and the commendable school and references to low performing schools include the under review schools and the commendable school.

Feelings About the Ratings

Educators in the higher performing schools reported feelings of happiness and pride in their ratings. Staff in two of these schools expressed surprise because they did not know how the absolute, improvement, and distributional scores would factor into their overall rating.

> *Of course, we didn't know what to expect for the first year, even a week before the scores were released. [One of our administrators] worked on setting the cut offs. We were having a principal's meeting, and we asked [the administrator], "Just off the top of your head, where do you feel we'll be?" [The administrator] did not even expect my school to be superior.*

While educators were happy and pleased to receive superior or commendable ratings, they were also anxious about maintaining their rating. Two of the superior schools were concerned that their high scores would be difficult to maintain and even more difficult to improve over time. The other high performing school attributed their rating to the amount they were able to improve but was concerned that major changes occurring in their student population would affect future ratings.

> *I'm always thinking about, I'm very nervous about trying to maintain it, because from my calculations, we have to be on the roof in order to maintain. Other than that, then I start to think, and I ask myself the question, "Are you doing the best that you can do?" And I can answer that question in the affirmative. So I just go on about my business. . . But I do think about it. My assistants think about it.*

> *Now, the data that I'm going to get this year might be completely different than the data I've gotten the last couple years, because [so much] of the population is new. And that has me worried. Because we have been working very hard… in the last couple of years, and have gotten good results, and we haven't changed our attack, so to speak. But the children have changed. And the main thing is it is [more than 50%] poverty now, as opposed to 40, or whatever. It will be interesting to compare the needs.*

Staff in two of the superior performing schools expressed happiness over their rating while staff in the third superior school felt as though the number of other schools receiving the superior rating diminished the prestige of the rating.

Staff in the under review schools expressed feelings of anger, depression, guilt, and discouragement in response to their rating. One of the under review schools was surprised by their rating because in the past they had received positive recognition for

their school's performance. Educators in both of the under review schools initially reported feeling defensive and worried about the public's perception of their school.

> *I think a good word for it is it's depressing. It's depressing when your school is rated that way.*

> *We're staying here late at night. I mean, you're going home with it, you're going to sleep with it. And when you're under review that hurts a lot. It makes you think like you're not good enough.   And I know we are. And we work twice as hard as some of the other schools.*

> *That made me really defensive. Because I know we're a good school, good teachers. And what's presented in the media after this arbitrary test, it's not fair, and it's not representative.*

Thoughts About the Ratings

As indicated above, there was a wide range of feelings in response to the ratings that the schools received. Beyond these affective responses, the ratings generated a great deal of thought on the part of educators. Many teachers and principals were reflective about the nature of the rating and its impact on their school. More specifically, nearly all schools viewed the rating they received as objective and credible, some schools believed it to have instrumental value; but all schools thought the rating was incomplete.

The Rating as Objective and Credible

A common criticism of traditional grading practices, particularly those of classroom teachers, is that they often include non-achievement factors that make them more subjective. Instead, grading systems based on student test scores are often seen as more objective measures of student achievement. In the current study, the schools widely recognized that school performance ratings were grounded in student DSTP test results. With the emphasis solely on student test scores, district and school level personnel viewed the formula as an objective means of measuring student performance on the DSTP. This was best reflected by a member of a school improvement team responding to the question of whether their rating was deserved:

> *I mean, if you measure it objectively, and someone has said, you know, these students in these schools disappointed us in their showing, I mean, you can't argue with that.*

In addition to viewing the rating of student performance as objective, school personnel generally viewed the use of the formula as a credible means to evaluate student performance. The perceptions of credibility were apparently fueled by the complexity of the formula used to calculate the ratings, and because with the inclusion of the improvement and distributional scores the overall rating gave schools credit for improvement.

> *Our kids make progress, and that's what it was based on. Not on the [absolute] scores so much, as the progress we made.*

The complexity of the formula may have added credibility to the rating but many educators commented on how confusing they found the formula and had a difficult time explaining it. Some of the more common misunderstandings centered around the role poverty played in calculating distributional scores and the process of attributing students' scores to the schools where they received 91 days of instruction.

While all schools viewed the formula for calculating the rating as an objective and credible measure of student performance, many questioned the use of a single indicator (i.e. the DSTP) in calculating the school's performance. However, several district administrators indicated that while the system was not perfect, because of its use of a single indicator, it did provide a means of evaluating performance.

> *As imperfect as it is, the accountability system is a way of measuring that effectiveness. We don't have any other measure. Anything else is anecdotal.*
>
> *The system is not refined enough yet, though it could be eventually, to make these kinds of distinctions about schools. The two-year measurement cycle approach is a good way to establish patterns but is limited…with its use of a single test.*
>
> *That's where I have some concerns, the performance ratings are based solely on the DSTP test and I think there are some issues there. One, can any one single measure fully illuminate the strengths or the impact school is having on kids.*

Even with these objections, some schools and districts used the formula to project the scores that would be needed in the future to improve or sustain their current rating.

At a Leadership Team meeting, I told my people, "There's no way you can sit back. Because in order to maintain a superior rating, this is what you have to do. This is the absolute score you have to have. You need a [X] point increase in your improvement scores. In distribution, you need a [XX] percent more reduction in the zero's, one's and two's." Now, they were a little flabbergasted. They were a little put off. "What are you talking about? We're doing good." I said, "But we can't rest on our laurels. Because this thing is based on continuous improvement.

We also met as a district achievement team very clearly stating to them…this is what you need to have as an absolute score next year, this is what you need to have as an improvement score next year, and this is what you need to have as a distributional score.

The Instrumental Value of the Rating

One of the intentions of the accountability rating system was to validate hard work and effort on the part of schools and teachers. High performing schools in the current study interpreted their rating in this way. For these schools the high rating served as a reward in itself. Principals mentioned numerous intangible rewards provided by the rating such as a positive school image, increased staff moral, and a competitive edge for attracting students. Principals also explained that with the superior rating came protection from intrusion and the freedom to operate in a manner that they saw fit.

It was affirming to the staff to be able to say that we received superior ratings in the categories that we did, when the staff has been working so hard. And it would have been very demoralizing, or morale would have gone down quite a bit, if we hadn't.

I think we're very proud, extremely proud. And we drain it for all it's worth. We use it as leverage…I mean; this is the era of school choice. We have to compete. So we use it as a sales pitch.

To me, it's good to have a superior rating. All right. It's good to have a superior rating, because then you don't have people coming into your school telling you what to do, or what you're not doing.

The high ratings resulted in some public recognition from local PTAs and school boards. Some of the schools were also given banners and plaques by their district office. This type of public recognition did not occur in all of the superior schools and in fact served to be a point of contention in one high performing school where the response from the district office was more low-keyed.

Beyond these benefits associated with higher accountability ratings, the school accountability system also provided monetary rewards to schools that were above the target on their absolute, improvement, or distributional scores. Schools receiving reward money indicated that these extra funds have enabled them to do things that they otherwise would have been unable to do. Unlike other funding, schools felt that they had greater discretion with reward money provided that decisions were consistent with the school's improvement plan.

We're able to do things that the district has taken away from us in their budget crunch. We're now able to do things, and get things that we weren't able to have before.

We were given guidelines, of course. The state had a few conditions attached to the money. And our curriculum director is watching what we're doing with the money. Everything has to go through her office. But as long as we keep things tied into our school achievement plan. And that's a pretty, it's a pretty broad plan. I mean, you know, we could do a lot of things with it. Our goal is to do something that would supplement our school, that we would not ordinarily be able to afford to do.

While the high performing schools were glad to receive reward money, some of the staff in the high performing elementary schools noted that schools under review were in more need of the money. This was best exemplified by an exchange between two teachers during one of the focus groups.

Teacher 1: When we got our superior rating, and when we were so excited that we were getting all this money, I was excited for us, but I also felt really sad for people in the district that weren't getting this money, and who really needed it. And I guess my thought is that, we are doing really great, and we're going to be doing even better when we get this money. But schools that are under improvement, they're not doing really well, and they're not going to be doing any better without any more money. And I just really think that's a really big problem.
Teacher 2: The schools that need it are the ones that aren't getting it. And the ones, if they had more money, they probably could be doing better.

In addition to questioning the fairness of the reward system to under review schools, educators also perceived there to be a financial disincentive to seeking re-classification to a "commendable" school.

So many schools opted, "I'm not going to write a response. Let me go ahead under improvement, because I'm guaranteed money there." Which, it all just didn't seem to be, like, smart thinking.

The Rating as Incomplete

Across all schools, there was concern that the rating failed to reflect the daily life of schools—the human qualities of the relationships between teachers and students. Educators in each of the schools explained that the ratings provided an incomplete picture of schools and what occurs within them. Staff in lower performing schools were particularly concerned that the rating did not capture all that was occurring to improve student achievement.

> *They read in the paper that this is a superior school, this is not a superior school. Obviously, these people are good, their students are good, they do their job well. And these people don't. And it just seems so cut and dry. And the issue of how the school is performing is such an entirely more complex issue than just, are you superior or are you under review.*

> *I think the intention was to raise the schools' scores. I think they need to come and spend some time in my building, or in any building, every day, to see what actually happens [to see] how hard people are working towards teaching the children, [and] all the other aspects that go into play with this.*

Staff across all schools indicated that some schools might face more challenges than others. They believed there were many factors, beyond the control of the school that influenced how well schools were able to improve student performance. A principal in a high poverty, high performing school described some of the challenges schools face that are not reflected in their rating but could be observed daily:

> *I want them to see children coming in hungry. I want them to see children coming in not doing their homework. I want them to see how much we go out of our way to get the parents to come in to talk with us, to work with us, to teach them what's going on, and they not show up. Or they do show up, and they can't read, or they do show up, and they do everything they can, and those children do succeed. I want them to see all the hard work the teachers put into play, and into the classrooms. I want them to see what it's like every day. And I think that [we are] not an exception, a lot of the schools are like this. And it's just the nature of [schools], we're not a corporate situation where people come in, they do their job and they leave. They're children that have a lot of different components that come into play.*

<u>Challenging Student Populations</u>

The student population of the school was cited as the primary factor affecting the ratings received. In fact, many viewed the rating as reflecting the nature of the student

population more than the school's ability to influence achievement. Many expressed concern that the rating system might unfairly classify schools as under review because they had a more challenging population than another school.

> *The schools that did most poorly on these performance ratings are also highly challenged schools. They have high levels of needy students and frankly if that's the population, if that is the community of students that you serve, you could have the most fabulous program in the world and you are just not going to fare well in those ratings.*
>
> *I think it feels really good to be a part of a superior school, but I think that has a lot to do with the population of kids that we serve. I would like to think that it has a lot to do with the teaching staff. I don't think by any means that we don't have great teachers, but, you know, you have to wonder if you drew from a different community of kids, how the scores would change.*
>
> *[More than 30] percent of the students that are coming up to this high school have scored a one, and that's what we're getting. And so we have now a year and a half to remediate them, and that's a lot of pressure.*

The emphasis on the student population is not to say that educators believed that some students' lacked the ability to achieve. In fact, most of the educators spoke not of students' shortcomings, but on the increased capacity required to better meet students' needs. The higher poverty schools discussed the additional challenges associated with working with these populations. For example, staff in a superior high-poverty school felt as though they needed to meet students' most basic needs before meeting their educational needs. They mentioned students' limited background knowledge and prior experience as well as limited parental support and health and safety concerns. However, the principal indicated that these challenges are not an excuse for keeping them from doing all they can to help students achieve.

Changing Student Populations

In addition to the challenges associated with certain student populations, all schools expressed concern about the impact that changing student populations might have on future school ratings. A few teachers in the elementary schools believed that these concerns were motivating some teachers to transfer to other schools in order to "follow" high performing students. Middle schools and high schools cited school choice as a

factor affecting their student population. While this is an issue that they have dealt with for some time, they expressed concern about the impact it could have on future ratings.

> *And all the students that are no longer in our district, were threes and fours. I didn't see one two. So, in a very real sense, they are recruiting our top students. And so, what is the score going to look like…if you take out a very significant portion of the top students? They're going to go down. You just can't make that much of a difference.*

> *You don't want to be under review. Then people actually will pull their kids out of your school. That's what happened at another school. They left some other school to come here. Even this year now, I have [many] that are coming from other places. So it's been better to have that, than to have the other.*

Concerns about changes in student populations were also reflected in the perception that the school accountability system was not truly longitudinal in its approach to calculating the school ratings. While people agreed that longitudinal DSTP data should be used to determine school ratings, they disagreed with the cross-sectional approach used to calculate the ratings. While the system looks at improvement over time, it does not follow the same group of students over time. From the schools' perspective, following the growth of cohorts of students over time would result in a more stable measure of improvement. To do otherwise was likened to "*comparing apples to oranges*" and viewed as non-reflective of the true improvement of each cohort of students – groups that educators saw as highly variable.

> *I would rather take a look at where we have kids coming into 5th grade, and what we've done with them, and I don't think that's what the test does. I think it [compares] 8th graders… last year's 8th graders compared to [8th graders from] three years ago, or two years ago. I believe that's how it works. Whatever, how many years ago. And I've been here ten years, and the 8th graders, every year, change.*

The variability in student groups created by taking a cross-sectional approach was seen as greatly influencing the school's performance rating. For example, two schools credited their rating to atypical student groups in the base-line measurement cycle.

> *To be quite honest with you, we got lucky. We had an excellent testing here last year. If it weren't for that, we'd be under review.*

> *We're talking about two different groups of kids. And that group of kids that they used as the base year went over to the high school, and some of those kids are graduating early.*

> *[It was a real] top group. Groups are different… You hope your base year is not a spectacular result.*

The value of following cohorts of students was further validated by some of the data currently provided by the Delaware Department of Education. The DSTP website provides "repeated measures"[xv] of cohorts in the different content areas over time. Many of the schools mentioned that these data validated their hard work even if it was not reflected in their accountability rating. For one under review school, the disconnect between the data available on the website and the data used for the rating provided a significant source of frustration.

> *The Department of Ed gives you the matched scores… if you looked at that, in writing we improved [almost 20] percent in the number of kids that went from not meeting the standard to meeting the standard. And in reading, [more than 10] percent. We did go down in math, but the state went down more than us. So I say, let's look at those things too. When the staff sees that, they don't consider themselves under review, or a team of people that should be under review… it didn't help morale to see those, good results, and then be put under review.*

Schools' Interpretations of the System's Formative Intentions

One of the many purposes of assigning classroom grades for performance is to motivate students by providing incentives to learn. In a similar manner, Delaware's school accountability rating system was intended to encourage and support on-going improvement in schools throughout the state regardless of their rating or type of school. For each of the schools involved in study, the rating served as a challenge to improve. Superior rated schools indicated that this challenge motivated them to maintain their rating. They also expressed fear of slipping in their ratings.

> *We're very proud of it. But we don't want to sit back and say, "Okay, we are a superior school." We have to work to stay there.*

> *It is something to live up to.*

> *We could be doing a great job, and we'll look bad, because we might not hit superior, because we don't have as far to go. So that part's pretty scary. And it kind of dumps more stress on the top of our heads.*

[xv] Referred to on the DOE website as matched pairs data.

Schools that were under school improvement felt pressure to improve student achievement for the next rating cycle. These schools acknowledged that there was much to be accomplished, but translating this knowledge into action was a difficult task.

> *We can't become under that category [unsatisfactory]. We need to do whatever we can to not be unsatisfactory.*

> *Time's ticking, you know, to figure out what to do to get these scores up, other than what we have been doing.*

> *The expectation from the state is that we will show some gains in student achievement. That is certainly an expectation of ours too. I'm not sure how realistic turnarounds are, in terms of student achievement, in terms of gains. We have a long way to go.*

All of the schools indicated that improving student learning had always been one of their goals and was not a product of the school accountability system. However, the advent of the system did bring increased attention to DSTP scores and activities specifically targeted to improving student performance. It also motivated increased reflection and self-evaluation.

> *So, a superior rating doesn't mean that you stop and you sit back...it means that we've done a good job... but now let's tease the data out a little bit more to see what we can do to (a) maintain that superior rating and (b) close some of the gaps and improve on what it is we are doing with the students we are even having success with.*

> *It's as if we're going into our intestines with a fine tooth comb, taking all of that 40 some feet of intestine, and scrubbing every little nook and cranny, to figure out what is the new thing that we're going to do in our educating these students to make sure that, you know, a higher percentage do well on the test.*

Support from DOE for all Schools

All of the schools, regardless of their rating, viewed the DOE as the primary source for information about the school accountability policies and their implications. However, how a school accessed and received policy information varied. Some schools received supporting information through district personnel who were in contact with DOE, while other schools contacted DOE directly via email and telephone. Cadre meetings, school improvement quarterly meetings, and other informational meetings held by DOE on the topic of school accountability were reportedly useful to district and school administrators.

In addition to providing up-to-date information about the details of the school accountability system, the data available from the DOE website played a major role in supporting the school accountability process. Administrators in particular found the data provided very useful.

It is amazing what you can do. You know. I got my matched scores. I knew my scores all the way down to 98. I went and downloaded and compared. It affirmed to me that I was going in the right direction on the days that I thought, "Oh my gosh, what am I doing here?" When I can see that, yes, we are improving.

They do have a comprehensive web site. That I'll say is, that's very good. They've got a lot of data; you can do all kinds of things. You can sort different kinds of data. You can get data from the DSC.

Principals, in particular, spoke of the availability of data for decision-making. They indicated that they devoted many hours to analyzing and interpreting the data. It should be note that principals in two of the southern schools felt that the Data Service Center provided a distinct advantage to northern schools as a source for additional support when analyzing their data.

Up north, they have...a service center that actually does everything for them. They want results, ask for it, and they do it. So there are inequities from north to south in Delaware.

The Process of School Improvement

Through our analysis of policy intentions it became apparent that the developers of the school accountability system viewed school improvement teams and their school improvement plans as the primary mechanisms for driving change in the schools. The School Review Instrument presents a working model of what a school's improvement process should look like. According to the rubric, team membership should be "*open to all who wish to participate*" and provide "*opportunities for staff and community involvement in decision-making.*"[xvi] The focus of the team's work is to improve student achievement through the development and implementation of the school improvement plan. This process is meant to be ongoing with the plan serving as a means for self-evaluation and goal setting throughout the year. Decisions made by this team are

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[xvi] Source: Delaware Department of Education. (2001). *School review process: School review team training and review process notebook.* Dover: DE, Rubric 2, Item H.

expected to be grounded in school needs as identified by school data which include, but are not limited to, disaggregated DSTP data.

Through the process of cross-case analysis, clear differences emerged between higher and lower rated schools with respect to their school improvement process and the sources of support available to them. The models presented below depict the nature of the school improvement process in high and low performing schools. These two descriptions represent composites derived from the participating schools and were intended to provide insight into the different ways that school improvement teams operate, how they have been supported, and obstacles that impeded their progress.

The Nature of the Process in Higher Rated Schools

Schools with higher ratings tended to view the school improvement plan as a working document that was implemented throughout the year and "tweaked" as necessary. In these schools the school improvement plans were an integral part of the school, providing a focus for everything that occurred within the school including professional development, resource allocation, and changes in instructional practice. Also, in these schools, the school improvement process was proactive. With the help of visionary leadership, these schools took a proactive approach to improvement. They anticipated future needs and demands on the school and began work towards such ends.

> *[We] tweak it sometimes. We look at our plan, what did we do, you know, great ideas in May that never get done the following year. And you just take them out. You don't know with the shifting throughout the year, what will work and what won't work. It is an ongoing, changing plan. There's always a plan in place. But if you came up with a great idea or something that you wanted to put into place, you can add it at any point [with an] addendum. Or you can say, "This is not working for this population, or for this school year, we want to delete it."*
>
> *You really have to be proactive and plan for a lot of this stuff. Whatever we do, I want it in here [the school improvement plan]. There's nothing that we're going to do outside, if it doesn't relate to something in student achievement, school climate, staff development.*

In the higher rated schools, the plan was generally created and "owned" by multiple stakeholders including administrators and teachers with the district office playing a supporting role. Team members were generally well informed of their roles and were

given support in their roles by the district office. Typically, in these schools the district office set larger goals for school improvement and the school improvement team worked within these parameters, addressing the issues as appropriate for their school. Team members were generally comfortable with this role and usually deferred to school and district administrators for data analysis and information about research-based practices.

> *So [the district] gives us guidance…any district initiatives that need to be put in the school improvement plan, are.   So they're very parallel, the district and the schools, as they should be. It's just like the district being the root, or the stump, and the schools being the roots that branch off.*

> *[Our principal], being the kind of person she is, will jump on any opportunity that is given to her. So the administration may say, "Well, we have some research-based program here. [Who] would be willing to do this?" And her hand is the first one up. So research from the administration, and having a principal who is more like a visionary, that's another way they use the research.*

In addition, while the whole school improvement team was involved in data-based decision-making, the teachers on the teams saw the administrators as more responsible for analyzing data and keeping them informed of research-based practices. Most analyses were conducted by administrators who presented school-wide findings and implications to the staff. Typically, teachers in these schools had a general knowledge of the school improvement plans and their goals, however the school improvement plans did not play a role in their day-to-day practice.

Teachers at these school sites typically exhibited high levels of buy-in and school improvement team members were frequently involved in facilitating the implementation of the plan. In all of the superior schools, school improvement team members indicated that their involvement in the planning process provided teachers with a "voice" for making changes within the school.

> *The reason we create a school improvement plan is to give teachers an opportunity to voice concerns and work together to improve and maintain the education of our students.*

> *Teacher A: This is my third year on that team, and every year I kept taking things back to the team, and they kept saying to me, "Why do we still have in the plan that we're going to buy more [X]? Nobody uses them. They don't work." It was finally taken out of the plan this year.*
> *Teacher B: You're bringing the ideas of the teachers to the meeting.*

Teacher A: That's true. You're right. It is a voice for the teachers.

Schools with higher accountability ratings focused their efforts on "fine-tuning" their work with students. Over they year they carefully chose to focus on innovations which would help them address the specific needs of their learners. These included initiatives tailored to the individual needs of students such as differentiated instruction and increased professional development around educating students living in poverty. Schools at this stage were typically focused on instructional issues; it was as if large programmatic changes had already been implemented, and attention could now be focused on making adjustments in practice.

Sources Supporting the Process in Higher Rated Schools

The superior schools in this study reported that their district office was a significant source of support for guiding the improvement process within the school. In some instances district personnel provided advice and suggestions to school improvement teams throughout the planning process in terms of what their measurable objectives and goals might be. They assisted principals in the analysis of their data and helped to share information with staff members. These districts helped strengthen the capabilities of these schools in other ways. In some districts individualized professional development was available to help teachers improve their instructional practices, and in others the district assisted with curriculum alignment and the development of classroom assessments used to inform teachers about student progress throughout the year.

In addition to district-level support, superior schools relied primarily on internal structures and capabilities of teachers and administrators for continued improvement. These schools had strong leaders, a supportive district, and a well-established school improvement team. On-going efforts toward school improvement were also marked by high levels of efficacy[xvii] and ownership on the part of teachers and administrators.

We've all worked hard. But they've [the teachers] worked the hardest, because they carry the load.   They were very, very happy. They have a certain walk now, a certain

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[xvii] Efficacy refers to beliefs about one's ability to perform a task, achieve a goal, or overcome an obstacle (Bandura, 1977).

attitude, that they can do it. And I think we'll have a real good shot at doing it one more time.

Educators felt as though they were "*heading in the right direction*" with respect to student achievement and worked to fine-tune their activities for continuous improvement. While their high level of efficacy was notable, also notable was their ability to recruit and retain capable administrators and teachers. The resources available at the district level to support the schools may have further bolstered this attitude.

District and internal support mechanisms were not the only important resources used by these schools. Many of the principals sought opportunities for their own professional development. For example, they spoke highly of the professional development provided through organizations such as the Delaware Association of School Administrators (DASA) and the Principal Academy.

> *You need to join DASA, as an administrator, they provide a lot of different workshops throughout the year. It's a lot of information towards getting your school ready for state testing. The Delaware Professional Center…provides a lot of workshops for moving a building towards change.*

> *Programs through the Principal's Academy have been wonderful, and they're free of charge to all administrators in the state, which is something that, unfortunately a lot of administrators just fluff off. If I can go to something that they're offering without stretching my professional development budget or anything, then that's more money for my teachers.*

The Nature of the Process in Lower Rated Schools

Unlike the more successful schools, the low performing schools were still learning how to use their school improvement plan and team as mechanisms for school-wide improvement. Whereas higher rated schools focused on specific activities and programs to improve student performance, the struggling schools were focusing on the precursors necessary to generate improvement within their school. For example, these schools were struggling with issues such as raising student attendance and recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

> *The only way we're really going to improve student achievement is by getting qualified teachers in the classrooms. And how can [we] compete with [other schools for teachers] when they're getting six thousand dollars more, to go…north. They're in a new building; they have less kids to deal with; they have dental plans; they have bonus packages. How*

can we compete with that? We train them. We put the time into them, and the upper districts take them.

My English teacher, who prepares my kids to go to tenth grade…could not continue the full school year, and we had a long term sub in there. A sub is not going to give the best quality instruction, because you don't get certified people in English. The second week of school [a resource specialist] retired. I've had a long-term sub in there until just last week when they finally hired a full-time employee. I have two new [content area] teachers. One of them is on administrative leave now going on the third month. I've had a long-term sub in a critical math area…9th grade math. If [students] don't get that, they're not going to be ready for 10th grade math. So now I've got all of these things that are like a, you know, a pot hole that I keep falling in, and every one of them has had a major impact to my test scores.

Staff members in struggling schools also viewed the school improvement plan and process differently than their counterparts in more successful schools. When asked why the plans were written, teachers in struggling schools were more likely to mention the need to satisfy the requirements of the consolidated grant application or site-based management. Furthermore, while data were beginning to take on more meaning in the decision-making process of these schools, teachers and principals were still learning how to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

Educators in the lower performing schools were experiencing a great deal of uncertainty. The need to improve the school prompted numerous and significant changes within the school which led to turmoil. Educators in these schools explained that the professional development necessary to support initiatives was frequently insufficient or missing and that teacher buy-in was often limited. All of these issues added to the confusion within the school.

*Teacher A: I think that there are some things that we do that are positive. It's just been a
        real negative year this year.*
*Teacher B: There seems like there's been a lot of turmoil, a lot of chaos, lots of things
        happening.*
*Teacher C: I think that the only people that like change are babies. If you throw too
        many things at people at one time, you can't do that many things right. It's just
        that this year there's been a whole lot of negatives. And it's weighing on all of
        us.*

This school has been a block schedule school for… years. We haven't had any in-service or professional development on block scheduling since the conception of it. We've got a lot of new staff who were not here then, and the staff who were there then need a refresher in this.

The low performing schools appeared to have limited capacity for stimulating their own improvement. In these schools, it had historically been the responsibility of the principal to implement change. After the principals or district level administrators made decisions, this information was passed to teachers with little opportunity for input. Teachers in struggling schools appeared to have little ownership of the school improvement plan as demonstrated by their limited role in developing and implementing the ideas in the plan. There was evidence however, that this was beginning to change in one of the schools receiving technical assistance from the DOE. In this school, teachers were beginning to take on more responsibility and ownership for the plan.

Sources Supporting the Process in Lower Rated Schools

Unlike their high performing counterparts, the lower performing schools indicated that the district support was more uneven. Generally these districts were attempting to provide assistance to their schools yet they were also developing their own capacities. District administrators were seeking out information to learn more about the school improvement process and how to best support schools. They were starting to look at the plans closely and discuss them with building administrators. They were also beginning to assist schools with data collection and locate resources to help them improve. But in the process of trying to help schools, it appeared as though these districts were having a difficult time striking a balance between providing versus imposing assistance.

The under review schools relied heavily on the Department's School Review Instrument (SRI) for guidance. The SRI was used as a rubric for evaluating school documents to determine if the school merited a site review. Schools found this tool useful when writing their supporting evidence for the document analysis. The SRI was also used during the site review process and was viewed by schools as providing direction during their school improvement planning process. The schools directed their efforts to areas depicted in the rubric.

[DOE] was so helpful in getting us to look at what the data was saying before jumping to the objectives. So our objectives [on our school improvement plan] are very focused. Now the trick will be actually carrying it out.

The [school improvement] plan helps us, and has made us sit down and look at where are we deficient according to the rubric that we are judged on.

I said to my staff, I said, "You know, now that they've given this rubric to us, we'd be fools not to comply with what number four says on each of the items." That's the goal. I mean, we've got to make that happen.

As developers of the rubric, DOE was viewed by the under review schools as having the "right answers" to the question of how to improve student achievement. These schools actively sought assistance from DOE with the hope that support from the Department would enable them to improve their rating. One of the under review schools found technical assistance and personal contact with members of DOE very useful. In contrast, the other under review school, whose contact with DOE appeared more limited, felt that the feedback from the review team was too vague.

We need some specific leadership on how to address everything that you see wrong. You see an achievement gap? We're working on that, but tell us some more things to work on this achievement gap. You see a problem with the reading level these kids have? Well, we're working on some things, but we sure could use some more help on how to bring reading scores up. The specific things you see that we need to work on, then by all means, give us some specific solutions.

Both of the under review schools reported that they did not receive timely information from the document review and, in one instance, the site visit. They were frustrated by being half way through the next measurement cycle before receiving feedback from the site review team.

It was very helpful from the state to have the rubric set up ahead of time to find out exactly how many score points basically we needed to qualify for the site visit. That was our first goal, to accomplish that. And I think, we have not received back the information, the feedback. I've been told that that is going to be coming at some point. (Interview, February 1, 2002)

So we went ahead, and that's the document that you got. And we submitted it to the department. And I have yet to receive anything in writing from the department... [this is] year one; my next test is March. This is February.

The Search for Strategies and Solutions

The rating that the schools received was clearly interpreted as a challenge to improve. As a result, all schools sought strategies and support to better or maintain their rating. For example, principals often turned to each other in search of strategies for improvement. When doing so, they sought out schools with similar demographics to gain an understanding of their approach to improving student learning. In addition, many of the schools expressed an interest in visiting other schools to gain an understanding of what they were doing differently and how this information could be used to improve their schools. The schools appeared to be developing informal networks with the purpose of sharing success stories and ideas for improving.

> *What we've been doing is looking at other schools like us who are doing well to see what they are doing.*

> *So we're just probing and looking. We're looking at other schools. We're looking at the data. How can we do it better?*

> *I would also like to see schools that find [themselves in] similar situations [to us], that are successful. And see what they're doing differently that really works. I think that that would be helpful to me.*

The search for "what works" led many schools to turn to each other and the DOE for advice. The lower performing schools appeared to yearn for a magic formula for improvement. These schools eagerly anticipated feedback from DOE so that they could begin to make changes that would help them to improve. They turned to outside sources in an attempt to find strategies that they could adopt immediately.

> *As we go into school reform now, we'll be using the [X] Program. [There's a] firm who's coming to help us. That's going to help us establish problem based and project based learning, and alignment of curriculum to state standards, and give us some new teaching strategies and things, all geared right to our DSTP score.*

While the lower performing schools sought a magic formula, it was clear that the superior schools did not believe that they had found it, or that one existed. Instead they believed that they needed to just continue the "*things we've been doing*". In fact, many of the high performing schools were hesitant to discuss their successes when asked to do so by external groups. When they did offer explanations for their performance rating,

they credited their success to very general conditions in the schools such as good students and hard working staff rather than specific strategies, programs, or curriculum.

> *We're very proud of ourselves, but it was hard work, and it wasn't that we did anything out of the ordinary. We just did our job.*
>
> *The other day, [a policymaker asked] "Well, what is your, what's the magic thing? What did you do to get this superior rating?" I said, "There is no magic cure. Every day is a new day. We're always trying to improve. We're always looking for new things." You don't say, this is what works, and we're sticking with it, because kids change, personalities change.*

The hesitancy to discuss specific strategies also may have stemmed from teachers' beliefs that what works in one school may not work in another. As an illustration, a number of participating schools have designated funds for the purchase of Accelerated Reader texts and tests. Teachers in one school who have successfully used this program do not believe that their results will necessarily generalize to other schools. As they explained:

> *Teacher A: Everybody's jumping on board to have this Accelerated Reader. And their scores are not going to change like ours did, because the teachers did so much. It was school-wide, it wasn't just one teacher or a grade level. The principal went along with it. The kids were given an incentive. It was an all out effort over the entire building.*
> *Teacher B: All the kids knew what was going on. We had an excellent coordinator. Our principal pushed it. We all had the same goal.*
> *Teacher C: It fit into our reading program too, which also helped.*

Observations of school improvement team meetings revealed that high performing schools used outside support services in a manner that was consistent with their goals and responsive to their determined needs. In low performing schools, the search for and use of support and strategies were not as targeted. Reasons for this apparent lack of focus included: strategies being imposed on them by their district, uncertainty over what would work, feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs to be addressed, and trying to address these needs without prioritizing among them.

Characteristics of Quality Schools: Looking at Schools in Light of the School Review Instrument (SRI)[xviii]

[xviii] Cite DOE (2001)

Delaware's school accountability system was designed to evaluate the performance of schools and motivate improvement through an on-going process of self-evaluation, informed decision-making and action planning. According to the minutes of the October 18, 2001 Delaware State Board Meeting, the purpose of the review process was to "determine if schools identified 'Under School Improvement' can present evidence of additional indicators to demonstrate 'Commendable' performance. The process can [also] assist all schools in their efforts for continuous improvement."

Much in the same way that teachers work independently with struggling students to provide advice and tutoring, one of the intentions of the school accountability system was to provide guidance and assistance to under review schools. The Department's School Review Instrument drove the review process and technical assistance provided. This instrument identified characteristics of quality schools. This instrument was composed of two interwoven parts, the first addressed effective planning and the second addressed effective implementation. Effective planning involved data-based determination of needs and the use of these needs and research for making decisions concerning curriculum, instruction, professional development, and school improvement. The effective implementation component of the rubric focused on the appropriate allocation of resources based on student needs, and the role of a positive school climate and community involvement in supporting high achievement.

Based on evidence from researcher observations and interviews, the educators in high performing schools seemed relatively unaware of the rubric. Even so, these schools were more likely to display the positive characteristics of the rubric (i.e. high levels of planning and implementation). Moreover, there was a great deal of variability among schools sharing common ratings. In other words, all of the high performing schools were not the same, nor were all the low performing schools. Each school manifested the rubric items to varying degrees and differed in their areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Data-driven Decision-making

According to the SRI: In high quality schools, data provides the basis for all school improvement decisions. In these schools, decisions are based on student needs identified through the analysis of achievement and non-achievement data.

All of the participating schools reported an increased use of data in making decisions. The data they used most often were those provided by the DSTP. Higher performing schools were able to successfully use data as a tool in decision-making while under review schools did not appear to use it as effectively. High performing schools also appeared more committed to the value of using data.

> *You can't waiver on any of the decisions. You have to use your data that you collect. All your disaggregated data. Utilize that to make sound decisions, and utilize that data as an accountability measure for yourself. Hopefully, if you're looking at the data, and making decisions based on that data, then the things that you put in place will make a difference.*

> *I've pulled down the needs assessments of my school. I've disaggregated it out for Title One and minority and majority. That [is how we make] data-driven decisions when we write our achievement plan. "Well, we are very weak in this area, in reading. We're very weak across the board in this area. In third grade only, measurement in math, whatever." That has driven a lot of our decisions.*

All principals mentioned the added responsibilities associated with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Many of these activities occurred after school hours and required capacities in which some principals felt there was room for improvement.

> *That's the weight of my job [data related responsibilities]. I have to do it on the side, or in the morning. . . Or I'll go home and get on the [DOE] web site on my own computer. My best time is Saturday or Sunday morning when there's no one here. I can look at the data, and I can think pure thoughts. During the school day, there's just no way that I can carry on any kind of in depth analysis at the computer, simply because the job won't allow you. I'm interrupted about every 15 or 20 minutes doing daily discipline.*

> *But the Department of Education says, "Well, that's all you have to do. Just take our data from the web site, and put it into a spreadsheet." But not everybody has the skills to do that. And there's no training for administrators to do that.*

> *But I think that we haven't even come close to tapping what our data can help us with just simply because we don't know how.*

Because of their expanded role, principals were experiencing high levels of stress. Many principals went so far as to question their desire to remain in their role as an administrator.

You know, it's here. Like it or not, we've got to embrace it, and we've got to deal with it. All I'm trying to do is survive. You know. It's just survival. Survival of the fittest. Going the extra mile. Staying up long hours to look at data and make decisions.

I love the people here love, you know, this stuff called school stuff. I really do. But the pressures now, just, just, you know, I just feel it every day. Tightening the noose around your neck.

You just try to deal with it with as much gusto as we can, given that we still have to run our school. We can't go around crunching numbers and analyzing stuff. We just don't have enough time. We've just simply made time to do it…that's why people get frustrated…that's why people get out.

Principals felt that their expanding role with data and leading school improvement efforts was compromising their ability to serve as instructional leader, a role they recognized as valuable. Time that they would have preferred to spend in the classrooms working with teachers was instead spent on paperwork and data analysis. A few district administrators expressed concern that increased paperwork could limit the time principals had to be instructional leaders.

The principal has to be an instructional leader. You have to get out there, and you have to tell people, explain it to them succinctly, as clearly as you can. "We're here. Do you want to stay [superior]? If you want to stay [superior], we've got to go here."

We say to principals, we need you to be omnipresent in the building. We have to be very careful about an unintended consequence of this process, is to not drive the principal back into the office. There is an incredible amount of paper work associated with this and you have people who are simply being overwhelmed with that.

In supporting their efforts, some principals sought out professional development and engaged in networking for support. While some principals found professional development to be extremely helpful, not all principals were able to participate due to the daily demands in the life of their school.

Research-based Practice

According to the SRI: In high quality schools, classroom instruction is research-based and emphasizes best practices.

Administrators and teachers in the six participating schools defined research-based practice in a variety of ways. District level administrators and many principals defined research as deriving from systematic studies of inquiry. They sought out research in journal articles and through attendance at conferences. In many of the higher performing districts, the district office was viewed as a clearinghouse for research-based information. Directors of Curriculum and Instruction and Accountability passed research information along to the schools. Teachers in these districts expressed gratitude for this information and viewed this as an important role of the district.

In contrast to district administrators, many school improvement team members appeared to have limited knowledge of academic research. For them, personal experiences or the experiences of others with a particular instructional strategy or program provided information on which to base decisions. Regardless of their definition of research-based practice, all school improvement teams were using some form of research to validate arguments for and against particular practices or program.

Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and State Content Standards

According to the SRI: In quality schools, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned to state content standards. Curriculum and instructional decisions are based on student needs.

The cross-case analysis revealed that the high performing schools were further along in the alignment of curriculum and assessment than under review schools. Superior schools in particular viewed alignment as essential for ensuring that students receive a consistent curriculum throughout their schooling. All of the superior schools, with help from their districts, have completed the process of aligning curriculum with state content standards. In contrast, the under review schools recently began initiatives to address the alignment of curriculum and assessment to the state content standards.

In addition to addressing the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the state content standards, the rubric also speaks to the importance of making instructional decisions based on student needs. In most of the high performing schools, efforts to improve instructional practice focused on differentiating instruction to best

meet the needs of individual students. Examples included school-wide training on student learning styles and increased professional development around educating students living in poverty.

While these strategies were school-wide initiatives, many of the schools implemented strategies specifically targeted to students scoring below the standard. Delaware's school accountability system shines a spotlight on low performing students through its emphasis on distributional improvement. Schools indicated that decreasing the number of students scoring below the standard was one of their primary concerns.

> *We're looking into what needs to be done to push the kids that were a 1. And it's all different kids; we can't even say the kids. It's the group, from one's to two's. And what are we doing to get the group of kids from two's to three's. A bulk of our kids that don't meet the standards are in the two's. We want them, as many to be pushed up to three's, because that helps our ranking.*

> *In order to maintain that superior rating, it becomes increasingly more challenging because you've got smaller numbers of students that you need to move from a one to a two to a three, but those are also, sometimes, the same students that have the most difficulties learning,*

Schools varied in the ways in which they addressed these concerns. Strategies included transition academies, tutoring, mentoring programs, extra time, and doubling up on content areas.

While no one would argue the importance of improving achievement of low performing students, there did appear to be unintended consequences resulting from this emphasis. Most of the schools focused their energies on those students below the standard who were perceived as easier to move to a performance level of 3 (meets the standard).

> *We've really grouped the kids according to that score. We've discussed in meetings where we really should put our focus—our kids who have achieved ones on the test, how high can they go at this point? Kids who are twos seem to be the kids we're going to really work on. Because it's realistic to hope that they will go from a two to a three. To go from a one to a three in that short amount of time, is very hard to see happening. But, who knows.*

We had to do a survey of the DSTP scores from 5th grade to 8th grade, and the majority of them we moved one to twos. We moved a few twos to threes. But we didn't have a major leap from one to three. You're not going to see that, these kids come in so low. I get them on 2nd grade level, 3rd grade level, some pre-primer. I mean, how did you get to the 8th grade on pre-primer?

One superior rated school further narrowed their focus on the students below the standard who showed the most promise in benefiting from additional instruction. In this case, whether a student received additional instruction depended not only on their prior performance level but also on their good behavior, consistent attendance, and positive attitude.

In addition to the restricted focus on certain students, many educators questioned whether or not the DSTP was overemphasized when making instructional and programmatic decisions. In keeping with previous years' findings, they questioned whether this emphasis was in the best interest of students (Banicky, Noble, & Siach-Bar, 2000; Banicky & Noble, 2001).

So now we're taking away all of their electives, and we're putting them in all these academies. I mean, we're teaching to the test. We're taking away electives, and we're giving them, just how do you pass the DSTP, because this is what we're evaluated on. This is what you're evaluated on as a 10th grader.

Teacher A: They might as well have put the state test in front of us, and say [make this your] achievement plan, "What can you do to get us here?"
Teacher B: If it's not pertaining to a standard, you don't teach it anymore.
Teacher C: Also, if you want to take a field trip, it used to be we routinely took the young kids to the zoo. Well if you can't write it out as a standard based activity you don't go.
Teacher B: I'm glad you brought that up. Because there are things that can change test scores that are not specific standards. Our children are so deprived of prior knowledge. We try to teach them, and there's nothing to connect to.
Teacher C: Yes. These field trips are so desperately needed.

Professional Development

According to the SRI: Quality schools engage in professional development activities that are aligned with student needs and curriculum decisions.

Throughout the school improvement process, higher performing schools appeared committed to seeking out professional development based on teacher and student needs. Lower performing schools were just beginning to initiate coordinated efforts in the area

of professional development. Furthermore, teachers in these struggling schools expressed concern that many new programs were being implemented without adequate staff training. Educators in all of the schools and districts expressed an on-going need for professional development in the use and interpretation of data and the translation of this information into instructional improvements.

> *Where I am hopeful that more help can come is in helping us understand how we translate DSTP results into instructional improvements. Aside from us drawing down the instructional needs indicators from online, there has been very little in terms of expertise from the state level, helping us understand patterns and trend lines, either from the district level or across the state.*

Appropriate Allocation of Resources

According to the SRI: In quality schools, resource allocations are aligned with student needs and areas of planned improvement.

Each of the schools was attempting to allocate resources according to student needs and areas of planned improvement. For the most part, financial resources were directed towards new programming, instructional materials, or professional development. All of the schools reported strains on human and financial resources with the implementation of the school accountability system. Principals and many teachers reported that their expanding roles took time away from things such as instructional leadership or planning for daily instruction.

Some schools struggled with recruiting and maintaining teachers certified in mathematics, other schools felt restricted by limited district resources. Low performing schools in particular expressed concern that they were playing on an uneven field because of the limited resources available to them.

> *The funding is, if anything, going backwards. Cuts in funds are hurting us. Cuts in staff. The district office is there, trying to help us out. But they're also, they have limitations as to what they can do.*

> *Then there's disparity [because there are] schools who aren't performing well because they don't have the resources, like the Woodbridges, or the Lake Forests of the world, or the Laurels, or the Delmars.*

It's a race. They've got a head start on us. Can we get there? I don't know. I mean I know we're going to make changes, but are we ever going to catch a school that has more money, more teachers, more resources, and students who come into their schools scoring higher. Are we going to catch them? I really don't know.

Educators at some superior and commendable schools also expressed concern that district level funds would be shifted towards schools under review. Additionally, teachers in the high schools were further concerned about the shifting of resources within the schools. For example, at the high school level most of the resources and school improvement efforts were focused on 9th and 10th grades.

Each school commented that the level of resources available to them affected school improvement efforts. All of them felt that school improvement would require additional funds, but many also mentioned that they worked towards improving achievement in ways that did not require financial resources. All schools and districts were involved in applying for grants and outside resources to help support their improvement efforts.

Teacher A: Not that money solves everything, but, you know, it certainly could help.
Teacher B: If you need to buy supplies, and books, and writing tablets, or whatever you need to support what you're going to teach.

Teacher 1: We either write the grant, or we just have to...
Teacher 2: Be creative.
Teacher 1: Be creative. Right…we find things that aren't going to cost us as much.

A Positive School Climate

According to the SRI: Quality schools use strategies to promote a positive climate that supports high achievement.

One of the characteristics of effective schools is a positive school climate reflected in good student behavior and a safe environment. Each of the schools in the current study indicated that good student behavior was important for improving student learning. Many of them have implemented programs designed to reduce student misbehavior through positive reinforcement or social skills training. Many of the schools

also expressed commitment to removing misbehaving students from the classroom so that teaching could occur.

> *Our teachers talk to each other and work together a lot with children. We have a positive support system in place for discipline. But I do not allow a child to stay in class when they disrupt. They will go home. They are permitted to come back, but they will not disrupt 28 other children's academics.*

> *You can walk down the hall between classes and there are barely any kids in the hall, and if there are, they're accounted for. That allows us to teach in the classroom, and not worry about the outside discipline.*

> *You actually have to get everyone saying that when the kid does something, "Good choice, bad choice? What could you have done differently?" You make the kid articulate it and then say, "Well, what are you going to do now?" "Well, I'm going to walk down the halls like I'm suppose to." "Well, go show me how you're going to walk down the halls. Let's see you do it." The kids walk away. So it does make a difference, that will deal with your climate. Really, you need an action plan for climate [and] everyone [has to] buy into a program that's focused on student controlled issues as a way to get your climate to be positive.*

The original rubric item related to school climate appeared to focus primarily on student behavior. However, the behavior and attitudes of teachers also led to the creation of a school climate conducive to learning. Educators in most high performing schools worked to create a supportive environment for their students and expressed a willingness to "go the extra mile" for their students. They expressed a desire to not only improve student behavior but also to improve the quality of their students' lives.

> *I think we have people who will go the extra distance on, to the point of, if they find out about a kid's situation, they will do all kinds of things beyond being just that kid's teacher. And that is, that's what makes us a commendable school…for a lot of our kids; this is the safest, best place they are. Ever. This is better than home. This is, they know that we care about them. They know that we want them to succeed.*

> *[The teachers] are willing to go out on the limb for kids. We're not afraid to say that a child is not succeeding, what can we do for that child?*

> *We go the extra mile with the kids. We worry about what happens to kids when they're not with us. And we worry about making sure that they get physical health, mental heath taken care of. We're doing what we can to support them and their families…they're not just numbers to us. They're not just bodies in your room that we have to raise the scores on.*

Community Involvement

> **According to the SRI:** High quality schools recognize that the whole school community plays an important role in the quality of the school and therefore keep community members informed of school data and involve them in the school improvement process.

With the exception of two high performing, low-poverty schools, most of the educators reported difficulty engaging parents and community members in their school improvement process despite efforts to increase involvement. The educators in the two high performing low-poverty schools felt as though parental support contributed to their superior ratings. They felt fortunate to have parents who made sure that students came to school prepared to learn and were supportive of them in their role as educators.

> *[Our superior rating] tells us we did our job and that our parents in our community are doing their job.*

> *[I attribute our superior rating to] staff and students and some parent support. Parents have been supportive of me.*

While each of the schools publicized their ratings via newsletters or meetings with parents, most educators reported little to no reaction on the part of parents and community members to the school ratings they received. A few educators offered explanations for the lack of response on the part of parents.

> *We didn't get a whole lot of parents that ran in here and said, you know, "We're going to take our kids out of here, because your school is under review." I really believe, because they don't feel that way.*

> *There were no calls to the district, none of the "this school is under review then I am pulling my child out, etc." like I thought there might be. I think that what matters is the relationship of teacher to child and so long as the child is relatively happy and appears to be making progress, parents do not care about labels. Labels don't affect choice, the number one reason people choice into a particular school is where the child is going to receive pre- or post-care, they don't ask about the school rating.*

Summary and Implications

The results of the current study revealed that the school accountability system is having a powerful effect on the manner in which schools view themselves and engage in the improvement process. As one district administrator noted:

With the school accountability and student accountability regulations coming into effect now, the pressure is on, I think, individual schools and their districts to achieve at least commendable, if not superior status, and, given what we understand about the formula and the importance of the test, I think that it is transforming the whole school improvement effort locally.

While the school accountability system may hold promise for transforming school improvement, the extent to which these efforts can be sustained or be undertaken in such a way as to avoid distortions is yet to be seen. In the final analysis, policymakers, parents, and educators are the ones who must decide if the approaches taken for improvement are in the best interest of students and schools in Delaware. The following summary of the policy intentions, key findings, and policy implications highlight the school's reactions to the system and resources required to move the reform forward.

Summative Intentions of the School Accountability System: The school accountability system was designed to provide an objective means for classifying and reclassifying schools based on a longitudinal record of school performance. It was meant to identify schools that were doing well and those that needed to improve. It was intended to validate hard work and effort on the part of schools and teachers and provide a means for determining eligibility for additional funds provided by the DOE.

For schools, the rating represented some truth about *student performance*, but not the whole truth about *school performance*. While they did view the rating to be an objective and credible measure of student performance on the DSTP, they questioned its use as the only indicator of a school's performance. They understood that the rating system placed an emphasis on improvement over time but reported that the cross-sectional approach used in calculating the ratings did not provide a complete picture of the influence that the school exerted on student learning. Many of the schools used the repeated measures data from the DOE website as evidence in support of their effectiveness.

The cross-sectional approach to calculating the ratings also led to concerns about changes in student populations and the effect it would have on future school ratings. Many educators emphasized the role that student populations played in the rating received by a school. In fact, many believed that the rating system identified schools

with less challenging and more challenging student populations. They believed that educating students from impoverished backgrounds required additional capacities and resources on the part of schools to meet their basic and educational needs.

The school accountability system was intended to validate the hard work of schools and high performing schools in the current study did interpret the rating in this manner. They were also pleased to receive reward money based on their performance, but questioned the fairness of a system that provided less monetary assistance to under review and commendable schools.

Policy Implications

- The data currently made available on the DOE website allows for multiple interpretations, particularly with respect to longitudinal improvement. How does the state plan to respond to challenges raised by these alternative analyses and interpretations?

- In what ways is the state working to ensure that the school accountability ratings reflect the school's influence on student performance versus those factors that are outside of the school's control? What additional indicators, besides the DSTP, could be used to provide a complete picture of school performance?

- What can be done to build teacher capacity and support them as they work to address the needs of a changing student population?

- In light of the fiscal constraints currently experienced by the state, how might the criteria for eligibility for additional funds be modified to support the work of schools in need of improvement and schools that need assistance in order to maintain a commendable rating?

Formative Intentions of the School Accountability System: The school accountability system was designed to encourage and support on-going improvement in schools throughout the state of Delaware regardless of school performance rating or type of school. This system was intended to provide guidance and focus for schools as they work towards improving the achievement of their students.

All of the schools in the study were working hard to improve student achievement by engaging in a variety of activities and initiatives. They reported increased attention to data and increased self-reflection in the school improvement process. Administrators in

each of the schools viewed the data available from the DOE website as a useful tool for planning and decision-making.

Differences emerged between higher and lower rated schools with respect to the nature of their school improvement process and sources of support. Higher performing schools appeared to have stronger school improvement teams that relied on their internal capacities and evidenced high levels of efficacy. Teachers at these schools exhibited high levels of buy-in and were frequently involved in facilitating the implementation of the plan. While the district often provided a framework for writing the school improvement plan, the details of the plan were typically left to the school. In addition, their district office served as an important source of support with data analysis and research dissemination.

In contrast to the higher performing schools, the school improvement teams in under review schools reported more uncertainty with respect to their ability to improve student learning. They viewed themselves as dependent on assistance from outside sources to improve their rating and were adopting major changes simultaneously which tended to result in turmoil. These schools turned to the DOE and their districts for support and guidance. The extent to which the under review school found the assistance from DOE useful depended on the amount of contact that occurred. Both of the under review schools reported that they did not receive timely information from the document review and, in one instance, from the site visit. They also indicated that the support they received from their district was limited by district level capacities and resources.

Policy Implications

- How can the state and local policymakers build the capacity of low performing schools without fostering further dependence on the Department?

- While there are no magic solutions, what can state and local policymakers do to support and promote the development of effective networks among schools and districts for sharing effective approaches and lessons learned in pursuit of improvement?

The System's Assumptions about the Characteristics of Quality Schools: The school accountability system recognizes that there are central elements of quality schools. These include: data driven decision-making, research-based practice, alignment of curriculum, instruction and state standards, professional development, appropriate allocation of resources, a positive school climate, and an on-going process of school improvement that is developed and implemented by the whole school community.

Despite the fact that schools with superior ratings appear to be the least aware of the various rubric items, superior schools seemed more likely to manifest characteristics reflective of effective planning and implementation. For example, in all of the superior schools data appear to play a stronger role in the decision-making process than under review schools. The superior schools also appeared to be further along in areas such as: alignment of their curriculum and instruction, commitment to professional development needs, and the allocation of resources based on identified school needs. Regardless of their rating, all schools reported difficulties with engaging the community in the school improvement process and reported a lack of community response to their rating.

While some generalized statements may hold across schools with similar ratings it is cannot be assumed that schools with the same ratings share the same strengths and weaknesses. School performance ratings appear to be simple indicators of school success; schools are superior, commendable, or under school improvement. However, it is important to recognize that schools vary in their approach to improving student achievement such that generalized assumptions about superior, commendable, or under review schools are not warranted.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process one of the major themes to emerge was the critical role that principals played in leading school improvement efforts. As a result of the school accountability system, a school's success has become more dependent upon the principal's capacity to build consensus, lead a team in site-based decision-making, implement school change, as well as analyze and interpret data. These demands have extended both the role and workload of the principal. Principals reported increased levels of stress and lowered satisfaction with their current position. They

believed that their expanded role with data and leading school improvement efforts compromised their ability to serve as an instructional leader in the school.

Policy Implications

- As the role of the principal expands, what supports will be put in place to prevent stress, burnout, and exacerbating existing administrator shortages?

- How can the capacity building among low performing schools be accelerated to help them catch-up and keep pace with the improvement required by the accountability system?

- How does the state plan to address the resource inequities in school/district capacity to support schools as they work to improve?

- How can the state assist schools and districts with increasing productive community engagement in the improvement process?

APPENDIX A

Methodology

"There is merit in open-mindedness and willingness to enter a research setting looking
for questions as well as answers, but it is 'impossible to embark upon research without
some idea of what one is looking for and foolish not to make that quest explicit."
(Wolcott, 1994)

Research Problem

The focus of this research was to examine how Delaware schools are responding
to the state's school accountability plan. To make our "quest explicit", the research team
chose to follow a design that added another dimension to the study. We believed that it
would be more useful to the Delaware policymaking audience, if the studies at the
schools sites were informed by policymakers' expectations. Therefore, the research
problem was expanded to examine Delaware schools' responses to the school
accountability plan in light of the expectations of those who were responsible for its
creation. Consequently, the study was conducted in two phases: the first, an exploration
of the intentions of the school accountability plan, and second, an examination of
schools' responses to those derived intentions at the district, principal, and teacher level.
Therefore, there were two stages of data collection and analysis: 1) a macro level analysis
of the school accountability policy itself, and 2) a micro level analysis of practitioners'
responses and beliefs that governed their reactions. The macro level analysis was
conducted first and it focused the data collection and analysis at the micro level.
Following Finch (1986), the purpose of this policy study was to describe and understand
the real effects of policy and to compare the assumptions upon which policies were based
with social experience.

Research Team

A team of researchers was committed to the conduct of this third year of the
study. Four of the five team members had been involved since the initial year of the
study. The team included four members of the Delaware Education Research and
Development Center staff and one faculty member from the University of Delaware
School of Education. The range of expertise of the team members included two
researchers with PhD's in qualitative methodology and educational policy, one Ph.D.
candidate from Boston College with an emphasis in qualitative methods, a retired
elementary school principal with a master's degree in educational leadership, and
educational researcher with a Ph.D. in social psychology. All members of the team were
actively involved in the complete study from the generation of research questions, the
collection of data, and its subsequent analysis.

Macro Level Design (July 2001 through February 2002)

Research Questions

The initial research questions explored at the macro level were:

- What are the intents of the school accountability plan?
- What does the Delaware Department of Education want to occur in schools as a result of the plan?

Data Sources and Collection

During this first phase of the study, the research team collected data from a variety of sources. These data collection activities included:

- Observation and collection of field notes at Delaware State Board public meetings;
- Participant observation at school review team training sessions conducted by the Delaware Department of Education (The purpose of this training was to prepare individuals to conduct document reviews and site visits as part of the school accountability system.)
- Document collection
  - DOE press releases
  - DOE State Board Public Meeting Minutes
  - DOE school review team training materials
  - DOE school review process documentation
  - DE School Accountability Establishing Targets and School Performance Ratings Report and Recommendations
  - DOE website information about school accountability
  - Delaware school accountability legislation

Data Analysis

Open coding

Two qualitative researchers who were members of the research team conducted the data analysis at this stage. The initial stage of data analysis followed a grounded theory model incorporating constant comparative analysis (Strauss, 1990). This is an inductive process whereby the researchers scrutinize data line by line and assign codes that capture the meaning of the data. The process that entails constant comparison of one unit data to another, sorting data according to what they have in common. This process of decontextualization (Tesch, 1990): entails segmenting and slicing up data into segments that are comprehensible by themselves and, at the same, large enough to be meaningful. The intention is to separate data extracts from original context while retaining meaning.

Development of Conceptual Framework

Upon completion of the coding process, categories were developed to create a conceptual framework that yielded the intentions of the policymakers and also guided the data collection and analyses at micro level. This process of describing and classifying serve to generate thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon being studied, rendering events or actions intelligible (Dey, 1993). Where meaning is determined through coding, classifying provides the basis of building a conceptual framework. From our content analysis three major areas of school accountability expectations emerged. These included: summative intentions, formative intentions, and characteristics of quality schools. For each group of intentions, numerous claims were developed. These claims provided the basis for the development of the on-going research agenda. Claims were then used:

- To provide focus for on-going field observations;
- As the basis for the development of a structured codebook used for structured coding of micro level data;
- In conjunction with initial field observations and principal interview findings, to develop school improvement team teacher/staff focus group protocol as well as district personnel interview protocol;
- To focus our research questions for on-going analysis and work in the field; and,
- To serve as the conceptual framework that guided the analyses at the within-case and cross-case levels.

Micro Level Design (October 2001 through May 2002)

Site Selection

The selection of schools (site sampling) was made prior to the 1999-2000 academic year. Several schools had agreed to participate. The study's criteria for selection included the following parameters:

- Grade configuration: 2 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 2 high schools
- Districts and counties (rural and urban)
- DSTP performance: low, average, high
- Size of school: small, medium, large
- Minorities: percentage of (low, average, high)
- Limited English Proficiency: percentage of (low, average, high)
- Family income level (SES): percentage of (low, average, high)
- Special education: percentage of (low, average, high)

Based upon the school accountability ratings, contained within these schools are schools that were rated superior, commendable, and under review. Some of these schools received site visits from the DOE review teams, while others did not.

Information about participating schools	Number of schools
Elementary Schools	2
Middle Schools	2
High Schools	2
Superior Rated Schools	3
Commendable Schools	1
Schools Under Review	2
Urban	1
Suburban	2
Rural	3

Data Sources and Collection

After the school performance ratings were released, the researchers began the collection of data at each of the six school sites. These data collection activities included:

- Observational field notes of faculty meetings
- Observational field notes of local school board meetings when school ratings were discussed
- Observational field notes of parent meetings when school ratings were discussed
- Observation of DOE presentation to local boards about the school accountability system
- Observational field notes of school improvement team meetings
- Individual interviews with school principals
- Individual interviews with district administrators responsible for providing schools assistance for school improvement
- Focus group interviews with teachers and staff members on school improvement teams
- School improvement plans (SIP)

Data Analysis

Memo writing
Throughout the study, each researcher wrote memos to capture their preliminary analytic thinking about events and interactions they experienced. Memos are important devices that facilitate reflections and insight (Maxwell, 1996). They are used to generate better understanding of the research topic. As discussed later, these memos also were shared among the research team members for peer examination as a means to improve the trustworthiness of the study.

Document analysis: A document analysis was conducted of each of the school's 2001-02 School Improvement Plans. The focus of the analysis was to address the following questions:

- What do schools take as evidence of improvement?
- To what degree do they value and use the data provided by the Delaware Student Testing Program?
- What group(s) of students is/are targeted within the plan?
- How are schools allocating financial resources?
- What does the SIP imply in regard to decision making processes?

This analysis provided an understanding of the role that SIPs played in each of the schools. The findings from this analysis informed the development of the principal interview protocols (Appendix B), the district personnel interview protocol (Appendix C), and the school improvement team focus group protocol (Appendix D).

Within-case analysis

This level of analysis allows researchers to draw and verify conclusions about a phenomenon within a single bounded case, in this study, a single school site. Individual researchers coded all site-specific data using a codebook that had been generated from the macro analysis (see Appendix E). In order to support consistency between coding, pairs of researchers coded all data, codebook and code definitions were developed and referred to throughout the process, and data coded by one researcher were checked by others. One researcher served to oversee process, troubleshoot, and answer questions. All researchers used HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis program, to assist in the organizing, managing, and retrieval of coded data. Each researcher wrote analytic memos throughout the data collection and coding processes. Brainstorming session for researcher orientations were held prior to final cross-case analysis

Cross- case analysis

The use of multiple cases in qualitative research increases the certainty that findings are not idiosyncratic and that findings derived make sense beyond a specific case. Multiple cases allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest, and consequently, lead to more powerful and convincing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis was organized through the use of a site-ordered meta-matrix that arranged assertions derived from the within case analysis according to the categories of the macro level conceptual framework. The full research team collaborated in the conduct of the cross-case analysis. The result was a conceptually-ordered, meta-matrix, a descriptive display that used the macro level conceptual framework as the organizing principle.

Assertions

Final claims or assertions were derived from the cross-case analysis. Assertions are derived from the repeated review of the corpus of data and identification of key linkages (Erickson, 1986). A basic task of qualitative data analysis is to generate these assertions through induction that are tested and retested against the database (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Throughout the report the reader will see exemplars (quotes, etc.) that serve as evidentiary warrant for the assertions or claims that are made.

Trustworthiness of Findings (validity)

Since primary goal of qualitative research is the understanding of a social phenomenon, not the discovery of a law or hypothesis testing, the criteria used for "trusting" the study are different. What makes experimental studies scientific or rigorous are the design and the processes of measurement. What makes a qualitative study rigorous is the *researcher's critical presence* within the context of the occurrence of the phenomenon. In qualitative inquiry validity cannot "be purchased with techniques". The trustworthiness or credibility of the study's findings depends the relationship of the conclusions to the "real world", in this case to the real world of the schools. Since the findings of qualitative inquiry are more context dependent, threats to validity or trustworthiness are made implausible not be methods but by evidence.

Numerous means were utilized in the conduct of this policy study to ensure its trustworthiness. These included:

- Triangulation- Derived from a navigational principle, triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point. It involves the collection of information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods. This reduces the risk that conclusions might reflect systematic biases or limitations of a specific method (Maxwell, 1996). In this study data were collected from diverse sources with diverse methods by multiple researchers.

- Participant checks- this is a procedure where researchers take data and interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived, asking them if the findings are plausible (Merriam, 1988). In our study, a participant check was conducted at the beginning of the year with teachers and principals to generate feedback on the findings of the year 2 report (see Appendix F) In addition, a participant check of our analysis of the first phase of this year's study, that is the policy expectations, was conducted with members of the Delaware Department of Education. Feedback was sought from Robin Taylor, Nancy Wilson, Joseph Crossen, Amelia Hodges, and Debbie Morgan. Each of these individuals plays a critical role in the school accountability system and the school review process.

- Long-term observations- Conducting observations at one site over time or repeated observations of same phenomenon at different sites increase the credibility of a qualitative study. In our study, four of the five researchers involved have been studying the same six school sites for a three-year period.

- Rich data- Data from studies should be detailed, complete, and accurate. This was ensured in our study through the audio recording of each interview. All interview tapes were then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who is independent of the R&D Center. In addition, a

qualitative data analysis program, HyperResearch, was used to assist with the organization and retrieval of coded material.

- Peer examination- Asking colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerge was a regular activity of the research team. Each member collaborated throughout the data collection and analysis process. Three researchers each took overall responsibility for a pair of cases and subsequently took the lead on the coding of data from their respective sites. To support consistency among the researchers, the following steps were taken: the initial coding was done in pairs; codebook and code definitions were developed collaboratively and referred to throughout the process; data coded by one researcher were checked by others; and, one researcher, other than the site researchers took the lead to oversee process, troubleshoot, and answer questions. Analytic memos were written throughout the coding process and shared among all members of the research team.

- Clarifying researchers' perspectives- It is important to explore and clarify the viewpoints of the researchers prior to and throughout the conduct of the study. This was done at various points in time during the study: initially when the research problem was formulated, at research team meetings, and, most specifically, just prior to the cross-case analysis activities.

Generalizability

Can or should the findings of qualitative studies be generalized? Case study research is not intended to generalize from a sample to a population. One selects this method to gain a better understanding of a particular phenomenon in depth, not because one wants to know what is generally true of many. Many prominent researchers have spoken to this issue.

"When explanation, prepositional knowledge, and law are the aims of an inquiry, the case study will often be at a disadvantage. When the aims are understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known, the disadvantage disappears." (Stake, 1978)

"When we give proper to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion." (Cronbach, 1975)

Therefore, we present these findings to help Delaware policymakers and educators develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of school's response to the school accountability system. By presenting our findings derived from the six school sites, we hope that policymakers and educators better appreciate and understand the complexity of this system as it is interpreted by those educators at the school level.

APPENDIX B

Principal Interview Protocol: Interview Day 1

INTRODUCTION: As you know we are interested learning about how schools are being affected by and are responding to the state's school accountability plan. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts. Please know that everything that you say will be held strictly confidential and that none of the reports released by the R&D Center will name yourself, your school, or your district.

Focus	Questions	Probes
General questions about school accountability	*Scenario: You have been invited to present at a course for new administrators, the topic for the day is school accountability, the instructor for the course - a good friend of yours is sick - It's your class for the day. You have been asked to speak to the group about the state accountability system.* 1. How would you describe the school accountability system to these new principals?	*Possible topics may include:* *Overall impressions, test score ratings, formulas…* *Regarding ratings:* What do those categories mean to you? What does it tell you about a school? What are the implications of the ratings to you as a principal - on your role and your school? *Regarding support:* What sources of support are available to you as a principal? What might a principal need? *Consequences & Incentives:* What are the consequences and incentives of the system? How do you feel about those incentives? How would you recommend using the reward or improvement money? Does the district office have control over how the money is used, or are you able to make these decisions? Does that money come directly to you, or does it go to the district office?
	2. Do you have any advice for these new principals regarding the state accountability system?	
Perceptions of the purpose of the school accountability system:	3. What is the purpose of the school accountability system from your perspective? 4. What do you see as the expectations of the system? 5. What do you think of these expectations?	
Personalize discussion to their own school	6. How does it feel to be a (superior, commendable, school under review)	

	school? OR What does the schools' rating mean to you? 7. Why do you think your school "achieved" the rating that you did? 8. What are you doing in response to the rating?	
Teacher/Staff response to the school rating	9. How did the staff/teachers respond to your schools' ratings?	
District response to the school rating	10. How did the district respond to your schools' ratings? 11. How would you characterize the relationship between the school and the district since the ratings were released? 12. What are you hearing from the district about your rating? 13. What role does the district play with providing you with information or support?	Is this the same as it was before? **If not**, how has the relationship changed?
Community response to the school rating	14. How did the community respond to your schools' ratings? 15. What types of messages & information went out to the community? 16. Who has been in contact with the school: Press? Parents? School Board? Other?	
Affects of accountability system on work of principal	17. How does the accountability system affect your job on a daily basis?	Does this system affect your role as a principal? How have you seen the principal-ship change as a result of the accountability system?

Principal Interview Protocol: Interview Day 2

INTRODUCTION: As you know we are interested learning about how schools are being affected by and are responding to the state's school accountability plan. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts. Please know that everything that you say will be held strictly confidential and that none of the reports released by the R&D Center will name yourself, your school, or your district.

Focus	Questions	Probes
Communication/information re: school accountability process	1. How well informed do you feel about the school accountability process?	The student accountability piece? The school accountability piece?
		What is your most helpful/reliable source?
	2. Where do you receive your information?	What is this message?
	3. Are you receiving a clear message about the school accountability process?	
		What are these messages?
	4. Are there mixed messages?	
Data & Decision-Making	5. What does the term data driven decision-making mean to you?	
	6. What role do data play in your work?	How do you use data? With staff members?
		How do you think that the district uses it?
		If not addressed, ask: What role does data play in planning for the school? How much do you rely on data when planning?
	7. Tell us about the data that the accountability system provides. What information does this give you? How useful is this information?	What information do you focus on most? What is most meaningful to you?
		Do you use any of the data that you get from the state accountability system?
	8. What other data do you find useful? How do you use it?	
	9. How comfortable do you feel in your role as data cruncher?	What type of support have you had in learning how to do this?

School Improvement Plans	10. How long have you been doing SIPS?	Has the process of writing SIPS changed with the advent of accountability? Do you see/predict any changes now that school accountability is in place?
	11. Explain how you go about developing your SIP.	When you are writing your objectives, what are the sources for your goals?
	12. Who knows about/uses the plan in your school?	How are they informed about the plan? How do they use it?
	13. What roles have the SIP and the SIP team played in the past and what roles will they play in the future?	What do you see as the utility of this process?
	14. Do you receive feedback on your plan from anyone outside of the school?	
	15. Have you/or your district done an evaluation of your SIP?	**If yes:** Who? How helpful is this feedback? How do you use this feedback in your work?
	16. Is your school involved in initiatives for school improvement that are not reflected in the SIPs?	**If yes:** Did this feed into the SIP? What did you learn from this evaluation? How do you use this evaluation? Could we have a copy of the evaluation?
Conclusion	17. Do you have any additional comments about the school accountability system?	

APPENDIX C

District Personnel Interview Protocol

INTRODUCTION: As you know we are interested learning about how schools are being affected by and are responding to the state's school accountability plan. The focus of today's interview will be on the role of the district in the school accountability process. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts. Please know that everything that you say will be held strictly confidential and that none of the reports released by the R&D Center will name yourself, your school, or your district.

Focus	Questions	Probes
General questions about school accountability	1. What is the purpose of the school accountability system from your perspective? 2. What do you see as the expectations of the school accountability system? 3. From your perspective, what do the performance ratings tell you about a school?	What do you think of these expectations?
District response to the school rating	4. How did the district respond to (*insert school name)*'s ratings? Why do you think (*insert school name)* received the rating that it did?	How did the community respond?
Superior schools & schools under review	5. *I'd like you think about a school in your district that is rated superior (or commendable if there are no superior schools in the district) and you believe it to be a superior (or commendable) school.* a. How do they use data? b. How do they use research? c. How would you characterize their alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment? d. How would you characterize their school improvement plan? e. Describe what the school improvement process looks like in the school. f. What role does the community play in the school's improvement process?	If they indicate that they can think of a school but do not agree with the rating, ask them why they do not agree with the rating. And then proceed with the questions listed in the middle column. If in responding to the why question they answer any of the questions listed in the middle column, then skip that question.

	Now let's think about a school in your district that was classified as under review earlier this fall and that you believe should have been rated this way. (Use questions from above.)	
Support for schools re: school accountability	6. What do you see as the role of the district office in the school accountability process? 7. What does the support from the district look like? How do you anticipate such support will impact the school? 8. We anticipate that one form of support you provide is passing information on to the schools. Where do you get your most useful information? 9. As a district, what resources do you use to help schools to be successful? What resources will you need to help schools be successful in the future?	Want to get at support in terms of: resources (people, $, professional development), information, advice, help with SIP & doc reviews, community outreach (informing public & dealing with response to ratings)
District involvement in school improvement process	10. What has been the district's role in the development of SIPs? Has this changed as a result of school accountability? 11. How were school improvement plans used before school accountability, is this different than how they are currently used? If so, how?	

Conclusion: Do you have any additional comments about the school accountability system that you would want policymakers to know?

APPENDIX D

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

INTRODUCTION: We are interested in learning more about Delaware's School accountability system from your perspective. The topics to be discussed during today's focus group include: the purpose of the school accountability system, your response to your school's rating, and what you see as the purpose of the school improvement plan in your school. This focus group is scheduled to last for one hour.

I would like to remind you that you may choose not to answer a question or refuse to participate in the study at any point without penalty. Also, please remember that everything that you say will be held strictly confidential and none of the reports released by the R&D Center will name yourself, your school, or your district. In order to aid in the process of data analysis I will be tape recording our focus group today.

Focus	Questions	Probes
Teacher response to the school rating	How does it feel to be a teacher in a school that's been rated *(superior, commendable, or under review)?*	What does this rating mean to you?
	To what extent do you believe that your school deserved this rating?	If they indicate that they deserved the rating "If an outside team were to come in to review your school what specific evidence would you give to support your school's rating?"
		If they do not feel the rating was deserved: "If an outside team were to come in to review you school, what specific evidence would you give to refute your school's rating?"
	As a school, what are you doing to improve or maintain your school's performance rating?	
[For schools that were rated as under review]	Earlier this year, your school was rated as "under review". What impact did the school review process have on the daily functioning of your school?	How helpful was the school review process for your school?
	How did the review process affect your work as a school improvement/leadership/achievement team?	
Purpose and process of school improvement planning	Pass out note cards & ask participants to complete the following statement: At (*school name*), the reason we create a school improvement plan is_____. Ask people to record a response and then share. While people are sharing record	

	their comments. Ask participants explain what they have done as a group to make each of the above things occur. What have you done as a group to make this happen?	What role does the team play in creating and writing the school improvement plan? (Trying to get at the nature of the process.) 　How do you decide on: 　　Planned activities? 　　Measurable objectives? 　　Resource Allocation?
	How do you see the plan being used in your school? In your district? What, if any, changes do you see resulting from your school improvement plan?	To what extent does data inform these decisions? What role does research play in the development of the plan?
	To what extent has the school accountability system changed the way the school improvement plan is developed or used?	We want concrete examples of changes that they have seen resulting from their improvement plan. With respect to the plan itself: who sees it? Is it something that teachers in the school use and refer to? Do you evaluate the plan at the end of the year? What purpose does this evaluation serve?
Conclusion	Do you have any additional comments about the school accountability system that you would want to pass on to Delaware policymakers?	

Appendix E

Codebook Generated Through Macro Analysis

Code	Category	Definition
Alignment	Defines Quality	Data that depicts how curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned to the state content standards.
Alignment-NOT	Defines Quality	
Community involvement	Defines Quality	Data that depicts the involvement of the school/community in all aspects of the school improvement process.
Community involvement-NOT	Defines Quality	
Data-based determination of needs	Defines Quality	Data that shows the school's use of data to determine student needs, and that such findings are shared with staff.
Data-based determination of needs-NOT	Defines Quality	
Decision-making process	Defines Quality	Data that depicts that curriculum & instruction decisions are based on needs, and shows how the school/community is involved in the school's decision-making process
Decision-making process-NOT	Defines Quality	
Instructional Practice	Defines Quality	Data that shows that teaching strategies are based on student learning needs.
Instructional Practice-NOT	Defines Quality	
Professional Development	Defines Quality	Data that shows that professional development activities/objectives are aligned with student needs/ curricular decision-making and that professional development occurs over time.
Professional Development-NOT	Defines Quality	
Research Based Practice	Defines Quality	Data that addresses how instruction is research-based/emphasizes best practice.
Research Based Practice-NOT	Defines Quality	
Resource allocations	Defines Quality	Data that shows how resource allocations are aligned with student needs and areas of planned improvement.
Resource allocations-NOT	Defines Quality	

Codebook Generated Through Macro Analysis (Cont.)

Code	Category	Definition
School climate	Defines Quality	Data that speaks to how the school uses strategies to promote a positive climate that supports high achievement; and that implementation is school-wide.
School climate-NOT	Defines Quality	
School improvement process	Defines Quality	Data that presents how the school improvement plan is a comprehensive plan that is central to continuous school improvement, and that school improvement is an on-going process that is developed & implemented by the school community to address all students' needs and abilities.
School improvement process-NOT	Defines Quality	
Unintended Defines Quality	Defines Quality	Data that depicts unintended outcomes of defining quality that appear to occur as a result of the school accountability system.
Impetus for improvement	Formative	Data that depicts the school accountability system as serving as an impetus for improvement in all schools regardless of school performance rating.
Impetus for improvement-NOT	Formative	
Supports school improvement	Formative	Data details the various ways that the DOE & the school accountability system support school improvement. These may range in degree of directedness from very direct to indirect. Includes the role of the school improvement team and the school improvement plan.
Supports school improvement-NOT	Formative	
Unintended Formative	Formative	Data that shows unintended formative results of the school accountability system.
Identifies good schools	Summative	Data that speaks to the school accountability system as providing a means for identifying good schools, while not serving as an indicator of "badness".
Identifies good schools-NOT	Summative	
Longitudinal record	Summative	Data that depicts the school accountability system as providing a longitudinal record of school improvement.
Longitudinal record-NOT	Summative	

Codebook Generated Through Macro Analysis (Cont.)

Code	Category	Definition
Means for classifying/ reclassifying schools	Summative	Data that portrays the school accountability system as providing a means for classifying/reclassifying schools based on their performance.
Means for classifying/ reclassifying-NOT	Summative	
Objective measure	Summative	Data that depicts the school accountability system as providing an objective measure of school performance.
Objective measure-NOT	Summative	
Rewards & support	Summative	Data that shows the school accountability system as providing a means for determining eligibility for rewards and additional support.
Rewards & support-NOT	Summative	
Unintended Summative	Summative	Data that shows unintended summative results of the school accountability system.
Validation of hard work & effort	Summative	Data that supports the notion that the school accountability system validates hard work and effort.
Validation of hard work & effort-NOT	Summative	

Appendix F

Participant Checks and Pertinent Educator Poll Results

At the beginning of the 2001-02 academic year, principals and teachers at the six study sites were asked to critique the findings from the second year of study which culminated in the report, *Detours on the Road to Reform: When Standards Take a Back Seat to Testing*. This critique of the findings differed slightly from a traditional participant check because it included teachers who did not directly participate in the previous year's data collection. The table below indicates the percentage of teachers and principals who tended to agree or agreed with the major findings from year 2.

In addition to following up with the participating schools, the major findings from year 2 were also used in the 2001 Statewide Educator Poll on the Condition of Education in Delaware. A scientifically developed random sample of 280 educators participated in telephone interviews between October 22 and November 18, 2001. A few of the findings were slightly reworded for use in the educator poll and are indicated in italic. The results from the public poll are also included in the table below.

As a result of the student accountability plan…	*% Responding that they tended to agree or agreed with this statement*	
	Case Study Respondents (N=220)	Statewide Educator Poll Respondents (N=280)
1. Instruction is not focused on the standards but on teaching to the DSTP. (*Poll Item: Instruction is focused less on the standards and more on teaching to the DSTP*)	74	64
2. The developmental needs of all students are being addressed. *	18	37
3. Teachers are feeling as though they "need to expose students to as much as possible…and hope that some of it sticks".	86	82
4. Curriculum changes are driven by the state test and not by student needs.	95	89
5. Teachers are teaching the same things in the same ways to most students. (*Poll Item: Teachers are teaching the same ways to most students.*)	64	47
6. Curriculum control is at the district/state level and not the school.	88	86
7. DSTP data are useful for improving instruction. *	31	53
8. DSTP data are useful for diagnosing individual student learning problems. *	21	47
9. There is a sense of powerlessness among teachers.	87	83
10. Decisions about teaching and learning continue to move further from the classroom and school.	90	84
11. Teachers' professional judgment is valued less.	88	84

As a result of the student accountability plan…	Case Study Respondents (N=220)	Statewide Educator Poll Respondents (N=280)
12. Children in Delaware are receiving a more well-rounded education. * (*Poll Item: Delaware students are receiving a well-rounded education*).	26	57
13. Teachers' morale has decreased.	91	86
14. Teacher shortages are likely to occur.	91	91
15. Professional development offerings have become more narrow.	84	62

*Based on the findings from year 2 of the case study, participants were not expected to report high levels of agreement with these items.

The results of the modified participant check and poll results support the validity of the analysis conducted during the second year of study. No less than two-thirds of the case study respondents agreed with the findings researchers expected agreement with, and no more than one-third of them agreed with the findings with which disagreement was expected. With the exception of items 5, 7, 8, and 12, the poll results indicated that findings from year 2 could be generalized to educators throughout the state. The reasons why these four findings do not appear to generalize are unclear, however two of the items were slightly reworded when presented to poll participants and may have altered the way they were interpreted by respondents. Additionally, prior to completing the survey, case study respondents received a presentation of the findings. It is possible that this presentation affected their interpretation of the findings.

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