



LEADS

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This issue of LEADS stems from research conducted by Drs. Betty Malen and Jennifer King Rice of the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland's College of Education. Findings come from case studies of two types of high-stakes accountability initiatives in two different contexts. The first case examined a metropolitan school district's experience with a reconstitution initiative that brought about sweeping staff changes in six of its low performing schools. The second case examined how a more rural elementary school responded to the graduated sanctions imposed on schools that fail to make "adequate yearly progress" as required in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Data sources included extensive reviews of documents, interviews with educators and parents, and observations of school operations.

The Impact of High Stakes Accountability Policies on School Capacity for Improvement

High-stakes accountability initiatives seek to instill dramatic improvements in school performance. While these policies take different forms, they generally try to strengthen the incentives for school improvement by issuing salient rewards to high achieving schools and/or by imposing stiff sanctions on low performing schools.

Recent research by University of Maryland faculty demonstrates that while these policies may intensify the incentives for school improvement, they also can diminish a school's capacity to meet prescribed performance standards. This unintended, negative effect can occur even in cases where the accountability policies allocate additional resources to the targeted schools, because the resources provided are not always the types of resources required to improve school performance. High-stakes accountability policies also may precipitate responses that undercut schools' ability to make productive use of the available resources. For example, in some of the cases studied, these policies imposed heavy human costs (e.g., stress, exhaustion, alienation) that prompted many of the strongest teachers to transfer to more attractive work environments and eroded the ability of those who remained to invent and implement school improvement plans. In other cases, high stakes accountability initiatives prompted schools to adopt, rapidly and indiscriminately, a host of initiatives that schools only partially or symbolically implemented. As a result, prized resources, such as time, energy, and talent, were dispersed across numerous distinct and disjointed programs and activities. Available resources were diluted, and school capacity for meaningful school improvement was diminished.

Since schools cannot improve unless they have the desire and the capacity to do so, policymakers must consider how high-stakes accountability initiatives strengthen not only the incentives but also the capacity for school improvement. The following guidelines, derived from this research, aim to help policymakers gauge how high-stakes accountability policies affect school capacity. These guidelines recognize the importance of looking not only at the resources allocated to schools but also at the factors that determine whether those resources can be put to productive use.

(1) Track the impact on the type and the level of resources made available to schools. One way to gauge how accountability policies affect school capacity is to develop an inventory of the various resources that accompany these policies. For example, do policies simply set ambitious standards and threaten stiff sanctions? Or, do policies provide additional resources such as new money, more staff, greater technical assistance and/or extended professional development opportunities? An inventory of the

resources allocated indicates whether and how policies enhance the resource base of schools. However, assessments that rely solely on an inventory of resources mask how high-stakes accountability policies can reduce school capacity, even when they provide additional resources. To avoid this pitfall, policymakers must take into account factors that affect the schools' ability to translate available resources into desired outcomes.

(2) Track the degree to which the resources provided are aligned with the resources required for school improvement. Additional resources, in and of themselves, do not translate into increased capacity, especially if the resources provided are not the resources required to accomplish the critical tasks at hand. Consider, for example, a school that must have enhanced human capital (e.g., a larger percentage of qualified, experienced teachers) to realize the prescribed standards. A reform policy that provides more curricular materials but fails to increase the stock of human capital has not increased capacity in ways that substantially enable the organization to achieve the standards imposed upon it. If accountability policies do not provide the types of resources a school requires to improve its performance, then they may fail to enhance school capacity even when they allocate new resources.

(3) Track the degree to which policies precipitate organizational responses that undermine the productivity of the schools' resources. High-stakes accountability initiatives can undercut the productivity of the resources made available to schools in several ways. The study reported here suggests that policymakers should pay close attention to the human costs these policies may impose and to the organizational inefficiencies they may engender.

Recommended Reading

Malen, B., & Rice, J.K. (2004). A framework for assessing the impact of education reforms on school capacity: Insights from studies of high-stakes accountability initiatives. *Educational Policy*, 18(5), 631-660.

Rice, J.K., & Malen, B. (2003). The human costs of education reform: The case of school reconstitution. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(5), 635-666.

Rice, J.K. (2002). Making economically grounded decisions about comprehensive school reform models: Considerations of costs, effects and contexts. In N.C. Wang & K.K. Wong (Eds.), *Efficiency and equity issues in Title I school-wide program implementation* (pp. 29-55). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

