



Clarifying
Complex
Education
Issues

Summary of EdSource Standards Survey Findings

A substantial number of California's school principals are taking California's new academic standards seriously and are optimistic that their schools can raise student achievement consistent with the state's increased expectations, according to the results of a new EdSource survey. They also say that smaller class sizes and more time for planning and teacher training would help them get the job done.

Sent to the state's middle and high school principals in December 2000, the survey asked school site leaders about the extent to which the state's new standards-based reforms were affecting instruction in their schools, their school's capacity to help students achieve the standards, and what challenges they face in doing so. A total of 620 principals from throughout the state responded.

The survey also showed that principals of schools that serve predominantly poor students, which are also generally the lowest performing schools based on the state's Academic Performance Index (API), differ somewhat from their colleagues in their perspectives. These school leaders are generally more pessimistic and are likely to see student and community characteristics (such as poverty, lack of parent support, and student mobility) as the most significant impediments to meeting state standards. They are also the most likely to voice concerns about teacher quality and capacity to teach to the more rigorous standards.

Key findings from the survey include the following:

Principals reported that they and their districts are paying attention to California's new academic content standards. All but five percent of the high school and middle school principals reported that standards consistent with the state standards are at least *partially* adopted in their school district. At both grade levels, about three out of four principals reported their districts have *fully* adopted such standards.

Further, the principals reported that the content standards and the state testing system

are the factors currently having the most substantial effect on curriculum and instruction at their schools.

Almost 80% of principals said their school is either fully capable or just needs to fine-tune its efforts to be able to help almost all students meet state standards. The 20% of principals who said their school faces "major challenges" were disproportionately from urban schools and high poverty schools. Respondents had the option of saying that the task was impossible, that their school would "never have the capacity" to do so. Among the entire 620 surveys returned, not one principal chose this option.

About a third of the respondents reported that their teachers are "fully capable and well-prepared or already teaching to the standards." Percentages were higher for middle school generally, for English teachers, and for teachers in rural high schools and suburban middle schools. Schools that said they face "major challenges" were much less likely to give their teachers this vote of confidence.

Only 15% said their teachers need serious retraining. This was consistent across all subject areas in middle school, and for English and math in high school. However, principals in urban schools were twice as likely to report the need for substantial retraining as principals in suburban schools.

Principals saw more subject area professional development for teachers as a key ingredient for successful standards-based instruction. For all subject areas (English, math, science, and social science) and for all types of schools (urban, suburban, and rural), "professional development in the subject area" was selected as desirable to help prepare teachers to teach to the standards. More than two-thirds of the principals chose this option. Most dramatically, about 80% of principals in urban middle and high schools identified this as a need for their math teachers.

In an open-ended question regarding state-level policies, principals mentioned the need for more professional development most often.

About half of those who did so called explicitly for the state to move back toward a system that gives local school districts more funding and greater flexibility to provide locally determined, mandatory teacher professional development and staff planning time.

Middle school principals said large class sizes impact their capacity to meet standards. Across schools at all performance levels (based on the API), large class sizes emerged as a concern in the middle grades.

High school principals raised concerns about testing. Some principals said high school students are tested too much. Others focused on the ambiguity about expectations

that has resulted from a misalignment between the state's Stanford-9 test, High School Exit Exam, Golden State Exams, and college admissions tests.

Principals differed dramatically in how much they said student and community factors impact school progress. At the lowest performing middle and high schools (those in the first and second decile on the API), principals reported that the biggest challenges they faced arose from the characteristics of the students and communities they serve, including student demographics and parental support. At schools in the highest decile, principals saw these factors as having almost no impact. 



EdSource is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization established in California in 1977.

Independent and impartial, EdSource strives to advance the common good by developing and widely distributing trustworthy, useful information that clarifies complex K–12 education issues and promotes thoughtful decisions about California's public school system.

This EdFact may be reprinted, with credit to EdSource.

For more information about our organization, a catalog of our publications, or details on how to subscribe to our Information Service, please contact us at:

EdSource
4151 Middlefield Road
Suite 100
Palo Alto, CA
94303-4743
650/857-9604
Fax 650/857-9618

E-mail
edsource@edsource.org
Or visit us on the web:
www.edsource.org

EdSource thanks the Noyce Foundation for investing in our work.

© Copyright 2001 by EdSource, Inc.

ABOUT THE EDSOURCE SURVEY

The survey was sent to all middle and high school principals in California.

- ✓ 331 high school principals/assistant principals responded, representing 38% of high schools in 56 out of 58 counties.
- ✓ 289 middle school principals responded, representing 25% of middle schools in 48 out of 58 counties.

EdSource's goal was to invite the opinions and perspectives of every interested site leader at a secondary school. A few points of clarification are in order:

- ✓ For logistical and practical reasons, the more than 6,000 elementary school principals in California were not surveyed.
- ✓ The results cannot be statistically generalized and should not be interpreted as necessarily reflecting the views of middle and high school principals statewide.
- ✓ The survey respondents were slightly more likely to be from schools that scored in the upper five deciles of the API, or above the state average.
- ✓ The designation of a school as urban, suburban, or rural reflects the principals' response on the survey form rather than any official designation.
- ✓ The data for 2000 Base Academic Performance Index (API), student ethnicity, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price meals, percentage learning English, and the average level of parental education were from the California Department of Education.

Even with these caveats in mind, the survey results are illuminating. They provide an important perspective that EdSource hopes will enrich the understanding of state leaders, the public, and K–12 educators regarding standards-based reform in California.

TO LEARN MORE

A copy of the survey itself and more complete tabulations of some of the results are available on the EdSource website: www.edsource.org

For more comprehensive information regarding the survey findings, see the May 2001 EdSource report, *California's New Academic Standards Take Hold*. Order online or contact EdSource at 650/857-9604.