



## California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA): Evaluation Findings and Implications

This document summarizes the official report of findings and recommendations submitted to the California Department of Education (CDE) in July 2003:

*Evaluation Study of the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program and the High Achieving/Improving Schools Program of the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999.* The text of the full report is available online at

[http://www.air.org/publications/elemsec\\_education.htm](http://www.air.org/publications/elemsec_education.htm).

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Accountability for student results has been the focal point of education reform since the mid-1990s, when states across the country began instituting performance-based accountability policies as part and parcel of their standards-based reforms. Helped along in this direction by the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, states are now being further challenged by the intensified accountability demands of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). If states are to succeed in responding to NCLB, they will need to understand and incorporate lessons learned in preceding accountability efforts.

To that end, this Evaluation Brief summarizes the main findings and implications of the legislatively mandated, independent evaluation of California's Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 (PSAA), conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) with support from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and EdSource.

### WHAT IS PSAA?

The Public Schools Accountability Act establishes a system in which *the state holds schools accountable* for demonstrating *academic progress* of students in their charge. Like similar systems elsewhere, PSAA is based on the dual premise that accountability in education should be aligned with the central goals of the system – that is, student achievement – and that schools should be the principal unit of accountability, since the entire school environment influences student success.

### Three Components of PSAA

Based on these premises, PSAA incorporates three central components: the Academic Performance Index (API), the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP), and the Governor's Performance Award (GPA) program.

**API:** The Academic Performance Index is a composite scale used to measure the academic performance and growth of schools. Ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, the API is calculated from individual student test scores on the Stanford-9 (prior to 2003) and on the California Standards Test. The annual API schoolwide growth target for

a given school is five percent of the distance between that school's current (baseline) API and the statewide interim API goal of 800.

**II/USP:** The Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) provides funds to support low performing schools' efforts to improve, including one year for planning and two years for implementation. In exchange, schools make themselves subject to future sanctions should they not improve. Eligibility for II/USP has fluctuated somewhat from year to year but primarily involves a school's ranking in the bottom half of API scores statewide and failing to achieve its annual growth targets.

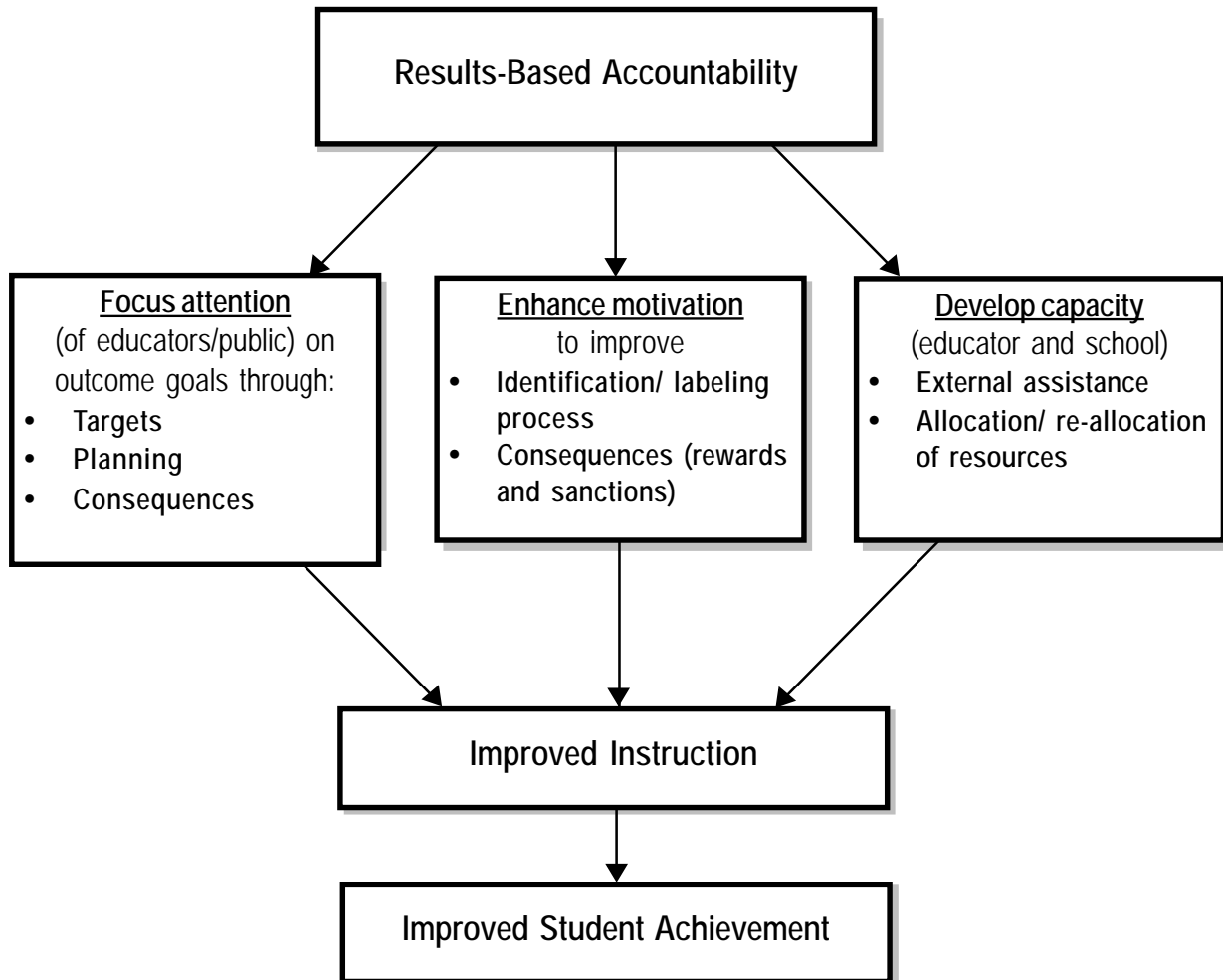
**GPA:** The High Achieving/Improving Schools Program (HA/ISP), also known as the Governor's Performance Award (GPA) program, provides

financial incentives to reward schools that meet their schoolwide API growth target, show comparable growth among all significant subgroups of students, and satisfy participation rates.

**Policy Foundation: Results-based Accountability**

These components of PSAA reflect a general model of accountability common to results-based policies at federal, state, and local levels. Underlying this model (depicted below) is a set of assumptions (Theory of Action) about how the chosen policy tools (such as incentives and assistance) will work to improve instruction and student achievement.

**Simplified "Theory of Action" of Results-Based Accountability Policies**



Like similar policies elsewhere, PSAA seeks to improve instruction and student learning by leveraging change in three contributing domains. First, through a combination of specific targets, site-based planning, and consequences, PSAA seeks to direct public and educator attention to student learning. Second, based on the view that educators lack sufficient will to improve on their own, these policies institute extrinsic incentives (rewards and sanctions) to motivate that improvement.

Finally, recognizing that limited capacity is also a problem in low performing schools, PSAA's II/USP includes additional resources and external assistance to help schools improve. The initial planning year is intended to build the needed capacity by identifying problem areas and focusing effort on coordinated and coherent strategies for improvement. Capacity is also enhanced through additional resources for both planning and implementation processes.

### Evaluation Charge

The charge of this evaluation was to assess both the implementation and the effects of the two PSAA school programs, the II/USP and the GPA. The evaluation and findings concentrated largely on the central tenets of the policy's "theory of action" depicted above. In this brief, we outline key findings of the evaluation, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for state and district policy.

## WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF PSAA AND ITS COMPONENTS?

This evaluation examined both the implementation of the II/USP and GPA programs and their effect. In this section, we address cross-cutting findings on the overall impact of PSAA. These findings cover two main areas: increased attention to student achievement and mixed achievement outcomes of II/USP and GPA.

### Summary of Key Findings for II/USP and GPA

- **Increased attention to student outcomes:** PSAA has successfully increased attention to improving student achievement and low performing schools.
- **Negligible achievement benefits for II/USP and GPA schools:** Since 1998, California schools have experienced large increases in student test scores, but the additional direct benefits to achievement from either the II/USP or the GPA programs were negligible.
- **Mixed motivational effects of PSAA incentives:** PSAA's threat of severe sanctions and promise of rewards carried little saliency for school personnel. More important motivators were the expected public scrutiny for low performance and (where applicable) direct monitoring from the district.
- **Strong district influence on implementation and outcomes:** Local school districts were central players influencing the degree of improvement in low performing schools generally and in the implementation of II/USP in particular.
- **Coherence and capacity key factors:** Instructional coherence and capacity at the school site were key factors determining the success of II/USP schools with respect to improved student learning.
- **Planning activities divorced from implementation:** Planning activities in the first year of II/USP funding generally proceeded as required by law, but with substantial variation in quality. Researchers found little systematic relationship between planning activities and subsequent student outcome trends, however, as planning was divorced from implementation.

### *The Research Methods Used For The PSAA Evaluation*

The timing of the evaluation and staged implementation of II/USP brought methodological challenges. The PSAA evaluation needed to examine schools' progress over time and as members of three separate cohorts of II/USP schools. Cohort 1 entered the program in 1999, Cohort 2 in 2000, and Cohort 3 in 2001, the last year for which API data were available when the evaluation was undertaken. Achievement trend lines for each cohort are therefore quite short, and for the last group of schools, no student achievement data were available to indicate the results of their implementation. In addition, some of the schools in each cohort also participated in the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) program, which brought different resources and requirements.

For this evaluation, the researchers gathered information about the achievement of schools in each cohort and the actions schools undertook, looking at both over time. The research used several methodologies, including:

- analysis of achievement trends using API scores and Stanford-9 test data from all II/USP, CSR D, and relevant comparison schools across the state and from all GPA schools;
- surveys of central office administrators from a large sample of II/USP districts and of nearly all external support providers;
- school-level surveys of teachers and principals in samples of II/USP, CSR D, GPA, and comparison schools; and
- in-depth qualitative data collection, in 21 case study schools across the three cohorts and across grade levels. Data included observation of schools; interviews with district administrators, school personnel, and parents; and analysis of longitudinal test-score data where available.

### **Attention to Student Achievement**

- ▶ **The PSAA has successfully focused the attention of K-12 educators on student achievement and low performing schools.**

Like other performance-based accountability systems, California's PSAA defines academic learning as the core goal of schooling and attention to student outcomes as the first step toward that goal. That is, policymakers assume that educators must first pay *attention* to student achievement if they are to seek and find ways to improve it.

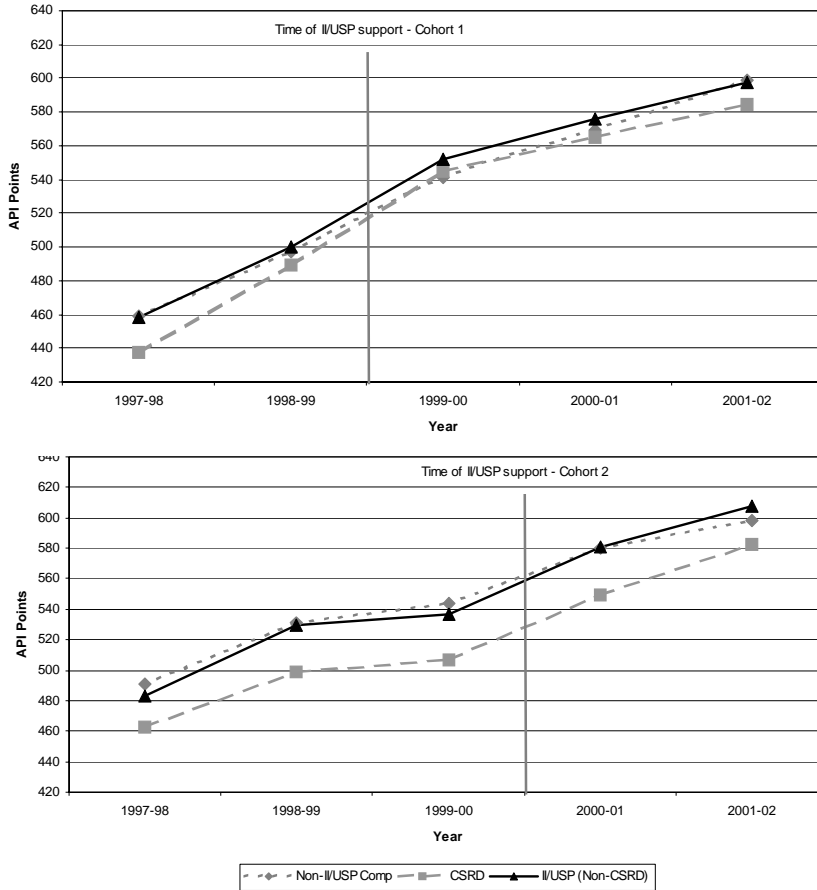
The PSAA has been very successful in capturing the attention of both district and school personnel and in focusing them on student achievement as measured by the API. Evidence from surveys and case study interviews indicate that school staff are aware of their API scores, targets, and decile ranks. District and school data also indicate a particular focus on literacy and mathematics instruction, two central components of the API measure.

Equally important, PSAA has shown a spotlight on lower performing schools in the state. Not only is this spotlight evident at the state level, but in many districts as well. While the manifestations and extent of the resulting attention vary from district to district, the concern appears widespread, often leading to additional specific actions and programs within school districts to support their low performing schools.

- ▶ **Attention to achievement, however, can become too narrow, to the neglect of a balanced curriculum and other student needs.**

The evaluation detected a potential downside to this singular focus on test-based achievement. Respondents in some schools and districts reported an over-emphasis on basic reading and mathematics skills to the neglect of other subjects and needs. This was particularly noticeable at the elementary level, where in some schools and districts the school day was consumed by large blocks of time devoted solely to the basics. In these situations, the response to accountability demands has left little time for art, music, physical

### Estimated average API scores for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 II/USP and comparison elementary schools from 1997-98 to 2001-02.



API scores for II/USP and non-II/USP elementary schools showed only small differences. The most notable change occurred in the first year of the program, when schools received a small grant for planning. (The estimated difference is on the magnitude of 0.11 to 0.14 standard deviations, or about 8-9 API points at the elementary level.) Within the context of the substantial overall gains in API statewide, particularly in 2000, these growth advantages seem tiny. However, they also constitute 50 to 80 percent of the schools' average API growth target, gains that appear somewhat more meaningful.

education, social studies, or science. In the press to raise test scores, some teachers are also finding it hard to address children's social and emotional needs.

In addition, some districts have chosen to adopt highly prescriptive curriculum packages as their central strategy for improving student achievement in the elementary grades. These curricula have the advantage of quickly "getting everyone on the same page," but rigid implementation of pre-set pacing plans can

prevent teachers from using their professional expertise and creativity to respond to the learning needs of individual students.

### Mixed Achievement Effects

► In general, low performing schools across the state made large gains in student achievement during the years of PSAA.

In California, average student achievement for both II/USP and comparable non-II/USP schools has increased sharply and significantly since the institution of the STAR testing program and the passage of PSAA. The gains were greatest at the elementary level for all cohorts - ranging from 107 to 140 API points on average, controlling for student demographics. (See charts on this page.)

► The direct additional contribution of II/USP to average achievement across participating schools, however, has been negligible.

The evaluation found only relatively small differences in test score improvement between II/USP and similar comparison schools (see

charts). These differences vary in direction, by grade level, and by cohort. In addition, the study finds no significant effect of II/USP participation on a school's likelihood of meeting API growth targets.

► Most II/USP groups experienced a small planning year bump in achievement.

The achievement analyses reveal a consistent small positive "bump" in achievement for the II/USP Cohort 1 and 2 schools relative to the non-

II/USP comparison schools during the first year of the program. This first year was a planning year during which schools received \$50,000 to hire an External Evaluator and develop a plan for improvement. For most (though not all) groups, however, the small jumpstart for II/USP schools began to dissipate after the first year. We attribute the bump to increased attention and activity generated by the planning process, which lacked follow-through in subsequent years.

► **The evaluation found no significant impact of the GPA program on achievement.**

The evaluation finds no evidence that receipt of a GPA award in one year contributes significantly to API growth in the following two years. The GPA program also had the potential for a systemwide effect, since the promise of a GPA would serve as an incentive for *all* schools to strive for their targets. An examination of the percentages of California schools that met their API schoolwide growth targets prior to and after the inception of the GPA program, however, did not reveal direct evidence of a systemwide incentive effect of the GPA program.

### WHY WERE THE EFFECTS OF II/USP AND GPA SO LIMITED?

There are several possible explanations for the limited effects of II/USP and GPA on student achievement trends.

► **PSAA may have had a generalized effect toward improving low performing schools beyond those participating in II/USP.**

One possible explanation for the small overall difference between the performance of II/USP and non-II/USP schools is that II/USP has generated increased attention to and support for low performing schools in general. For example, some districts used the opportunity of additional state funds for II/USP schools to free up other district resources for low performing schools not in the program. As a result, in addition to any *direct*

effect II/USP may have had on participating schools, it may also have had a comparable but unmeasured *indirect* effect on non-participating schools. To the extent that this is the case, the full impact of the program may be obscured.

► **School improvement planning and implementation were not well integrated.**

Another explanation lies in the failure of the II/USP planning process to realize its assumed promise. Evaluation data indicate that, although the planning activities conformed to PSAA requirements, the quality and depth of the planning year experiences varied greatly, as did the quality and capacity of External Evaluators and their organizations. Perhaps more important, even where External Evaluators were strong and the planning process was generally considered successful, its influence on subsequent school practice was often minimal. This lack of relationship between planning activities and subsequent changes in either practice or outcomes seems largely due to a disconnect between the planning process and implementation. Currently, the policy does not require consistent monitoring, assistance, or follow-through after the planning year.

► **Neither the threatened severe sanctions of II/USP nor the promise of GPA awards proved salient or motivating to most school personnel.**

The PSAA anticipates that both the threat of sanctions and the promise of financial rewards will increase schools' attention and motivation to improve student achievement. In order for these threats and promises to have their desired effect, however, staff must be aware of them and believe they will be implemented. The evaluation found that stakeholders were often well aware of the threat of sanctions for II/USP schools, but held mixed views on their effectiveness. Some school staff reported that the punitive nature of II/USP was disheartening, rather than motivating. In addition, many were skeptical that the state would actually impose severe sanctions. In

contrast, they believed the less severe consequences, like a public hearing or a state assistance team, were more likely to occur.

In the case of the GPA program, the study found both the awareness and saliency of awards – therefore their motivating power – to be minimal. Though recipient schools were pleased to have received awards, the recipients did not feel the additional monies had been a strong motivating factor to improve instruction. In addition, the majority of school staff did not believe that their school would actually receive awards if their outcomes improved.

► **Achievement growth varied widely among schools.**

A final possible explanation for the program’s limited effect stems from the wide variation in achievement trends among II/USP schools. Some appeared to benefit substantially from program participation and funding while others gained little or even lost ground. Comparison schools showed similarly varied patterns (see chart below). This wide variation suggests that the effects of II/USP may be strongly influenced by other

*factors outside the program*, including district context and internal school capacity.

**WHY DID SOME II/USP SCHOOLS FARE BETTER THAN OTHERS?**

This variation in outcomes raises the question of what other factors influence school improvement and student achievement.

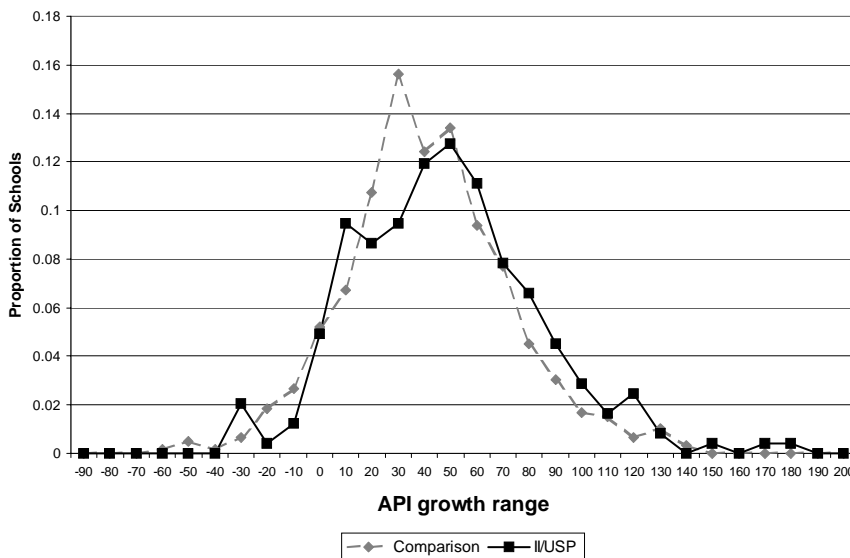
► **Districts matter!**

The evaluation found that *local school districts significantly influenced instructional practice and achievement trends in low performing schools, whether or not those schools participated in II/USP.*

A district’s influence on II/USP schools varied based on the extent and nature of its actions. For example, many districts determined which schools would participate in the program, in some cases requiring that all eligible schools in their jurisdiction apply. In addition, some districts played an active role in selecting the External Evaluators. Some districts also set up or required supports during implementation, including external assistance, professional development, and monitoring.

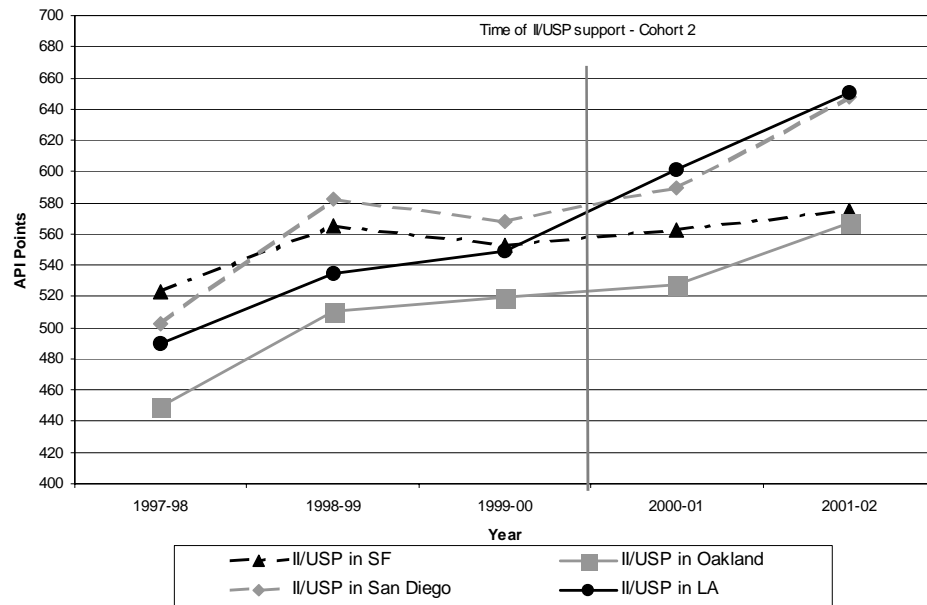
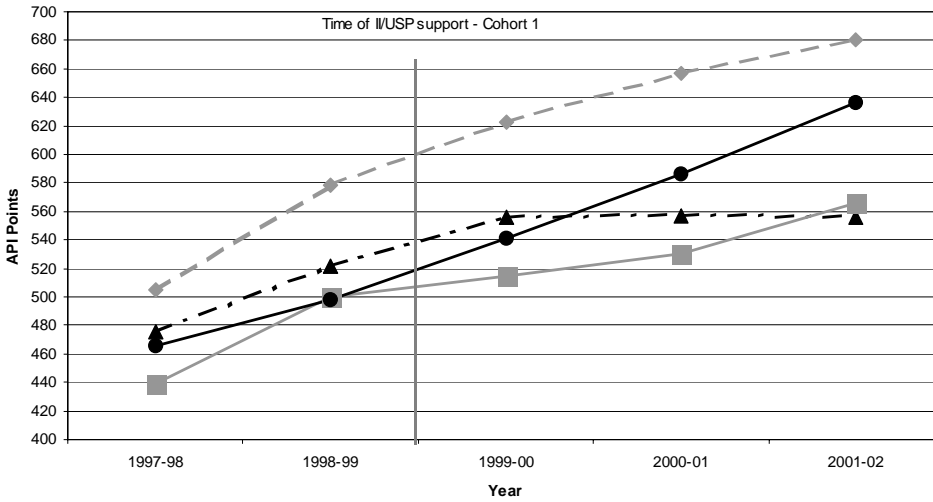
The influence of the district was not limited to its schools participating in II/USP. An analysis of achievement data for the four districts with the largest number of II/USP schools – Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Oakland Unified school districts – reveals a large, statistically significant contribution (either positive or negative) of district membership on both II/USP and comparable non-II/USP schools (see chart on page 8). Information from the case studies reveals that this influence came in large part through instructional policies, which

**Distribution of API growth for II/USP and comparison elementary schools, 1999-2000**



*The distribution of school growth demonstrates the wide range of growth among both II/USP and comparison schools.*

### Estimated average API scores for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 Elementary Schools for Four Districts.



API growth patterns for the four school districts vary substantially from each other and also differ from II/USP and comparison schools statewide. These district-level differences are large and tend to drown out any effects that the II/USP program may have created.

found that instructional coherence is a key component of effective school organizations (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Levine and Lezotte, 1990). Staff in schools with strong instructional coherence share a common and coherent vision for instruction, are focused on student learning, and regularly monitor student progress. In addition, this coherent vision is manifested in the alignment between instructional content, professional development, and student assessment.

The case study data from this evaluation indicate a strong association between a school’s instructional coherence and its growth in student achievement. Of the 15 Cohort 1 and 2 case study schools, eight experienced exceptionally high achievement growth after entering the II/USP program. Six of these had highly coherent instructional programs, while the remaining two were largely coherent and becoming more so. By contrast, the four schools with the *least coherent* programs were all in the *low-growth* (or even negative growth) category.

The case studies also suggest that the school-level strategies most likely to lead to instructional coherence and improved student achievement

districts implemented for all of their schools or for those designated as underperforming.

► **Instructional coherence is key.**

A central goal of the II/USP planning process was to develop greater coordination and alignment of goals, activities, and resources at the school site – in other words, greater school coherence. Extensive previous research has

share certain characteristics. They have internal consistency and are sufficiently specific to provide common direction to school personnel. They are consistent with teachers’ beliefs about what constitutes good instructional practice. And they include some form of regular monitoring of their implementation on the part of school or district leaders.



Teacher survey data provide some additional confirmation of the positive relationship between program coherence and various student and school outcomes, although survey responses could not be directly linked to changes in test scores.

► **Instructional coherence requires capacity and leadership.**

The evaluation found that school staffs vary substantially in their capacity to develop a coherent instructional program. Two aspects of this capacity stand out: *collaboration and professional community* among teachers, and *instructional leadership* by the principal or other school site leaders such as other administrators or resource teachers. Where teachers established or already had regular means of collaborating on instructional practice, and where they had guidance and monitoring of their progress by instructional leaders, they were better able to institute common curriculum and instructional approaches across classrooms and grades. In some cases, the instructional leadership needed for coherence came not just from school-based personnel, but also from the district – through common curriculum, instructional support personnel, and assessment policies all aligned with state standards.

*Material resources* are also part of capacity, but the experience of II/USP demonstrates again that fiscal resources are a necessary but not sufficient means to school improvement and increased achievement. On average, II/USP schools received \$50,000 for the planning year and approximately \$200 per student for implementation. For the most part, schools spent their II/USP funds as intended, for instructionally relevant goods and services and to pay their External Evaluators during the planning year. According to respondents, the monies allocated for planning were sufficient, but the funds for implementation were not.

In addition, delays in state dispersal of funds hampered both the planning and implementation activities in II/USP schools and the use of GPA funds by award recipients. Schools were often unable to implement all of the activities laid out in their Action Plans, especially activities such as

professional development that needed to occur before the start of fall semester.

## WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS SUGGEST FOR POLICY?

Lessons learned from the implementation of the II/USP and GPA programs have important implications for both state and local decision makers today as they incorporate new federal requirements into California’s accountability system, further implement the state’s current intervention programs, and generally continue to work toward improved performance for all California students and schools.

In this section we concentrate on recommendations for state policy makers. See the box on page 11 for a discussion of policy implications at the district level.

► **Keep the attention on student learning and low performing schools.**

PSAA and related standards-based policies have succeeded in capturing the attention of the education community and the general public. Further, the attention has been focused on student outcomes in general and on low performing schools in particular. That attention should continue. More specifically:

- √ **Consistency.** As the state moves to respond to NCLB, it should continue to use the API as an indicator of school level performance because it has garnered statewide attention. The API is also gaining wider legitimacy and professional acceptance through reduced emphasis on an “off-the-shelf” basic skills test and the incorporation of tests designed to assess students’ mastery of the state’s academic standards, the California Standards Tests (CSTs). Moving to an entirely new system of school accountability would fuel perceptions of policy instability, which in turn tend to undermine the impact of state efforts. This recommendation does not preclude modification of the API to incorporate

additional measures, as has occurred with the roll out of the CST.

√ **Focus.** The state should continue and perhaps sharpen its focus on the lowest performing schools. This study found that the impact of this focus extends well beyond the schools directly participating in specific assistance programs. At the same time, it indicates that the direct effect of participation in such programs might be enhanced if scarce state funds, and other forms of support and monitoring, were concentrated on the schools in greatest need, as in the High Priority Schools Grant Program.

√ **Balance.** The state should consider ways to help schools balance attention to core academic goals with attention to other developmental and academic needs of students. The California Department of Education should also track – through its evaluations or other indicators – the degree to which accountability measures inhibit schools’ ability to address these other concerns.

► **Recognize and enhance the role of districts.**

One of the key findings of this study is the powerful influence of district context in creating conditions conducive to schools’ achievement growth. Yet II/USP did little to harness and direct district influence or to hold districts accountable for ensuring the success of their II/USP schools. Accountability policies in the future could proactively anticipate districts’ influence by directly building in a role for district leadership.

√ **District plan.** At the very least any school accountability policy involving potential sanctions for low performing schools should require not only district sign-off on the school’s improvement plan but the submission of a separate *district plan* detailing how the district will support and monitor the schools throughout the program.

√ **Incentives.** The state’s move toward district-level accountability might also

include incentives to districts (e.g., reduced regulatory requirements) for improved performance in the district’s lowest performing schools.

► **Encourage and support instructional coherence and professional capacity at school sites.**

Instructional coherence was the most consistent predictor of school-level growth in student achievement in our case study schools. Both districts and the state can contribute to the development of school-level instructional coherence by creating policy environments that motivate and support it.

√ **Policy alignment.** Alignment of standards, assessments, professional development programs, and other instructional policies, are important. This alignment process, as demonstrated by the increased emphasis on the California Standards Tests in the API, is underway in California and should continue.

√ **Policy stability and transparency.** Frequent changes in accountability policies and programs lead to confusion and mistrust, while burdensome and conflicting requirements for multiple plans siphon school energy and attention away from more instructionally relevant tasks. The state needs to avoid sweeping or erratic changes in policy as it moves to respond to NCLB requirements or changes in the political landscape.

√ **Guidance for improvement planning.** Planning processes required by state and federal programs need to be streamlined and more explicitly directed towards developing instructional coherence at the school level.

## Implications of Evaluation Findings for District Leaders

The findings for this study underscore the potential influence of local district context and policy on the size and direction of student achievement trends, particularly in low performing schools. This evaluation suggests at least three domains of potential district action: district responsibility, site-based planning, and school capacity building. In each domain, districts should seek to enhance instructional coherence at the school site.

### Districts have the responsibility for ensuring school success.

- **Do not assume the problem lies entirely or mainly at the school site.** The first and most important step a district can take is to assume responsibility for the success of all schools within its jurisdiction – particularly those that have historically been low performing. Effective district action is predicated on this responsibility.
- **Examine and alter district policies that may be hindering progress at low performing schools.** In addition, while II/USP and similar policies target the need for school-level improvement, the *underlying causes* of school failure may lie as much at the district as at the school level – through such factors as human resource policies, student assignment practices, inequitable resource allocation, and fragmented or ineffective instructional guidance. To the extent that such underlying causes remain unaddressed, school failure will persist or re-emerge.
- **Place district priority on improving performance at the lowest performing schools.**

### Planning is not a panacea—Implementation is key.

- **Build capacity for effective planning.** Improvement planning is often a first and central step in accountability programs like II/USP. However, schools often lack the requisite knowledge and skills to assess their needs, set reasonable and specific goals, or design effective strategies for attaining those goals. Districts can make a difference in the lowest performing schools by providing targeted assistance, focus, and resources to plan well.
- **Promote strategic and coherent planning.** Often school improvement plans reflect a laundry list of disconnected activities or programs that dissipate rather than focus attention and effort on instructional improvement. Districts can help guard against this problem by monitoring plans for the clarity of their vision and the likelihood that selected strategies will produce coherent practice.
- **Connect planning to implementation through follow-up support, monitoring, resources, and accountability.** “Planning” is only as good as its implementation. This study suggests that low performing schools need consistent implementation support – either directly from the district or from intermediaries.

### School capacity has a critical influence on instructional coherence and student performance.

- **Recruit, develop, and retain high quality teachers in low performing schools.** A knowledgeable and skilled professional staff is a pre-requisite for student success in high poverty and low performing schools. Districts can help attract and retain high quality teachers through appropriate *incentive structures, improved working conditions, and revamped human resource practices* in the central office. On-going, focused, and high quality *professional development* strategies can then help ensure opportunities for continued growth and effectiveness of all professionals at the school site.
- **Encourage and support instructional collaboration and professional community among teachers through a common focus on student learning, time to plan, and additional supportive structures.** This evaluation found that those schools with a strong professional community and instructional collaboration were more likely to develop a coherent and effective instructional program. Time and opportunity for professional conversation about the work and results of teaching and learning provide the organizational foundation for this community.
- **Build and sustain school site-level capacity through the development and deployment of instructionally strong site leaders and effective management in low performing schools.** Multiple studies, including this evaluation, have pointed to the critical role played by site leaders in the success of school reform efforts. One of the main contributions a district can make is to ensure that high poverty and low performing schools have the most skilled leaders possible.
- **Promote data-based decision making at school sites by making available valid user-friendly data on student outcomes and instructional processes and by ensuring schools have knowledge to interpret and apply those data to relevant instructional conditions and problems.**

## CONCLUSION

Data and analyses from this evaluation demonstrate that California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) and Academic Performance Index (API) have had the desired effect of focusing attention on student achievement. This attention has most likely contributed to the substantial increases in average API scores, especially in elementary schools, since the PSAA was passed.

At the same time the findings point to the very limited additive effect of the II/USP and GPA programs to improving test scores, at least on average. This average, however, masks the large variation in how participant schools fared in the program and the influential role that districts played in fostering improvement in their low performing schools.

Attention and instructional coherence became key themes from both the case study and survey data. It appears that II/USP captured initial attention in participating schools but lacked structures to ensure that this attention was maintained or directed toward implementing coherent strategies after the planning year.

These findings emphasize the central role that school districts play in the improvement of low performing schools in general, and in the implementation of II/USP in particular. Districts can provide targeted assistance and focus, and should make sure that instructional coherence is a central goal of any planning and improvement process.

California is in the early stages of what must be a long-term commitment to school improvement. The analyses completed in the PSAA evaluation derive from data collected at a particular point in time, relatively early in the implementation of the PSAA programs. The longer-term trajectories for II/USP schools are of course unknown. Moreover, the analyses raise important questions about the factors that influence the implementation and effects of the accountability program that were outside the scope of this short-term evaluation. The state should continue to follow the progress of II/USP participants and support further exploration into effective ways to assist low performing schools. California has made important gains in the past few years. A thoughtful approach by state policymakers to accountability at this juncture could help to solidify and expand the state's progress.

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This brief draws on the work of the full research team identified in the technical report.

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