

ADOPTION AND ADAPTATION:  
NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL DISTRICTS' RESPONSES TO STATE  
IMPOSED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS:  
AN EIGHT-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Note:** Readers are directed to the Education Finance Research Consortium’s website, <http://www.albany.edu/edfin>, for the Appendix to this condition report. The Appendix includes detailed individual school case analyses which are referenced in the report, and are an integral part of the author’s study.

## *Executive Summary*

New York State has embarked upon an ambitious effort to raise high school graduation requirements for all students. Graduation from high school in New York is becoming increasingly contingent upon being able to pass a series of examinations that historically have been taken primarily by the college-bound student population. Two previous studies (Monk & Hussain, 2000; Monk, Hussain, & Miles, 2000) examined school districts' compliance as the new policy began to be implemented and reviewed the consequences of the new policy for students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers. In this study, we build on these earlier efforts to investigate the responses of school districts to this very significant change in New York State policy.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Our study begins with a statistical trend analysis of all school districts in the State, including the Big 5 city school districts of New York City, Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, and Yonkers. We were able to gather test taking and test performance data for all New York districts from the New York State Education Department, and we use these data to study changes in student participation and performance over time. The most recent assessment of the New York experience (Monk & Hussain, 2000) covered the period between the 1991-1992 and 1997-1998 school years. Here we are able to add two additional years of data, and can therefore bring the analysis forward to include the 1999-2000 school year. We are particularly interested in what the two new years of data will reveal, since there was some suggestion in the earlier study (Monk & Hussain, 2000) that the State had reached a point where average student performance on the exams was beginning to decline.

### **Qualitative Analyses**

We also supplement our statistical analyses with a case study of school districts' responses to NYS Regents reforms. The case study focused on interview data from five school districts. Interviews were conducted with district personnel (building and district level) and where there is independent evidence of either successful efforts to expand student participation in the exam program or failure to move additional students into the Regents academic track. We refer to these districts, respectively, as "Movers" and "Stayers". We also categorize districts by their gains in student performance over time. Some districts showed great increases in student performance (in terms of passing rates on the High School English exams) while others demonstrated dramatic decreases or no change in passing rates. We refer to these districts, respectively, as "Hot" and

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“Cold”. We then selected five districts that could be categorized as “Hot-Stayers”, “Hot-Movers”, “Cold-Stayers”, or “Cold-Movers”.

Teams of four to seven researchers made daylong visits to each of five districts during the winter and spring of 2001. The researchers interviewed administrators, teachers and community leaders and collected relevant documents. A profile of each district's perceptions and beliefs and its organizational and programmatic responses to the new learning standards are presented. Among the topics discussed are the major issues facing each district, the degree to which local educators and community leaders believe that all children can learn at high levels, and the nature of pressures felt by educators. We also investigate and report on the explicit strategies put in place by districts to address the issues of academic intervention services (AIS), professional development, dropout management and its relation to GED participation, and the allocation of resources, including staff reassignment.

### **Selected Findings**

#### **Statistical Study Results**

- Mean participation rates are rising, although there is a surprising level of variation around the means given the specificity of the new graduation requirements.
- Rising participation levels are associated with declines in the percentage of test takers with scores of 65% or better, and the strength of this negative relationship appears to be growing.
- There are large inequalities in both participation as well as performance results for schools in the large cities of the State compared to others. These inequalities also exist between the population of students with disabilities and the general student population.
- There is no strong or systematic relationship between spending levels and increased participation on Regents examinations.
- There is no strong or systematic relationship between dropout levels and increased participation on Regents examinations.

#### **Qualitative Study Results**

- There is a distinct lack of agreement among participants that “all children can learn.” Superintendents are most likely to agree with the statement, whereas teachers and community leaders are least likely to agree.
- Pressure on parents, students, teachers, and administrators is building. At times the pressure is viewed as productive (e.g., motivational) while at other times it is seen as unhealthy.

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- Two versions of Academic Intervention Service (AIS) programming are occurring. *Supplemental* AIS instruction takes the form of AIS classes in addition to regular academic classes. *Supplanting* AIS takes the form of AIS replacement classes being offered in place of regular academic classes.
- Moving students at risk of high school failure into GED programs occurs as a means of counting them as “transfers” rather than “dropouts.”
- Staff development predominantly focuses on standards implementation (e.g., test scoring and curriculum alignment) and much less so on pedagogical improvement.
- There is some evidence of teachers “fleeing” the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, though the phenomenon seems to be most pronounced in the more difficult educational settings (e.g., poor schools).
- In the poorest districts, there are modest efforts at resource reallocation, though most districts are adding AIS staffing to the regular staffing levels, resulting in new costs.
- BOCES leadership is cited as a major source of assistance to local superintendents in negotiating the web of state policies, regulations, and reports relating to the new learning and graduation standards.

## **I. Introduction and Background**

New York State has embarked upon an ambitious effort to raise high school graduation requirements for all students. Graduation from high school in New York is becoming increasingly contingent upon being able to pass a series of examinations that historically have been taken primarily by the college-bound student population. Two previous studies (Monk & Hussain, 2000; Monk et al., 2000) have examined compliance on the part of school districts as the new policy began to be implemented as well the consequences for students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers. In this study, we build on these earlier efforts to investigate the responses of school districts to this very significant change in New York State policy.

### **Statistical Analyses**

Our study begins with a statistical trend analysis of all school districts in the State, including the Big 5 city school districts of New York City, Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, and Yonkers. We were able to gather test taking and test performance data for all New York districts from the State Education Department and we used these data to study changes in student participation and performance over time. The most recent assessment of the New York experience (Monk & Hussain, 2000) covered the period between the 1991-1992 and 1997-1998 school years. Here we are able to add two additional years of data, and can therefore bring the analysis forward to include the 1999-2000 school year. We are particularly interested in what the two new years of data will reveal, since there was some suggestion in the earlier study that New York had reached a point where average student performance on the regents exams was beginning to decline.

### **Qualitative Analyses**

We also supplement our statistical analyses with a case study of school districts' responses to NYS Regents reforms. The case study focused on interview data from five school districts. Interviews were conducted with district personnel (building and district level) and community leaders. The districts were purposively selected based on independent evidence of either successful efforts to expand student participation in the exam program or failure to move additional students into the Regents academic track. We refer to these districts, respectively, as "Movers" and "Stayers". We also categorize districts by their gains in student performance over time. Some districts showed great increases in student performance (in terms of passing rates on the High School English exam), while others showed dramatic decreases or no change in passing rates. We refer to these districts, respectively, as "Hot" and "Cold". We then selected five districts that could

be categorized as “Hot-Stayers”, “Hot-Movers”, “Cold-Stayers”, or “Cold-Movers”. Despite this emphasis on district categorization, we ultimately found that the mover-stayer/hot-cold categorization is not very descriptive of the districts’ organizational and programmatic responses. Instead we found that community demands on the districts and available resources were more closely associated with the nature of the district responses than whether they were a Mover or Stayer, or Hot or Cold.

Teams of four to seven researchers made daylong visits to each of the five districts during the winter and spring of 2001. The research teams interviewed administrators, teachers and community leaders and collected relevant documents. A profile of each district's perceptions, beliefs and organizational and programmatic responses to the new learning standards are presented. Among the topics discussed are the major issues facing each district, the degree to which local educators and community leaders believe that all children can learn at high levels, and the variety of pressures felt by educators. We also investigate and report on the explicit strategies put in place by districts to address the issues of academic intervention services (AIS), professional development, dropout management and its effect on GED participation, and the allocation of resources, including staffing and teacher reassignment. Individual District reports are included as Appendices.

It is particularly timely to examine this phase of the implementation of New York State’s efforts to raise high school graduation requirements. Recent research has revealed evidence of continued progress toward compliance coupled with a surprising level of continuing variation (Monk & Hussain, 2000). In addition, the previous study revealed what may be some early evidence of student distress. It is important for New York to monitor compliance as well as the consequences associated with this significant change in policy. The earlier studies provide a base from which to examine and interpret the most recent experiences. State policy makers have valuable opportunities to benefit from a sequence of studies that monitors the impact of ambitious school reform.

## **II. Regents Test Participation And Performance**

In this replication study, we are interested in both tracking statewide adherence to the Regents testing program and the relationships between participation and performance outcomes. We cover the period between 1991-92 and 1999-2000, and we continue to center on four Regents exams: English, Math I, Global Studies, and U.S. History. We chose these exams because they were the focus of the earlier study and because they are among the earliest exams students were

expected to pass. To minimize redundancy, in the findings section we focus on results from the English and Math examinations, and to a lesser degree on the U.S. History and Global Studies exams. In general the findings are very similar across the exams, though we note significant differences as they arise. As in the prior study, we focus on district level averages for the roughly 630 “regular” K-12 school districts in the State, and we make comparisons with the Big 5 city districts. For the city districts, the individual high school is the unit of analysis. In the last section we focus on the participation and performance of special education students in the Regents testing program.

We provide an update of the degree to which districts comply with the Board of Regents intent to increase the percentage of students taking the various tests. We use a series of trend lines as the starting point for this analysis. In particular, we depict changes in the percentage of students taking the various exams over time. We then discuss the nature of the variation around the mean for the most recently available data. Next, we contrast the experiences of districts with relatively large increases in participation with districts whose increases have been modest. We are particularly interested in relationships between changes in participation rates and student performance measures, dropout rates, and spending levels. We use scatter plots and Pearson correlations to gain insight into the bivariate nature of these relationships. We apply a similar yet abbreviated approach for our analysis of special education students.

## Data and Methods

Our data come from several sources. Information about the Regents testing program comes from the School Report Card Data File. The school district attribute data come from the School Financial Master File (SFMAST) and the Institutional Master File (IMF). The New York City data come from the School Report Card Data File as well as from data collected by Professor Leanna Stiefel and Patrice Iatarola. The participation and performance data for the special education student population was prepared as a special extract for this study and is not publicly available. We wish to thank the New York State Department of Education in general and Ron Danforth, Michele Shahan, Richard Glasheen, and Deborah Cunningham in particular for their assistance in gaining access to and interpreting the New York State data. We also wish to thank Leanna Stiefel and Patrice Iatarola for giving us access to their New York City data.

We developed a protocol for deciding whether or not to include a district or school in our analysis. In the case of the non-Big 5 school districts, we excluded districts that did not enroll students in grades K-12 and districts that fall under special acts. Our goal was to focus attention on

the “regular” non-big 5 school districts throughout the State. In the case of the city school districts, we excluded special education and alternative schools.

As with former studies, we calculate a participation rate and several performance indicators. The participation rate is defined as the number of students taking an exam divided by the average grade enrollment or AGE. We use the AGE as a proxy for a true cohort. A true population cohort is group of people fixed in membership, such as a graduating class or birth year. In order to track the participation and performance results over time, we relied on the AGE to approximate the participation and performance of students eligible to take the exam. Prior to 1996, the NYSED did not track the participation and performance of student class cohorts on the Regents exams. Therefore in instances where students from several class levels participate in a Regents exam, we are unable to separate the results by class. We rely on the AGE to smooth over these exceptions.

We utilized two specific test performance indicators. The Regents provided for a transition period wherein passing rates for the examinations were lowered during the early years of implementation. For this reason, we refrain from using the term “passing rates,” since there can be variation in what the passing rate is depending on the year and the exam. We rely instead on the count of students achieving a score of 65 percent or higher. We then use one of two denominators to discuss test score performance. The term “Passing-test takers” is defined as the count of students achieving a score of 65 percent or higher, divided by the number of students taking the test. The “Passing-Cohort” is the same numerator divided by the AGE, or the number of students in the cohort.

We also rely on other performance outcomes, including the dropout rate and spending per pupil. Dropout data are derived from the school report card files. The dropout rate is the ratio of the number of students reported as dropping out in a school year, divided by the number of students considered enrolled in grades 9-12 in the fall of that school-year. Our spending per pupil statistic is the ratio between district level approved operating expenditures and total fall enrollment (including Pre-K and Kindergarten)<sup>2</sup>. Our fiscal data for the 1999-2000 school year are based on an estimate provided by the NYSED.

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<sup>2</sup> Spending per pupil is measured several ways in New York State. Through discussions with State Education Officials, we chose this measure as an average between a method that weights expenditures by student characteristics (ETAPU) and the school report card method which divides expenditures by an average daily attendance enrollment figure.

## Findings

### Trends in Participation Rates

**English.** Figure 1 shows change over time in the percentage of students taking the English Regents exam in the regular K-12 school districts of New York, the Big 4 city districts, and in New York City. The figure covers the period 1992-2000 for the regular K-12 districts and 1996-2000 for the city districts. The chart shows quite clearly that participation rates have been increasing for all three types of schools over this period. The regular K-12 districts moved from an average participation rate of 60.4 percent for the school year 1991-1992 to 91.4 percent for the school year 1999-2000. Participation rates in the city schools also are increasing, but it is clear that participation rates within the city schools historically have been substantially lower than the regular K-12 districts. In particular, the Big 4 districts move from an average of 49 percent in 1995-1996 to 82.5 percent in 1999-2000. Participation rates for the NYC high schools are between those from the Big Four and the regular K-12 districts. What is interesting is the recent decline in the difference between city schools and regular K-12 districts. In 1995-96 the range between the Big Four and the regular K-12 districts was 22 percentage points. By 1999-2000 this difference had dropped by more than half to 8.9 percentage points.

The increase in participation rates, measured as a statewide average of regular K-12 districts and across city high schools, is dramatic in terms of policy adoption. This increase also is displayed visually in Map 1.

**Mathematics.** Mathematics participation percentages for the regular K-12 districts are shown in Figure 2. The percentage starts at a higher level than was the case for English and has also been increasing over time. Figure 2 reveals an increase from 74.1 percent in 1991-1992 to greater than 100 percent in 1999-2000.<sup>3</sup> The figure also reveals a parallel increase in participation for the Big 4 districts as well as a net decrease in participation over the period for New York City students. Despite the decrease that can be seen for New York City, the NYC participation rates remain in between those observed for the rest of the state and the Big 4 city districts. The uniform increase in participation rates on the Math Regents exam is also displayed on Map 2.

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible for participation percentages to go above 100 percent because of the construction of the pupil count in the numerator of the index. This is particularly possible in subject areas like mathematics where students from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade can be taking an exam that is ordinarily taken by 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students.

**U.S. History and Global Studies.** Longitudinal results for the U.S. History and Global Studies examinations are generally consistent with patterns we observed for English and Math (see Figures 3 and 4). It is interesting to note that participation rates for Global Studies begin and end at higher levels than is the case for U.S. History. The U.S. History results for the regular K-12 districts are noticeably higher than for the city schools, a difference not observed in the other exams. Readers will note that the results for the Global Studies exams end at the 1998-99 school year. The state modified this exam in 1999-2000; as such the results are not comparable through this year.

In summary, participation on Regents examinations has increased steadily across the state in both city schools and regular K-12 districts since the early 1990's. In general city schools tend to have lower participation rates than regular K-12 districts. Participation rates also vary by the type of Regents exam. Participation is generally higher for the Math and Global Studies examinations, and lower for English and U.S. History.

#### **Cross Sectional Variation in Participation Rates**

The trend lines reported in Figures 1-4 are averages for the three different types of schools we study. It is important to understand that variation exists around these averages and that schools and districts continue to vary with respect to the level of participation in the Regents testing program. For example, Figure 5 provides a histogram that describes the distribution of participation rates for the English Regents examination for the regular K-12 school districts for the 1999-2000 school year. The distribution is normal, with a mean of 91 percent and a standard deviation of 14.96. A common method for describing the distribution of a population with respect to its average and standard deviations is the coefficient of variation, or COV. The COV describes the spread of a population distribution about its mean; more specifically it describes the percentage above and below the mean within which 2/3 of observations lie. A smaller COV indicates a tighter distribution and greater similarity among observations. Table 1 reports the COV for the Regents English program. Between 1996 and 2000 we observe not only increased participation on this exam, but also more uniform participation rates in both the regular K-12 districts and the city schools. Stated differently, the similarities in district and school participation rates on the English exams have increased over time and are consistent across the state. It is clear that variation continues to exist, at least up through the most recent data, in the level of participation across schools within the State. There is greater variation among schools in city districts when contrasted with the regular K-12 districts. A substantial portion of this finding, however, is likely due to the smaller population size (i.e., number of high schools) in the city districts.

## Trends in Test Score Performance

**English.** Figure 6 reveals trends in the percentage of English test takers who received scores of 65 percent or higher. We can see that for the regular K-12 districts, the percentage of takers with scores of 65 percent or higher declines between 1992 and 2000. Specifically, the percentage declines from 91.0 percent to 80.6 percent. The period of decline begins subtly in 1995, and continues through 1999. In the most recent period there is a slight upswing in performance. This decline is consistent with the argument that students facing the greatest deficits in terms of their ability to perform on the exam are the last students to enter the testing program.

The results for the city schools can also be found in Figure 6 and are interesting in several respects. First, we note that the percentage of students scoring above 65 percent is lowest for the New York City schools. Recall from Figure 1 that New York City's participation rates were higher than those found in the other big cities. The higher participation in New York City may mean that New York City is dealing with a more needy population of students, and that this is pushing its performance percentage lower.

Second, we note that despite being at a lower level, the performance percentage for New York City actually increases in the year following 1995-1996, and declines over the next two years. Thus, in contrast to what we observe for the other types of schools (i.e., city schools in the Big 4 cities and the regular K-12 districts elsewhere in the State), New York City has been able to keep its percentage of test-takers scoring at 65 percent or better from substantial drops as it has simultaneously moved to increase the percentage of students participating in the testing program. The schools in the Big 4 cities reveal more substantial declines over the period, with most of the decline occurring between 1998 and 2000. Moreover, despite the overall success New York City has enjoyed at keeping its percentage of test-takers at or above performance rates of 65 percent, it registered a decline between the two most recent years in the time trend.

For both New York City and the regular K-12 districts we observe a period of performance stability in the most recent data. This may indicate the positive response and effort of district and school programs to increase participation and performance on the English exam.

Figure 7 reports the second performance indicator we examined, which focused on the percentage of the cohort that received scores of 65 percent or higher. We reasoned that even if increases in participation were bringing new students into the testing program, there was no guarantee that the overall percentage of the cohort scoring above a cut point would increase. If the percentage of takers scoring above the cut point dropped precipitously, the percentage of the cohort scoring above the cut point could decline. For the regular K-12 districts, we observe a steady increase in the percentage of students taking the exams who received scores of 65 from 1992 until

1999. In the most recent data there is a small decline in this performance trend. The pattern is a bit different for the Big 4 city schools, where an earlier increase is followed by either a steady state or a modest decline.

**Mathematics.** Figure 8 provides the test-taker results for Mathematics. In contrast to what we have seen for English, the percentage of takers in the regular K-12 districts who received scores of 65 percent or higher for Mathematics is more variable over the period. In contrast to the steady, modest decline with some indications of acceleration in the most recent period, there is an up and down quality to the Mathematics trend prior to 1996. Following that year, there is a consistent decline in the performance score consistent with the results from the English exam.

The results for the big cities are similar to the regular K-12 districts. Between 1996 and 1998 we observe a steep performance decline, followed by a two-year period of stability. Again, New York City performance trends are similar to those experienced by the regular K-12 districts, but are more dramatic in their annual change. The period of performance stability among city schools observed after 1998 is likely due to small changes in actual participation on the Regents Math exam. Recall that over this same period the regular K-12 districts increased their participation substantially.

Figure 9 provides the cohort test score performance results. Here again we see evidence indicating that the regular K-12 districts are increasing the percentage of cohorts scoring above the cut point on the Mathematics Regents exam, although not consistently, while this is not the case for the big city schools. It is also striking to observe the absolute differences in the percentage of cohorts scoring at or above the 65 percent cut point. In the most recent period, the average for the regular K-12 districts is three times that which is being reported by the city schools (i.e., 77.3 for the regular K-12 districts and 26.6 and 24.0 for the New York City and Big 4 schools, respectively).

**U.S. History and Global Studies.** In Figure 10, we see the U.S. History exam results and can recognize the now familiar pattern in which the trend line for the regular K-12 districts lies substantially above the lines for the city schools and where performance rates for the New York City schools are at their lowest levels. Again, we see evidence of some degree of success in New York City to hold the line on further declines in the percentage of takers who score at or above the 65 percent mark. We also see relatively severe declines in the performance percentage (from 67.2 to 50.8 percent) for the Big 4 city schools. The magnitude of this decline is quite striking. The trend for the regular K-12 districts is rather steady with the exception of a fairly dramatic drop between

1996 and 1997. This drop is followed by a rise, which stands in contrast to the drops that were observed in the most recent periods in the English and mathematics areas.

Figure 11 shows the cohort performance results for the U.S. History exam. It is interesting to note that the percentage of the cohort above the cut point increases for the Big 4 city schools despite the drop in the percentage of takers who score above the cut point that we saw in Figure 10. Overall, the trends suggest that over time a larger proportion of the cohort is scoring above the cut point on the U.S. History examination.

Figures 12 and 13 provide analogous results for the Global Studies exam. Here we see a decline between 1996 and 1997 for the regular K-12 districts that is similar to what we observed for the U.S. History exam. Again, the city schools' percentages are below what we observe for the rest of the state. New York City reveals some ability to hold the line on further decreases in the percentage of test-takers scoring below the cut point, while the schools in the Big 4 cities show substantial declines. The cohort results show increases in general, although the schools in the Big 4 cities experience a decline followed by an increase.

### **Correlates of Changes in Regents Exam Participation Rates**

We now consider relationships between changes in test score participation rates and a series of outcome or response attributes such as test score performance levels, dropout rates and spending levels for school districts and schools. We discuss correlation in terms of simple bivariate relationships, measured with Pearson correlation statistics (zero-order correlations) and displayed with scatter plots. For the majority of the analyses our data are divided into four basic time periods: 1992-1994; 1994-1996; 1996-1998; and 1998-2000. We postulate that changes in participation in the short term (i.e., two years) will impact test score performance rather quickly and be visible over a two-year period of observation. We suspect, however, that changes in both the dropout rate and district spending will be more gradual. As such we analyze the nature of the relationship between test participation and outcomes (i.e., dropouts and spending) over both a two-year and four-year period of observation. In contrast to the previous studies, we measure change as a percentage of growth, rather than as the difference between measures over two points in time.

The findings from this current update are generally consistent with the earlier studies in two ways. First, increased participation rates are associated with declines in test score performance. The strength of this association has increased throughout the 1990s. Second, increased participation rates are not associated with increases in dropout rates. However, in contrast with prior studies, we find a small positive relationship between increased participation rates and school district spending

when measured over a four- rather than two-year period. These findings are discussed below in greater detail.

### Test Score Performance Results

For the sake of keeping the exposition manageable, we focus our attention on the percentage of test-takers who received a score of 65 percent or better on the indicated exam. Our cohort results are available on request. We are interested in seeing if we can detect changes in the nature of the relationship between changes in participation and changes in the percentage of test takers scoring above the 65 percent cut point over the study period. Our discussion focuses on changes in the shape and direction of the distribution at hand. Rather than drafting scatter plots over the four time periods for each exam, we developed overlay scatter plots that compare changes between the 1992-1994 and 1998-2000 time periods.

**English.** Figure 14 displays two scatter plots for the regular K-12 districts where the variable on the vertical axis is change in the percentage of test takers who scored at or above 65 percent on the Regents English exam and the variable on the horizontal axis is change in the rate of participation for the indicated periods of time. There are several observations to draw when comparing these two plots. First, not all the districts experienced an increase in participation rates over the periods. Given the overall increases that we saw earlier in the trend data, the chances are that districts that experienced drops from one period to the next responded with increases in the subsequent period. Second, it is easy to observe the distribution of the performance changes over time and their direction. We observe a wider spread of performance changes in the latter period, as well as a shift towards negative performance changes between 1998-2000. Third, while the 1992-1994 scatter plot suggests that there is a modest negative relationship between participation and performance, the 1998-2000 scatter plot suggests a stronger relationship over time. The zero-order correlations between these two variables are  $-.21$  for 1992-1994,  $-.26$  for 1994-1996,  $-.39$  for 1996-1998, and  $-.34$  for 1998-2000.

Figure 15 simplifies the two scatter plots in Figure 14 by blending them as overlays. Viewed in this manner it is easy to see how modest growth in the participation rate in the late 1990s is more strongly associated with performance declines than is observed between 1992 and 1994.

**Mathematics.** The regular K-12 school district results for Mathematics in Figure 16 are similar to what we found for English. It is indeed striking to notice how the scatter plot shifts downward by the time we reach the most recent period. Proportionately, there are substantially fewer cases above the horizontal axis in the 1998-2000 period than in the earlier period. Between 1992 and 1998, the relationship becomes more decidedly negative with the passage of time. The zero-order correlations between these two variables are  $-.15$  for the 1992-1994 period,  $-.26$  for 1994-1996, and  $-.36$  for 1996-1998 period. Another interesting observation is the sizable number of districts whose participation on the Regents exam declines substantially over the 1998-2000 period. This contingent is large enough to influence the correlation measure. In contrast to the  $-.36$  correlation we found for the 1996-1998 period, the corresponding correlation for 1998-2000 was  $.05$  and non-significant.

**U.S. History and Global Studies.** Figure 17 provides analogous findings for the U.S. History exam. We again see a negative relationship between the change in participation and the change in the percentage of test-takers with scores at or above 65%.<sup>4</sup> Again, there are downward shifts in the scatter plots with the passage of time, but not as dramatic as with other exams. The scatter plot shows some degree of similarity between changes in participation and performance on the U.S. History exam during the early and latter part of the 1990s. Though the relationship remains negative, the nature of the distribution does not change all that much.

The findings for the Global Studies examination are similar to results on the U.S. History, English and Math exams. A scatter plot is not shown for these findings, but the zero-order correlations are  $-.16$ ,  $-.34$ ,  $-.49$ , and  $-.16$ , respectively, for the study periods 1992-1994, 1994-1996, 1996-1998, and 1998-1999. Recall that due to modifications to the Global Studies examination in 1999-2000 we cannot extend our analysis through the last study year. (The last correlation statistic,  $-.16$ , was calculated by comparing years 1997-1998 and 1998-1999, rather than 1997-1998 and 1999-2000.)

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<sup>4</sup> For U.S. History, the zero-order correlations for the regular K-12 districts in sequence were:  $-.25$ ,  $-.32$ ,  $-.43$ , and  $-.28$ .

## Dropout Results

We are also concerned with how increased participation in the Regents testing program may affect other performance outcomes such as district level dropout rates and per pupil spending. For the remaining analyses, we relied upon the change in participation in the English Regents exam as an overall measure of the district's or school's level of progress toward the new Regents standards. Reliance on the participation rate for the English exam is an appropriate measure of adherence to Regents test programs given that the new graduation standards required passing the Regents English exam first.

Consistent with our prior studies, there is no obvious bivariate relationship between a change in participation and a change in the dropout rate. This is true for the 1995-1997 and 1997-1999 study periods<sup>5</sup>. The zero-order correlations were essentially 0 and ranged between -.02 and +.007. We also reviewed the relationship between changes in participation and dropout rates over a four- rather than two-year study period (i.e., 1994-1995 to 1998-1999.) Even over the longer study period there was no observable relationship. Given that low correlations were also reported in the earlier report for both the regular districts and city schools, we did not extend the analysis to the city schools in this update. In conclusion, we did not find evidence of a tendency for increased participation rates to correlate with increased dropout rates.

## Participation and Expenditure Per Pupil

Our final set of analyses reviews the correlations between changes in the English Regents exam participation rate and changes in spending per pupil. In this section we investigate whether the movement of more children toward full participation in the Regents test program is associated with changes in overall spending among the regular K-12 districts.

Spending levels rose in nominal terms throughout the 1990's. Yet spending does not appear to be related with test participation in a large or systematic fashion. When measured over a two-year time period, the percentage change in spending per pupil is not associated with the percentage change in Regents test participation (i.e., English participation rate). Four time periods were studied: 1992-1994; 1994-1996; 1996-1998; and 1998-2000. The zero-order correlations were less than .1 for each successive time period. When measured over a four-year time period, 1996-2000, we found a small but positive relationship. Figure 18 displays this association in a scatter

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<sup>5</sup> Dropout data, as collected by NYSED, lags the school report card data by one year. As such we only have annual, district level dropout data for the 1995-1999 period.

plot. The corresponding correlation is  $+0.104$ . Overall, the association between spending and participation is surprisingly flat.

#### **Focus: Special Education Student Performance on Regents Test Program**

The heightened Regents learning standards and graduation requirements made effective for the general K-12 population were phased in more cautiously for children with disabilities. New York State's implementation of its accountability program acknowledged the need to include, more fully, children with disabilities in State assessments and the general education curriculum. Traditionally, children with mild and moderate disabilities could graduate with one of two diplomas. Regular education students, with or without disabilities, could earn a local diploma by passing Regents Competency Tests (RCTs). Students with disabilities who did not participate in either the Regents subject area exams or RCT exams, or who failed them, could still graduate by satisfying the curricular goals of their individualized educational program (IEP), thereby earning an IEP diploma. In 1997, the Board of Regents modified the 1995 graduation requirements for children with disabilities in what has been called the *Safety Net*. In short, children with disabilities who entered the ninth grade between 1996 and 2000 are required to take Regents level courses and Regents subject exams, but are not required to pass them in order to graduate with a local or IEP diploma. However, the State has clearly emphasized greater inclusion of children with disabilities in the comprehensive learning and exit exams.

Given the option to participate in Regents examinations and achieve a Regents diploma or achieve an IEP diploma, it is unclear whether students with disabilities will reach for and attain the higher standard. Some evidence suggests that the IEP diploma option is growing in popularity relative to the Regents diploma. Between 1996-1997 and 1997-1998, the percentage of children with disabilities earning Regents Diplomas increased from 4.8 to 5.1 percent, a growth rate of 6.3 percent. The growth rate for students earning a local diploma decreased by 6.2 percent. However, those students earning an IEP diploma grew by 21.6%, more than three times the rate of growth for special education students achieving a Regents Diploma. At present, 1/3 of all children with disabilities who graduate earn an IEP diploma (VESID, 1999). Clearly the connection between children with disabilities and their participation in the Regents Examinations warrants closer attention.

In this next section, we focus on the participation and performance of students with disabilities on the comprehensive Regents exams<sup>6</sup>. In order to draw out the basic trends, we limit our findings to analysis of the English and Math examination results for the regular K-12 districts, from 1997-2000. This approach is similar to the previous presentation but much shorter. Given the similarity between results for district level trends in the total population and trends for students with disabilities, our descriptive analysis is brief. We include a summary of our findings below, but include Figures 19 through 25 for further reference.

There are three major findings in this section. Consistent with the regular K-12 districts and the city schools, participation in the English and Math Regents exams for students with disabilities increases between 1997-2000. The growth rates are quite similar year to year, with no major deviations. The average participation rate on the English exam, between districts, was 66% in 1999-2000. Second, the performance trends for students with disabilities are consistent with the general population. The percentage of students with disabilities taking and scoring better than 65 on the English or Math exams decreases between 1997 and 2000. The performance trends for the cohort increase. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the participation and performance levels of students with disabilities are much lower than the overall average. Measured each year, the difference between the overall K-12 district average and the special education participation and performance rates is greater than 30 percentage points.

Figure 19 shows Regents English participation rates for special education and regular education students in the non-Big 5 districts for the period 1992-2000. Figure 20 shows similar data for the Regents Math participation rates. Figure 21 illustrates the variation in Regents English participation rates for the special education population during the 1999-2000 period. Figure 22 shows testing passers (e.g., grades above 65%) on the Regents English exam for the regular and special education populations in the non-Big 5 districts for the 1992-2000 time period. Figure 23 shows cohort passers for the Regents English exam for the same population and year as Figure 22. Figure 24 shows testing passers for the Regents Math exams for regular and special education populations in the non Big 5 districts for the 1992-2000 period. Figure 25 illustrates similar data as Figure 24 for cohort passers.

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<sup>6</sup> According the dataset supplied by NYS, in 1996-1997 485 regular K-12 districts reported testing children with disabilities on the Regents English exam. By 1999-2000, this figure grew to 607, an increase of more than 25 percent. The same pattern holds for data reporting on the Regents Math exam. It appears that prior to the new graduation requirements, a large portion of the regular K-12 districts across the State were not

## Discussion

Now that New York State is further along in its high performance standards implementation efforts, it is wise to examine the effort and assess progress. Our goal has been to provide an update on the progress made to date. Our major findings are:

- Mean participation rates are rising, although there is a surprising level of variation around the means given the specificity of the new graduation requirements.
- Rising participation levels are associated with declines in the percentage of test-takers with scores of 65% or better, and the strength of this negative relationship appears to be growing.
- There are large inequalities in both participation and performance results for schools in the large cities of the State compared to others; these inequalities also exist between the population of children with disabilities and the general population.
- There is neither a strong nor systematic relationship between spending levels and increased participation on Regents examinations.

The negative effects of increases in participation on the percentage of test-takers who “pass” the exams warrant careful monitoring. In some respects, this is not a surprising result given that students who heretofore would never have pursued an academically rigorous curriculum are now taking demanding courses and sitting for exams that historically have been taken only by college-bound students. Indeed, policy makers may be tempted to “tolerate” these declines as part of the cost of raising performance standards. The fact that the percentage of the cohort passing the exam is rising may be of some comfort to those inclined to ignore negative results.

In our earlier study, we also found evidence of this negative relationship. At the time, we took note of it, were not surprised by it, and were inclined to be impressed that it was not in fact stronger than the data showed. Here again we find it, but we are less sanguine about its implications. It is important to note that the magnitude of the negative relationship has strengthened. We think it is prudent to be concerned about what this trend suggests. We note that in some instances the drop in the percentage of takers passing the exam was sufficiently strong to cause a drop in the percentage of the cohort that passed the exam. We may be reaching some important ceiling effects, and these need to be examined carefully.

Our analyses of the special education participation and performance data reveal rather interesting results. Overall these results align themselves with those from the general K-12

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including children with disabilities in the Regents exams, or failing to report their performance on those exams.

population in terms of upward and downward trends. However, the scores are much lower, raising the question of whether special education scores actually depress district level performance across the state. Given the increasing participation of special education students in the Regents examinations, the ceiling effects mentioned earlier may not fully explain the negative relationship between participation and performance. We postulate that in several instances the decrease in performance across the state is probably the result of increased participation of academically weak students. It may also be the case that the performance of special education students on Regents examinations is *the population* that acts to depress district level scores in general. Future research is warranted to isolate the effects of special education students on these aggregate indices.

The dropout findings are interesting, but should be viewed cautiously. In terms of the actual implementation of the new graduation requirements, New York is still at an early stage of implementation. The true impact of the higher standards on drop out rates will likely not be seen until students begin to experience exclusions from graduation lists. There may be a non-trivial degree of “denial” present within the system in the sense that students, parents, teachers and others are not quite convinced that the State will really deny graduation to students who do not pass the Regents exams.

This study reveals quite explicitly the significant differences in participation and performance that exist between the city and the non-city schools and districts in New York. These disparities are disturbing and warrant careful consideration.

In summary, we conclude that implementation is moving forward and with impressive results, but with evidence of some worrisome developments. We encourage the State to continue monitoring its implementation efforts carefully, and we hope the information we provide in this report will be useful to New York educators and policy makers responsible for improving the performance of the schooling system in their State.

### **III. Case Analysis<sup>7</sup>**

#### **Overview**

The substantial variation in district and school participation and performance on the Regents tests gives rise to important questions about how educational organizations are responding to state mandates, local pressures, and internal demands. In the quantitative portion of this study we utilized bivariate analyses with aggregated data to explore the relationships between district performance and local environmental characteristics such as poverty level, tax effort and student population characteristics. This work extends our efforts to model changes over time in participation and various performance outcomes (e.g., test scores, dropout rate, and spending) (Monk & Hussain, 2000). However, the models alone do little to reveal the complex set of interactions within an educational system and community that produce organizational responses to shifts in state policy.

In this section of our condition study, we embed rich and rigorous case analyses of five school districts within the broader “case” of the implementation of the new learning and graduation standards in New York State. We do this to provide new and useful information to state policymakers and educators who are trying to improve student learning across the state and better understand the implementation of new state policies. In doing so, we investigate and report on the ways public school districts are responding to state-led standards-based reform. In addition, we attempt to identify other supporting and competing pressures that shape school and district responses to the new state standards.

#### **Data and Methods**

The organizational responses of school districts to standards-based reforms constitute the “case” of our study. The case, then, is the collective and cumulative responses of a set of school district organizations to the new state policies and requirements. The organizational response is conceived as observed changes in district and school organization and program, expectations among educators and community leaders, and community interactions and sentiments developed as

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<sup>7</sup> The authors give a special thanks to all the educators and community leaders who gave their time and expertise to assist us with this study. We especially thank the superintendents and their support staff who allowed us into their school districts and provided us with candid and informative responses. We have gone to great lengths to adequately and accurately portray the hard work going on in these five school districts. We hope to have succeeded in our effort.

a response to environmental and institutional pressures (e.g., regulation, professional norms, and underlying belief systems) related to standards-based reform.

Specifically, we employ an embedded case study design. The school district organization represents the primary unit of analysis for this study. Secondary units of analyses are critical leaders in school district governance, such as superintendents, deputy superintendents, finance officers, principal(s), department chairs, teacher union representatives, teachers and Board of Education presidents. Interviewees were chosen based on a “snowball” sampling approach, in which we began with a formal list of position titles we intended to interview (consistent across all districts). During these initial interviews, respondents suggested additional names and positions, some of whom we contacted and interviewed. Comparisons of the interviewee’s interpretations and messages will assist in triangulating the school district’s responses. The validity of their responses is checked by analysis of local archival documents, other interview data, and vice-versa.

The case study sampling method was designed according to principles of criterion and stratification sampling (Patton, 1990), where school district sites of above average and below average criteria were selected for study. We targeted six case studies for this analysis. The purpose of this approach was neither to gain statistical representativeness nor generalizability, but rather to develop our understanding of major issues of policy, policy implementation, and variation in organizational response.<sup>8</sup>

We used the following sampling criterion:

1. The database of non-Big Five school districts was parsed to those districts that displayed “average” test participation rates on the English I exam over a two-year average of 1992 and 1993. “Average” participation denotes school districts within one standard deviation of the statewide mean, or between 51.9 and 69.7. A total of 270 districts were identified.
2. Districts were then categorized based on changes in both test participation and performance between two averaged time periods, 1992/1993 and 1998/1999, and labeled as follows:

*“Movers”*: Districts with changes in participation rates greater than 30%.

*“Stayers”*: Districts with changes in participation rates less than 15%.

*“Hot”*: Districts that outperformed the state average for performance gains (greater than a –8.5 change between 1998/1999 and 1992/1993)

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that we did not attempt to formally assess instructional changes. The cost of staff and resources needed to conduct such analysis (i.e., observe classrooms, analyze lesson plans and classroom assessments) proved to be prohibitive.

“Cold”: Districts that performed lower than the state average for performance gains (less than a  $-8.5$  between 1998/1999 and 1992/1993)

Six districts were selected from these four categories. Two districts are “Hot-Movers” (Districts K & G); two are “Hot-Stayers” (Districts L & R). One district was selected from “Cold-Movers” (District M) and one from “Cold-Stayers” (District N; See Figure 26). This “purposeful” sampling is based on the idea that performance outcomes (e.g., participation and test-passing rates) are related to structural and programmatic differences. By intentionally seeking districts with different performance levels, we hope to observe and illustrate variations in program, structure, and community.

The utility of this approach is that it allows us to investigate organizational strengths and weaknesses, in terms of school district practice, without focusing on extreme examples of organizational performance. The defined criterion should assist policy makers and practitioners in their ongoing decision-making as to the pace and scope of the policy changes. This sampling frame is also useful for theoretical development, though a discussion of this advantage is beyond the scope of this paper.

Once a list of potential districts was identified, letters were sent in January 2001 to six superintendents with information about the scope and purposes of the study the demands on the district, and a request that he or she consider participating in the study (See Appendix A for the one-page overview of the study we shared with potential and participating districts). Table 2 displays basic descriptive information about each participating district.<sup>9</sup>

The site visits took place between February 27<sup>th</sup> and March 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>10</sup> Participating in the site visits was a research team assembled by Professor John Sipple that included five graduate students

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<sup>9</sup> District G (a “Hot-Mover”), while part of our original sampling, proved to be problematic in scheduling a site visit. We conducted an initial two-hour interview with the superintendent, but were unable to schedule a site visit. We subsequently dropped District G from the analysis.

<sup>10</sup> As we received commitments to participate from each district, the principal investigator (PI) scheduled 90-minute interviews with each superintendent. The PI conducted all introductory superintendent interviews in the superintendents’ offices between January 22 and February 28, 2001. One or two additional researchers accompanied the PI on four of the six visits. At the conclusion of the initial interviews, the researchers began the process of scheduling one-day site visits. In some districts this was effortless; in others, it took several attempts to secure an agreed-upon day. Once the date was secured, we sent a list of people (formal titles) whom we wanted to interview. This served to structure and organize the interviews, and created some degree of consistency across study sites. Each superintendent then clarified the specific titles pertinent to the district (e.g., Director of Pupil Personnel Services vs. Director of Special Education; Department Chair vs. curriculum coordinator).

from the Department of Education at Cornell University, a current director of Special Education for a local school district, a current middle school teacher/department chair, and, for one visit, the executive Director of the New York State Rural Schools Program and a professor at Vassar College (see Appendix B for details on the research team). On site, the team would separate and interview most participants individually, though small groups of teachers, administrators, PTA leaders, or Board members were interviewed collectively when necessary or convenient. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 120 minutes, with the average length being approximately 40 minutes. Overall, researchers conducted 95 interviews with 132 individuals.

The researchers used a set of structured interview protocols to guide the interviews (see Appendix C), though participants were given the opportunity to share concerns and ideas not covered in the protocol. Structured interviews are important when attempting systematic and consistent questioning, for reducing bias in the interview setting, and increasing the probability that all relevant topics will be covered in each interview.<sup>11</sup> All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded by the research team using QSR's N-Vivo software package. As a final check on validity, drafts of the individual cases were given to superintendents during July and August 2001 for their review and comment.

## Findings

In presenting the findings from the case study, we remind the reader that the purpose of case study research is not to ensure or pretend that the findings are generalizable to all districts across the state. Rather, the case study allows for rich description and analysis of how select districts are interpreting and responding to the new state learning and graduation standards. Whereas statistical analyses are valued for their depiction of broad trends across districts and time, the case study is valuable for its fine-grained illustration of how individuals and districts are coping, struggling, and succeeding in their efforts to meet the needs and demands of their local community and the state.

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In trying to minimize the disruption to the educational process, and oftentimes work within the guidelines of the teacher contract, we limited our on-site time to a single day. During this day, a team of researchers (four to seven in number) worked in small teams or individually to conduct the interviews. Every effort was made to coordinate and schedule as many people into the one-day visits as possible. Our priorities were middle and high school English and math teachers, building principals, central office personnel, and others as time allowed (e.g., guidance, technology, department chairs, assistant principals, Board members).

<sup>11</sup> Each participant was asked to sign a statement (see Appendix C) indicating that he or she understood the purposes of the research, could withdraw from participating at any time, and realized that individual responses would be kept strictly confidential. This was done to ensure that interviewees participated freely and without worry that their comments might be used against them in any way.

The ensuing discussion of our results reflects the “case” of local school district response to the new state imposed learning and graduation standards in New York State in 2001. This case focuses on the impact of the state policies on local districts. Within this larger case, we embed individual studies of five school districts. We include these cases in the Appendix for the reader to read and examine. Each individual case provides greater detail and evidence for our claims than we make in our general report discussed below and each individual case provides a rich description and flavor for each individual district in its own context. The overarching case analysis may tend to blur the differences between the embedded cases, whereas each individual case may accentuate local community norms and expectations.

### Perceptions and Beliefs

#### Major Issues Facing Districts

In order to place learning and graduation standards into the broader context of public education in the spring of 2001, we set out to identify the major issues faced by each district. In other words, where are the new standards on the radar screen of local educators? Is it the sole issue that must be addressed, or is it just one of many pressing issues faced by local educators and their community? After interviewing over 130 educators and community leaders in 95 interviews<sup>12</sup> in five different communities, we were struck by the impact the Board of Regent’s decision to require all students to earn a Regents diploma had on each district. This decision, coupled with the new elementary and middle school testing program, has, at the very least, captured the attention of educators across the state and has generated much activity, discussion, and debate.

When asked what is the most important issue facing their district today and in the coming years, educators and community leaders referred to the state standards, assessments, and curriculum most often (44% of all coded responses<sup>13</sup>). This suggests that the state standards are indeed a major issue facing the five districts. The state standards were mentioned about twice as often as the next most prevalent responses including fiscal issues (19%) and the changing demographics of students in their community (17%). Special education, school facilities, the

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<sup>12</sup> Some interviews were conducted in small groups.

<sup>13</sup> Our analyses included the tabulation of the number of respondents who mentioned each major issue and the number of total references to a particular major issue. The two tabulations are highly correlated and as such are essentially interchangeable in terms of assessing the range of major issues faced by participating districts.

Regents “safety net”, and school violence were mentioned less frequently, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

These aggregate responses across the five districts conceal important inter-district differences. District N stands out as there was near uniformity of the significance of the state standards among all respondents within the district. This should not be construed that all participants in District N are in agreement or disagreement with the standards, but simply that the standards are the “most important issue facing the district.” This is a district that began implementing an “all Regents” program nearly five years ago and that had a superintendent who aggressively led the district toward an all-Regents curriculum. In this district the standards do not have the newness that is reported in Districts L, M, and R, nor were the standards considered a passing fad. As such, the standards in District N are pervasive throughout the ranks of administrators and teachers.

Educators and community leaders in Districts L and R also report that standards are a major issue (about 50% of the references) but that fiscal (especially District L) and demographic (especially District R) issues were prominent ones they were facing. District K was the only district in which school facilities and special education received much mention. Facilities may be a more salient issue in District K, as reported by most central office and building leaders, due to the relatively low reimbursement rate from the state on its building construction. This results in a higher local tax burden for funding building renovations or construction. As for special education, it is clear that in District K there is a push to have fewer students classified in special education (see more below in the AIS section). This conscious and purposeful push may account for the relative prominence special education has in this district.

The one district where the standards were not the most prevalent response is District M, where major community-based changes recently have occurred. By no means did this diminish the absolute importance of standards within the district (we found much evidence that the standards are driving significant change within the district), but it does signal the relative position of standards in light of local community events and demands.

We also found that respondents viewed the issues not as disconnected entities, but rather as an interconnected web of related issues. In other words, state mandates were typically not implemented in a vacuum, without regard to other fiscal and programmatic issues. A related issue concerns financing the state standards. This was discussed in all districts.

### All Children Can Learn

The new learning and graduation standards, no doubt, have pressed all educators to address the question, “Can all children learn at high levels?” We found strong evidence that agreement or disagreement with the statement varies little across the five districts, but varies greatly between the central office, school buildings and community. Superintendents are most likely to agree with the statement, whereas principals and teachers are less likely to do so. We found evidence of this distinction in every district.

Among superintendents and central office staff, the belief that all children can succeed is pervasive in four of the five districts. District R’s superintendent is confident that “among all the school community, the Board of Education, superintendent, teachers, support staff, everyone, administrators, the whole thing... every student can achieve.” Indeed, a recurrent belief amongst central office leaders in District N is that high expectations are necessary and beneficial, that the new state mandates will prove instrumental in shifting the responsibility of student achievement towards educators, and will challenge low community expectations and teachers' explanatory, or excusatory, models of student underachievement. In District R, there is the sentiment that “given proper resources” all children should be able to succeed. One central office representative went so far as to state that educators “don’t have a right to set a target at any less than (all students) being successful”. In District M, there are two schools of thought. One is an apparent tension between whether some students are simply not capable of performing at the requisite levels to earn a Regents diploma. The other is whether the district can financially support the programming necessary to allow all students to succeed.

Building administrators were somewhat less convinced, though we documented a range of responses. Many principals seemed to reflect the attitudes and convictions of their superintendents. Though the concern was voiced that not all students will graduate with Regents diplomas in District N (whose superintendent was unwavering in her push for an all-Regents program), building administrators seemed to understand that the expectation is that if a student is not successful, the district/school/teacher must intervene to help. In other words, the reforms have brought about a purported shift in who is accountable for student success. Additionally, building administrators in District N reported that the common standards would assist those most at risk of failure. Conversely, in District M, where the superintendent questioned whether all children could pass Math A, a building principal stated: “A lot of these kids...just can’t meet these standards. There’s no way they’re going to meet them and some of the kids do get frustrated and they end up dropping out of school.”

Of all the respondents with whom we spoke, teachers and community leaders were the least convinced that all students could succeed with the new standards. Teachers and community representatives (e.g., PTA leaders) often shared mixed views of the standards. Despite the strong convictions of central office and building leadership in District N, teachers tended to focus on several factors that might prevent all students from passing the Regents examinations. These factors concern the interaction between student learning styles, abilities, and demographics and the new learning requirements. There is a belief among some teachers that the examinations encourage and reward only a limited set of learning styles and that some students simply learn differently than that which is required to do well on the exams. There is also strong sentiment among some teachers (as well as some administrators and community leaders) that some children simply do not have the raw abilities to succeed at the newly established levels of English and Math. The concern over demographics seems to be a blending of the previous two issues (learning styles and abilities), though it also includes an apparent lack of parental support for many children.

In District R, there was much sentiment that student background and lack of resources will make it very difficult to attain the higher standards. A teacher rhetorically stated: “‘All kids can learn,’ and yes they can. Can all kids learn the same things? ... Well, no... I sincerely believe that there are some kids that are just plain not capable of doing certain things and we’re trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.” Educators in Districts K, M, and R also shared consistent statements and beliefs about their concerns as to the feasibility of all children graduating with a Regents diploma. Specifically, in District K, three teachers agreed with the statement that “...it’d be great if they all passed, but in a real world you know every kid can’t pass every exam; it’s not going to happen.” Even so, all but one teacher referred to efforts made with all students to ensure their successful performance on exams.

By and large, community leaders<sup>14</sup> with whom we met questioned the need and value of having all students earn a Regents diploma. Several community leaders in District L agreed that there is still a great need for “plumbers and electricians” and that the new standards were unnecessary for such professions. One community leader in District R noted: “I think that [parents] feel honestly that [the standards] are not attainable by many, that there are so many students here that it’s just not a reality, that they’ll never be able to achieve that level.” A community

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<sup>14</sup> These include PTA leaders, chamber presidents and school board members. In order to conceal the identity of the community members we interviewed, we necessarily need to be vague as to who we attribute these statements to.

representative in District M qualified her belief in whether all children can make it: “Probably true as long as you provide enough resources and enough time.”

In sum, while there seems to be a discrepancy between those who believe all students can and should earn a Regents diploma in four years and those who believe that certain students will not pass the new standards even if they spent the rest of their years trying, there is the belief that the reality lies somewhere in between. With enough resources and enough time, the respondents with whom we spoke suggested that maybe all children can pass. We interviewed many educators (teachers, administrators, and community leaders) who deeply believe that all students are simply not capable of passing the Regents requirements in the traditional four years of high school. They do suggest, however, that given five or maybe six years, nearly all could succeed.

### **Pressure: Sources and Consequences**

We initially designed our data collection, in part, to identify the variety of sources of influence on the educators in the participating districts. For example, we were interested from where the ideas for at-risk and special education students came (e.g., NYSED, BOCES, NCTM), and how such ideas were introduced to the school district (e.g., memos, conferences). While we did identify a small set of agents from which some ideas and support came (e.g., NYSED, BOCES, NYCOS), we realized that the more salient issue for us to understand was the amorphous sense of pressure felt by a majority of the respondents. Observers may interpret the specific responses to the pressure as either positive or negative, but what is indisputable is that there is heightened pressure in the public educational system as a result of the new, and very public, learning and graduation standards. It is for this reason that we report on the pressure felt (perceived or real) by the respondents.

It became clear as we visited each district that nearly all participants felt heightened pressure to perform in their respective positions. Some suggested that the pressure was beneficial while others described a negative side. The pressure, when identifiable, tended to come from different sources depending on the district and the individual's position within the district (e.g., superintendent vs. teacher). In short, central office officials, especially superintendents, felt pressure from the state, their local school board and community leaders. Building leaders felt pressure from the central office officials, teachers and parents. Teachers, most often, stated that the pressure was more self-imposed than any real pressure from administration, board, or parents.

We have consistent evidence from all districts that the main pressure on superintendents is to raise test scores while keeping the local property tax rate at a reasonable level so that the district budget can pass. This pressure to keep tax rates down typically came from Board of Education

members (District N & L), local community leaders (Districts M & K), the media (District M) or community-based tax-watch groups (District R). Superintendents felt strong pressure from both their school boards and the state to show improved results on their school report cards. One superintendent pointed to the Commissioner and the Board of Regents as providing the “non-negotiable” directive to superintendents to insure that all students meet the new standards, noting that it’s his job to “find a way” to meet those standards. In terms of the local media generating pressure on the school district, this seemed to play a strong role in four communities, with respondents from Districts M, L, N, and K speaking to the impact of media coverage and test score reporting. The most negative publicity was reported in District M.

The pressure manifests itself both in positive and negative ways, though the interpretation often varies by respondent and position. For example, while there was strong agreement that the new standards are altering practice by aligning curriculum and instruction with the state exams, some administrators, teachers, and community leaders agree with and praise the changes. Others, often teachers and a small number of community leaders, interpret the same result as unjust constraints on instruction that result in shallow and relatively meaningless curriculum. For instance, an elementary ELA teacher in District K describes how the standards define what it is that students need to learn and how it holds teachers accountable for such learning:

I think that it should be done that way. Is there pressure? Absolutely, but I think it comes back down to the accountability aspect of it. The standards checklist that we have to check at the end of each year is a real definition of what mastery is within our district.

While most respondents agreed that the standards are establishing a template and definition of “mastery” and what should be learned, the disagreement arose over whether this is the proper template and definition. Teachers also had difficulty elaborating on the source of this pressure. While some teachers spoke about their pride or reputation, a deputy superintendent in another district responded to a question as to where the pressure is coming from and how it gets transferred from central office to the classroom:

Well it feels like God some days. You know the State Ed Department tells us, so we tell [teachers]. Because certainly, if our 8th grade scores don’t get better this year, I’ll feel it, the superintendent will feel it, the board will feel it. We’re going to share that wealth. The teachers are going to feel it.

Educators who applaud the Board of Regents and Commissioner Mills for their leadership in meaningful school reform suggest that the changes are profoundly effecting the education of children. An administrator from District N lauded the new assessments for “require[ing] administrators and teachers...to be more accountable and do a better job instructionally across the

board for all kids.” A teacher in District K argued, “I feel like it’s a good test to teach towards. You know it’s not multiple choice, ... it teaches higher level thinking skills and...I’m pleased about that.” Another District K teacher, who teaches English/Language Arts Academic Intervention Services, added:

I’m very pleased to see that graphic organizers are being used more and that was certainly encouraged by the way the ELA was set up. Children...in our building have been weak in writing skills and I think the English language arts as well as a math but mostly ELA have required the children to do more writing and we’ve really addressed their writing needs more.

A District L teacher interprets the result of pressure on mathematics in a positive light

By raising the bar a little bit [the standards have] helped us to push the kids a little bit more. And I think that’s good. Most of the kids seem to be able to meet that standard. I think they’re learning a lot more, they’re able to express themselves a lot better. They’re finding ways to answer questions not only using Math but they’re bringing English in too because they realize that they can answer questions with not only an equation but also a paragraph. So I think that the standard, raising the standards has helped a lot of kids learn.

An administrator in District N puts the pressure in a different context; again the interpretation can be positive or negative. He states pressure comes not from the need to perform, as conveyed from central office leaders, but from the amount of time and resources available to evaluate and alter existing curricular and organizational structures. In other words, it is the *addition* of important responsibilities to an already busy set of tasks that generates the pressure. Some suggest, however, that the intense focus on the curricular and organizational changes brought about by the standards organizes and prioritizes administrators’ responsibilities. We found clear evidence of this focus in Districts N and M. A key difference between these two districts, however, is that District N has been reforming itself to the standards for the past five years. This has allowed District N time for the standards to pervade the district, whereas most of the changes in District M have occurred during this past year. In District M, a building principal talks about the positive outcomes when facing the intense pressure in a low performing school:

I think the pressure is making us better. I feel we’re up to date on everything. The courses we’re offering and why. What we’re doing to increase assessments, developing plans, the whole bit is opening our eyes... I think because of that we’re more aware, because we taught ourselves of what it is all about, so I think starting at the barrel is actually a good thing...and I think it’s almost like you have no where to go, can you really suffer more?

Rather than the positive interpretation of pressures felt by some, others suggest that the pressure has negative ramifications. The majority of these responses came from teachers, though some PTA leaders voiced their concern about the new pressure on the system. Some individuals we

interviewed, spread across all districts, do not believe the new standards represent what parents want or what children need. These individuals articulated that the new standards create unproductive pressure on teachers to teach to a test, and students to only learn what is on that test. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from District L shares this point of view:

And what part of what I do am I going to drop so that I can do the preparation for the assessment tests? I'm not going to go there! I'd rather teach the kids things that I think they really need for the future, like the research paper or whatever, being a critical learner. I'm not going to be driven by the assessments.

Numerous educators shared first-hand accounts of the effects of the “unrealistic” expectations and increased pressure to succeed in school. Some describe increasing rates of students dropping out of school, anorexia, and acting out in classrooms. An urban principal, also from District M, sums up much of what others told us:

Well I think the higher standards put a lot of stress on kids nowadays. Kids can't be kids anymore and 3 things are happening. 1) You're having kids drop out of school or going for a GED. 2) We have discipline problems that are directly related to not being able to see any success in their schooling... because they can't meet the standards so they start being a problem that way or 3) those kids that are not a discipline problem, they just give up.

Yet another source of pressure, according to a number of administrators in District N, is teachers' resistance to change or accept responsibility for the performance of their students. This has been and will continue to be a source of pressure for administrators as they work to promote change. Demographic and fiscal constraints are another common source of pressure among educators across the different districts. When asked about the source of pressing issues facing District M, one principal links the demographic and fiscal issues facing the districts in the study: “Not being able to support the tax base. I mean we're having trouble now, our school taxes are really rising and city taxes, county, and people just can't [afford the tax increases].” This struggle is felt more in the central offices than in the school buildings.

Despite pleas from many state policymakers and educators that the new exams cover material from multiple years of instruction (e.g., the exams given in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade are to cover grades K-4), the reality is that the pressure falls squarely on the shoulders of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. One 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher responded when asked whether the pressure falls more on certain grade levels than others:

Absolutely, 8th grade. Well despite...the fact is it's supposed to be a 5-8 test, it's always in the newspaper, it's always in the news, it's always in our report card, it's an 8<sup>th</sup> grade junior high school test. So we [teachers] feel great pressure on ourselves, on our reputations as to how the kids are doing.

Another manifestation of the pressure that came across in all districts is the difficulty teaching students whose parents who do not take responsibility for their child's education and expect schools to "fix" their child. This exchange is representative:

Interviewer: What do parents want?

Teacher 1: A cure all.

Teacher 2: And that goes back to the pressure. I sometimes feel that I am the only one accountable for the students' success...

In summary, we reiterate our claim that three issues -- perception of the major issues facing their district, agreement with the belief that all children can learn, and the ubiquitous perception of pressure -- shape and constrain local decisions among educators as to how they respond to changes in the learning and graduation standards. We now report on the explicit strategies and programs the five districts are using to implement the new standards. We remind the reader that the individual cases are in the Appendix. These cases provide additional detail and context for the implantation of the new state standards.

### **Programmatic Responses and Strategies**

The remainder of this report details how districts are reorganizing, building capacity and managing resources to meet the new standards. While we identified a number of different strategies in our data collection, four categories of activity seem to capture the core responses among the districts we studied. The four categories are Academic Intervention Services with attention to special education, dropout management and its relationship to GED programs, professional development of teachers, and, finally, the reallocation of existing resources, or more commonly, the allocation of new resources.

The use of the term Academic Intervention Services, or AIS, was used in each district we studied. This is surprising given the very recent directive from the state requiring AIS services for students who are not passing the Regents exams or are scoring at Levels 1 or 2 on the grade 1-4 or 5-8 exams. While the programs are often revised versions of previously implemented remediation services, very few respondents used the term remediation. Every district had in place some version of AIS programming.

### Academic Intervention Services

In the districts we studied, the most prevalent strategy for organizing instruction to assist all students in meeting the higher standards is termed Academic Intervention Services (AIS). We found evidence for the use of this term and practice in every district. Generically, the related instructional format takes one of two forms. The more prevalent organizational form (found in four districts) is to add on instructional time, often in the form of additional class periods of instruction in a given subject area in place of a study hall or art class. The less prevalent form (found in two districts) is where a substitute version of an academic class replaces the regular offering. We call these two organizational forms Supplemental AIS and Supplanting AIS. In contrast to Districts N and K, which have been modifying their academic and support programs for five years, Districts M, L, and R are just beginning their AIS programming, having just completed their first year of these revised services geared toward the new standards.

**Supplemental AIS:** One model for AIS programming, which we term supplemental, is found in four districts (L, R, M and G). In this model, AIS classroom instruction is *in addition* to the regular Math and English classes<sup>15</sup>. Students initially take the regular English and Math courses, but if they begin to show signs of failure, they are placed into an AIS class that replaces a study hall or elective in their weekly schedule. This year (2000/2001), many students in several districts were taking two English classes and/or two math classes (one regular education and one AIS). There is concern, however, that in the coming years as more exams are required to graduate, how schools will find the time to offer both regular and AIS classes in multiple subject areas (e.g., math, English, science, history) without completely eliminating elective courses and/or after-school activities many students find motivating and enjoyable.

While this brief description of AIS programming reflects the generic practices and scheduling in the districts we studied, a closer inspection reveals differences in the application of supplementary AIS. In District K, AIS programming appears to be an extension of special education services in that it serves both traditional special education students and non-classified students in need of extra support. There is a push, at least from District K's central office, to reduce the number of classified special education students. This serves to reduce meetings and paperwork, thereby increasing the instructional time available to special education professionals. This strategy

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<sup>15</sup> As of the spring of 2001, the only two Regents exams required for graduation are English and one Math. Thus the initial AIS programming in the districts is targeted on English and Math. It is expected that other subject areas will be added in the coming years as the other exams become required for graduation.

also makes it significantly easier for regular-education teachers to refer non-special education students for additional help. At the elementary level, District K has hired two “basic skills” teachers who work with students one class period a day in an area of need. This instruction in Math or English is in addition to the regular elementary instructional time in the subject areas. At the secondary level, pre-existing remedial teachers were converted to full-time (and certified) resource room teachers.

Similarly, District L refined its previous remedial programs in creating its AIS programming. In addition to the instruction in regular academic classes, math, reading, and writing labs that are staffed by certified AIS teachers in English, mathematics, and Global Studies are available to students on a walk-in or referral basis. These labs are available to students during lunch, study halls and after school. District L has also implemented Alternative Regents Classes (ARCs) in which the required subject matter is stretched over longer periods of time than is typical of regular Regents courses. It should be noted, however, that a few teachers voiced frustration at having to over-simplify curriculum in an effort to better engage students new to Regents classes. Teachers noted many instances where high achieving students were unchallenged and became bored with class expectations in courses where special education inclusion was the rule.

In District M, the placement of students into AIS programming strongly relates to the release of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade test scores. Several administrators spoke about the problem of scheduling 9<sup>th</sup> graders and having to guess which students would have to be provided with supplementary AIS courses. In practice, it was not uncommon for students to be pulled from electives (e.g., art, band) in late October when just-released 8<sup>th</sup> grade test scores identified students scoring at Level 1 or 2 who are required to receive AIS services. This caused much frustration, disruption, and angst among staff and students. Students received an additional class period of instruction per subject area per four-day cycle. The District uses a combination of pull-out and push-in services for its special education and AIS students. District M has effectively lengthened its school day for many students by altering its teacher contract, thus allowing more flexible starting and ending times to the teacher workday. This allows additional time for AIS services before and after the regular school day. The junior high school recently began an after-school bus to allow students to stay after school with volunteer teachers to receive extra instruction. An expanded summer school plays a major role; the District estimates that this helps to keep 20% of the students at grade level.

The idea behind AIS in District R is to insure that students can participate in their regular curriculum throughout the day but still receive the assistance they need to succeed after regular school hours. This enables students to remain “heterogeneously grouped” in most instances, and avoids the “real threat” of a self-contained AIS program. Again, a late bus is provided twice a week

for elementary children and everyday for middle and high school students. Some AIS programming is offered during the day in 15-minute segments between the academic “blocks” and is housed in resource rooms. Six-week summer “camps” are also available for elementary and middle school students.

**Supplanting AIS:** The second general model for AIS is to hire additional AIS teachers (former Title One teachers or aides) to teach separate AIS courses in English or Math that supplant the regular versions of these classes for low achieving students. For instance, Districts N and K generated a separate tier of AIS courses from the “regular” classes. Taught by certified teachers, these classes serve students who are unsuccessful in the mainstream. District N capped these classes at 18 students and often employed an aide in addition to the teacher. This practice seems to serve multiple purposes. First, it streamlines the instruction in the regular classes by removing “low achieving” students (a source of frustration for some in Districts L and R). It also appears that the AIS classes become the “answer” for students with behavior problems in the regular classes. The AIS classes, it is argued, have smaller class sizes than do regular classes and better serve the individual needs of the students.

District N reports three strands (most are careful to not term these “tracks”) in their high school: remedial (or Focus), average, and accelerated (or Challenge). The old Target program, a one-year high school program in District N aimed at providing on-task instruction within smaller class sizes for low performing students, had been expanded into a series of “Focus” classes in grades 2 - 12. Focus classes are subject-specific (e.g., English, Science, Math, and Social Studies). With no more than 18 students per class, and no more than six classified as having special needs, these AIS students are placed in Focus classes based on various performance measures. Certified subject area teachers lead Focus classes in partnership with either a certified special education teacher or a certified reading teacher. In a few instances, mostly at the middle school, a teaching assistant helps the subject area teacher. Replacing the former Honors English and Social Studies track, Challenge courses are offered to all students willing to commit to more rigorous curricula. This change was prompted by an investigation into the relative underperformance of Honors students on the state assessments. Honors courses only served a select population of students, usually those tracked since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Other AIS services include summer school, “student assistance labs”, stretch courses, and a voluntary after-school period for extra help.

We found limited evidence that an informal goal of AIS classes (either the supplanting or supplemental model) is to reduce the number of students classified as special education students. One motivator is to reduce the amount of paperwork, meetings, and costs associated with

identifying and classifying a child into special education services. The cost savings (particularly the time of the special education teachers) can then be reallocated into improved “push-in” programs for the remaining special education students and additional non-classified services provided by special education teachers to regular education students. But these observations are neither definitive nor universal. In fact, we found conflicting motivations for this practice. On one hand, as districts reduce the number of special education students, they are able to increase resources (i.e., time, expertise) for non-classified low achieving students. On the other hand, one strategy used by some districts to increase passing rates is to take advantage of the “testing modifications” for classified students. Special education students may be placed in a distraction-free environment, allowed additional time, and/or have exam questions read to them by a teacher depending on the requirements of the students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs). If a student is not classified, however, no such modifications are allowed.

### **Dropouts and G.E.D. Management**

District personnel revealed intriguing responses to our interest in “at risk” students and the new learning and graduation standards. Four of the five superintendents and an array of high school principals identified a “strategy” of shifting students on the verge of dropping out to GED programs (typically run by BOCES). This practice allows districts to document that the student “transferred” and did not drop out. On paper, this shows that the student simply transferred to another “school” whether it is a BOCES GED program or another high school. The end result is that dropout data does not capture transfers to GED or alternative schools. To be counted as a dropout, districts would need to completely lose track of a student. This was commonly discussed as students “disappearing.” This finding may help to explain our quantitative finding of a lack of a relationship between an increase in Regents participation rates and dropout rates.

We found evidence of this practice in four of the districts (District K reported no dropout/GED issues or prevention programs). No one in our study admitted to pushing students toward this path (i.e., GED versus continued high school work), though several administrators across the districts made certain that students understood their options and that earning a GED was one. As one principal stated, earning the GED “is better than nothing.” One Deputy Superintendent noted that it was common “to put a student in a car and drive him downtown” to the GED center. By comparison, Districts N and R operate their own GED programs for students. District N began “calling back” students who had dropped out; District R created a GED program in the high school basement. Both programs separate the regular students from the GED students and both are reported to reduce the dropout rate of the respective districts.

The nature of GED programming in these four districts raises important issues about interactions between performance measures and organizational reform. Whereas the identification of at-risk students begins in the early elementary grades, we found evidence that teachers advise students of the GED option as early as 8<sup>th</sup> grade. AIS programming requires teachers to identify students who are at risk of not meeting new high school graduation requirements. These identifications, taking place at the elementary and middle school levels as well as the early high school years, are the avenues that link poor performing students to AIS services.

The second issue, and potentially more controversial, is a function of how dropout rates are calculated and reported. Two superintendents and several high school principals reported that as long as students are moved into a GED program, they are reported as a “transfer” and not a dropout. This has the result of reducing dropout rates as reported on the school report cards, and removing each of these students (typically low performing) from the denominator of all exam-passing rates. For example, District N recently “called back” 40 students who had “disappeared” to enroll them in an in-house GED program. District R, who previously had only been allotted 23 slots in the BOCES-run GED program, recently began its own program and immediately placed 68 students. These additional 45 students could, in effect, reduce the reported dropout rate by 2.5% a year. District M, while not running its own program, delivers students on the verge of dropping out directly to the BOCES GED program. District L reported that the transfer option to alternative settings including GED programs was once reserved for students considered to pose a safety risk to other students and staff. However, the practice is sometimes now used for students at risk of not completing the requirements for the Regents diploma.

The relation between GED participation and dropout rates was not something we set out to explore. We were interested in how districts were servicing “at-risk” students and “potential dropouts” during this time of heightened pressure to ensure that all children earn a Regents diploma. But as we completed each of the site visits, it became clear that the transfer of students to GED programs was common. Further study is warranted.

### **Staff Development**

Many in the policy and research communities now consider enhanced staff development to be an integral step in the quest for higher standards. Yet, the absence of substantive modifications to staff development programming in our case studies was a rather surprising finding. Teachers and administrators reported making few changes to staff development programming as a result of the new learning standards. We found little evidence of meaningful attempts to retool or enhance the capacity of existing teachers to meet the new standards. Within our cases, *new* staff development

generally means time spent learning how to score the new state exams and how to align their local curriculum with state standards. These activities are typically offered by BOCES and are documented in each of our districts. Most districts continue to offer few resources to teachers interested in attending professional association meetings or conferences. Administrators report being constrained in offering travel money because of weak resources, but also due to a lack of suitable substitute teachers.

We found little evidence in our interviews with teachers that professional teacher associations were taking the lead in offering courses or instruction for new teaching strategies, or effective presentations of content. Teachers who are proactive and seek out new information at professional association meetings generally report learning about new interpretations of the State guidelines rather than new teaching strategies. With regard to administrators, the same pattern persists. Administrators report that BOCES leadership and the state superintendents' and principals' associations have value, but most often in terms of implementation and guidelines for the state standards, not by way of instructional or organizational improvement.

With regard to individual districts, District K acted most proactively, hiring a consultant four years ago to work with staff on developing content standards for every discipline at every level and linking the district content standards to the state learning standards. Teachers who have been with the district for a number of years recalled helping to build district standards and recall "quite a few workshops on performance-based assessment" where they were "trying to build higher levels of thinking as opposed to just short answer, basic knowledge type questions." Administrators and teachers agreed that this work continues to provide the structure needed to assess student mastery and prepare students for state assessments. Since this effort, however, staff development is reportedly constrained significantly by the substantial time teachers are already pulled from their classrooms for a number of reasons (e.g., to train for scoring the new exams, serve on district committees). Teachers express reluctance to miss even more instructional time for additional staff development activities. District officials report they have adequate monetary resources, though freeing up teachers to engage in staff development is now problematic. Resources are reportedly a problem in District L, where teachers and administrators reported that resources dried up as the school year progressed. Four days (two full and four half) were built into the district calendar this past year to allow for additional staff development time, and it was reported by teachers that the focus of district-directed staff development activities was always related to the standards.

Of all the districts, District R's and District M's respondents seemed to be the most content with the staff development available and utilized. Teachers and administrators alike noted this was a high priority for the district and that many options were available. By using the local BOCES

services, a local teachers' center and its own resources, District M offers a wide array of professional development. A principal summarized and emphasized the broad array of staff development related to the new curriculum and assessment and a better understanding of the students for whom they are responsible as follows:

Every single day throughout the school year and into the summer, [there are] literally hundreds of course offerings, programs, training...there's just an infinite number of opportunities for teachers and administrators to be trained today to not only be aligned with the State standards but to truly understand the students that we're teaching, their learning styles, their needs...We're pouring a lot of money in it and the teachers are taking advantage of it. They are attending.

In District N, a significant portion of new resources generated through grants (e.g., Goals 2000, IDEA, Title I, Title III), redirected resources freed up by building project money and other redirected funds have been devoted to staff development. One administrator considers this a "dramatic investment in staff development." This district also recently passed a major technology bond, of which a significant portion is allocated to staff training.

#### **Resources: Fiscal Reallocation and Staff Reassignment**

We expected to observe a certain degree of staff reallocation, or a "cashing in" of one position for another. With the exception of District R, we found little if any reallocation of staff. In the smaller districts, the opportunity to reallocate staff is reduced, given the few number of positions. In fact, when asked about the movement of teaching resources in response to new standards, the respondents, whether business officials or teachers, were confused by the question. Any and all staff positions seem to be new positions. It appears as if the AIS positions are either brand new positions or a new version of Title 1 teachers (particularly at the elementary grades). District K reportedly added five and one-half new positions, all of which are linked to the AIS programs. District L added two new AIS positions, while not making any reductions. The school board in District N approved twelve new AIS positions recently.

Whereas Districts K and L have not engaged in "smoke and mirrors", Districts R and M have been the most fiscally creative, in large part because they are the two most fiscally distressed districts we visited. We quote a passage from our individual case study of District M to highlight the degree to which it is engaged in a juggling act to stay afloat during this time of increased standards:

Despite the admitted use of "smoke and mirrors" and "pulling rabbits out of the hat" to maintain a balanced budget, key sources of revenue to support the standards implementation include Title 1 funds for AIS staffing and summer school ("We really

don't have a summer school program except for that money"), Title 2 funds for professional development, and a lot of hard work securing competitive grants. The grants, while totaling \$450,000 last year, are still a small fraction of their \$70 million budget. The grants fund some after school and latchkey programs. Comprehensive Reform School District (CRSD) funding has assisted elementary teachers with improved instructional methods. Federal class size reduction funds were "very helpful" though their ability to offer full-day kindergarten is hampered by facility issues and the fact that the state does not allow a phasing in of the program. To free up another \$835,000 this year, the district made "radical changes to our method of buying Blue Cross/Blue Shield coverage and in getting our employees to agree to take a five dollar increase on the co-pay on medication." The new high school is being built at "no cost to our citizens." Nevertheless, despite all the efforts to maximize state and federal aid, the predominant source of new funds is through local taxation, which leaves the community with a tax rate of \$21 per thousand, real assessed value. In sum, the Superintendent stated, "Our financial work has been second to none."

District R has also juggled its fiscal strategies to squeeze dollars out of zero percent increases in their local tax rate.

District R has not had a property tax increase in four years, primarily due to a commonly identified and active tax watchdog group. However, the district has found some new funding sources. These additional funds are a result of a small student population increase within the district, greater federal funding for students with special needs, and a grant to reduce class size at the elementary school level...In addition to these new resources, the district has "been able to live off the land, so to speak," says a central office official. Creative budgeting and reallocation of existing resources has been essential in District R to fund standards-based reform initiatives without an increase in taxes. For example, the district has made an effort to bring students back to their "home school" from BOCES and GED programs. By doing so, the district has been able to consolidate funding for AIS in the schools. This also decreased transportation costs. Another cost saving strategy employed by the district was to eliminate time-and-a-half pay for custodial staff working Saturday's by including a clause in the contract making Saturday part of the regular workweek. Another strategy described including budgeting state aid based on the previous year's aid, allowing the district to put unanticipated monies into a reserve fund. This allows the shifting of some district costs—such as bus purchases, termination pay, and unemployment insurance—into this reserve fund, and free up a portion of the operating budget to hire new teachers. Some of the federal funding for students with disabilities, previously used for professional salaries, has been put towards staff development and computer hardware for Internet access.

Existing staff responsibilities also have been altered in accordance with the district's focus on meeting the new standards. Teaching assistants, instead of "copying at the copier," are now "doing small instructional groups set up by a teacher," said a central office administrator. Remedial English and math teachers along with regular classroom teachers are taking on AIS classes and resource room duties in place of study hall or cafeteria duties. Department chair responsibilities are shifting to include supporting elementary teachers in subject area planning, while regular teachers are becoming more involved in special education. Two educators also reported that fewer electives were being offered as teachers were reassigned to AIS and Regents classes and students were faced with more requirements, although no value judgments were attached to these observations.

We found mixed evidence for the concern that teachers are “fleeing” the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. In the smaller districts we found little, if any, switching of grades. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon is more pronounced in larger districts. Unfortunately, we also found a tentative link between the wealth of the district and 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers’ propensity to remain in those grades. In the largest and poorest district, these two grade levels are now fully staffed by beginning teachers, whereas the more senior teachers have requested and received transfers to other grades. A district leader provided an explanation for why he/she believes such transfers occur:

Well actually in our district, the 4th grade teachers, a lot of them have bailed for lack of a better way to put it...and have asked for a transfer to other grade levels. It’s hard because they spend the whole year teaching to the test. You go from September to January teaching ELA and you go from January to May teaching Math and you try to get science in there because that’s 1 of those 2 [other exams] but they can’t take you down quite as far. I mean that’s it, honestly. That’s sad. (Central Office Official, District M)

In one suburban district, we found a high amount of grade switching. In part this is due to the common practice of “looping” whereby teachers remain with a class of students for two years (e.g., grades 3 and 4). An additional factor however, is the discrepancy between teachers who reportedly like the new standards and exams – and hence request a 4<sup>th</sup> grade assignment – and those who cannot tolerate the exams and leave the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The end result is a self-selection of staffing in this district. Many of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers enjoy the pressure, the accountability and content associated with the exams. Their colleagues, who have a very negative attitude toward the exams, teach 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade. In District L more senior teachers reported that the high stakes testing grades (i.e., 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>) are most often taught by new teachers. Though they expressed empathy for the new teachers, they remained, by and large, in the less pressurized teaching assignments.

## **Additional Issues**

### **Contractual Issues**

Our interviews included an assessment of how contractual issues impact student learning opportunities. This is an issue where there are clear discrepancies, on average, between teachers and administrators. Administrators commonly bemoaned the “shackles” of the teachers’ contracts and their “paralyzing” effects on administrators’ abilities to provide students sufficient opportunities for additional learning. Administrators likened the teachers’ workday to an iron cage, noting the importance of the bells at 7:23am and 2:45pm, and “the 182 days of the school year”. In one particularly contentious district, a district administrator stated:

We would like to extend our school day just so that it's comparable with the other districts in [this] county. We have the shortest day in [this] county. It's a contractual issue. These teachers will fight tooth and nail."

Many teachers, on the other hand, saw little impact of the contract and simply requested that they be compensated for time worked. If administration wants them to work late afternoons or over the summer, they ask for just compensation. District K offered to pay an hourly wage over the summer, though teachers requested approximately 1/200<sup>th</sup> of their annual salary for each additional day worked. There is certainly variation on this issue across districts and even within districts over time (e.g., during times with unsettled contracts). In fact, many administrators and teachers spoke about the dedicated teacher who commonly works well beyond the contract. One suburban teacher described the impact of the contract in this way:

Academic Intervention Services, they wanted to extend our day [to provide AIS] and the union won't let that happen. So you know in that respect, I think, I kind of do my thing. I think on the one hand to have the district who wants more from us without giving us more and the union on the other hand tends to be a little anal but I think in that way the union has good protection. The contract is a good protection from the district telling us that we need to do more with paying us more.

## BOCES

We found tremendous support for the role that various BOCES serve in light of the new standards. Specifically, many administrators praised BOCES' District Superintendents for their valuable role in filtering, previewing, explaining, and providing a "heads-up" to local superintendents as to new and/or changing regulations. Also discussed was the valuable role BOCES play in providing professional development opportunities for teachers.

## Discussion

Our case study addresses school district responses to new curriculum standards and graduation requirements in New York State. We investigated five school districts and gathered data from teachers, administrators, parents, board members, and community leaders. In doing so, we set out to enrich the discussion surrounding the implementation of high stakes school reform. We hope this study, coupled with the statistical analysis of student participation and performance rates, provides valuable feedback for state policymakers and educators as they shape and monitor the continuation of the phase-in of the new requirements.

We began this study by identifying four categories of districts (e.g. "Hot/Movers", "Cold/Stayers") thinking that getting behind the performance differences would reveal underlying structural and programmatic distinctions at the site level. During our analyses, these distinctions

became relatively unimportant and, at times, misleading. The more relevant of the two continuums is whether or not a district was a “Stayer” or “Mover”; this continuum is pegged to student participation on the English Regents exam. Yet despite this categorization we found a “Mover” who was just beginning to alter its academic program to reflect the new standards (District M) and a “Stayer” that had been engaged in major reform efforts for five years (District N). In other words, just because districts moved more students into the Regents program did not mean those districts made significant changes to their academic programs. As a result of our study it appears that community demands and available resources are better correlates of significant programmatic change.

School districts in our study face a wide range of pressures to implement new learning standards and achieve higher graduation requirements. While school district officials identify with the statement that “all children can learn at high levels”, there is less agreement at the building level and among some community leaders. This has an impact on community and educator support for the new standards. Pressure felt by educators is building, the most acute of which is focused on the balancing act of providing more and better services for all children while keeping costs and local tax rates in line. This pressure has positive ramifications, in that the education of all children is now center stage and more is expected of students who traditionally have not been pushed very hard by their parents or teachers. Some suggest that this pressure is not all positive, that it forces a one-size-fits-all education on students, and it ignores individual differences in interest and ability.

Districts have responded with very clever and intricate budgeting and a variety of academic programs, student groupings, and staffing changes geared toward educating all students. Which of these models will prove to be most effective is unclear, but much experimentation is taking place. Related to this is the increased demand for accountability and data analysis. Given all the new sources of student and school performance data, this is a positive step. We did not find much evidence, however, that educators charged with such analysis feel prepared to adequately learn from and alter academic programs based on the data available. We found evidence that students most at risk of failing and dropping out are moving into GED programs. The effect of this shift has been hidden, in part, by the dropout reporting system, which counts GED students as transfers and not dropouts.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Our choice to blend quantitative and qualitative research methodologies emphasizes the inherent benefit of measuring events from several angles. The cross-sectional and trend analyses offer important descriptive evidence across New York State school districts. Findings that stand out include the widespread increase in participation on a series of Regents exit exams, performance declines on those exams, and stark disparities between the participation and performance scores among urban and non-urban school districts. These findings identify intriguing trends in several baseline measures of school district participation and performance with the Regents Learning Standards and Graduation reforms. The qualitative analysis expands on this topic in great detail in order to identify organizational reforms at the district level attributable to state-led standards reform. Fortunately or unfortunately for policy analysts, this blend of research methodologies yields findings that raise as many questions as they answer.

For instance, how can the pressure, which now has both positive and negative ramifications, be made more uniformly positive in altering instruction and district programming? What roles do teacher and community expectations play in the development of academic programs that would allow and support all students to succeed in the new graduation standards? How prevalent are the varying AIS, staff development, dropout/GED, and resource allocation strategies? While much work remains in school to ensure that all students are prepared to succeed, we are learning much about the process of school reform, practices that lead to increases in achievement, and policies that reduce or exacerbate differences between districts. Yet, in spite of these important questions, there are several key places where the two research methodologies reinforce each other quite nicely.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses addressed changes in participation rates on the Regents exams. We found that between 1996 and 2000 participation rates rose across New York. More importantly, we found more uniform participation rates in both the regular K-12 districts and the city schools over this time period. However, among our case study districts these similarities in participation rates understate the rather large variation in district responses to Regents graduation requirements. Participation rates among the case districts varied along several lines. Districts with strong community involvement and pro-active Superintendent and Board leadership tended to adopt programmatic reforms in response to the new state standards earlier. Early activity (1995 or 1996) seems to explain higher participation on the Regents exams among certain districts. In contrast, districts with low participation levels appear to be less organized and

more mired in fiscal stress, or less actively pursuing all-Regents programming changes because the community is more interested in issues other than test scores.

The quantitative studies found few, if any, relationships between changes in Regents test participation and either district level spending or dropout rates. It seems likely, based on the evidence from the case studies, that it is still too early in the implementation process to uncover any sizable change in district level spending patterns. Even among districts with rather strong programmatic reforms, the reforms are funded by rather modest changes in the property tax rate or through grant writing. While we found some evidence of reallocating resources and cutting peripheral programs, most districts have relied on new monies to add new programming. In terms of the argument that the new standards should not cost much more than the “old” system, it was very clear in all districts we studied that the students most at risk of not graduating with a Regents diploma will require significant amounts of additional instructional time. It is not uncommon to provide these students one to three class periods of a subject area per week *in addition to* their regularly scheduled classes.

The relationship between participation rates and dropout rates is murkier. Recall that the correlation analysis uncovered no statistically significant relationships between district participation and dropout rates. Administrators in the case study districts readily acknowledged the practice of advising at-risk students, as well as students who had already dropped out, to select GED programs. This practice has the effect of systematically reducing the dropout rate, biasing any analyses of this variable, and it may have an impact on passing rates as the GED students are removed from the denominator in computing passing rates.

While much work remains to ensure that all students are prepared to succeed, we are learning much about the process of school reform, the practices that lead to increases in achievement, and the policies that reduce or exacerbate differences between districts. It is now clear that the Board of Regents has the full attention of educators across the state and has started the ball rolling on the road to higher learning standards for all students.

## **V. Recommendations For Policy And Further Research**

- The State should consider targeting districts with low participation rates on the Regents exams, and developing new strategies to increase student involvement in the Regents' testing program. A simple rank order strategy could be used to identify these districts, or a more sophisticated approach, like cluster analysis, could be adopted. This latter approach

would allow the State to identify groupings of districts with low participation levels, while controlling for background characteristics.

- AIS – Continue to allow flexibility to meet this requirement, though the costs of creating AIS services are consuming nearly all new resources. In time, we should be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy. At present the strategies do not have a long enough track record to make an assessment.
- Student Grouping – The alternative forms of student grouping need to be carefully analyzed. There is much experimentation taking place without much data collection, analysis or critique.
- Dropouts – Begin collecting data on transfers and GED participation and passing rates. This is a loophole, or pressure release, that needs to be further investigated.
- 55-65 and Safety net – While some districts (e.g., K and N) jumped out in front by implementing an all-Regents curriculum five years ago, some districts are still in the early stages of their transition. There is both a learning curve and new costs associated with the transition. The complete phase-in of the standards and the 65% passing rate for all students needs to be analyzed carefully. For some districts, students will only have 3-4 years of a revised curriculum, whereas students in other districts will have had potentially 8-9 years of a revised academic program. Nevertheless, it is clear that after dragging their feet for several years, perhaps presuming the standards would go away, all districts in our case study are now actively modifying staff, student grouping, finances, and academic programming to enhance the learning opportunities for all students in their districts. Extension of the “55 score” or *Safety Net* could further delay the local adoption of state reforms.
- Staff Development – Despite the tremendous increase in student, school, and district performance data over the past three years, disturbingly few teachers and administrators have the knowledge and skills to make use of the data. These skills must be developed if the state is to capitalize on its hypothesis that increased testing will result in improved instruction and learning. Much attention has been paid to scoring new exams and aligning curriculum (both important activities). Next up, we suggest, should be a focus on using the

existing student, teacher, and school performance data to better inform programming and instruction.

- Also concerning data analysis, teachers and administrator alike consistently questioned the usefulness of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade test results due to the timing of when test scores are made available to the districts. Specifically, they expressed a desire to use the test data over the summer to revamp programs and make more accurate placements for students in the fall. Unfortunately, the test scores are not returned to the schools until well into the fall semester – after placements have been made and when there is precious little time to make use of the data. We are concerned that the test data are being underutilized.

## **VI. References**

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## **Figures, Maps and Tables**

Figures 1 through 29, Maps 1 and 2, and Tables 1 through 4 follow.