

HOW HAVE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS  
CHANGED SCHOOL DISTRICT PRACTICE?  
RESULTS FROM A STATEWIDE SURVEY OF  
NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL DISTRICTS<sup>a,b</sup>

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**Note:** Readers are directed to the Education Finance Research Consortium's website at <http://www.albany.edu/edfin> for the Appendix to this condition report. The Appendix includes additional information related to the authors' study.

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## *How Have Performance Standards Changed School District Practice?*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, a great deal of policy, scholarship, and publicity has focused on issues of school improvement and accountability in all regions of the country. *School improvement* represents efforts to “build capacity” in local schools and improve classroom instruction, inclusive of special services like special education and remediation. *School accountability* is defined as the systematic measurement of outcomes (e.g. test scores) to assess who (e.g., student, teacher, school, district) is meeting a given standard and who is not. The distinction between the two policy initiatives is often blurred. While some states focus on school improvement, most states rely solely on performance outcomes. The focus on outcomes largely assumes that public scrutiny of organizational performance will lead to improved teacher practice and student achievement. While New York State’s version of school improvement focuses significant attention on school processes – including staff development programming, data driven decision making, Comprehensive District Education Plans (CDEP), improved annual teacher performance reviews, and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) – most public attention has been focused on test scores as a measure of school improvement.

By simply evaluating aggregated outcomes, very little is learned about the mediating effects of organizational capacity and procedures and how they interact with local communities. Unfortunately, little is known about what organizational processes within schools and districts are actually changing as a result of state policy and the heightened pressure from the accountability system. Results include a limited capacity to identify best practices and to discuss effective strategies to improve student achievement towards new learning and graduation standards. We argue that the popular emphasis on Regents graduation requirements tends to diminish the *process-based* focus of New York State’s version of standards-based education reform. While some policymakers and academics attribute gains in student achievement to heightened accountability or standards, the *processes* by which accountability and standards are enacted must be identified and better understood. In short, studies of state initiated standards-based reforms have yet to systematically determine whether standards-based reforms actually stimulate changes within school district organizations and, when change occurs, what changes are enacted.

Findings from the case study portion of our 2001 EFRC Condition Study (Monk, Sipple, Killeen, 2001: available at <http://www.albany.edu/edfin>) shed light on this issue and serve as a starting point in the quest to better understand the relationship between comprehensive state reform efforts and tangible school change. Extensive interviews with school district personnel revealed the occurrence of several rather important changes taking place in the districts studied. Pronounced changes taking place are related to the delivery of academic intervention and special

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education services, and GED participation. We found additional changes, though narrower in scope, in staff development programming and district level allocation of new and old resources. Districts we studied are relying heavily on these changes to achieve the higher standards, though are doing so with a variety of emphases and specific strategies. Moreover, administrators, teachers, and board members are involved in the middle of an intricate balance of state and community influences. While the state was reported to be a significant factor in the specific changes enacted at the local level, we found strong evidence that community-level issues also shape the response and interpretation of state policies. We seek to expand upon these findings in this Condition Study.

This condition study aims to report on the prevalence of practices and strategies from a representative sample of school districts across New York State. Among the strategies measured by this study are those related to changes in teacher staffing, student grouping, academic intervention services, dropouts and GED programming, and the professional development of teachers. The data for this analysis is from a series of phone surveys conducted between January and June 2002. The respondents are superintendents and randomly selected principals from the sample of school districts representing all of the NYSED-defined need/resource capacity (N/RC) categories except New York City. Stratifying the sample by the need categories ensures a random selection of urban, suburban, rural, high, and low need districts that is representative of the 643 school districts in the state that include high schools. Our respondents include superintendents and a representative sample of principals from the Big Four districts: Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers. The current study does not include data from New York City public schools, though we plan to collect similar data from New York City administrators and teachers in the fall of 2002.

Our survey instrument asks superintendents and principals to both weigh the importance of certain issues along a scale as well as to state whether a particular strategy is being used in their district or school. Thus our data includes both continuous and non-continuous data elements. For example, in Section I, Influence on Reform, we rely on the average item response to report the importance of agents (e.g., BOCES, Board of Regents, central office, etc.) in the standards implementation. Sections II through V rely almost exclusively on frequency statistics that report the proportion of district and school administrators that indicate whether or not a particular strategy is in place. For example, we report that the majority of superintendents (77.5%) indicate that they have increased their certified teaching staff in response to the new learning and graduation standards. In this example our sample data is properly weighted and thus the finding

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represents a perspective of all school superintendents across NY State (excluding New York City) and the high school principals within these districts.

We are also concerned with item response variation across need categories as well as district performance categories. Thus, for all analyses, districts are categorized by need categories and performance level. Performance categories indicate low, average and high district average scores on the 2000-2001 English Regents examinations. Average performance indicates a district within one-half standard deviation above or below the state mean. Low or high performing districts are those with district scores below or greater than one-half standard deviation from the mean. When reporting item response variation across the need and performance categories, we rely on weighted data to report general findings across categories, and the unweighted data to test for statistically significant differences across the categories. The survey includes a small number of open-ended questions and also allows for the recording of additional comments and clarifications made by respondents. When possible we rely on these comments from superintendents and principals to reinforce or describe patterns found in the statistical findings. The sampling framework, survey instrument, and analysis of the survey results are described in more detail below. Future analyses will report on data from teachers and involve comparisons of administrator and teacher responses within and between districts including New York City.

### Sampling Framework

The primary unit of analysis for this study was the school district. However, in order to identify personnel within the district for the survey, a three-stage sampling framework was designed. Because this study reports only administrator data, we only report the first two stages here. In short, however, six teachers (3 English and 3 Regents science) are being randomly selected from within the high schools in our sample. About 470 teachers have been surveyed at this time. We expect to complete the teacher surveys and report these results by the Fall of 2002.

**Stage One: The District.** One hundred and seven (107) districts were selected from a total possible pool of 643<sup>1</sup>, or 16.6% of the population of non-NYC districts that include high schools.<sup>2</sup> Districts were stratified based on the New York State need/resource capacity categories

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that in 2002 New York State officially lists 700 school districts. Fifty-six of these districts, however, do not include high school grades, and so are not relevant for the scope of this study. These districts were removed from the pool from which the sample was drawn.

<sup>2</sup> In order to ensure a 15% sample, we over sampled with the assumption that we would lose some districts. In order for a district to be included in the final analysis, not only would the superintendent have to agree to participate, but also the principal in a high school in the same district and then the teachers within that high school.

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and randomly selected from each of five needs categories (Table 1 shows the number of districts selected from each stratum). The need categories result from an assessment of educational need (school district student poverty) in relation to the fiscal capacity of the school district to place districts into six distinctly different categories: New York City (1), Other Large Cities: ‘Big Four districts’ (2), High Need Urban and Suburban (3), High Need Rural (4), Average Need (5), and Low Need (6). Each district in a category faces similar challenges, and is able to draw on comparable resources (see [http:// www.emsc.nysed.gov/reperd399/similar.html](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reperd399/similar.html)). Given the small number (4) of Large City Districts, all were included in the study. In the remaining strata 15% or 20 districts were selected, whichever was greater. Table 1 displays the numbers of districts – weighted and unweighted – in this set of analyses.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Letters were mailed to the superintendents of selected districts in early January 2002, asking them to individually participate in the study and to allow permission for their district to be included in the study (See Appendix A). Calls were made to superintendents in each stratum until the quota for each stratum was met. All surveys were conducted by telephone using a CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) system and conducted by individuals employed by the Computer Assisted Survey Team (CAST) at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Calls commenced on January 28, 2002 and concluded on March 11, 2002. A total of 121 surveys were completed. Of the 121 available districts, 107 districts had principals also complete surveys in Stage Two (see below). These 107 districts become our final sample for this analysis.

**Stage Two: The High School.** Once the districts were selected and the superintendent survey completed, high schools within these districts were selected for the study. Given the purpose of this study we defined high schools as those schools that included a 12th grade. This includes high schools with grades 10-12, 9-12, 7-12, 6-12, 5-12 and K-12. Except in the category of large cities, one high school was randomly chosen from each of the districts that had more than one high school. In the Big Four districts, 2 high schools were chosen out of 4 in Syracuse, 2 of 5 in Yonkers and 2 of 7 in Rochester. In Buffalo, the largest of these districts, 4 high schools were chosen out of 16.<sup>3</sup> A total of 114 high schools were selected to participate in the study within the

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<sup>3</sup> The pool from which we selected high schools was pared down by removing special-purpose alternative schools. We removed one high school from Syracuse, four from Rochester, and one from Buffalo because they are distinctly different from the regular schools in the districts. For example, five high schools in Syracuse have between 1,100 and 1,600 students each. The school we removed has just over 100 students.

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107 districts selected in phase one. We eventually obtained data from all four Syracuse high schools. Once the high schools were selected, letters were mailed to the principals of selected districts on March 12, 2002, asking them to individually participate in the study. All surveys were conducted by telephone by CAST at Cornell University. Calls commenced in February and were completed in early June. A total of 114 surveys were completed.

### Survey

The purpose of the survey was to document how districts are responding to the new State policy requirements. Questions focused on such strategies and responses as: Academic Intervention Services, Professional Development, Dropout Prevention, GED and Student Grouping. The surveys for the superintendents, principals and teachers were nearly identical (See Appendix B for a copy of the superintendent survey). The only difference between them was the context the interviewee was asked to consider when answering the questions. Superintendents were asked to reflect on their district, principals on their school, and teachers on their department. Questions were closed-ended and interviews averaged 23 minutes.

## **Findings**

### Section 1. Influence on Reform

We set out to document the relative influence on programmatic changes as reported by district and building administrators. We asked each respondent “to rate how much actual influence you think each group or person [agent] has” on each of four key issues. The agents include the NYSED/Board of Regents, BOCES, professional organizations, superintendent/central office, principal, teachers, and the local community. This range of agents is intended to capture a wide range of potential influences across a list of important local programmatic decisions. Key issues studied for each agent include: decisions made on staffing assignments; Academic Intervention Services; student grouping; and GED programming.

A central question for this analysis is the following: Does influence on districts vary across decision issues, across agents, across neither, or across both? To investigate this, we first examined univariate means and then compared means across need categories and performance level. The overall means for the four issues by agent are shown in Table 3. Our findings suggest that:

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Using this same logic, we also removed seven other schools from those N/RC categories 3-6 districts that

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- Staffing decisions are most influenced by superintendents and principals, each with a mean of greater than 4 in a range of 1 (no influence) to 5 (a great deal of influence).
- BOCES and the state (NYSED/Board of Regents) both have above average influence on rural districts, while local communities have below average influence on the same districts.
- Decisions regarding academic intervention services are influenced most by local administrators and the state (NYSED/Board of Regents).
- Student grouping is most influenced by teachers whereas GED decisions are most influenced by principals and, to a lesser degree, superintendents.
- Low need districts report below average influence from all agents, except their local community.
- The responses of principals closely mirror those of superintendents along these measures.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 shows the mean influence for each programmatic issue by agent. A more general pattern exists, though, with regard to the agents. Greater variation in influence on districts seems to be found between agents and less variation between issues by agents.<sup>4</sup> We then compared the seven influence factors by need category and performance level to investigate which agents were most influential for different categories of districts. This is important to determine whether the relative influence of different agents varies by the wealth/geography of a district or the performance of a district. Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 1 display the means for the seven factors by needs index and performance level.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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were distinctly different from the regular high schools.

<sup>4</sup> To test this relationship, we calculated reliability tests on the seven different sets of four items and found the association between issues ranged from modest to strong. The alphas are .61 for central office, .66 for NYSED/Regents, .56 for principals, .84 for professional associations, .63 for teachers, .74 for BOCES, and .72 for local community. Subsequent factor analyses also suggested a link between the four issues as the agents loaded together. Based on these factor analyses, we created a series of seven factors - one for each agent -each of which include the four issues. Thus, the seven factors represent a more global degree of influence by each identified agent.

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When compared with the high need urban/suburban districts, superintendents report that teachers have a greater influence on decisionmaking in the Big Four city districts. On the other hand, principals appear to have less influence than in the other types of districts. The high need rural districts are significantly influenced by BOCES. The set of low need districts is less influenced by professional associations, BOCES and central offices. Turning to the performance level of districts, low performing districts report greater levels of influence from principals within their district and slightly heightened influence from professional associations when compared with other district types. Otherwise, there appears to be no strong relationship between reported influences from agents and performance level.

[INSERT TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE]

### Section II. Standards and Staffing Patterns

Given the uniform and powerful emergence of state mandated reforms, the forces that govern faculty and staff assignment within school districts are likely to have changed dramatically. Given the heightened emphasis on student achievement as measured by school and district outcomes (e.g., test scores, dropout rate) we suspect that districts will choose to tailor hiring practices to the NYS learning and graduation standards. The new learning and graduation standards create several incentives for districts to increase the quality of staffing currently serving the poorly performing segment of the student population. First, the learning and graduation standards tend to focus great attention and resources on those students failing to achieve the minimum standards by withholding graduation and/or requiring services for students with low performance on the elementary and middle grade exams. In terms of school or district level pressures, the poorly performing segment of the population can also skew school and district level performance indicators. Strategic minded administrators would likely recognize these incentives or pressures and seek remedies to improve performance by strategically allocating faculty.

To assess these issues the survey asks questions about faculty and staff changes in direct response to the NYS learning and graduation standards. We suspect that administrators will also direct and redirect greater and more talented human resources towards the poorly performing segment of the population. The survey assesses this issue by asking school administrators to describe how staff was selected for academic intervention services (AIS). Our key findings include the following points, with detailed results shown in Table 5:

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- The majority (77%) of NYS superintendents and principals concur that they have increased the size of their teaching staff in response to the NYS learning and graduation standards.
- Certified teachers are typically assigned to staff AIS classes though teaching experience is not a large factor in their assignment.
- The nature of teacher labor contracts appears important in the assignment of teachers to AIS services, and more important among urban districts.

When asked if the NYS learning and graduation standards have motivated changes in the number of certified teachers or the assignment of teachers, the majority of school superintendents (77.3%) indicate they have increased the size of their teaching staff. Only 12.9% indicate that the policies have stimulated internal staff reassignment or changes in teaching responsibilities. These findings are consistent, though more moderate, among principals, and across the need categories. A number of respondents indicated the process of increasing staff size also involves the shuffling of certified teaching staff to areas where non-certified staff was working. Interestingly, no respondents indicated that faculty retirement was causing any great strain or concern. When commenting on “other” reasons for increasing the number of certified staff (19.1%), superintendents quickly cited a blend of explanations, including the interaction between enrollment changes and programs like class size reduction, changes in district standards and AIS requirements.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The patterns we find for teachers do not hold for changes in the hiring or reassignment practices of teacher aides. Approximately 40% of school superintendents and principals report increasing the number of teacher aides in response to new learning and graduation standards. About one-third of all districts indicate making no changes to the hiring or reassignment of teacher aides. Very few indicate they have decreased staff. Interestingly, superintendents indicate making changes in the teaching assignments or responsibilities for teacher aides at about twice the level of teachers. Principals, however, report making these changes for teachers at about twice the level of teacher aides.

High need urban and suburban districts seem to hire more aides and change teaching responsibilities less often when compared with the other need categories. These differences are fairly pronounced among the superintendent responses. For example, 56.1% of High Need urban and rural districts report hiring more teacher aides in response to the standards, in comparison

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with 34.2% of superintendents within the Average Need districts. One school superintendent remarked that the reason for the increase in aides is because they are becoming more useful, “They’re becoming handmaidens for the teachers.... Monitoring groups, running things off where they may have only been greeting students at the door before.”

How is staff (teachers and aides) selected for Academic Intervention Services? In other words, what factors are considered when assigning staff to work with the under performing students? District administrators staff AIS support services principally with certified teachers in academic labs and support classes. Almost 90% of superintendents and almost 80% of principals concur with this practice. The assignment of teacher aides in the AIS support services is less uniform. Only 35.4% of superintendents agree that aides are assigned to academic labs, and 50.2% report that aides are assigned to support classes. The findings among principals are approximately the same.

Superintendents and principals concur that teaching experience is not a large factor in the assignment of teachers to AIS classes. Just over 30% of school superintendents report assigning teachers with more years of experience to AIS courses. However, there are some rather substantial differences across need categories. Although not statistically significant, principals and superintendents concur among High and Average Need districts that teaching experience is more important than among the Low Needs districts. In general, twice the number of principals in High and Average Need districts assign teachers to AIS classes based on teaching experience in comparison with administrators in Low Need districts. When comparing performance levels, however, principals in Low Performing districts use more experienced teachers to staff AIS services at a significantly higher rate than do Average or High performing districts,  $p = .028$ .

Labor contracts appear important in the assignment of teachers to AIS services. 40.1% of superintendents report selecting staff for AIS assignment based on contract language. The contract appears more important among the Big Four and High Need Urban and Suburban districts than districts in the Low Needs Category. For example, 65.9% of superintendents in High Needs Urban and Suburban areas indicate that contractual language is important in AIS staffing, in comparison with 35.4% in the Low Needs Category. The findings are consistent among principals, though not statistically significant across the need categories.

### Section III. Student Grouping and Movement

Interest in those students at risk of not meeting the new standards prompted us to ask administrators about student grouping (i.e., tracking), inclusion practices for children with special needs, students dropping out, GED programs and alternative education in their districts. In

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response to state policy guidelines, we'd expect to find decreases in tracking as local diploma classes disappear. Inclusion, though already practiced in response to federal and state statutes, seems to be changing in response to policies requiring special education students to meet all standards to earn a NYS high school diploma. Trends in student dropouts can be quantified more clearly next year as data become available, but we get a sense of administrator perceptions and expectations here (See Table 6). The GED has been presented as an available option to those students who do not meet the standards, so an increase or decrease in participation in these programs indicates whether districts are moving all students toward meeting state graduation standards or not. We do not get a picture of how alternative education programs are being used in districts, only whether or not these programs serve greater or fewer numbers of students. Future research might look into the question of whether or not these programs do provide an alternative path to high school graduation for the students who participate.

This section details the following main findings:

- 46.9% of superintendents report changes in student grouping policies in response to changes in the learning and graduation standards.
- Of those superintendents reporting changes in response to the NYS learning and graduation standards, 97.1% report that more special education students are being included in core academic classes.
- Superintendents and principals generally report (64.9%) that drop out rates are not responding to changes in the NYS learning and graduation standards. 27.7% report an increase in dropouts. (See Figure 1)
- Approximately one-half of all superintendents and principals concur that GED enrollment is increasing in response to changes in the standards, while one-half report no change in GED enrollment.
- As with GED, about one-half the administrators report increasing referrals to alternative education programs and about one-half report no change in referrals.

**Student Grouping.** When asked if district or school criteria for grouping students have changed in response to the new learning and graduation standards, about one-half the superintendents and principals responded “yes.” The Big Four (100%) and High Need Urban and Suburban (78.1%) districts report that they are altering their criteria most often, while only 30.1% of Low Needs districts did so. A few administrators made comments to shed light on these changes with regard to mathematics courses (e.g., stretch courses introduced for some students, and the offering of additional AIS classes for some).

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Respondents who answered affirmatively that they altered their criteria for student grouping were also asked to identify how students in their districts are grouped according to four criteria: all classes in high schools are differentiated (i.e., students are grouped according to some criteria into different classes within a subject area); some classes in high schools are differentiated; classes in high schools are not differentiated; and not applicable because there is only one class per grade in the high school (4.1% of districts). Fifty-seven percent of superintendents reported that some classes are differentiated; only 1.7% report that all classes are differentiated. Administrator comments suggest that grouping, when it does exist, is most often self-selected by those students in honors and AP courses.

[INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

**Inclusion Practices.** One-half of state high school and district administrators report changes in how special education students are included in general education courses in response to changes in NYS standards. In the Big Four districts, almost every administrator reported changing inclusion practices. Superintendents from Low Need districts report changes at noteworthy, but relatively low, rates (30.1%), though principals from these districts report changes at relatively high rates (73.9%). District changes in inclusion practices and needs categories are significantly related,  $p = .03$ . Across Performance levels, administrators also report changing inclusion practices at a rate of around 50%.

The nature of these changes indicates greater inclusion of students with special needs in core academic classes. Ninety-seven percent (97.1%) of superintendents who reported changes in response to the NYS learning and graduation standards also report that more special education students are being included in core academic classes. Only High Needs Urban and Suburban districts report this change at a lower level (70%). Need categories and change in inclusion categories are significantly related at the district level,  $p=.03$ . When we compare Performance level categories, 8.7 % of superintendents from Low Performing districts report more special education students in AIS classes. Average and High Performing districts report no increase in the number of special education students in AIS classes. Some principals report fewer special education students in core academic classes, whereas no superintendents reported this way. Only principals from Average Need and Low Performing schools report increasing numbers of special education students in AIS classes, though some principals comment that numbers are increasing in both core academic and AIS classes.

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**Students Dropping Out.** Superintendents and principals generally report that drop out rates are not responding to changes in the NYS learning and graduation standards. In response to changes in the standards, the majority of superintendents (64.9%) indicate that there is no change in the dropout rate, 27.7% report an increase and 7.4% report a decrease. Findings from the principal survey are similar. Administrators were not asked to report actual numbers because we were interested in perceptions of the trends and the ‘hard’ data will be available in the future to calculate actual changes during this time period. Interestingly, many administrators expressed concern about dropout rates in the future while reporting no increase or even a reduction in the present. Also, a number of administrators point out that the GED and alternative education programs are serving as safety nets for students.

When analyzing responses by Need categories, we find that Average Need districts report increases at the highest rate of 34.9%, in contrast with the lowest rates for the Big Four and Low Needs districts (0% and 9.7% respectively). All of the Big Four and 90% of Low Need districts report stable dropout rates. These variations between groups approach significance at  $p=.12$ . Principals respond similarly except that one-half of Big Four principals report increases and many High Need Urban and Suburban schools report decreases (26.8%).

Performance level groups reveal some interesting patterns. Forty five percent of the Low Performing districts report increases, while 26.1% of Average Performance and 20.5% of High Performing districts report increases. Three-quarters (73.6%) of the High Performing districts report that dropout rates are stable, while 46.6% of Low Performing districts report stable dropout rates. Principals, reporting for their schools, respond somewhat differently and the variations here are significant at  $p=.021$ . Principals of Average Performing schools report increases at the highest rate of 33.5%, and most High Performing schools (82.7%) report no change.

**GED.** Approximately one-half of all superintendents and principals report that transfers to GED programs are increasing in response to changes in the standards, while one-half report stable GED enrollment. Among the Need categories there is not much difference across categories, except that only 20.4% of Low Need superintendents report increases in GED participation. High Need urban, suburban and rural districts are the only groups of districts to report decreases in GED transfers (about 5%). Low Need districts report no change more frequently (79.7%). Again, these patterns are consistent with principal responses. Among performance level groups, Low Performing districts report increases more frequently (62.1%) than other performance levels. Low Performing districts also report the only decreases (6.8%) and High Performing districts report no change more frequently (62.4%). The variation between performance level groups is significant at  $p=.025$ .

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[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

**Alternative Education.** As with GED, about one-half of administrators report an increase in referrals to alternative education programs; about one-half report no change in referrals. These results closely mirror the reports on GED transfer rates. A few participants comment that their use of alternative programs is limited by availability and funding. One school superintendent commented that the school has added alternative programs in response to changes in standards and therefore referrals have increased. Overall patterns of alternative education program enrollment are similar to those reported for the GED programs. Principals' responses are consistent with these patterns. The more interesting findings correspond with Performance level groups. High Performing districts report increases less frequently (34.7%) than Average (55.7%) or Low Performing districts (61.6%). About 6% of Low Performing districts report decreases. Most High Performing districts (65.3%) report no change. These variations are significant at  $p=.034$ .

### Section IV. District Strategic Responses to Reform

In response to state reforms, district leaders may choose to initiate or enhance a set of policy strategies to achieve higher student learning and graduation levels. Based on our case analyses we found a relatively unified set of strategies at work. In Section IV we discuss the prevalence of nine specific strategies used to enhance student learning, graduation levels and teacher quality. These strategies include:

1. Academic labs
2. After hours assistance with a certified teacher
3. Summer school (non-mandated)
4. Teaching test-taking strategies
5. Stretch classes in core subjects
6. AIS in separate classes
  - a. AIS in place of regular classes
  - b. AIS in addition to regular classes
7. Class size reduction
8. GED program referral
9. Professional development

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Superintendents report using a wide range of program intervention strategies (see Table 7). The vast majority reports using walk-in labs, after-hours assistance with a certified teacher, summer school, test taking strategies, stretch classes in core subjects, Academic Intervention Services classes and GED program referrals. Most of these strategies were implemented or expanded in response to changes in the NYS learning and graduation standards. For example, of those superintendents who report using stretch classes in core subjects or academic labs for students, 85% report implementing or expanding these strategies in response to the changes in learning and graduation standards.

Section IV details the following main findings:

- The majority of superintendents – 88% – report that GED programs are in place; 33.5% have implemented or expanded their GED programs in response to changes in the state standards.
- Approximately one-third of all superintendents report making efforts to reduce class sizes as a program strategy; of those, 87% report implementing or expanding this strategy in response to the standards.
- The overwhelming majority of superintendents – 98.3% – indicates that AIS classes are offered in addition to regular education classes, rather than supplanting those classes.
- More than 83% of superintendents report teaching test taking strategies. Of the 83%, 69% introduced or expanded test taking activities in response to standards, 53.3% believe the strategies enhance student learning and 97% believe the strategies are effective for improving students' ability to pass Regents exams.

Class size reduction strategies appear to be more popular in more urbanized areas, though less than one-third of school district administrators report using them. Among the 33% of superintendents who did implement class size reduction strategies, 92% report doing so in response to changes in learning and graduation standards. Though these differences are not statistically significant, there appears to be some variation in the practice of class size reduction strategies across the need categories. One-half of Big Four superintendents report implementing these strategies, whereas only 39% of High Need Urban and Suburban superintendents concur. By contrast, only 16.7% of High Need Rural districts have implemented class size policies. These same basic findings also hold for principals and are statistically significant across need categories ( $p = .000$ ).

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[INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE]

In prior case study analysis we saw indications that some district administrators pressured potential dropouts into GED programs, an effort that was justified on the grounds of limiting changes (i.e., increases) in a district's dropout rate. These findings were troublesome, mainly for the faulty logic at work, although it may be that GED program services could provide improved student learning where regular instruction could not. Our study approached this issue directly, seeking to understand the prevalence of GED programs and their relationship to changes in the state standards. The majority of superintendents – 88% – report that GED programs are in place. Of those, 33.5% have implemented or expanded their program in response to changes in the state standards. Although not statistically significant, it is interesting to note that seven times as many superintendents in High Need Rural districts report changing their GED programs, compared with superintendents in Low Need districts. These patterns – greater use of GED programs by High Needs districts in response to standards – are also reported by principals, and are statistically significant across need categories ( $p \leq .001$ ).

We also inquired about the prevalence of teaching test taking strategies and beliefs surrounding the usefulness of the strategies in adhering to state learning and graduation standards. More than 83% of superintendents report teaching test taking strategies. Of those superintendents, 69% introduced or expanded test taking activities in response to standards, 53.3% believe the strategies enhance student learning and 97% believe the strategies are effective for improving students' ability to pass Regents exams. When pressed, a number of superintendents and principals reported that teachers implement the test taking strategies on an informal basis, and that district level policies are not in place. Overall the responses seem to vary across need categories, though the differences are not significant. For example, superintendents from Low and Average Needs districts tend to attribute the implementation of test taking strategies to standards and student learning benefits at lower levels than higher needs districts. However, there is near uniform agreement among the respondents and across the need categories that these strategies improve student pass rates on Regents exams. Like the superintendents, 76% of principals report having test taking programs in place, and about 90% report changing them in response to state standards. By contrast, among principals there is greater agreement that test taking strategies improve both student learning and passing rates on Regents exams.

An overwhelming majority of superintendents – 98.3% – report that AIS classes are offered in addition to regular education classes rather than supplanting those classes. Superintendents across need categories uniformly report that AIS programming was implemented

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and or expanded in response to the new standards and that it improves both student learning and students' ability to pass Regents examinations. Reports from principals mirror these findings. This finding clarifies a question we raised in our 2001 condition study in which we found evidence of districts engaging in the "supplanting" of regular academic courses with AIS classes.

The prevalence of targeted intervention strategies also differs by district performance level. On the whole, superintendents from Low Performing districts appear to employ strategies at greater frequencies in comparison with the High Performing districts. This pattern holds for class size reduction efforts, after-hours teacher availability, GED and summer school offerings and offering test taking strategies. Though these differences are not statistically significant across performance levels, the trend is strong nevertheless. For example, 87% of superintendents in Low Performing districts report that teachers are available for academic support before and after school, whereas 80.6% of superintendents in the High Performing districts report the same.

These differences do not hold for the provision of academic walk-in labs. In this instance, superintendents in 92% of High Performing districts report the presence of academic labs. This compares with only 72% of Low Performing districts. Nor do these patterns hold for stretch classes (extended classes designed to cover the same material as a course of shorter duration; e.g., a one-year course "stretched" over 2 years). Both principals and superintendents report that stretch classes are more prevalent in High Performing districts than in Low Performing districts.

According to superintendents, both Average and Low Performing districts tend to implement test taking strategies more often High Performing districts. The difference between Average and High Performing districts is large. Average Performing districts report relying on test taking programs at levels near 90% in comparison with 76% among High Performing districts. These findings are not statistically significant across the performance levels.

### Section V: Professional Development

Professional development is an integral part of the new learning and graduation standards policy in New York State. We address this topic both generally and in some detail, inquiring about systematic changes to teacher quality improvement programs. Our findings include the following main points:

- The vast majority of superintendents and principals report that teachers are participating in additional hours of professional development in response to changes in learning and graduation standards.
- The type of professional development activities are reported to be fundamentally different from prior years, and include an increased emphasis on standards and curriculum frameworks

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and changing instructional methods, and aligning local curriculum with state learning and graduation standards.

- Of the variety of techniques used to give teachers time to participate in professional development activities, superintendents and principals agree that using substitute teachers and scheduling professional days during the school year and summer are most popular.

Nearly 90 percent (88.4%) of superintendents reported that teachers are now participating in additional hours of professional development when compared to past years. Slightly fewer principals – 78.8% – reported such increases for their staff. When asked whether the new learning and graduation requirements were the reason for the increase, 86% of superintendents responded “yes.” At the same time, nearly all superintendents reported that the added hours of professional development was an effective way to improve both student learning (97.5%) and students’ ability to pass the Regents exam (93.3%).

Though teachers are participating in more hours of professional development, 73.1% of superintendents surveyed reported that teachers were engaged in fundamentally different forms of professional development. Fewer principals – 64.5% – reported that this was the case. Examining school superintendent responses by performance levels, there are noteworthy differences among Low, Average, and High Performing districts. Ninety-four percent (94.1%) of Low-Performing districts reported they engaged in fundamentally different professional development practices, while 66.4% of Average Performing districts and 69.5% of High Performing districts reported their teachers engaged in fundamentally different professional development. Similarly, principals in Low Performing districts – 77.2% – more often reported that teachers engaged in fundamentally different professional development compared to principals in Average Performing districts (54.1%) and Low Performing districts (69.1%).

There were also distinct differences between districts in the 5 Need categories. Large City districts and High Need Urban and Suburban districts more frequently reported engaging in fundamentally different professional development, 100% and 95.1% respectively, while 70.7% of High Need Rural, 75.7% of Average Need and 60.2% of Low Need districts reported that teachers were engaged in fundamentally different professional development compared to prior years. While the percentages were slightly lower for principals, the pattern was the same.

Districts that reported using fundamentally different forms of professional development were asked a series of questions to assess how professional development practice in their districts had changed. The most common responses from both superintendents and principals include: increased emphases on changing instructional methods; aligning local curriculum with state learning and graduation standards and increased emphasis on standards and curriculum

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frameworks. The Large City districts seem to be fundamentally changing their professional development practices, with 100% of the superintendents reporting that they have adopted all the practices noted in the survey. All superintendents in the Low Performing districts reported increasing the emphasis on standards and curriculum frameworks, aligning curriculum with the state learning and graduation standards and changing instructional methods. Also, more superintendents in Low Performing districts reported an increased emphasis on the Regents Exam (91.9%) and content knowledge (78.0%) compared to superintendents in High Performing districts in these areas (85.4% and 59.0%, respectively).

[INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE]

Finding the time for teachers to attend professional development workshops can sometimes pose a challenge for districts. However, 97.4% of superintendents reported providing teachers with time for professional development during regular contract hours; slightly fewer principals (90.7%) reported the same. How districts carved out time for teachers' professional development varied. However, both superintendents and principals most often cited using substitute teachers and professional development days during the school year and summer as the most-often used method of providing teachers with time for professional development. Only a few superintendents (12.1%) reported reducing teacher workload in order to make room for professional development.<sup>5</sup> While more principals reported reducing teacher workload, the overall percentage was still low – 18.1% – compared to other strategies. Districts were also less likely to use early dismissal or a late start for students compared to other strategies, with 68.1% of superintendents reporting that they used this strategy.<sup>6</sup> High Performing districts more often reported using substitute teachers and professional days during the summer than Low Performing districts (see Table 9). Ninety-seven percent (97.1%) of superintendents in High Performing districts used substitute teachers and professional days in the summer, while only 80.6% of superintendents in Low Performing districts reported using substitutes and 75.2% reported using professional days in the summer.

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<sup>5</sup> Here, the high performing school superintendents reported YES with a greater frequency than we would expect.

<sup>6</sup> However, there is a relationship between N/RC category and the response to this question and it is significant ( $p=.011$ ). For the Large Cities, High Need Rural and Average Need, the reported frequency for superintendent responding YES was higher than we would expect given the proportion of the total population that each need index represents. High Need Urban and Suburban and Low Need, had lower frequencies than we would expect if this relationship were independent.

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### **Conclusion**

In this condition study, we set out to build upon findings from our previous condition study. In that study we identified a number of practices and strategies in five school districts as each tried to meet the new Regents learning and graduation standards. Our task in this study was to document the prevalence of such practices around issues of teacher staffing, student grouping, Academic Intervention Services, dropouts, GED programming and the professional development of teachers. To do this, we collected data from principals and superintendents from a representative sample of school districts across the state.

In short, we found that districts face a variety of influences in trying to meet the new standards and we were able to document different influences across urban and rural, wealthy and poor districts on programmatic issues central to the new state standards. Districts also appear to be adding certified staff and altering the grouping of their students. Nearly all districts provide additional instructional time in the form of Academic Intervention Services in addition to regular academic instruction. We found a marked increase in the inclusion of special needs students in core academic classes. More administrators are reporting increases in GED transfer rates than dropout rates. Much attention is being paid to professional development for teachers, with the vast majority of districts reporting changes in both the content of and time devoted to staff development.

In future months, we will add teacher data to our analyses, as well as include New York City teachers and administrators. These additional analyses will provide further insights into the processes districts of all types use in their efforts to meet the new learning and graduation standards.

### **Policy Implications**

Our findings from this Condition Study suggest several policy implications.

- Regarding our finding that one-half of all school districts report that the number of students “transferring” to GED programs is increasing, the Board of Regents must decide if they consider the GED option to be a legitimate alternative to a Regents High School diploma. If the answer is yes, then no changes are warranted. If, however, the Board is not satisfied that participation in a GED program is an acceptable alternative, then the Board must make changes to reduce the number of students who choose this option. It is also important to further investigate the reasons why the number of students choosing this

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option is increasing. We have evidence from our previous case analysis that, in an attempt to reduce the publicly visible dropout rate, administrators are informing students of all their options, including obtaining a GED.

- The significant changes being made to inclusion practices also warrant further attention. On average, one out of every two school districts has changed its inclusion practices in response to the new state standards by including more special education students in “core academic” (e.g., Regents) classes (two-thirds of High Need districts, one-third of Low Need districts). This raises important questions about the value of such change. While we are unable to determine whether inclusion is a positive or negative change for special education students, we do suggest that close attention be paid to the effectiveness of inclusion practices.
- Given the additional staffing allocated to AIS programming, it is critical to monitor where staffing cuts are made in times of fiscal stress. It is relatively easy to add AIS staff when budgets allow, but how districts reallocate staff and programming in times of budget cuts remains to be seen. Moreover, our finding that contractual language is used more often to staff AIS classes in High Need urban areas than in Suburban or Rural areas may also have an impact on the requisite decisions in times of budget cuts.
- While it is clear that nearly all school districts (97%) are following the state-mandated model of providing supplementary instruction for underperforming students (i.e., AIS<sup>7</sup>), it is important to further investigate what the additional instructional opportunities look like. Very little is known about what type of instructional services are provided in AIS classes, or who is teaching these classes. Do AIS programming strategies replicate regular classroom instruction, allow alternative forms of instruction, or provide individual tutoring in a study hall-like atmosphere? Not that any one model is the answer, but the relative effectiveness of different strategies must be further elaborated. The state should investigate promising AIS programs and contemplate whether further policy specification could be utilized to enhance the delivery of AIS services statewide. Given a coherent implementation of the AIS policy directive within school districts, the state can continue to capitalize on this policy and greatly enhance the type and quality of AIS services across all school districts.

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<sup>7</sup> Regulations (8NYCRR 100.1) require that AIS be offered in addition to regular instruction. Such state regulations have the force of law.

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- Given the general increase in staff development – 9 of 10 districts, (73% in Low Performing and 97% in High Performing districts) – the State could substantially participate in the facilitation of the ongoing professional learning among educators. Towards this goal, the state should first evaluate whether its programs and incentives for staff development are coordinated and cohesive. School districts should clearly understand how staff development programs and incentives connect with general and specific policies connected to the learning and graduation standards. This evaluation will require coordination of multiple revenue sources, programs, and agencies. For example, both the Office of Teaching and the Office of K-16 initiatives control various programs related to staff development and training. The latter tends to administer reward and incentive programs, whereas the former manages a series of teacher mentoring programs.