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School Improvement Plans in Elementary and Middle Schools on Probation

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Abstract

This article reports on a study of school improvement under conditions of high-stakes accountability. Planning is a key mandate for persistently low-performing schools on probation in many accountability systems. We investigated what kinds of school improvement plans schools wrote under these conditions and what role the plans played in the school improvement process. The study consisted of 2 parts: a content analysis of 46 school improvement plans selected from 1 state accountability system, Maryland, and case study data from 3 elementary and 4 middle schools. This article draws primarily from interviews conducted at the 7 schools. The study showed that schools responded to performance demands of the accountability system with a pattern of external obligation and internal managerialism. School improvement plans were less useful as tools for a broadly based internal development process.

High-stakes school accountability systems are proliferating in the United States. Many state governments have designed policies that combine standards, school performance assessments, productivity targets, rewards, and sanctions to deal with poorly performing schools. In most accountability systems, schools as whole organizations are held accountable, and the work performance of teachers and administrators is measured indirectly through the behavior of students (Quality Counts, 2001). Often, accountability agencies put schools identified as persistently low performing on probation (Ascher, Ikeda, & Fruchter, 1997; Guskey, 1994; Mintrop, 2000; Wong, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 1998).

Probation is a period during which schools are challenged to reverse decline. Many schools on probation are mandated

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to undergo a formal process of school improvement, which often stipulates the formation of school improvement teams (SITs), compilation of school improvement plans (SIPs), and external monitoring of the plans' implementation. School improvement plans codify a school's envisioned improvement design. These SIPs, most often subject to state or district review and approval, are a linchpin in accountability systems. They serve as a tool for the accountability agency to direct schools toward rational management of improvement and to translate external (i.e., state or district) expectations into schools' internal obligations. Ideally, SIPs facilitate an effective, internalized, and self-sustained process of school improvement. The content of the plans and their usage at schools are vivid testimony to the way educators conceive of the task of school improvement under conditions of high-stakes accountability and probation. Given the enormous resources that schools characteristically expend on the compilation of SIPs and that accountability agencies expend on reviewing these plans, educational researchers should take a closer look at the practical value of SIPs.

In this article we explore what kinds of school improvement plans low-performing schools on probation produced and how educators at the schools used the plans. We selected the accountability system of Maryland for our study. We conducted a content analysis of 46 plans representing about half the probationary schools in the state as of 1998. Subsequently, we collected data at seven schools on teachers' awareness and usage of the plans and on the role of the plans in the day-to-day process of school improvement. Both the content analysis and case study data suggested that school improvement plans, though central in accountability system designs, had only limited utility for internal improvement processes in schools under the threat of sanctions. Rather, they signaled schools' conformance with externally induced obligations. Internally, and only in the success-

ful cases, plans served as administrative levers to forge compliance among faculty. We lead to this conclusion in several steps. After a brief introduction of our interpretive typology and a contextualization of our data in the Maryland accountability system, we present findings from the content analysis followed by case study data. Finally, we discuss what the identified patterns may have revealed about the dynamics of school improvement under conditions of high-stakes accountability.

Effective Schools, Accountability, and Patterns of Change

We derived from our review of relevant literature three patterns of school change: a pattern of ineffectiveness, a pattern of external obligation and internal managerialism, and a pattern of internalized development. These three patterns serve as the basis for interpreting our findings.

The literature on school reform is replete with accounts of school improvement failures (Sarason, 1990). Embedded in highly contested political environments, schools answer to conflicting and often contradictory demands, and their external legitimacy is precarious (Wirt & Kirst, 1992). As a result, schools lose sight of student learning as their primary goal; they suffer from change overload (Fullan, 1991). Their operations are often fragmented and incoherent (Fuhrman, 1993). Schools shield core instructional routines from external scrutiny and react to demands for change with symbolic action and ritual compliance (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Meyer & Rowan, 1978). Reforms result in incremental additions to existing services rather than evaluation of past practices or transformation (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

School improvement plans produced with this pattern of ineffectiveness have been found to be unrealistically comprehensive and full of minutiae rather than focused and strategic (Broadhead, Cuckle, Hodgson, & Dunford, 1996; Levine & Leibert, 1987). Planning efforts document

grand visions and routine tasks (Conley, 1992, 1993) or become occasions for conversations about day-to-day operations (Clark & McCarthy, 1983; Wallace 1994). In Conley's (1993) study of strategic plans, philosophy and mission of the plans were an eclectic assortment of tenets that reflected the "conventional wisdom" of the time, goals and objectives tended to be vague or marginally realistic, strategies were numerous and activities incrementalist, the instructional core was not the primary focus of planning, and action plans were not innovative or original (Conley, 1993, p. 23). The plans largely symbolized educators' public posture. School faculty participation in writing and implementing the plan was often limited (Biott, Easen, & Atkins, 1994).

School improvement efforts under the auspices of effective schools research aim at eliminating this ineffective pattern by making planning a more rational process. Planning is a key ingredient of the school improvement process in effective schools. According to Lezotte and Bancroft (1985), school improvement begins with educators' motives for creating a high-quality education that serves all children. Improvement efforts are research-based, that is, program designers use research knowledge on current best practice, and improvement is data driven, that is, needs are identified from measurable and observable evidence. Data are disaggregated for various student groups and skills, strategies concentrate on teaching and learning, and success is measured in terms of student outcomes. Student learning and behavior goals are agreed upon by the school, and progress toward goals is evaluated through frequent monitoring of student learning. The school engages in a process of organizational planning and development, informed by the belief that improvement is possible without a large infusion of resources or personnel. In this way, school improvement becomes a more rational process.

Rational models of organizational improvement have gained impetus in recent

systemic reform efforts. Systemic school accountability systems align system goals with school organizational goals and create coherence between incentives and instructional programs (O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). A group of economists (Hanushek, 1994) has theorized that past school reform attempts have not improved student performance and have encouraged waste of human and financial resources because schools and educators lack clear performance incentives. A good incentive system is tightly linked to student performance. It specifies goals and leaves it up to educators to decide how to achieve them so that schools can pursue solutions that best fit their needs. Because the link between resources and inputs, on one hand, and student outputs, on the other hand, is not clearly understood, a good incentive system balances "flexibility in the means of education" with "crystalline clarity regarding the desired ends" (Hanushek, 1994, p. 88). Clear and authoritative performance goals provide the external impetus for schools to focus on student achievement and to adjust their own expectations of students to the high expectations of the accountability agency. Consensus on goals and standards, a prerequisite of effective school improvement processes, is more easily attained when school improvement is embedded in an external accountability system.

The presumed press of accountability systems toward rationalizing school operations by means of external control may result in a pattern of top-down managerialism. Characteristically, schools tend to cope (Louis & Miles, 1992) rather than respond proactively to externally induced regulations or innovations. Even when schools fulfill external obligations to authoritative accountability agencies whose demands are backed by sanctions for noncompliance, they may respond superficially (Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1997; Wong et al., 1998). Tucker and Coddling (1998, p. 21), advocates of standards-based reform, recog-

nized this when they said, "Relying on standards alone to change student performance is tantamount to believing that a more sophisticated measure of student failure will by itself turn failure into success. It will not." As a remedy, they stressed the importance of working on school vision and school culture. External accountability carried out by way of rigorous performance testing may actually have a detrimental effect on internal development processes, as in Newmann's sample of restructuring schools (Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Newmann and colleagues showed that schools that had begun to formulate internally generated standards and to build community around them tended to be located in low external-accountability environments, whereas high external accountability coincided with less well-developed internal processes.

A school responding to external performance obligations with a managerial model of school improvement characteristically aligns its goals to the standards of the accountability system. Goals, therefore, are clear and focused on student achievement. The improvement plan uses the system's quantitative diagnostics (e.g., performance tests, required school surveys). Activities center on curriculum and instruction, and professional development is viewed as training of new skills primarily in that area. Responsibilities for tasks are clearly assigned, but administrators and specialists on top of the organizational hierarchy carry a large burden. In the spirit of accountability, demands for new resources as well as attention to teachers' work satisfaction and motivation are deemphasized. School improvement plans are relevant as public statements of the organization and as management tools for administration and specialist teachers to leverage teacher compliance with leaders' or administrators' strategies.

McDonald (1996), summarizing his experience with change processes in schools affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools, warned against a view of school

change as leveraged. The alternative he described is a view of change as relational whereby faculties become involved in an ongoing reflective conversation on the school's purposes, students, and standards. Standards involve the whole school as a community. They are formulated in a dialogue with students and parents about the necessary steps to achieve these standards. The core source of this conversation is the moral empathy of adults toward the children they have chosen to educate (Meier, 1995). Real standards "have to be constructed on-site." They can be externally formulated, but they have to be substantiated "by the light of the actual performance of students" (McDonald, 1996, p. 151); in other words, they must be internalized. Change, in this view, is internalized and communitarian rather than externally induced and managerial.

School improvement as an internalized process under conditions of external accountability may be associated with a number of characteristics in school improvement plans. School goals reflect the standards of the accountability system, but these will be interpreted in light of student work. The plan addresses how the school will get from the present situation of probation to lofty external standards. Needs analysis combines diagnostics based on externally generated data with internal school knowledge. Analysis of causes for shortcomings focuses on those aspects of the situation that can be attributed internally and therefore influenced by educators at the school. The school's philosophy expresses the faculty's reflection on core beliefs and culture and speaks to the unique conditions of the school. Professional development consists of ongoing activities that accompany a re-vamping of instruction and student-teacher relationships. The work of classroom teachers is evaluated directly, and work commitment is a central concern. Classroom teachers as much as the administration take responsibility for activities.

We presume that a successful account-

ability system does two things. It provides external standards and mandates of effective management that schools can accept as obligations. Practitioners must internalize these obligations, that is, they make sense to practitioners and give occasion to goal formation in light of site conditions, critical reflection, self-evaluation, focus, and fresh commitment, leading to a culture of new possibilities for student achievement and teacher performance (Barth, 1990; Deal & Peterson, 1999). Thus, in persistently low-performing schools, both external challenge and internal disposition, managerial elements exerting control, and communitarian elements inducing commitment may be required. It is the putative strength of accountability systems to move ineffective schools to a higher level of effectiveness. If standards, sanctions, and managerial mandates of the accountability system had no effect on schools, schools, more likely than not, would exhibit a pattern of ineffectiveness, as described above. But school improvement mandates, first and foremost, present themselves as external demands to which targeted schools may answer with a pattern of external obligation to managerial mandates coupled with internal managerialism. Finally, a pattern of internalized change may develop as schools translate external demands into internal goals and strategies. In our data analysis we searched for indications of these patterns. Though these patterns may not have appeared in pure form, strength of specific characteristics allowed us to infer the kind of change process high-stakes accountability has occasioned in schools on probation.

The Maryland School Accountability System

Our analysis was restricted to schools on probation in one accountability system, and our findings need to be seen in this context. Although little evaluative research has been done on accountability systems, it has been theorized that design differences among

these systems affect educators' responses to accountability (Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996). The Maryland school accountability system has been in place since 1993 and, unlike systems in other states, has been fairly stable over the past 7 years. In Maryland, the state superintendent and board of education designate as "reconstitution eligible" schools that perform in the bottom rank in absolute terms. In addition, the schools need to have had declining performance records in the 2 years prior to identification. Thus, the state identifies the lowest-performing schools that show evidence of recent decline. However, no automatic quantitative formula triggers identification. Rather, state officials retain some discretion in the process.

The heart of the Maryland accountability system for elementary and middle schools, besides attendance rates and basic skills test scores, is a performance-based test (MSPAP = Maryland School Performance Assessment Program) that assesses students' ability to perform a broad range of complex activities, often with real-life applications (Maryland State Department of Education, 1997). The state considers 70% of students scoring satisfactory on the MSPAP an acceptable benchmark. In 1997, the state average for elementary school math was 47%, whereas the mean score for probationary elementary schools identified in 1996 was 10%. In reading, the difference was 25 points. Performance differences for middle schools are similar. Schools exit probationary status when they perform at least at the state average on the MSPAP. (Very few probationary schools in Maryland are high schools. These are evaluated differently from elementary and middle schools. Thus, we omitted high schools from our analysis of school improvement plans.)

Upon identification as reconstitution eligible, Maryland's term for probation, the school is required to submit a school improvement plan for the state's approval. Review panels and state monitors visit the school to help identify needs and over-

see implementation of the plan. The state provides limited additional funds for reconstitution-eligible schools but relies largely on the strength of its incentives to move districts and schools to action. Funding and organization of capacity-building measures for individual schools are largely left to local districts, which in the case of Maryland tend to be large and congruent with counties. State monitors visit the schools regularly, but they are not much involved in the schools' internal affairs.

Up to October 1998, the state had put 89 schools on probation. Most of these schools, as we mentioned, performed in the bottom rank, had declining test scores, and were faced with numerous challenges. For example, in the 82 elementary and middle schools of these schools on probation, students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch ranged from 32% to 100%, with a median of 77%. Most of the reconstitution-eligible schools (RE schools) in Maryland serve an African-American student population (over 80% of the enrollment in most RE schools); the overwhelming majority, five-sixths, were located in the state's largest city, about 10% were located in another local jurisdiction with a majority African-American population, and two schools were located in other counties. As of the year 2000, three schools went off probation successfully, and final sanctions (i.e., state takeover) were applied to three schools. Reconstitution eligibility in Maryland, rather than a transitory stage, appears to be a protracted period of probation for schools facing exceptionally arduous challenges.

Method

The Plans

As public and official documents, SIPs represent the "espoused" (Schein, 1991) views of teachers and administrators on the task of improving their schools. Naturally, espoused views are not necessarily identical to educators' common sense or more deeply held beliefs about school change, nor are espoused designs necessarily implemented

designs. We therefore complemented content analysis of SIPs with data collected at schools.

For the documentary analysis, we selected 46 schools, representing a little over half of all RE schools in 1998, by balancing three criteria. The sample should reflect the proportion of the reconstitution cohort, the distribution of school types (elementary, middle) in the universe of all RE schools, and the local jurisdictions involved. Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample according to the three criteria. Schools wrote the school improvement plans according to a template developed and required by the state. Local districts assisted schools in writing the plans according to the state template. On average the plans were 200 to 300 pages long. The state altered the format in 1998, resulting in plans that are less than 100 pages. Most of the plans we analyzed were the longer version, giving us insight into the way schools think about their improvement efforts in detail—though our view and that of the schools were filtered through the state-mandated template.

The Maryland SIP template attempts to induce a model of school improvement that is standards based and combines managerial and cultural aspects of the process. In the typical Maryland school improvement plan, schools are to start from an analysis of needs and causes that lead to underperformance, using the diagnostic tools of the accountability agency. Goal formation consists of a section on the school's philosophy divided into vision and mission and a section on goals and objectives. Needs analysis and goals are to result in suggested strategies for improvement that are enumerated in an action plan. The action plan also identifies individuals or groups at the school who are responsible for implementation. Ideally, the plans should be internally consistent, in other words, needs, causes, goals, and activities should align and follow from each other rationally. Presumably, then, the plans would deter inefficiency and facilitate effective management and internal change

TABLE 1. Selected School Improvement Plans by Cohort, School Type, and District

Cohort	Total Number of Plans	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools
1995	3	1	2
1996	16	12	4
1997	9	6	3
1998:			
District A	9	4	5
District B	9	6	3
Total	46	29	17

that rests on affirming schools' core beliefs and culture.

Content Analysis

The 46 plans were read, coded, and rated with the help of a code book. The codes followed the format of the plan: needs, causes, diagnostics, philosophy, goals, activities, resources, and responsibilities. Activities were subdivided into organizational, climate, parent and community, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and teacher performance (e.g., lesson plans, evaluations) activities. We used a database manager (MS-Access) to structure data entry and coding. Two trained readers who shared the reading load read the plans independently. A small number of plans were initially read by three researchers. These three, two readers and a third person, established agreement on codes and ratings. In addition, to gain a sense of coding reliability, 20 of the 46 plans were read by two readers at various intervals (i.e., 10 from each reader overlap). We compared the codes and ratings of these 20 plans with each other, as well as all plans read by one rater with all plans read by the other. If similar values were obtained between the two data sets and the matched pairs, we deemed ratings and codings reliable. This was done for each analyzed rating or coding. Codings and ratings that were deemed unreliable (e.g., ratings of priority) were deleted from the analysis. In this article we only report on quantitative findings for which we could obtain agreement between the two raters within a margin of no more than plus or minus 5 points (counts, percentages).

Case Study Data

We collected case study data in seven schools on probation. The seven schools are located in the two districts that have the largest number of reconstitution-eligible schools in the state. Three of the schools are elementary schools; four are middle schools. The seven schools are demographically representative for reconstitution-eligible schools: all are attended by more than 90% African-American students and deal with high poverty: 40%–90% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The seven schools' performance histories resembled those of other probationary schools in the state. All posted low and precipitously declining scores at the time of their entrance into the program. While the schools have been on probation, their performance scores have fluctuated. No school's MSPAP scores have either continuously declined or risen. Some schools have made small gains in their scores (1%–5%), and some have declined or remained on the same level while in the program. One school made strong score gains upon identification and then stagnated in the subsequent year. Two of the schools had been on probation for 3 years at the time of data collection, one school for 1 year, and four schools had been identified 6 months prior to the beginning of data collection. In six schools, we collected data during 2 school years, in one school for only 1 year.

At each school, 21 formal interviews were conducted, with the exception of one elementary school where we only had 12 formal interviews but more informal ones. At each school we interviewed the princi-

pal, instructional specialists, school improvement team members, and a cross-section of teachers according to seniority, subject-matter background, and grade level. The exact distribution among these categories of teachers differed from school to school. At some schools, gaining cooperation from teachers was a challenge. In five of the seven schools, our data collection coincided with novel probationary status, and visitors were sometimes regarded with suspicion. Formal interviews were supplemented by varying numbers of informal interviews, conversations, and observations of lessons and meetings. Most formal interviews were transcribed, entered into a qualitative database manager (Nu*dist), and coded.

The interviews covered a range of topics. Six formal interviews at each school followed a protocol that explicitly inquired about school improvement plans (see appendix). The interviewers were given questions and expected answer ranges. They were instructed to make sure the answer range was covered by the interviewee, but they were not required to ask all the questions listed in the protocol. Fifty-five interviews, about eight per school, were given the code "school improvement plan" by the coders, meaning that the respondents explicitly mentioned SIPs in the interviews. Among these 55 interviewees, there were five principals (two principals did not wish to be audiotaped), at least one instructional specialist and one plan writer from each of the seven schools, and four department heads from the four middle schools. The remainder of the interviewees were teachers, some senior and some novice, who taught in a variety of grade levels and subject matters. These interviews were the primary basis for the analysis presented here. In addition, interview data stored under the code "strategies" further illuminated the utility of school improvement plans at the schools, as did background data from case study reports written for each school.

An anonymous teacher questionnaire was administered to the seven faculties.

Three of the 244 items dealt specifically with school improvement plans: Are you familiar with the school improvement plan? (item IV.E); Could you recite at this moment the school's quantitative performance goals? (item IV.F); The following list contains various elements of the accountability system. Are these elements present in your school? How effective has each element been for school improvement? (item IV.C, response to SIP). A total of 190 educators returned completed questionnaires. Response rates varied between 25% and 75% across schools. The questionnaires were distributed to the mailboxes of all full-time members of the faculty. Some teachers placed completed and sealed questionnaires in a specific return box located in the faculty lounge; others handed their questionnaires to us in person when we visited their classrooms.

Results and Discussion

Content of the Plans

Presentation of findings from the content analysis follows the main sections of the plans: analysis of needs, causes of decline, goals, philosophy, and activities. We emphasize data that speak to the patterns of change discussed above.

Analysis of needs. Student achievement, attendance, and student discipline were mentioned almost exclusively as needs in schools' analyses. Not surprisingly, all 46 plans mentioned low student achievement, as measured by the state's performance assessment, and negative climate measures. Schools typically documented school climate by listing numbers of office referrals, suspensions, and other such measures, or they referred to student responses to a climate survey that was conducted as part of the school's audit. About three-quarters of the plans documented improvement of attendance as a need. By comparison, needs that were not directly measured by the state accountability system were featured less. For example, only 11% of the schools men-

tioned lack of parental involvement. Data used for the diagnosis of needs were mostly quantitative (70% of all entries for use of data) and derived from the performance indicators required by the state: MSPAP, Maryland Functional Tests, attendance rates, and, to a lesser degree, climate measures (collected through a standardized school climate instrument). By contrast, qualitative data from interviews, self-study, or observations that might document the internal knowledge of school personnel appeared infrequently in the plans. Overall, the needs analyses of all 46 schools were aligned with the performance indicators of the state's accountability system.

Causes of decline. About 70% of all causes of decline mentioned in the 46 plans could be attributed to external factors. Typical external attributions for problems included scarce resources, high student mobility, and the socioeconomic environment of the students. Thirty percent of the causes mentioned were attributed to internal factors and thus controllable by the school's efforts. Schools highlighted as internal causes shortcomings of specific teacher groups, organizational-structural issues, limitations in teachers' skills and knowledge, and leadership weaknesses. Although the accountability system directs schools to look at their internal shortcomings by way of prescribed school performance indicators, when the schools were free to explain the shortcomings, they overwhelmingly pointed to factors over which they exerted little or no control.

Goals. In most SIPs, the goals were based on the quantitative performance indicators set by the state accountability system. Schools almost exclusively emphasized improved achievement scores on both the performance-based and basic skills tests (MSPAP and MFT), attendance rates, and school climate measures (e.g., office referrals, suspensions, measures on the standardized climate survey). These goals accounted for 91% of all entries in this section of the plans. Numeric goals were gauged to

the expectation of the state accountability system. In the case of the performance-based test, which is by far the most important measure of school performance in the state's weighted statistical assessment formula, this translated into schools reaching the proclaimed threshold of 70% of students passing at a "satisfactory" level within a prestipulated period of time. The following is an example of a typical goals statement written by a reconstitution-eligible middle school in 1998: Long-range goals: (1) By June 2000, _____ Middle School students will meet or exceed the standards for the Maryland Functional Tests in reading (95%), mathematics (80%), and writing (90%); (2) By June 2000, 70% of _____ Middle School students will meet or exceed the satisfactory level (proficiency level 3) in all content areas as measured by the MSPAP Maryland School Performance Assessment Program; (3) By June 2000, student attendance will meet or exceed the state satisfactory standard of 94%. (A fourth long-range goal for climate that follows is not displayed here.)

The school then enumerated short-term objectives for these goals that divided the differences between actual school performance and external performance benchmarks into segments, each representing 1 year of expected growth toward the 70% mark. In actuality, the school's 1997 Maryland School Performance Program Report Card indicated the following percentages of students at a "satisfactory" level or above: reading 1.6%, mathematics 0.8%, social studies 6.1%, science 3.7%, writing 5.3%, and language usage 7.7%.

The discrepancy between actual school performance and the state benchmarks was stark across most of the 46 SIPs, although it was especially pronounced in the example above. According to our calculations on 33 reconstitution-eligible schools (1996 cohort), these schools increased the number of students scoring at the satisfactory level by an average of 3%–5% over a 2-year period. In order to reach the expected performance

benchmark of 70% satisfactory in a reasonable time, many schools, including the middle school in the example cited above, professed to increase that percentage by at least 15% every year—a feat that would require extraordinary awareness of the challenge and determination on the part of faculty. We cannot judge from the SIP document alone whether these goals have generated such awareness and determination, that is, to what degree they have become guideposts of an internal dynamic of school improvement. We can, however, infer that internalization was shallow when schools calculated their performance goals according to a formula without addressing the gulf between projected high growth and past performance. We found in 90% of the 46 plans a procedure for goal formation that was similar to the example above. We concluded therefore that in most schools goals were formed in conformity to state accountability system expectations with achievability doubtful.

Philosophy. Making inferences from statements of philosophy about a school's change process is difficult. What might be grandstanding and a collection of clichés in one case may represent the hard labor of internal reflection in another. But it could be useful to know whether schools used this section to profile a moral, cultural, or programmatic focus (e.g., technology magnet, Montessori approach) or whether an approach of covering all bases prevailed. Our data indicated that a covering-all-bases approach prevailed in the 46 coded plans. On the average, we coded four tenets per school. Twenty-eight of the 46 schools mentioned as a tenet (in one formulation or another) that “all students can learn.” Twenty-four schools cited tenets circumscribed by the code “preparation for the competitive society/technological age” and the code “development of individual students to their fullest potential.” Other statements prevalent in the philosophy domain were: “high expectations for our students” (20 schools); “safe environment” (19

schools); “school as family/community” (17 schools); and “contributing to democratic and diverse society” (15 schools). These tenets made up 85% of all coded tenets. The following exemplifies a typical philosophy section:

Vision statement. We envision the _____ Elementary/Middle School as a learning community where all students succeed. There will be an exemplary instructional delivery system and a safe and orderly environment, with students, parents, community partners, and staff working collaboratively to achieve the goals of _____ Elementary/Middle School.

Mission statement. The _____ Elementary/Middle School enthusiastically supports the mission of the _____ City Schools by creating a school environment that celebrates, challenges, and rewards each child's individuality. The mission of _____ Elementary/Middle School is to educate all of its students so that they are able to achieve at their maximum potential.

Philosophy. The guiding belief statement of the _____ family is “Educational excellence encompasses everyone.” To that effect, we believe every child should experience . . . a strong and effective instructional program . . . cultural events that broaden his/her horizons . . . positive self-concept and heightened self-esteem . . . a safe and orderly school environment.

Quantification of activities. Activities were ordered according to seven domains: organization, governance, climate and attendance, parents and community, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and teacher performance. The analyzed plans attested to an extensive array of activities. Table 2 displays the median number of activities schools planned for each activity domain. A set of close to 50 activities on the average amounts to a substantial reform load for a school. Curriculum and instruction activities were a focus (77% of professional development activities were curriculum and instruction related), but they represented less than half of all ac-

TABLE 2. Median Number of Activities per School according to Activity Domain

Activity Domain	Median Number of Activities
Organization	4
Governance	3
Climate and attendance	7
Parents and community	5
Curriculum and instruction	11
Professional development	9
Teacher performance	4
Total entries	46

tivities. Schools also attended to many other areas of their operation. Governance (e.g., shared decision making), so prominent in earlier restructuring efforts, played a lesser role in the Maryland accountability-driven reform.

Content of action plans. We rank-ordered activities according to the frequency of their mention in the plans. Rank-ordering was done separately for each activity domain (see Table 3). Only activities up to the median number for each domain are listed here. Table 3 shows that the content of intended activities was related closely to most frequently mentioned needs that coincided with school performance indicators. Most intended organizational changes were additions, for example, new specialized services (e.g., attendance monitor) or extensions of existing programs (e.g., extended instructional time). Governance activities were related to the task of managing and implementing the plan. Curriculum and instruction as well as professional development activities were centered on the new challenges of the performance-based test (e.g., test language, importance of writing, portfolios, student-centered instructional strategies), on district-adopted curricula, and on new instructional program packages. It is to the credit of the Maryland assessment program that many of the curriculum and instruction activities aim at increasing the complexity of learning rather than at test drill and practice alone. Teacher performance activities revolved around increased control (e.g., mandating lesson plans, tighter supervision), whereas commitment-enhancement

activities were relatively deemphasized, comprising 17% of all teacher performance entries.

Responsibility. Responsibilities for implementation rested to a large degree on administrators and personnel in charge of special services (e.g., counseling office, reading specialist, resource teacher). Principals and other administrators were responsible for about one-third of the total number of 2,113 activities listed by all 46 schools. Another third were the responsibility of special personnel and services, and classroom teachers were only responsible for about one-quarter of activities. Thus, overall, administrators and special services personnel rather than classroom teachers were largely responsible for implementation and were therefore the focus of improvement efforts. The proportions shifted in the curriculum and instruction domain. Again, administrators and special services personnel were listed as responsible for 57% of the 536 entered activities. But in this case, special services picked up 43% of responsibilities versus only 14% for the administration, and classroom teachers were responsible for 61% of activities (total exceeds 100% because of multiple nominations per activity).

Professional growth. The vast majority (87%) of listed professional development activities were classes and workshops. The majority of the professional development activities (351 activities among the 46 plans) were related to curriculum and instruction (77% of all professional development activities). Many topics were closely related to the new tests and curricula. About half the

TABLE 3. Rank Order of Activities in Forty-Six Action Plans (by Median Number of Activities) for Each Activity Domain

Organization	Governance/ Coordination	Climate/ Attendance	Parent/Community	Curriculum and Instruction	Professional Development	Teacher Performance
New personnel	School improvement team	Tightening attendance procedures	Parent workshops	Packaged instructional program	Dimensions of learning	Requiring use of specific curricula or materials
After-school extended program	Monitoring activities	Awards (assemblies)	Parent nights	Computer-assisted instruction	MSPAP/Maryland learning outcomes	Requiring lesson plans
New specialized role/service (e.g., after-school tutoring)	Task forces and committees	Schoolwide discipline plan	Parent/community newsletter	Planning test-specific activities	Performance-based instruction	Tightening principal supervision
Grade-level teams (e.g., common planning time)		Conflict-resolution program	Regular home calls	Remediating specific curricular weaknesses	Cooperative learning strategies	Peer coaching
		Spirit days	Parent-shared decision making	Student portfolios	MARS (performance-based math)	
		More parent-teacher conferences		Cooperative learning	STARS (performance-based science)	
		Display of student work and strengthening of counseling department (tie)		Interdisciplinary integrative units or lessons	City curriculum implementation	
				New test-specific performance-based lessons or units	Reading instruction	
				Developing list of test words	Cooperative discipline	
				Writing process	Writing across the curriculum	
				Projects (e.g., reading club, family literacy)		
				Writing prompts		

plans mentioned workshops on student discipline. It is noteworthy that space for ongoing dialogue on progress made was not part of intended professional development activities according to most plans. Generally speaking, schools presented professional development in the plans as a list of discrete classes and workshops and almost never as continuous growth, deliberation, and inquiry that would be integrated more organically into daily school routines.

Evaluation. Of the 2,113 total activities, raters coded 45% as "new" and 55% as "ongoing" (usually indicated by phrases such as "will continue" or "will begin," respectively, although the time frame was often difficult to pinpoint clearly). These 1,162 entries for ongoing activities contrasted with only 83 activity entries into the data base for "progress made," a category raters were to record whenever they found evidence of a past activity or program clearly identified as having been beneficial or effective for the school. Given that a high percentage of activities carried over from one year to the next, one would have expected a more analytic or evaluative stance.

Internal capacity and scale of action plan. We grouped the 46 reconstitution-eligible schools in our sample according to size. We posited that if SIPs were truly the product of a school's internal capacity to implement the activities listed in the plan, then small schools should list fewer activities than large schools because small schools have fewer adults to carry out activities. The 10 largest schools in our sample had between 760 and 1,130 students; the 10 smallest ones had between 240 and 350 students. But the number of activities listed by both groups was 45 on average, almost identical to the mean for the whole sample. Hence, size was not a decisive factor in the number of activities that schools pledged to carry out in the course of 1 school year.

Performance improvement and types of activities. We further posited that schools posting the largest performance gains on the MSPAP would emphasize different ac-

tivities from schools with the largest declines. The 10 most improved schools in our sample posted a gain of .06 to 17.5 points in their composite performance index (CI) from 1997 to 1998. The 10 schools showing the most decline posted a loss of -0.7 to -8.8 points for the same period. Yet, the types of activities both groups chose were similar and resembled the overall pattern of all 46 schools. This finding puts the utility of school improvement plans in doubt. When neither the number nor the specific kinds of activities planned appear decisive for schools' improvement, the quality of implementation, rather than the quality of the written plan, seems key.

Interpretation of content patterns. A look across the analyzed sections of the plans revealed that schools used external performance indicators as a basis for their needs analysis and adopted ambitious external goals as their performance objectives. A good proportion of intended activities were aligned with the ambitious performance indicators of the state accountability system, most notably the performance-based achievement test. Activities in the domain of curriculum and instruction were central and aimed at upgrading teaching skills and learning environments. Thus, there was an indication that schools aligned their (intended) action with accountability demands.

In contrast, the plans reflected a notion of change that emphasized standard programmatic solutions (e.g., packaged programs) and the extension of existing programs (i.e., more instruction, more personnel, more skills). The number of intended activities in many schools represented a substantial load, if not overload. They blanketed performance "territory" rather than focusing on central strategies for the year. The externalization of causes of decline, the lack of ongoing evaluation of past activities, the absence of representations of teachers' knowledge and expertise on these matters, the burden of responsibility administration and special services carried, the neglect of teacher commit-

ment activities, the notion of professional growth as skill- and workshop-bound, and the sameness of plans regardless of school personnel capacity and actual performance all corroborated a pattern of compliance, external obligation, and internal managerialism. Of the three patterns we initially discussed, external obligation/internal managerialism was the best fit with the content of the plans, though there was some evidence of traditional ineffectiveness as well and an absence of indicators of internalized change.

The effectiveness of the rational management model school administrators and planners (most likely prodded by the stipulated planning template) employed rests on the degree to which classroom teachers embrace the ambitious goals spelled out in the plans and recognize the effectiveness of chosen activities based on their own daily experience. But when, for example, goal statements are formulaic accommodations to external demands, they cannot inform action and evaluation; when philosophies cover all bases, they cannot rally the effort of school staff for the year; when professional development is brief and fragmented, there will be no extra time to work through the contradictions, conflicts, and dilemmas that need to be addressed if groups are to act with common purpose.

The plans' format attested to the determination on the part of the state accountability agency to improve schools by aligning state performance goals with school goals, by rationalizing management, and by making schools' change efforts measurable and subject to monitoring. The result was that school goals and objectives mimicked the accountability system's goals and that action plans privileged discrete and delimited activities. Do plans in such formats, though seemingly rational, become useful and meaningful tools for faculties to get organized?

Case Study Data

We explored this question with the help of interview data from the seven schools.

The people we interviewed can be differentiated into five groups: those who wrote the plans or dealt with the plans in an administrative capacity; those who professed to know their school's plan and to implement it faithfully; those who deemed the school improvement plan important but did not know it; those who admitted to ignorance of the plan; and finally, those who knew the plan but rejected its potential to bring about school improvement. Respondents in all of these groups saw school improvement planning primarily as a requirement with which one must comply. The following are some representative teacher and school administrator responses to the interview questions (interview ID numbers are noted in parentheses):

What about the school improvement plan?

Well, we had a meeting the last in-service day we had. That was it. It's not open for debate. (A-6)

It's very important, because I can't do my job unless I follow that plan that we devised. It's that last year everything was so rush, rush, that the committees that were set up, they had a certain amount of time to get things done. And I talked with several teachers, and we don't ever remember being informed of what was in the school improvement [plan]. (A-13)

I don't really feel as though I've had a big part in the plan. Just making sure that I'm implementing and doing what has been set for our area. (B-11)

As a teacher, how do you see your role in the school improvement plan and the school improvement process?

It was required. I mean, that's my role, to do whatever's required. (B-12)

Do you think there's a general buy-in to the plan here at the school?

Yeah. And I think it's more or less we didn't have a choice. I think the [SIP is] more from the administration, not necessarily the [whole] school; the administration makes the decisions. I think if I asked for it then I probably could get a copy of it. (G-14)

I work from the school improvement plan, period!

What do you mean by that?

I mean that everything that I do is related to that plan in some kind of way, to see that it's implemented and, you know, whatever is in there is carried out. (G-15)

Though most respondents viewed the plans as an external requirement, some saw benefits in developing them, particularly administrators and teachers in leadership positions at their schools, like this urban elementary school principal:

What that document forced us to do was to begin to take a look at our school, and to look at it in critical areas. We were satisfied that our kids were coming to school. But then when we looked at it, we were able to say, "Well, this specific group has difficulty getting to school. This group comes consistently." (E-7)

Ms. L. was a senior teacher in her edge-city middle school. Being relieved of regular classroom duties, she played a triple role as reading specialist, program coordinator, and test coordinator at her school. As one of the major plan writers, she was active in school improvement:

It's [the SIP] been real helpful in seeing what we are doing. What *are* our programs? In looking at our MSPAP data, and being guided by an administrator who understands what the data is saying, and in a certain sense that was a good thing in her newness. She could look at it from, not such an invested way as myself, who *knew* those kids last year that took MSPAP, you know, and I wish I could go to them all now and say, "What happened?" . . . It's made us talk about things that otherwise we wouldn't have. And so, again, even that hasn't been negative, except that, like today, you've got 10 things to do, and you've just got to find time to do them all. . . . You know a lot of times you repeat things that aren't going right, and you don't see it 'cause you're so into it. . . . We are looking at changing the schedule. We spend too much time administratively in lunches. . . . So those are the kinds of things that this has made us look at. And so again, though it's true dead-

lines, and it's definitely some pressure that I haven't felt before, in this way, it's not been bad. (A-3, reading specialist, program coordinator)

Ms. D. worked in a middle school where probation sparked a proactive stance of the principal. The school adopted a variety of easily monitored measures. Some of them were geared to make better use of instructional time, for example, by mandating the use of timers:

I believe it [the SIP] makes sense. I believe that we need to focus more and more, I guess all the time, on the implementation of, the nature of the implementation is coming along correctly. And I think [the principal] has some pretty good plans, and looking at, you know, just checking with us, seeing what's going on, asking us questions about what works, what doesn't work. I think, overall, the process of dealing with the [daily lesson plans] is very effective. Teachers are getting time-on-task skills more ingrained in themselves; therefore, it's more ingrained in the students. So that works very well. It's sort of like a habitual thing now, where we have it, and they're even looking for, "Well, how much time do we have?" or they're asking questions, they're looking for their time. Because we know they want us to get over this, so there's more and more stress put on time, you know. So, we want to have them prepared for that. The MSPAP is timed, and they need to be able to get a certain amount of things done in a certain amount of time, which is good, and we practice that. It's just the everyday part of what we do now. (B-10, classroom teacher)

In the interviews, teachers reported as valuable that the SIP provided the faculty with common goals and strategies, even though the latter were mostly not formulated and enforced by the teachers themselves:

I would say the benefit that we have is simply because we made, we have a guide to go by. That is the only benefit. But I think that could have been done

even if we weren't recon-eligible. So, other than us having one particular guide, where everybody knows what should be done, there haven't been any. (C-8)

[Last year] we had a piece of curriculum guide that we didn't really, you know, it laid up on the desk. Maybe one day we didn't know what we wanted to do, we would look at it. But, everybody is using [it] this year. You know, for each academic area. So, it's made a definite change in the continuity and consistency for the kids. (A-13)

Interestingly, although the idea of common goals and strategies found support among some respondents, others saw the concomitant standardization of routines and practices as more troublesome, if not ludicrous:

It [the SIP] showed us a goal. The difference is putting a name to what we're doing. The difference is quoting the plan, meaning that we've always had a plan. . . . Now, it's moreso a uniformity, and I don't, I say that's an improvement, but at the same time I see,—I don't know. I'm an individual, and I feel that my classroom should be individualized. (B-12)

For you to tell me that you want my notebook on the right-hand side of my desk, I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to, because that's just . . . and I'm not being disobedient. I'm not leaving my authority, because I have a high level of respect for authority. I respect the position. I don't always respect the person, but I always respect the position, and I'll always do it. But, I'm sorry, you do not tell me, no state person, you're not going to tell me how to organize my desk. (B-9)

Writing and compilation of plans. In all schools the plans were written by small groups of teachers. Often it became the primary responsibility of one or two individuals. The principals were strongly involved, but the actual writing was in most cases delegated to resource teachers who worked outside the classroom and were given release time for this task. Plan writing was not part of the routine operations of schools. Indeed, plan writers emphasized the extraor-

dinary time it took to write the plan, time that kept them from normal duties.

Writers and administrators from all schools described the writing process as arduous. Upon identification, a school had only a few weeks to compile the first draft of the plan, and during this time plan writers had to consult a variety of groups and individuals within the school. The extent and intensity of this internal consultation varied from school to school. Respondents from one elementary school mentioned a form of planning that involved teachers and community members. But in most schools, compiling the plan involved teachers with special roles in the school, such as department heads, testing coordinators, and so on:

Well, they [the plan writers] have to have so much information and so someone—and of course the principal has been the key person, but in all fairness, unless you take a teacher out of a class where she—you take the ones that can put the materials together, so you're taking your seasoned veterans, but somebody has to do that. And in the time frame, which you must admit was pretty compressed. . . . About people being brought out of the classroom, we've tried working, we work after school. We've done weekends. I mean, so, it's not just that we see this as the only time when we can work. But to get a lot of the people who have second jobs, you have to depend on day time when we can work. (A-3, plan writer)

Plan writers did not mention a substantial role of the faculty at large in the writing process. If the faculty was involved, they were less likely to be decision makers and more likely to be information providers. A principal in one of the middle schools described the process:

We always sent down information to let the staff know what we are working on, what's involved in it, what we need from them, what they have to submit by which date, and we get what we need in on time and then we're able to file it and go from there. (A-1)

Plan writers' and administrators' gaze was directed outward rather than inward. Passing muster with district and state authorities was their primary concern. In the interviews, planners described vividly how they repeatedly revised their drafts to accommodate feedback from the district office. District offices felt scrutinized by the state monitoring office and felt beholden to state officials' standards and formats for a good plan that the state board of education would approve. In many schools, plan writers expressed in interviews or informally how sensitive they were about the quality ratings and comments the plan drafts received from external reviewers.

In many instances, the original drafts the schools submitted required extensive revisions. Plan writers and administrators from most schools were not quite sure what would pass as an acceptable plan. Mixed messages from external reviewers made the task more burdensome, in the view of many respondents:

There wasn't much input from the rest of the staff. Small modifications were made, but there wasn't a lot of overall interaction. We all had our section and we wrote. [The principal] would get it, approve it, make his comments, give it back, revise, revise, revise, revise, about 20 times, and then you put it all together to make sure it had continuity and it flowed. Then, from, I would say January, once we came back to school, all the way to May, and so, it took a lot of weekends to make your draft to have it ready Monday morning so you could submit it. And then the state got in, and they sent it back, with their revisions. And so, that happened about two or three times. And so, during this constant revision of different parts, and different people seem to contradict what the other said . . . the state, the county people say yes, then the state people say no, or even the state office representative will say yes, but then the head chief gets it, says no. (B-12)

They [the local office] weren't even clear on what the plan should look like. They were never, that was never out there. We were always, I always had the

feeling it was a cat-and-mouse game to begin with. It was, we would write something and submit it, and they would say no, but they wouldn't say it should be this way. (E-7, principal)

In some cases, negotiations between administrators and external reviewers over small details were intense:

Well, the revisions that we did were basically, for example, there's a list that [district] makes a comparison among the state scores, the [district] school scores, and this school that I wanted to incorporate in the plan because of the fact that it showed that we were doing better than the median score of [the district]. And that we were closer to the state. At one time it was suggested that we not use that, and I said, "Why not?" Well, because some of the scores didn't indicate that there had been a great deal of improvement, and that wasn't as important to me as the fact that overall they showed improvement, or they showed where we were doing better than [the district], in terms of the median scores. So, why not show it? I mean, that to me was a feather in our cap. So I wanted it there. And, okay. It's there. It's in the plan. (G-4, principal)

In this situation, some interviewees called for some kind of model that would make it clear to the school what was expected of them in terms of the plan's form and content. Planners at the schools felt that officials must have some ideas as to what they wanted the plans to look like and wondered why officials refused to give schools this information.

I guess what I question is why do we have to do this very expensive report saying this is what we're going to do or this is what we have in place? . . . I feel that if they targeted our school as being reconstitution eligible, they must know what was in place and what was not working out of those that were in place. . . . We were not successful. What makes you think we're going to be so successful now? Why aren't you bringing in people from another school or just

the reconstitution team to say, "Hey, this is a means of making sure that you can become a success"? What's been proven to work? Share that with us. Share the findings of success from any other school. That has not been done. Then you're just gritting your teeth. You want this report. So you've got it in paper. I'm not impressed. I'm not impressed that we have anything that's going to work. (A-4, assistant principal)

I suppose it would have been a good idea to have a finished plan, so that we could have looked at one that had been approved by the state, so that, not necessarily to copy it, but to use it as a model so that revisions would not have to constantly be made. (G-4, principal)

Finally, plan writers pointed to schools' inability to conduct sophisticated data analyses demanded by the planning template:

I think we need to be taught how to write a decent school improvement plan. We need to know how to analyze our data. We need to know what goes into a good plan. And I'm talking about we as administrators. That's the kind of training that we desperately need, and not in isolation from our staff. Teachers need to learn these same things with us. I don't want to dictate to this staff where we're going, and what we're doing, and how we're going to get there. I want us to develop that together, which is what our team did with our plan. We wrote that thing together. (F-7, principal)

All schools therefore relied on support from district personnel. Although some schools, particularly those that had been identified at the inception of the program, felt left alone and overwhelmed in this process, others praised their district office for the help they were given. In all cases, the writers felt steered by, or at the whim of, district or state personnel. Writers and administrators from almost all schools reported that when the final drafts were eventually returned to the schools, the plans had been rewritten again without input from school personnel, and content had changed substantially:

Our school improvement plan was written last year, with the staff's input, but only those staff members, truly only those staff members that were part of the SBMT, School-Based Management Team. A lot of the components of the English/Reading Department were not developed and correlated to the department as a whole. It was just something put in by the English Department chair, without any collaboration. To me, from what I can see and what is on there, when that plan reached its stage of getting to the county level, where it had to be revised again, it had been changed. And certain things were changed in the plan that were not originally written, which I'm assuming that the county felt should be changed, before it was admitted to the state. So when we got it back there were things that were changed. But even prior to that, there, to me, was not enough collaboration to make that plan truly what it should have been made. (A-16)

Presumably, the review process was used to oblige schools to adopt particular views and strategies deemed correct or effective by district or state officials, a presumption that was confirmed in an interview with an official from one of the districts.

Knowledge, involvement, ownership. When teachers were asked on the questionnaire if they knew their school improvement plan and if they could recite the plan's quantitative goals, a surprising number answered in the affirmative. (It should be noted here that in some schools response rates were low, and highly involved teachers and administrators tended to be over-represented in our sample.) Two-thirds of respondents professed at least some knowledge, and close to two-thirds claimed they could recite at least some quantitative goals. But a more nuanced picture emerged when we looked at qualitative data. When we asked about the plan in the interviews, responses from teachers who were not plan writers, administrators, or critics of the plans tended to be brief, if not terse, as the following typical responses indicate:

What do you know about your school improvement plan?

I know that they make us where we're accountable for it, so . . .

Do you have one?

I do. It's thick.

All right. Does it drive . . .

Oh, it definitely drives this program.

Does it, really?

Front seat.

Does the school, does the plan make sense to you as a teacher?

It does. I think the goals are meetable, you know, given time. And, you know, that's what the kids need. They need time.

Were you involved in helping to design it?

No.

Do you see things that may not make sense, that you might want to change, or modify?

I kind of think most of it makes sense. (B-1)

What do you know about the school improvement plan in this school?

I think they have a pretty good one.

Have you ever attended a meeting?

No.

Have you seen the school improvement plan?

I think we did see it.

What do you think is in it?

Ways to improve the school. I think ours is broken down into, isn't it math, reading? (E-12)

Have you finished reading the school improvement plan?

I've seen it.

Have you?

I mean, I've seen it, I'm familiar with it. It's a lot of "let's change the percentages, let's increase this," and it's important, but it's another example of teaching as a science. If we could kind of modify these numbers, things will be better. (G-1)

Tell me about the school improvement plan.

I can't. I haven't read it. I've been introduced to it, I just haven't read it, because to me, that's just more political paperwork. If you can't follow through with it, if you are an administrator and your hands are tied . . . they evaluate principals on things like attendance. Okay, but principals that are too concerned about their attendance are not going to suspend anybody. (G-6)

At the time of data collection, the plans were an outcome of a broad-based internal communication process that could have clarified directions and motivated actions

faculty-wide in only one of the seven case study schools. Both the tight time lines for the submission of the plans and the orientation of administrators and planners toward complying with new external mandates preempted such a process. Once the plan was written, dissemination was an administrative process or left up to chance: "Well, I'm on the school improvement team, which, of course, everyone's invited to be a part of it. So, unless someone just is not wanting to be involved, they've had opportunities, and the documents have been there for them to read, in the office." (A-3)

The strong external steering of the writing process, the overwhelming concern of plan writers and administrators about passing the external review, and the abbreviated internal communication process among faculty resulted in a feeble sense of ownership of the plans at the schools. As we mentioned above, in some schools principals and plan writers themselves stated that they did not recognize the final drafts as their own products. In some instances, department heads and instructional specialists did not feel that they were connected to the final product.

I chair the social studies department. But in all honesty, the part of the plan that's written there is not mine because of the way that it was developed last year. There are many, many parts of the plan that people do not, there was no input from those people. In other words, there's social studies there, but the way in which the plan was developed, social studies, the social studies department did not actually develop the majority of that. It was done by several people who were subbed throughout the day, or several weeks, and they wrote it. . . . I follow my curriculum. We have a new curriculum . . . we have a new curriculum guide this year. It's basically still the same, but a different guide. (A-7)

A former member of the school improvement team expressed her frustration with lack of ownership:

I used to be on the team, but I got off because of the fact that it's still, regard-

less of what the school improvement team, they say, is supposed to be the decision makers for the school. But that's not necessarily so because they had to go to a board that sits down, and they go through it, and they refine it, and they pull things out that they don't like and tell you, you have to change this, and you have to change that. And when it comes back, it's not your product, so that's the reason I got off, because it still didn't help. It wasn't ours. We don't have a say-so. That's a waste of time. All that, the school improvement plan, is just for formality. Just to say that the school has a voice in what goes on in their school, and it's not necessarily so if you're going to change it. Well, all of us have a copy of the school improvement plan. Every person that works here. But, I mean, it's rarely used, it's rarely used. In the midst of everything else we have to do, people aren't going to sit down and read through a school improvement plan. (D-24)

Sense of ownership was further diminished because of high teacher and administrator turnover in these schools. In addition to large numbers of teachers (up to 50% in some schools) arriving at the beginning of the school year and leaving at the end, most of the schools experienced a change of principals around the time they became reconstitution eligible. Development of the SIP began when the school was identified as reconstitution eligible in the spring; identification was based on the performance scores of the previous year. The school year was almost over by the time the plan was approved. As a result, some administrators and teachers did not feel they owned the problem because they had arrived at the school a year after the decline, and others felt that they did not own the solution because they had arrived during the new school year. Now they were "stuck" with a formally codified and officially sanctioned plan whose wisdom seemed questionable at times. With additional planning iterations, some schools, or at least the core of improvement activists, seemed to have gained

a greater sense of control and ownership if leadership remained fairly stable.

The constant influx of new teachers has led to increasing numbers of inexperienced teachers in many reconstitution-eligible schools. These new teachers were often oblivious to whole-school reform concerns, and school improvement plans were often irrelevant to them. A senior teacher from a middle school with high teacher turnover that had been reconstitution eligible for 3 years explained:

So the school improvement plan, does that actually drive what is happening here at the school in terms of curriculum?

It does for a portion of our teachers, but remember, we have all the new teachers. They don't even know what the school improvement plan is, much less how to use it. They're too busy trying to write a lesson plan. They're not interested in the school improvement plan, and when we talk about school improvement, they're looking at the school as it is today, not how it was last year. And we're trying to improve it or how it was 5 years ago. They're only concerned with the day-to-day operations. So in that we are not using the school improvement plan as effectively as we should because we don't have the staff to understand the data and set the data and have a vision to improve. (D-23)

A first-year teacher from another school confirmed this statement in these words: "You had to have been here last year, and I guess when they first started the plan, I mean, 'cause a lot of it's confusing. And being a first-year teacher, I'm just trying to do the best job I can for my kids. . . . Helping them out after school. Really it's like, it's background information, and I don't understand, but I know if I do my part, then I'm doing, you know, the right part as far as the school improvement plan" (A-11).

School differences. Although the patterns we have discussed so far applied across all schools, differences among schools were discernable, particularly in the way a school handled the plan once it was approved by

the state accountability agency. The approaches of three of the seven schools illustrate this point. At two of these three schools, planning and writing were done by a small cadre of two or three teachers and administrators.

For example, in one elementary school, the reading teacher, on release from regular classroom duties, took it upon herself to compile the plan. At the core of the plan was a reading curriculum that this teacher had designed. The principal made it known that he wanted to see this curriculum implemented in the primary-grade classrooms. Here, the plan guided the school's administrative team and was carried out as teachers used the daily curriculum.

In a medium-sized middle school, faculty had greater input in the writing of the SIP during the first year it was compiled, but in the second year two instructional specialists at the school took charge. As a blueprint for action, the SIP loomed large in weekly team meetings. Usually, grade-level teams consisting of up to six teachers, the principal, and the instructional specialists participated in these meetings, which were held in the principal's office. During the meetings, teachers were reminded constantly of the urgency to improve. They were informed of current goals, teaching practices that the principal expected to have implemented in the classrooms, and the specialists' latest ideas about effective practices.

In one large middle school the plan was of lesser importance. The new leadership team had not designed the plan that was in operation at the time of data collection. Knowledge of the plan was not widespread among faculty. The new administration's first priority was to reestablish order and student discipline. Though the school had experienced a severe crisis in this area during the previous school year, student discipline did not figure prominently in the approved plan. The plan was therefore of little relevance to the current problems facing the school.

It is conceivable that probation works with a two-phase dynamic. External pressure and determined internal managerialism may initially get a school started on the path of improvement until an internal development process takes off. (We want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.) The patterns in the seven schools, however, point in another direction. Two of the schools, one elementary and one middle school, had been on probation for several years by the time we conducted the study. Interview data showed that, in comparison to schools that were identified more recently, school improvement plans played a less visible role in the long-term probationary schools. Similarly, when schools were initially identified, SIPs drew interest among faculty and administrators, and plan writers sought input from the faculty. But in subsequent years, writing or updating the plan turned into a managerial task of administrators and teachers with special functions as schools responded to probation with increasing organizational rigidity (Mintrop, Curtis, King, & Plut-Pregelj, 2001).

Summary and Conclusion

The interviews show that in most instances a small core of administrators and activists compiled the plans in the seven schools. The writing process itself is primarily steered from outside the schools. Not only is improvement planning embedded in a stringent accountability system whose posture the schools' probationary status reinforces, but the state also gives schools a template that prestructures planning tasks and plan content. Moreover, district and state agencies oversee the writing and refine the final product so it reflects official preferences or can meet state board approval. School administrators and plan writers feel beholden to sometimes murky external expectations. Regular classroom teachers are infrequently consulted as experts, and they rarely participate as decision makers. A

broad-based consultation process is lacking widely.

The content of the plans corresponds to these conditions of strong external steering. The plans show a pattern of alignment. Site goals mimic official quantitative performance goals, needs analysis follows performance indicators, and many intended activities revolve around the state's ambitious and pedagogically complex achievement test. Moreover, plans are comprehensive to a fault and only loosely tailored to internal faculty capacity, perhaps creating a condition of change overload rather than strategic focus, that is, if all intended activities were implemented faithfully. Such sweeping implementation is less likely, considering that there is little evidence that the plans are internalized. To recall, the enumeration of mainly externally attributed causes of decline reads more like a plea to the public for leniency than an examination of the schools' problems—perhaps a "rational" approach taken by schools that serve large numbers of students from impoverished social environments.

School administrators and teachers with special assignments, who are listed as responsible for implementing the majority of proposed activities, are inclined to see the beneficial internal effects of SIPs as occasions for reflection, even though they may bemoan the extraordinary burden of writing and revising plans. Regular classroom teachers, by contrast, exhibit only superficial knowledge of their school's SIP. A general lack of ownership of the plans, which in some schools extends to traditional leadership roles (e.g., department heads), pervades the interviews. This dearth of knowledge and ownership notwithstanding, teachers express a strong willingness to comply with plans. Some teachers state their compliance with the admittedly unknown. The high knowledge of SIP content indicated by teachers' self-reports on the survey, which could not be confirmed by interviews, may find an explanation in this readiness to comply. Many regular teachers

accept the SIP as a tool that district and school administrators use to focus the faculty and to standardize operations. Bitter teacher opposition is rare, but when it is verbalized it is directed against standardization and loss of autonomy.

What does our analysis of the content and usage of school improvement plans say about the dynamic of school change under conditions of high-stakes accountability and imposed sanctions? The 46 plans and data from the seven schools give testimony to the success of the state in involving schools and districts in the compilation of an impressive, largely standardized document that strongly reflects the accountability agency's model of school change. Most likely, this involvement does not extend to the large majority of regular classroom teachers, but it forces the teaching personnel who participate most in planning—administrators and career teachers with special assignments—to apply the state's lens to their school's underperformance and, at the very least, to symbolically align their own views of change with the state's program. Despite widespread complaints, the SIP gives plan writers a thorough learning experience, an exercise in aligning their mental models (Senge, 1994) with the thinking of the state accountability agency. In the more passive parts of the teaching force, the SIP results in what is at times a stultifying compliance.

The role of improvement plans in the internal development of the schools is less clear. At best, they seem to function as an officially sanctioned lever that school administrators can use to demand unified action from faculties. In our sample of seven schools, this only happens when the principal backs the plan with a thorough internal monitoring system. Otherwise, most teachers ignore the plan despite professed compliance. Considering the enormous time and energy spent on compiling a plan, it is, at worst, an albatross that distracts educators from the business of improving their schools. We stress again, however,

that our conclusions are restricted to the inner workings of one accountability system design. It is conceivable that other systems with design features that more explicitly bridge the external/internal divide could result in different dynamics. Our case nevertheless demonstrates both the penetrating power of accountability systems in eliciting obligations to external demands and in shaping managerial models of change and their limitations in bringing forth broadly based internal development.

Appendix

Project on the Study of Schools on Probation

Interview Guide II: Improvement Strategy/SIP

Main Inquiries

This instrument aims at illuminating the degree to which teachers "own" the school improvement process, understand their part in it, and are willing and able to play their part. As in the meeting observation guide, we explore RECON/Probation as enabling strategic planning and coordinated action, shaping the faculty's motivation, and the school's programmatic and human development.

To what degree does the school's change design (SIP) become implemented? Are teachers

aware of the change design and do they fulfill their expected roles? Are strategies and external criteria of success internalized by faculty? Does RECON/Probation shape a school improvement process characterized by ritual compliance, managerial top-down execution, collegial restructuring, or some other pattern?

The following concepts are explored:

- Teacher's vision of improvement
- Awareness of the school's strategy
- Teacher's part in school's strategy
- New "technologies" (activities, materials, etc.)
- Implementation of plan
- Internalization of accountability system
- Expectation of success
- Valence of success
- Usefulness of RECON instruments (SIP, monitoring, staff development, etc.)
- Perception of faculty as a group
- Group accountability
- Faculty-coordinated action
- Hierarchical/collegial decision making

This interview requires familiarity with the school and a detailed knowledge of the school improvement plan. Follow Interview Guide I for personal information on teacher. When you conduct the interview make sure that your interview partner's answers cover the range/concept intended by the protocol. Not all questions have to be asked as long as we gain the necessary information indicated in the answer range.

Interview Protocol

Question	CONCEPT/Answer Range
How do you envision the school to improve? What steps, in your view, are most important for the school?	TEACHER'S VISION T. formulates his or her <i>own</i> ideas
What was your involvement with the SIP? Do you know what is in the SIP? What would you say are the most important aspects of the SIP? Does the SIP make sense to you? What is left out? What needs to be changed? (Present specific goals and activities from the plan.) Does this goal/activity make sense to you?	AWARENESS OF STRATEGY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCESS GOAL CLARITY Varying degrees of knowledge and involvement Weak or strong sense of meaningful process Congruence between school plan and personal vision
What is your own part in the school's plan? How does your part fit in with what your colleagues do? Do you feel you are adequately prepared to do your part? What additional skills or resources do you need?	AWARENESS OF STRATEGY GOAL CLARITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCESS EFFICACY/CONDITIONS OF SUCCESS Vague idea of own role vs. clear idea of task and responsibility

- Sees connections between her effort and her colleagues' efforts vs. is restricted to her own classroom
 Feels well prepared vs. requests more training and is insecure
- What steps have you taken, will you take in the near future?
 What new materials, technologies, ways of student groupings, procedures, programs have you tried, will you try?
 Who decided to use these? Why did you select these?
- Do you think the steps you are taking will lead to success? Will you be able to achieve the goal laid out in the SIP (quote from SIP)?
 What makes you optimistic/pessimistic?
- How important is it for you to meet the state/district standards?
 If I was visiting your classroom, how would I see this (importance)?
- Does the school have additional resources, personnel, and prof. dev. opportunities as a result of RECON?
 How has this affected the work in your own classroom/area?
 What would happen if these additional resources disappear?
- The accountability system holds the faculty as a whole accountable for performance. It doesn't make any distinction between strong and weaker teachers, new and senior teachers.
 Is this fair?
 Is it working?
- Do you feel the faculty acts as a unified whole? More so since the school was put on probation?
- Do you receive all information you want or need?
 Who makes the important decisions here?
 Who is in control?
- Do you think you have influence over decisions that are made?
 Is your voice heard?
 How much do you get involved in whole-school affairs?
- Do you discuss issues of school improvement openly?
 Can you criticize the plan or the administration or other colleagues if you think something is wrong?
- IMPLEMENTATION
 (Prompt for specifics from the SIP)
- INTERNALIZATION (OF SIP, SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS, EXTERNAL PARTNERS, MONITORS, EXTERNAL SUPPORT STAFF)
- THEORIES OF CAUSE/EFFECT
 (Discuss specific activities and probe for rationales)
- EXPECTATION OF SUCCESS
 It's going to be hard with these kids
 I have evidence that it's working
- VALENCE OF SUCCESS
 (Prompt for goals other than achievement)
 Achievement is central to me
 I like the pedagogy that the assessment implies
 I believe in pedagogy different from test
 Educating decent human beings is more important than scores
- CAPACITY BUILDING
 SUSTAINABILITY OF CHANGE
- GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY
 We have such high turnover
 We are all in this together
 We help each other
 I work so hard, should not be judged on the merits of colleagues
 Kids are educated by the whole school
- GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY
 COORDINATED ACTION
 We are divided
 Some have more power than others
 We stick together
- COORDINATED ACTION
 HIERARCHY
 COLLEGIAL DECISION MAKING
 (Prompt for examples)
 Answers should give a sense of "improvement by command" vs. "improvement as internal restructuring"

Do you agree with the way decision making is handled here (particularly with regard to the strategies to get off probation)?

Once decisions are made, are they usually carried out at this school?

How much choice do you have in carrying them out?

Do you have people in your classroom/area that tell you what to do?

Who sees to it that they are carried out?

Have things changed since being put on probation?

In many schools there are those who are working very hard and others who put in less effort into their work? Is this the case here as well?

What happens to those here at this school that are not working as hard?

Do you think the school benefitted from being put on probation?

Has the school benefitted from SIP, monitors, etc.? (Probe for features of accountability system)

If you compare the school the way it is this year/ since it was identified as on probation (recon, etc.) with the way it was before, do you see differences?

Will these differences make the school more successful? Explain.

IMPLEMENTATION

ENFORCEMENT

THREAT OF SANCTIONS

AUTONOMY/COORDINATED ACTION

Things are disorganized here

Everybody does what he/she wants

The principal is tough

Colleagues are in your face

Resource teachers are in the classrooms all the time (Probe for agreements, resentments)

USEFULNESS OF ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM AND HIGH-STAKES DESIGNS

No involvement and no contact with system

They play a direct or indirect role in improvement process

Open response

Note

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