

## **IV. Systemic Reform in MSAP Projects and Schools**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent to which federally funded magnet projects are promoting systemic, standards-based reform.

According to Goertz, Floden, and O'Day (1995), systemic reform “embodies three integral components: (1) the promotion of ambitious student outcomes for all students; (2) alignment of policy approaches and the actions of various policy institutions to promote such outcomes; and (3) restructuring the governance system to support improved achievement.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, systemic reform involves efforts to create a coherent, coordinated set of state and district policies to guide schools and teachers in improving student achievement.

In this chapter, we examine the extent to which the programs in MSAP schools are guided by and consistent with reform efforts underway in the states and districts in which the schools are located. The results in the chapter are based on surveys completed by MSAP Project Directors and principals conducted during the 1999-2000 school year—the second year of the MSAP grant. The results provide a portrait of MSAP projects and schools at one time point. A second set of surveys, conducted during the 2000-01 year, will provide information in the final year of the MSAP grant.

The chapter contains four main sections. First, we examine the extent to which MSAP schools are focusing on reform strategies consistent with those emphasized by their districts. Then, we review the extent to which MSAP projects have been designed to support state and district curriculum frameworks, assessments, and performance standards in the core subjects (mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies), and the extent to which the programs in MSAP schools match state standards. Next, we examine the degree to which MSAP schools are held accountable for student performance through specific rewards and sanctions, and the relative influence of states, districts, and schools in setting performance goals for students. Finally, we consider the extent to which MSAP projects are coordinated with other programs and the types of support that district-level MSAP staff provide to MSAP schools.

### **MSAP Support of District Reform Strategies**

One way to assess the role of MSAP in supporting system reform is to ask whether MSAP projects and schools are engaged in activities consistent with the main strategies that districts have adopted to improve student achievement. As a first step, we asked MSAP Project Directors to indicate the emphasis given by their districts to the following 10 strategies to improve student achievement:

#### ***standards-based reform***

- establishing high standards
- aligning curricula with standards
- linking professional development to standards

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<sup>1</sup> Goertz, M.E., R.E. Floden, and J. O'Day. *Studies of Systemic Reform, Volume 1: Findings and Conclusions*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1995, Chapter 1, p. 1.

***approaches to curriculum and instruction***

- integrating technology
- implementing research-based models

***resources for instruction***

- increasing instructional time
- providing tutoring
- reducing class size

***relationships with the community***

- involving parents
- coordinating social services

The results shown in Figure IV-1 indicate that nearly all MSAP districts report placing a major emphasis on standards-based reform.<sup>2</sup> For example, more than 80 percent of MSAP districts report placing a major emphasis on establishing high standards for students and on aligning curricula with standards. Many MSAP districts also report placing a major emphasis on approaches to curriculum and instruction. Somewhat fewer districts report placing a major emphasis on resources for instruction (for example, about 55 percent report placing a major emphasis on reducing class size), or on relationships with the community.

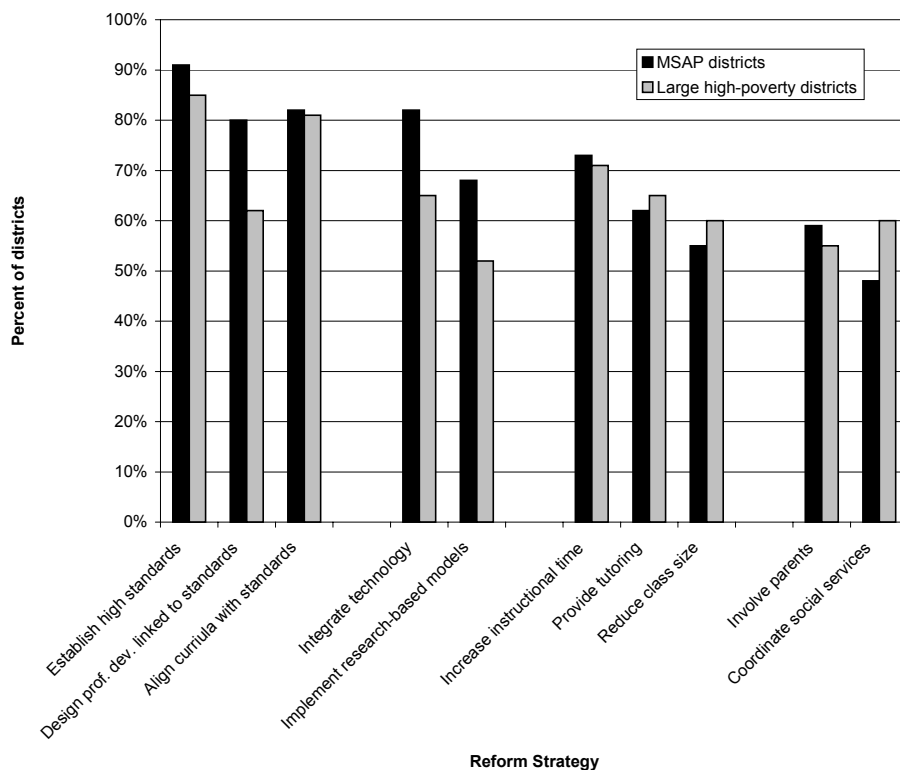
As shown in Figure IV-1, the emphasis that MSAP districts report placing on standards-based reform is similar to the emphasis reported in a recent nationally representative survey of large, high-poverty districts conducted in the late fall of 1998 and the early winter of 1999, one year prior to the MSAP survey.<sup>3</sup> MSAP districts appear to place somewhat more emphasis on new approaches to curriculum and instruction (technology and reform models) than did large high-poverty districts in 1998-99. However, the emphasis that MSAP districts report giving to resources for instruction and relationships with the community is similar to the emphasis reported by large, high-poverty districts.

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<sup>2</sup> See Table A-IV-1 in Appendix IV.

<sup>3</sup> The national results are reported in Turnbull, B., J. Hannaway, and S. McKay. *Local implementation study: District survey results*. Washington, DC: Planning and Evaluation Service, U.S. Department of Education, 1999, 77-78. The study by Turnbull et al. provided data on three groups of districts: all districts; large, high-poverty districts; and small high-poverty districts. As indicated in Chapter I, MSAP districts on average are considerably larger than typical districts in the U.S. as a whole, and they tend to enroll more disadvantaged students. Thus, we selected large, high-poverty districts as the most appropriate comparison for the MSAP results.

**Figure IV-1**  
**Percentage of MSAP Districts Placing Major Emphasis on Standards-based Reform Strategies**



n=varies from 53 to 56 districts

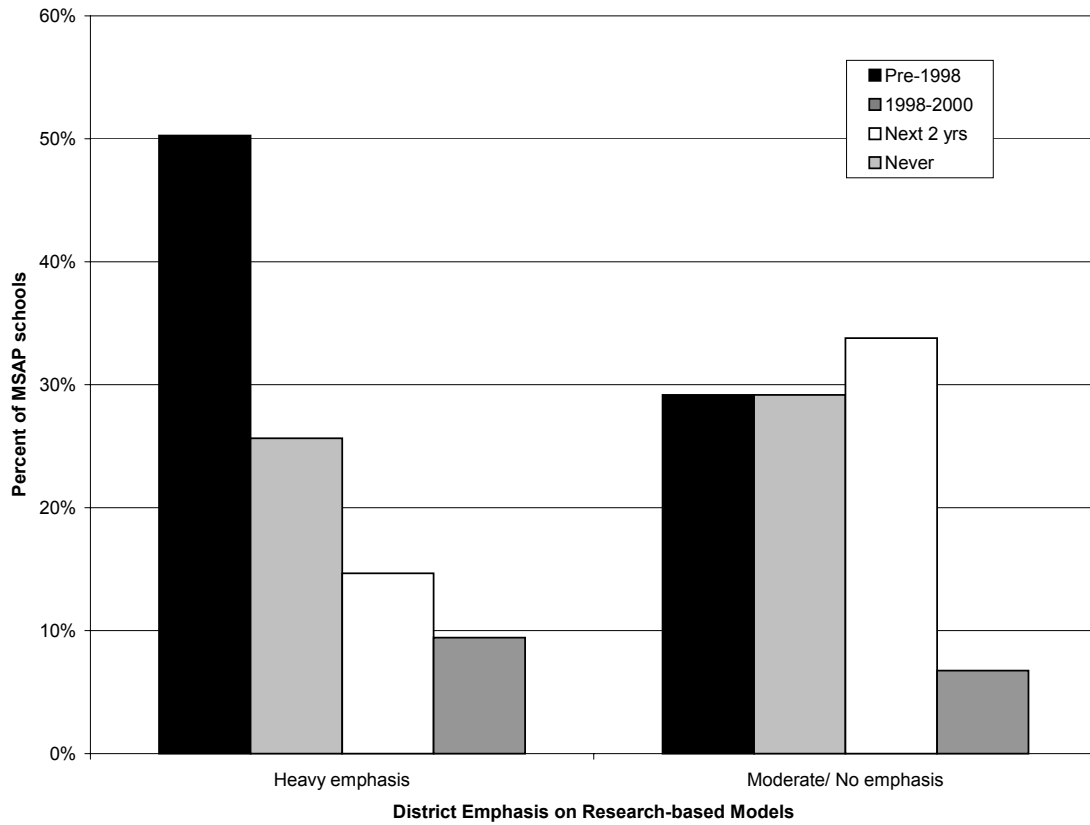
Source: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 17; and Turnbull et al., 1999 Implementation Study

To examine the degree to which the reform strategies adopted by MSAP schools are consistent with the strategies emphasized by MSAP districts, we asked the principals of MSAP schools to assess the extent to which their schools had adopted each of the strategies included in the MSAP Project Survey. For each strategy, we asked the principal to report which best described the implementation of the strategy in the school: the strategy was implemented before 1998-99 (i.e., before the first year of the MSAP grant period); it was implemented since 1998-99 (i.e., during the 1998-99 or 1999-2000 school years); it was a priority for the next two years; or the school had no plans to implement the strategy.

The results indicate that MSAP schools in districts that place a major emphasis on particular strategies are more likely to have adopted those strategies *prior to* the MSAP award than are MSAP schools in districts that do not place an emphasis on such strategies. Figure IV-2 displays data on the percentage of MSAP schools that have adopted research-based reform models among MSAP schools located in districts that have placed a heavy emphasis on research-based models, and among MSAP schools in districts that have placed only a moderate or no emphasis on research-based models.<sup>4</sup> For example, about 50 percent of MSAP schools in districts that place a heavy emphasis on research-based models had already adopted such models prior to the MSAP award; while about 29 percent of MSAP schools had adopted such models in districts placing some or no emphasis on adopting research-based reform models.

<sup>4</sup> See Table A-IV-2 in Appendix IV. We combined results for schools in districts that placed a moderate emphasis on reform models with those for schools in districts that placed no emphasis on reform models, because the number of districts that reported placing no emphasis on reform models was quite small (n=5).

**Figure IV-2**  
**Percentage of MSAP Schools Adopting Research-based Reform Models in Districts with Heavy or Moderate/No Emphasis on Research-based Models**



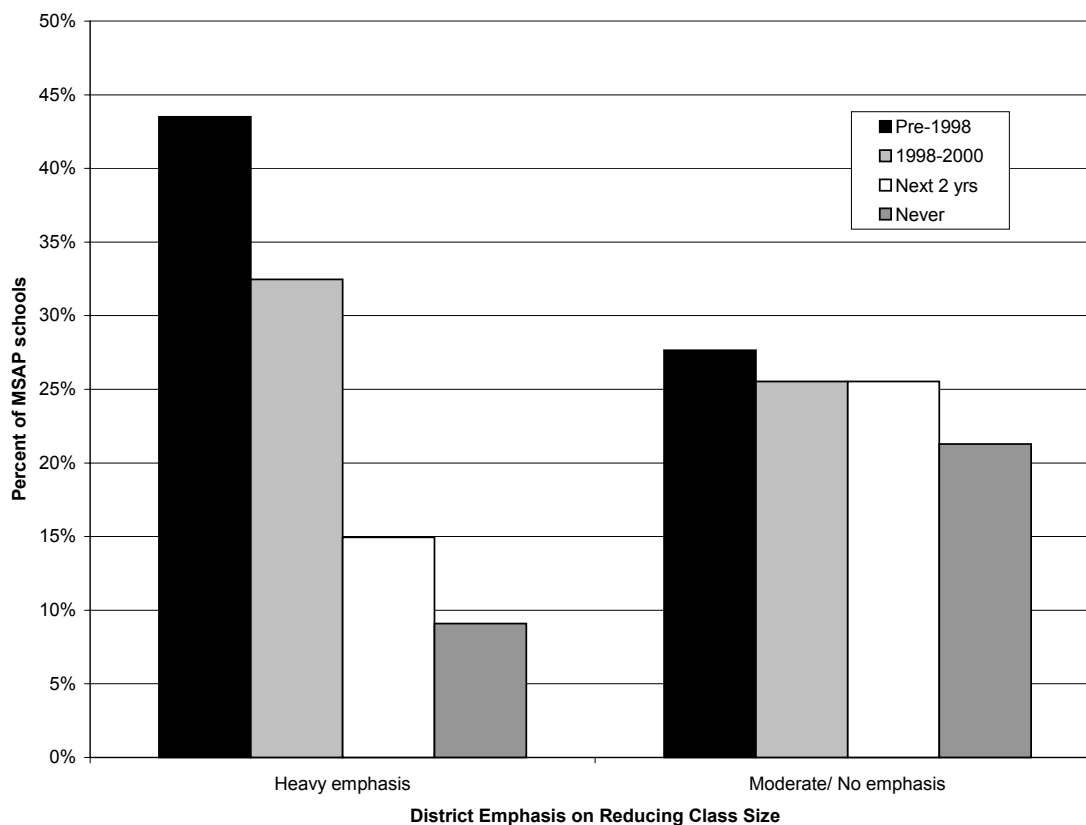
n=262 schools in 53 districts

Sources: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 17; MSAP Principal Survey, 1999-2000, Item 25

Figure IV-3 provides similar results for the reduction of class size reform strategy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Table A-IV-3 in Appendix IV.

**Figure IV-3**  
**Percentage of MSAP Schools Adopting Class Size Reduction Strategies in Districts with Heavy or Moderate/No Emphasis on Class Size Reduction**



n=247 schools in 53 districts

Sources: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 17; MSAP Principal Survey, 1999-2000, Item 25

These results suggest that MSAP districts may select schools for participation that were *already* engaged in activities consistent with district reform efforts at the time of the MSAP award. Thus MSAP resources may help support district reform efforts in part by reinforcing and extending the reform-oriented activities underway in MSAP schools.

## Alignment with Frameworks, Assessments, and Performance Standards

Another way to assess the role of MSAP in supporting systemic reform is to examine the extent to which MSAP themes and goals are aligned with three key elements of systemic reform: state and district curriculum frameworks, assessments, and performance standards. As a first step in examining alignment, we asked MSAP Project Directors to indicate their *familiarity* with three elements of systemic reform at the state level (state frameworks, assessments, and performance standards). We also asked them to report the *influence* they believe these elements of state systemic reform have had on MSAP themes and goals. Finally, we asked them to report their judgment of the *match* between these elements and MSAP themes and goals.

It is worth emphasizing that the data we have are based on MSAP Project Director perceptions. In the spring of 2001, we will ask principals and teachers in MSAP schools and comparison schools in the in-depth Case Study sample to answer similar questions, which will provide a more complete portrait.

Overall, MSAP Project Directors report that they are quite familiar with state frameworks, assessments, and performance standards in the core academic areas.<sup>6</sup> About 70 percent report being quite familiar with frameworks, assessments, and standards in mathematics, and 77 percent in language arts. Project Directors report being somewhat less familiar with frameworks, assessments, and performance standards in science and social studies, although the level of familiarity is still high (about 61 percent and 59 percent, respectively).

Project Directors also report that the state frameworks, assessments, and performance standards exert a strong influence on the themes and goals of the MSAP schools. About 82 percent report a strong influence of standards in mathematics and in language arts, 64 percent in science, and 55 percent in social studies.<sup>7</sup> The percentage of Project Directors reporting no influence or only a slight influence of state frameworks and assessments is quite small. In both mathematics and language arts, only one MSAP Project Director (representing two percent of the sample) reported no influence, and only two Project Directors (four percent) reported slight influence. In science, the percentages reporting no and only slight influence are five and nine percent, respectively, and in social studies, they are seven and 11 percent.

To provide a composite measure of the influence of state frameworks, assessments, and performance standards in all four subjects on MSAP themes and goals in each MSAP district, we created a composite index averaging the influence of standards in the four core subject areas.<sup>8</sup> The index places each district on a scale ranging from “not at all” to “to a great extent.”<sup>9</sup> The values of the index for all MSAP Project Directors that completed the relevant survey item are shown in Figure IV-4, with dots that each represent one MSAP project. For example, the one dot just over value 1, “not at all,” indicates that one project reported that the state frameworks and assessments had not influenced the MSAP themes and goals at all. The two dots above the value 2 “only slightly” show that two projects reported that the state frameworks and assessments had influenced the MSAP themes and goals only slightly, with three more projects reporting influence between “only slightly” and “somewhat.” The results presented in Figure IV-4 indicate that, while the overall influence of state standards on MSAP themes and goals is high, there is some variation among districts. In more than half of the MSAP districts, Project Directors report that standards have influenced MSAP themes and goals to a great extent. In some districts, however, standards have had only some or slight influence, and, in one district, no influence.

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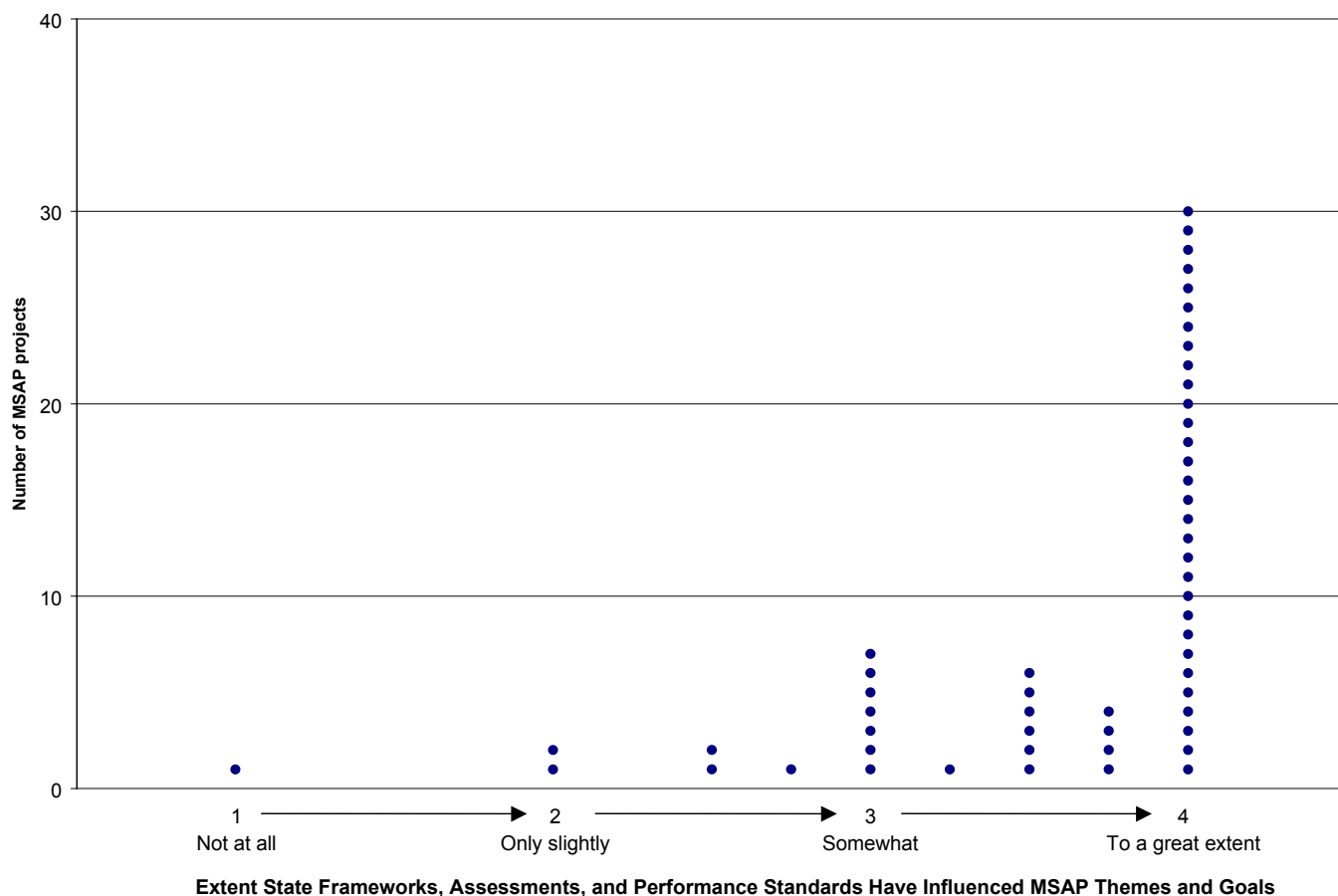
<sup>6</sup> See Table A-IV-4 in Appendix IV.

<sup>7</sup> See Table A-IV-5 in Appendix IV.

<sup>8</sup> See Table A-IV-6 in Appendix IV.

<sup>9</sup> In constructing the scale, we assigned the following values to represent the level of influence. 1=“not at all,” 2=“only slightly,” 3=“somewhat,” and 4=“to a great extent.”

Figure IV-4. Influence of State Frameworks and Assessments on MSAP Themes and Goals



How to read: Each dot represents one MSAP project.

n=54 projects

Source: Scale based on MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Items 19-22

In addition to asking about the influence of state frameworks, performance standards, and assessments on MSAP themes and goals, we also asked Project Directors to judge the *match* between the standards and MSAP schools' instructional goals. According to the MSAP Project Directors, there is considerable agreement between standards and MSAP instructional goals. Nearly 90 percent of MSAP Project Directors report that state frameworks, performance standards, and assessments match those of project schools to a great extent in mathematics and language arts; nearly 75 percent report that they match to a great extent in science; and about 66 percent report that they match to a great extent in social studies.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, most of the MSAP Project Directors report that state and district standards match MSAP themes and goals, but our data also provide some indication that the match is less strong in some districts. This conclusion is buttressed by evidence from our telephone interviews with Project Directors. Our interview data indicate that in some districts, MSAP schools are serving as a model for standards-based

<sup>10</sup> For districts that have established district frameworks, assessments, or performance standards, we asked a similar set of questions about the match between district standards and MSAP schools' instructional goals. The results are nearly identical to those for state standards.

reform efforts. (See box.) But in a few districts, the match between state and district standards and MSAP programs is less strong.

**MSAP Project Directors told us:**

- State politics are a growing cause for concern in one MSAP district (and others), in terms of the way state grades are given to each school and the way the rigor of the state standards changes each year.
- Similar concerns are voiced by another Project Director whose project has an MSAP-supported Montessori school. Standards, assessment, and student achievement have become hot issues in the district, and at times there are conflicts between school goals and district goals. For example, the Project Director notes that the heavy emphasis on standardized testing does not fit well with the Montessori system, but the school is “getting there.”
- One MSAP district, which had not yet linked its curriculum to standards, is looking to its MSAP schools for guidance. Because the MSAP schools have developed a standards-based curriculum, it is serving as a model for the district.

## Accountability for Student Performance

Another way to assess the MSAP role in supporting systemic reform is to examine the degree to which MSAP schools are held accountable for student performance. As an initial step in this analysis, we asked the principal of each MSAP school to report whether the school had set specific, quantifiable performance goals for students. The principals in approximately 90 percent of MSAP schools report that the school has set quantifiable goals for the academic growth students should achieve each year in reading and mathematics. Over half of the principals also report that their schools have set quantifiable goals in one or more other subject areas (e.g., science or social studies).<sup>11</sup>

We also asked each MSAP principal to report who has the greatest influence in setting these goals: the state, the district, or the school. Overall, 30 percent of schools report that the state has the most influence; 31 percent report the district; and 36 percent, the school.<sup>12</sup> As one might anticipate, principals of MSAP schools in the same MSAP district tend to agree on the level having the greatest influence on student performance goals. For example, in one MSAP district, four of the five MSAP schools report that the state has the greatest influence; while in another district, seven of the nine MSAP schools report that the district has the greatest influence.

To assess the extent to which schools in MSAP districts are formally evaluated on the basis of student performance, we asked MSAP principals to report whether schools in their districts receive specific *rewards* for student achievement (cash or resource awards, other recognition), *technical assistance*, or specific *sanctions* for poor achievement (reassignment of the principal, assignment of the school to a higher level governing body, or reconstitution of teaching staff). As shown in Figure IV-5, technical assistance is the most common response to poor performance in MSAP districts (reported by about 78 percent of MSAP principals), followed by other recognition (69 percent) and principal

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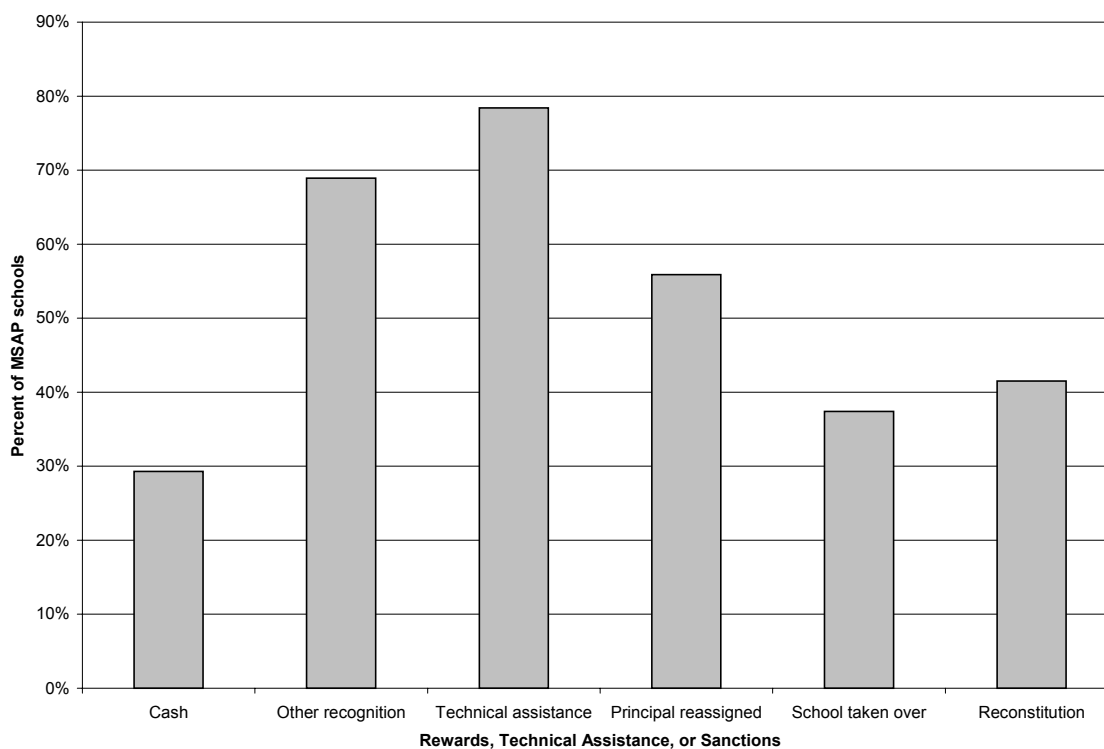
<sup>11</sup> See Table A-IV-7 in Appendix IV.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to state, district, and school, we provided two other response options: “federal programs” and “other.” Two percent of schools reported that federal programs have the greatest influence on goals for student progress, and two percent reported “other.”



reassignment (56 percent).<sup>13</sup> Cash rewards, being taken over by a higher level governing body, and reconstitution of the teaching staff are less commonly used as responses to poor performance in the MSAP districts.

**Figure IV-5**  
**Rewards and Sanctions That MSAP Schools May Receive as a Result of Student Performance**

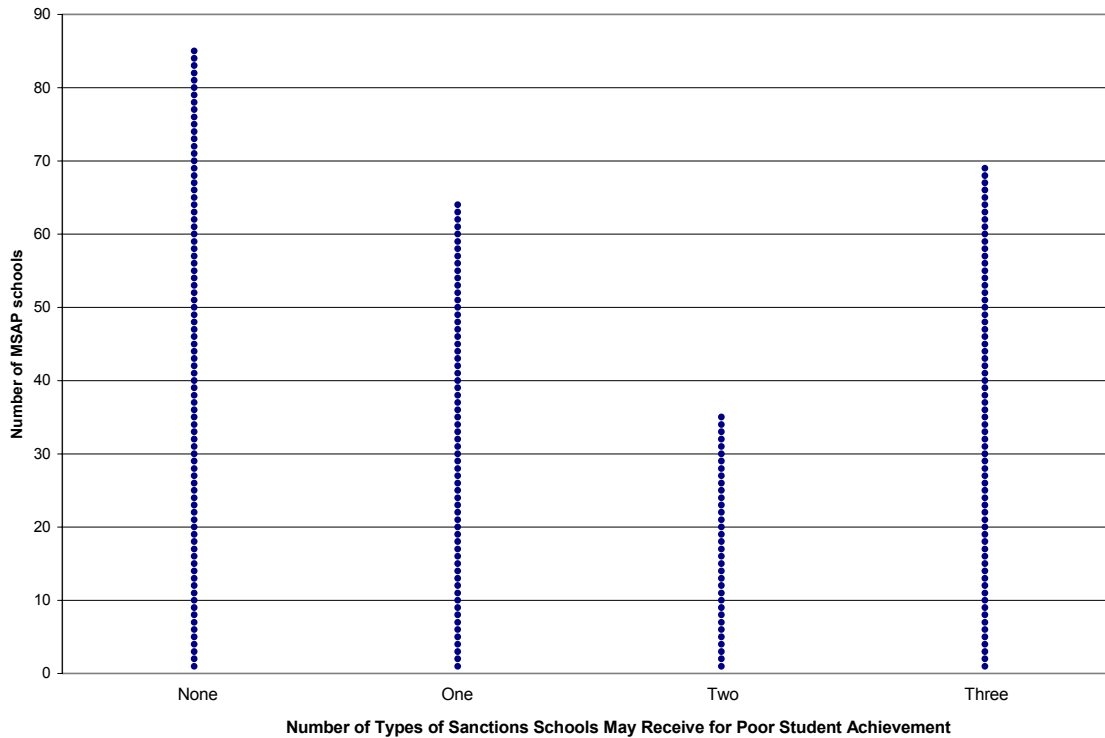


n=259 to 263 schools  
 Source: MSAP Principal Survey, 1999-2000, Item 16

The principal survey data indicate that the districts in which MSAP schools are located vary considerably in the emphasis they place on rewards or sanctions as a response to student performance. Figure IV-6, for example, displays the number of MSAP principals that report that their districts employ all three types of sanctions mentioned on the survey in response to poor student performance (principal reassigned, school taken over, and reconstitution), as well as principals that report that their districts employ two, one, or none of the three types. (Each dot in Figure IV-6 represents one MSAP principal.) The results indicate that 70 MSAP principals report being in districts that employ all three types of sanctions, while 85 report being in districts that employ none of the types.

<sup>13</sup> See Table A-IV-8 in Appendix IV.

**Figure IV-6**  
**Number of Types of Sanctions Reported by MSAP Principals**



How to read: Each dot represents one school.  
 n=256 schools  
 Source: MSAP Principal Survey, 1999-2000, Item 11

As a final indication of the effects of accountability provisions on MSAP schools, we asked each MSAP principal to indicate if the school had been targeted for improvement. (Since the identification of schools for improvement is generally based on tests administered in the spring of the academic year, principal responses on the survey refer to the status of MSAP schools in the 1998-99 year.) Overall, about 16 percent of MSAP principals report that their schools were identified as in need of improvement; about 25 percent of the students enrolled in MSAP schools attend such schools. Overall, 28 percent of minority students enrolled in MSAP schools attend schools identified as in need of improvement, while 16 percent of non-minority students attend such schools.

### **Coordination and Co-funding of MSAP with Other Programs and Activities**

A final way to assess MSAP’s role in supporting systemic reform is to examine the extent to which MSAP activities are coordinated with other programs. We examined coordination and co-funding in a number of ways. First, we asked MSAP Project Directors to report whether their districts receive funds from two specific federal programs: Title I and Goals 2000. For districts receiving funds from these

programs, we asked about the extent to which the activities supported by these programs are coordinated with MSAP.<sup>14</sup>

The results indicate that all but one of the MSAP districts that responded to the question received Title I funds during the 1999-2000 year. Fifty-seven percent of the Project Directors in districts receiving funds reported that activities supported under Title I are coordinated with MSAP-supported activities to a great extent. About three-quarters of responding districts reported receiving Goals 2000 funds, and 36 percent of the Project Directors in districts receiving Goals 2000 funds reported that activities supported under Goals 2000 are coordinated with MSAP activities to a great extent.

As a second approach to examining coordination between MSAP and other district activities, we asked each MSAP Project Director whether the Project Director's district has certain administrative roles or positions (e.g., Coordinator of Curriculum or Title I Coordinator). We also asked whether the Project Director holds any of these positions, and, for positions not filled by the Project Director, the extent to which the Project Director interacts with individuals in these roles and positions in planning and implementing MSAP activities.

The data show that 96 percent of the MSAP districts have a coordinator of curriculum, and most MSAP districts also have coordinators of professional development, assessment and testing, and Title I.<sup>15</sup> Somewhat fewer have coordinators of choice or magnet programs or federal program coordinators. With one exception, these positions are filled by someone other than the MSAP Project Director. As might be anticipated, the one exception is the coordinator of choice or magnet programs, which is a position held by more than half of the MSAP Project Directors in addition to their MSAP role.

Figure IV-7 displays the extent to which MSAP Project Directors interact with individuals in other roles and positions in planning MSAP activities.<sup>16</sup> The results indicate that MSAP Project Directors tend to interact to a great extent with coordinators of curriculum and choice. They interact somewhat less with coordinators of federal programs, assessment and testing, professional development, and federal programs (including Title I).

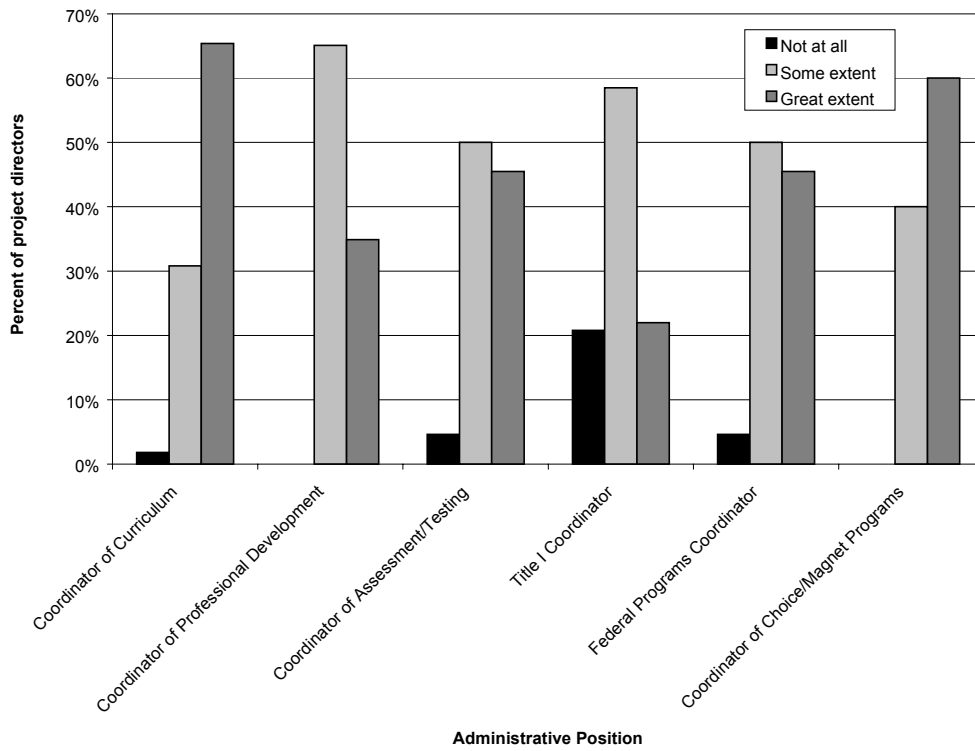
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<sup>14</sup> We also asked MSAP Project Directors about other sources of co-funding for MSAP activities, including other Department of Education programs and National Science Foundation (NSF) systemic initiatives. We plan to examine coordination with these programs more fully in coming reports, in conjunction with evidence on co-funding we obtain from the case studies.

<sup>15</sup> See Table A-IV-10 in Appendix IV.

<sup>16</sup> See Table A-IV-11 in Appendix IV.

**Figure IV-7**  
**Extent of Interaction of MSAP Project Director and Other District Staff in Planning and Implementing MSAP Activities**



n=56 projects  
 Source: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 11

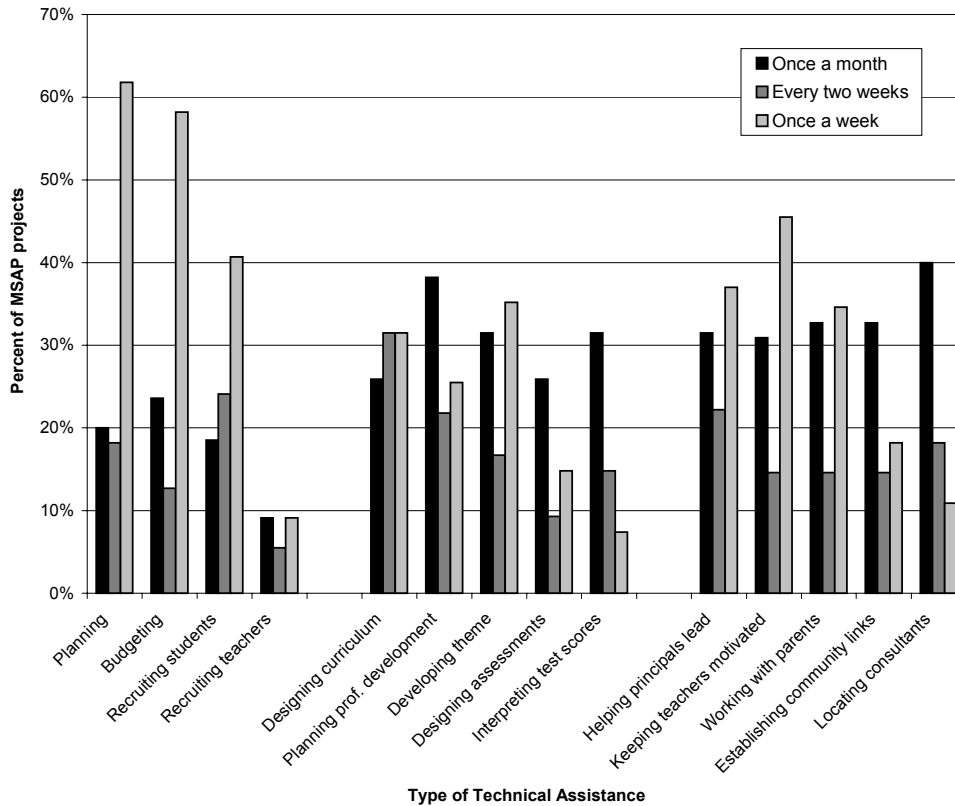
We combined Project Director responses to the set of questions about coordination with district administrative staff to create a composite index measuring the overall level of coordination of MSAP with other district staff. The index places each district on a scale running from “not at all” to “to a great extent.”<sup>17</sup> The index value for each MSAP district providing complete data on the relevant items is shown in Figure IV-8, with each dot representing one project. The results indicate that there is considerable variation across districts in the extent to which MSAP Project Directors interact with other staff in planning and implementing MSAP programs; the overall level of coordination ranges from “not at all” to “to a great extent.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In constructing the scale, we assigned the following values to represent the level of influence. 1=“not at all,” 2=“to some extent,” and 3=“to a great extent.”

<sup>18</sup> See Table A-IV-12 in Appendix IV.



**Figure IV-9**  
**Type and Frequency of Technical Assistance Provided by MSAP Project Directors and Other District-Level MSAP Staff**



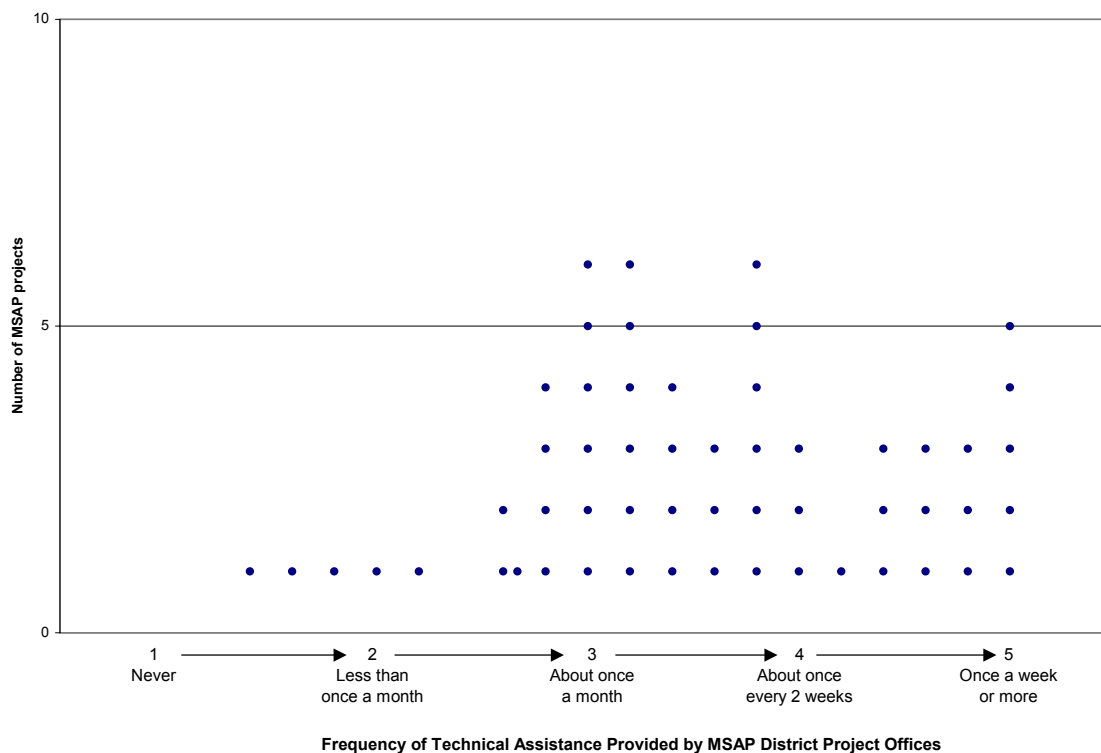
n=55 projects  
 Source: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 13

While all of the forms of technical assistance shown in Figure IV-9 are likely to play a role in supporting systemic reform, technical assistance focused on curriculum and instruction is likely to be especially critical. To assess the overall frequency of technical assistance that MSAP project offices provide on curriculum and instruction, we created a composite index averaging the frequency of five types of support: designing curriculum and materials, planning professional development, developing themes and activities, designing assessments, and interpreting test scores. The index places each district on a scale running from “never” to “once a week or more.”<sup>21</sup> The values of the index for each district are shown in Figure IV-10, with each MSAP district represented by one dot. The results indicate that there is considerable variation across districts in the extent to which MSAP projects provide support for curriculum and instruction.<sup>22</sup> In some districts, MSAP Project Directors report providing such assistance on average at least once a week; in other districts, MSAP Project Directors provide such assistance on average less than once a month.

<sup>21</sup> In constructing the scale, we assigned the following values to represent the frequency of technical assistance. 1=“never,” 2=“less than once a month,” 3=“about once a month,” 4=“about once every two weeks,” and 5=“once a week or more.”

<sup>22</sup> See Table A-IV-14 in Appendix IV.

**Figure IV-10**  
**Provision of Technical Assistance Focused on Curriculum and Instruction by MSAP Project Directors and Other District-level MSAP Staff**



How to read: Each dot represents one MSAP project.

n=55 projects

Source: MSAP Project Survey, 1999-2000, Item 13

Taken together, our analyses of coordination show that in many MSAP projects, MSAP activities are coordinated with other district efforts in a number of ways, including co-funding, administrative interaction, and technical assistance to MSAP schools. Our data also indicate that there is considerable variation across districts in the extent to which coordination occurs. In some districts, MSAP activities appear to be highly integrated into district planning; in other districts, there is less coordination.

## What We Learned

- Schools supported by MSAP funds seem to be supporting local systemic reform efforts. Many of the schools are reported to have adopted activities that are consistent with reform strategies emphasized by their districts. The emphasis given to specific types of reforms in MSAP districts is similar to the emphasis reported in a nationally representative sample of large, high-poverty districts, but MSAP districts report somewhat more emphasis on technology and reform models.
- Most MSAP projects report a match between their themes and goals and their state and district standards.
- Nearly all of the MSAP schools (90 percent) have established specific goals for student performance in reading and mathematics achievement. Accountability for student performance most frequently takes the form of technical assistance for poor

performing schools. About 16 percent of the MSAP schools have been identified as needing improvement.

- MSAP Project Directors coordinate their activities with those of other federal and district programs, particularly Title I, and interact most frequently with district curriculum coordinators and directors of choice programs. Project Directors provide frequent technical assistance to their MSAP-supported schools, especially in project planning and budgeting.

## **What We Hope to Learn**

- Our items regarding the extent of support for district reforms may have elicited socially desirable responses, and actual support may not be as great as that reported. During Case Study visits in spring 2001, we will look for evidence of the relationship between MSAP programs and district reform efforts.
- Our findings suggest that some dissonance may occur between the standards-based reforms adopted in MSAP states and districts and the themes and goals of MSAP schools. We will investigate this issue during Case Study visits in spring 2001.
- Our data on accountability indicate considerable variation across MSAP districts in the types of accountability mechanisms employed. Our data suggest that many MSAP schools face clear rewards and sanctions based on student performance; we plan to examine the influence of these accountability provisions in more detail in our Case Studies.
- The extent of coordination between the MSAP project and other district-level programs such as Title I and Goals 2000 seems to vary considerably across the districts, as does the technical assistance that MSAP project staff provides to schools. In our Case Study districts, we will look into the ways in which programs are coordinated (e.g., means and frequency of communication) and technical assistance is provided (e.g., identification of needs, types of responses). We will also explore the effects of coordination and technical assistance on the quality of the programs in MSAP schools.