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## Teachers' Response to Standards-Based Reform: Probing Reform Assumptions in Washington State<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Because teachers' efforts are central to the success of standards-based reform, it behooves the policy community to look carefully at the beliefs about instruction that are rooted in this reform theory. Building on teacher-centric research on standards-based reform and ideas about teaching practice from research on multicultural education, this paper focuses on the assumptions embedded in Washington state's approach. Survey data from a representative sample of teachers suggest that the state's program of high student learning standards, aligned assessments and an accountability system has shaped teachers' instructional

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practice and their students' learning in ways that the state's reform theory assumes. However, teachers' concerns about student achievement and instructional supports indicate problems with the inherent logic of the state's reform regarding how well it serves a diverse student population.

Keywords: teacher surveys; state standards; statewide assessment; multicultural education.

### **Respuestas docentes a las reformas basadas en estándares. Probando los presupuestos acerca de las reformas en el estado de Washington**

#### **Resumen**

Dado que entender los esfuerzos de los docentes es central para comprender el éxito o fracaso de una reforma basada en estándares, es fundamental que quienes participan de políticas educativas, examinen cuidadosamente las creencias acerca de la enseñanza que fundamentan teóricamente una reforma. Este trabajo analiza los presupuestos incorporados en la propuesta de reforma del estado de Washington investigando como los docentes, comprenden las reformas basadas en estándares, y las practicas de enseñanza desde la perspectiva de la educación multicultural. Datos obtenidos en una encuesta con una muestra representativa de docentes sugiere que el programa de estándares de altos aprendizajes, evaluaciones secuenciadas, y de accountability escolar ha moldeado las practicas de instrucción de los docentes y el aprendizaje de los estudiantes de la manera que la teoría de reforma educativa suponía. Sin embargo, las preocupaciones de los docentes acerca de los logros académicos de los estudiantes y el apoyo a la instrucción indica la presencia de problemas en la lógica inherente en el programa de reforma del estado en relación a cuan bien atiende las necesidades educativas de una población diversa de estudiantes.

Palabras clave: encuestas docentes; estándares estatales; evaluación estatal.

The massive investment by state governments in standards-based reform, now more than a decade old, is a basic feature of the contemporary educators' landscape, so much so that many take the premises of this approach to reform for granted. The logic is simple enough, and on the face of it, makes sense: Create clear and ambitious standards for student learning, develop consensus around these standards, connect the standards to an assessment program keyed to the standards, and attach an accountability system with real consequences (for students and for schools). Add an overarching federal reform policy for good measure—*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB)—and remind constituencies that this reform takes seriously the intention that *all* school children can and will meet standard. The result: a piece of public policy with widespread support that, so far, has shown considerable staying power, despite critiques from various directions (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Jennings, 2003; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002).

The theory of action underlying standards-based reform is a little more complex than the above logic might imply, and its implicit assumptions about how teachers will teach in response to

the reform are especially important and potentially problematic. Because teachers' efforts are arguably the most immediate and strongest school-based influence on student learning and, as such, are central to the success of standards-based reform (Rowan, 1996), it behooves the policy community to look carefully at the assumptions about instructional response embedded in this reform theory and consider evidence concerning the soundness of these assumptions. This article undertakes that work, by reporting on a recent study of teachers' responses to standards-based reform in one state (Washington), a setting in which conditions for investigating the reform are ripe and for which an appropriate source of data presents itself.

Because there have not been many attempts to consider how, over the long term, the sustained presence of a standards-based reform policy becomes incorporated into local instructional practice, the question arises whether the assumed connections between the promulgation of the state's reform initiative and actual changes in teaching practice or student learning are realized. Washington state offers a good opportunity for examining these matters. The state has maintained a consistent standards-based reform initiative for over a decade; the standards were developed through a gradual process with a high degree of teacher involvement across the state, forestalling outright rejection by teachers on the front end of the policy implementation; a lengthy period of years (a dozen) transpired between the introduction of the standards and the ultimate high-stakes consequences in students' high school graduation. Furthermore, public, professional, and policy support for the reforms has remained relatively constant over the years. Under these conditions, one might expect to find evidence in teachers' views of their own and their students' work that the reforms have taken effect.

In this setting, *how sound are the explicit or implicit assumptions about the connections between state reform and teaching practice?* At this point in the life cycle of this policy initiative—when the reform is no longer new—is there any evidence across the full range of the state's teacher workforce that teachers are responding as the reform theory would presume, or at least that they are moving in this direction? These are matters that good evidence can illuminate, evidence derived from teachers' perceptions and practice. To this end, this paper first describes the scholarship and theory that informed the research design and data analysis, followed by a more detailed look at Washington state's policy context. Next, we summarize our research methods and the data sources that offer answers to the questions. Following that, we review key findings and show how they support two broad themes concerning the assumptions about teachers' responses to reform. In the final section, we discuss the implications of the findings for the way standards-based reform in Washington state is conceived and executed, to meet the learning needs of the full range of the state's students.

### **Examining Assumptions about Teachers' Responses to State Standards-Based Reform**

To shed light on the potential impact of state standards-based reform on improvements in teaching and learning, we clarify what the theory of action would assume about how teachers attend to, interpret, and act on reform messages or requirements. Doing so probes the operative theory of action, not only for the assumed causal connections between major state actions (e.g., creation of learning standards, establishment of an accountability system) and ultimate outcomes (improved student learning), but also for the intervening mechanisms (especially teachers and teaching) by which the causal force of the reform might bring about these effects. The assumptions we encounter in this process about how teachers think and behave bear close scrutiny.

The starting point is the overall theory of action—that is, the set of assumptions about the way the world works or how it may be changed that may guide, explain, or justify the change (Argyris & Schön, 1982). The capsule characterization of that theory at the beginning of this article captures the basic approach taken in Washington and in many other states. But stated in these terms, the theory rests on a more fine-grained set of assumptions about what teachers will think and do when faced with the fact of the reform. Because they are not really “theories” in the classical, scholarly sense of the term, reformers’ theories of action are likely to be inherently incomplete, in the sense that they highlight particular actions and causal sequences over which reformers exert the greatest control, while leaving other actions or conditions, which lie in a “zone of wishful thinking” beyond the reformers’ control (Hill & Celio, 2001, p. 17), hoped for and often implicit. By scrutinizing these assumptions, observers and policymakers can get a more concrete sense of both the logic that might enable the policy to achieve its goals and a first line of evidence that it has actually done so.

At least five assumptions about the connections between state reform and improved teaching reside in the theory of action that underlies standards-based reform in Washington and many other states. Whether or not these are stated in so many words, such initiatives assume that teachers will respond in the following ways after the enactment of the reform policy:

*Assumption One:* Teachers will pay attention to the reform and become familiar with the standards and what they imply for practice (Wilson & Floden, 2001).

*Assumption Two:* Teachers will take the reform seriously, as will their supervisors and other local leaders, who will exhort teachers to meet the demands of the policy, and offer support, as needed (Stecher, Chun, Barron, & Ross, 2000).

*Assumption Three:* Teachers will adjust their instruction to align with the standards and associated assessments (including preparation for assessment) (Stecher et al., 2000). In the best sense of the phrase, they will “teach to the test.”

*Assumption Four:* Teachers will expect all of their students to succeed—and believe that they are capable of succeeding (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). Where students are likely to struggle, teachers will adjust their teaching practice to maximize the students’ chances of success (Kannapel, Aagaard, Coe, & Reeves, 2001).

*Assumption Five:* Teachers will have access to appropriate professional learning opportunities (Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; Thompson & Zeuli, 1999). What is more, those teachers who are not fully prepared to teach to the ambitious learning standards, if not others, will take advantage of these learning opportunities, thereby developing the requisite knowledge, skills, and commitment, and their teaching practice will improve accordingly.

The net effect of these responses, so the theory goes, will be improvements in student learning, as shown schematically in Figure 1. In short, this picture of assumed teachers’ responses rests on a further assumption that students will take the reform seriously, have access to appropriate learning opportunities and home support, and perform accordingly, culminating in demonstrated mastery of the knowledge and skills which the reform initiative promotes (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001; Powell, 1996).

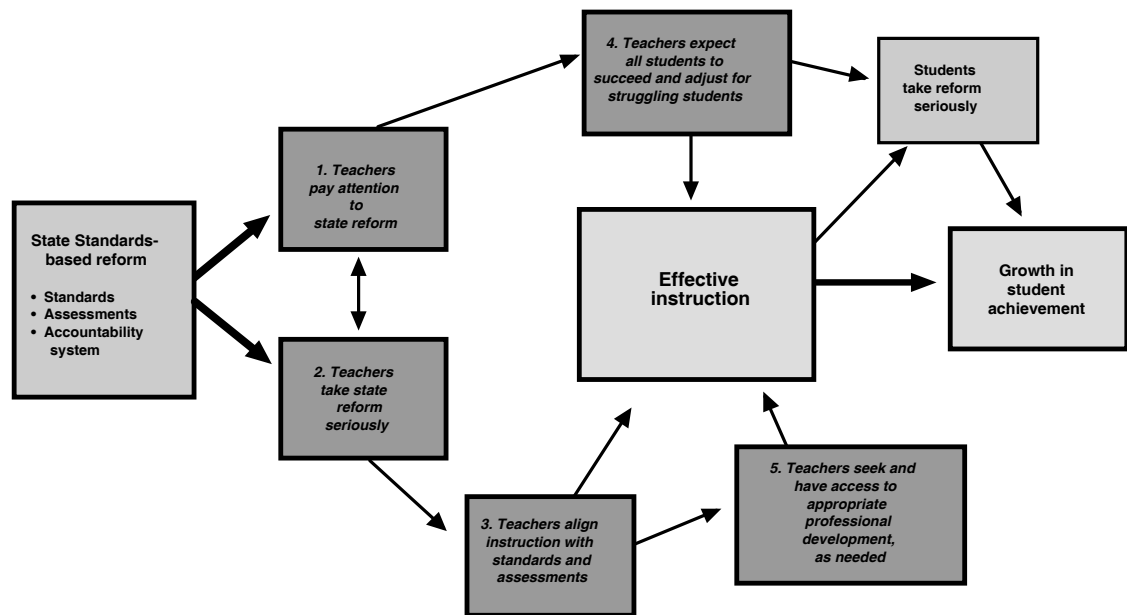


Figure 1. Six assumptions about the responses of teachers to standards-based reform policy

Though they are generally implicit, one can infer these assumptions from the way most states have configured state-level standards, assessments, and accountability requirements, from the logic of doing so, and from the broader rhetoric that surrounds this reform movement. There are other assumptions that could be added to this list (e.g., concerning the equitable allocation of resources to schools, district capacity, community expectations, and parental support), but in broad strokes this set captures essential activities related to the preparation for, and act of, teaching itself that would need to be in place no matter what the context. Admittedly, these assumptions emphasize the *instrumental* side of reform initiatives—in the sense that they presume a somewhat rational view of policy and its relation to policy effects. Reform policies can be understood in other ways, as a symbolic act, for example, or as the management of political conflict or the promotion and protection of social values (Malen & Knapp, 1997). Seen from these vantage points, the reform initiative does not necessarily implicate teachers and teaching in the ways outlined above. That said, there is still value in considering the instrumental logic of the reform theory, as it is likely to be a central premise behind many actors' work.

While this inquiry focuses on how teachers' actions reflect certain assumptions underlying a state reform theory of action, we acknowledge that teachers are responding to federal and local initiatives as well. Following on the heels of the state standards-based reform movement, NCLB strengthened and broadened federal authority over public education (Jennings, 2003). With bipartisan support, this legislation reinforced or strengthened the high-stakes consequences that were a part of most state reforms, by tying availability of federal funding to successful implementation. The expectation of NCLB is that students from all groups will achieve proficiency in state assessments in reading and mathematics by 2014, and that highly qualified teachers would help them get there. In this sense, the federal law embodied many of the assumptions implied by the state reforms. On their part, districts mediate both federal mandates and state learning standards, often assuming prime responsibility for the equity agenda of standards-based reform (McLaughlin &

Talbert, 2003). As the local entity responsible for implementing standards-based reform, districts often add specificity to the reforms, by defining in more operational terms what teachers are expected to do to meet the standards, though at the same time reinterpreting state expectations in the process (Spillane, 1996). From the teachers' point of view, however, the presence of federal and local input into the standards-based policy environment surrounding their teaching may not matter that much. They may not know or care whether the version of standards-based reform to which they are responding emanates from state, local, or federal sources, or some combination. The essential assumptions reviewed above are still likely to be the same.

Not all observers of state standards-based reform hold as optimistic a view of the way teachers and teaching will respond to this class of reform initiatives as the logic of the reform implies. On both logical and empirical grounds, critics have asserted that these reforms can have counterproductive effects on instruction. These issues include a narrowing of the curriculum being taught (Madaus & Clarke, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001); an overemphasis on some aspects of the curriculum, such as problem solving, to the detriment of other aspects, such as acquiring basic skills (Wilson & Floden, 2001); a reduction in teachers' willingness to undertake "authentic" performance-based assessment (Whitford & Jones, 2000); a reduction in teachers' morale (Jones, G., Jones B., & Hardin et al., 1999); and a decline in teacher professionalism in the face of standardized prescriptions about what they must accomplish (Whitford & Jones, 2000; Stoll & Stobard, 2005). These criticisms bear careful consideration in any analysis of teachers' response to reform.

## Framing Ideas

Two bodies of scholarship frame this work—scholarship concerning the implementation of standards-based reform at the teachers' level and the education of low-income and historically underserved racial and ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> First, researchers have been developing a substantial body of evidence about the implementation and impacts of standards-based reform, much of it tracing the reform policy from point of origin at the state level to the ultimate destination in classrooms (e.g., Fuhrman, 2001; Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997; Spillane, 2004). While many of these studies pursue the matter from a reformer-centric viewpoint, starting with the reform provision and tracing downwards to their destination in classrooms, a small body of alternative work pursues the matter in a more teacher-centric way, focusing on the attitudes, actions, and perceptions of teachers, along with observable effects on classroom practice (Knapp & Meadows, 2005). Second, scholarship on reform in multicultural contexts and a rapidly developing line of studies about the education of culturally and socioeconomically diverse learners offer insights into ways teachers can more effectively approach a diverse student population (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco M., 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> Students from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups have had less access to high quality public education in the United States than their peers. These include students from the following racial and ethnic groups: African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. Throughout this paper, we use this term interchangeably with the shorter phrase *students of color*. We also use the term diversity throughout the paper. Here, we are referring to the differences among racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups that teachers are serving.

**Teacher-centric Research on Standards-Based Reform**

A great deal of research has investigated the implementation and effects of state standards-based reform, and some has attended to what teachers do and think in the standards-based policy environment in which they find themselves. Two lines of inquiry are especially helpful in investigating the first three assumptions underlying the reform theory of action (regarding teachers' attention to the reform; the seriousness with which they and others take the reform; and their adjustment of instruction to align with standards and associated assessments). The first line of inquiry concentrates on teachers' responses to aligned curricular reforms (e. g., Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002; Porter & Smithson, 2001; Wilson & Floden, 2001) and a second, more recent line, focuses on teachers' response to assessment and accountability (e. g., Grant, 2001; Kannapel et al., 2000; Mabry, Poole, Redmond, & Schultz, 2003; Stecher et al., 2000; Whitford & Jones, 2000). In certain cases, scholarship in these lines has informed the critiques of the unresolved equity agenda of standards-based reform. Summaries of this body of work paint the following kind of picture of effects on teachers and teaching:

Teachers are tired, sometimes energized, sometimes confused. They sometimes feel a loss of professional identity—the essential job of teaching amidst new reform pressures. At least initially, the majority of teachers do not get “both the words and the tune” of standards-based reform, which is not surprising given how ambitiously the new learning agenda has been set. They have responded to standards-based reforms in a variety of ways, and whether they are happy about the direction of reform or not, few teachers have ignored, or feel they can ignore, the current wave of state and federal policy activity. Not surprisingly, there are discernible impacts on teaching practice, some more attuned to the intent of standards-based practice, others not... (Knapp & Meadows, 2005, p. 143).

More specifically, these studies shed some light on several of the assumptions noted earlier. For example, teachers appear well aware of the reforms, and are paying attention to them, especially those aspects that are heavily tested (Wilson & Floden, 2001). There are clear, though often superficial effects on context of instruction that are traceable to state (and sometimes national) standards. There are observable changes in teachers' practice that relate to what state standards tag as the most important, though often teachers seem to be making changes that may not reflect the deeper intent of state reforms, as in research on 25 elementary and middle school mathematics classrooms (Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). While elements of reform-oriented practice were present in all of the study's classrooms, only four of the participants taught in ways that truly reflected reformers' ideas about mathematics instruction.

Studies focusing on standards suggest that these tools have only limited effects on changing instruction; however, survey research provides clear evidence that state assessments have altered teaching, sometimes more substantially (Abrams, Peudilla, Madaus, 2003; Stecher, et al., 2000). By comparing teachers' responses in states with low- and high-stakes attached to improvement on assessments, for example, Abrams, et al. documented that the pressure to raise scores compels teachers to dedicate substantial amounts of instructional time to test preparation. More specifically, a large number of teachers in both high- (85%) and low-stakes (67%) states reported teaching test-taking skills in preparation for the state tests.

These changes in instruction hint at another kind of teacher-level response to state reforms: teachers have found it difficult—or not practical—to enact the basic premise of standards-based reform—that *all* students be helped to succeed. The pattern manifests itself in several ways. First, in a variety of settings, teachers simply do not believe that all students are capable of meeting state



standards (Spillane, 2001), or they hold different meanings for “all children can succeed” (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002), and they often attribute this to students’ backgrounds. The roots of the problem go far deeper, however, and implicate policy, support systems, and school program design, as much as teachers’ beliefs about how state standards-based reform efforts have addressed issues of equity. Orfield and Kornhaber (2001) maintain that when it mechanically adheres to standards-based assessment systems, high-stakes accountability can clearly perpetuate an education system that does not work well for many learners, especially students of color from low-income family backgrounds. Massel, Kirst, and Hoppe (1997) characterize nine states’ approach to equity in the early design and implementation of state reforms as “episodic and weak” (p. 9). They note that policy designs did not address the social problems affecting numerous districts. C. Suárez-Orozco and M. Suárez-Orozco (2001) articulate a similar limitation in the design of many standards-based policies, arguing, “The models for these school reform efforts have as a common denominator the experiences of middle-class mainstream children” (p.144). Related research has indicated that the press to bring all students to standard has marginalized multicultural reforms in a Midwestern school district (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000).

### Promising Practices for Low Income Students and Students of Color

The possibility that a large number of teachers may not be serving all students equally well under standards-based reform—especially students from low-income and racial-minority backgrounds—begs questions about what is known about teaching these segments of the student population effectively. Here, scholarship on multicultural education is particularly useful and helps to illuminate what might be meant or implied by Assumptions 4 and 5 cited earlier (regarding teachers’ expectations that their students will succeed; and teachers’ access to appropriate professional learning opportunities). It follows that a major goal of the field of multicultural education “is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (J.A. Banks, 2004, p. 3).

The goal of bringing all school children to standard is enormously ambitious for a system that, since its inception, has served only some learners well, while sorting others into less demanding “tracks” or simply offering them an impoverished education on the premise that they are capable of little more. Past practice of this sort has clearly contributed to “achievement gaps” between the performance of students from different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups.<sup>3</sup> Drawing primarily from ethnographies and qualitative case studies, research about classroom and school-based practices in multicultural education offers examples of strategies that have been effective at bridging these gaps in achievement between White students and those from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups.

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<sup>3</sup> The widely used term *achievement gap* refers specifically to differences in performance between different groups of students, generally highlighting the underachievement of students from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups and those living in poverty. We maintain that this concept is limited inasmuch as it fails to suggest the role of other key differences affecting the performance of students in school. Meier (2002) argues: “Some of the gaps we need to worry about require a direct political assault. These include the gap between the resources that are available to some kids and not others—including those that we’ve denied kids because we claim they don’t affect their test scores! One gap to focus on is the quality of teacher expertise provided, which is a tougher task than imposing more tests, but one not made easier by our relentless bashing of people who teach poor kids—not to mention their lower salaries and inferior working conditions” (p. 152).

Prominent among discussions in multicultural education are three aspects of common practice in schools that standards-based reform makes varying attempts to address. First, the curriculum that predominates in U.S. schools misrepresents and makes invisible many segments of a pluralistic student population (Nieto, 1992; Banks, 2004). This omission in schooling can have an alienating effect on members of marginalized groups, who experience significant cultural discontinuities between their home lives and what they experience at school.

Second, while their teachers are not likely to understand or appreciate the home culture or funds of knowledge they bring to school (Moll, 1992), some teachers modify their instruction in ways that clearly facilitate these students' academic achievement. Notions of culturally responsive and culturally relevant teaching exemplify approaches to instruction that work well with students of color by attending to the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and learning styles of the students (Gay, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1994). Through these means, these instructional practices enable teachers to treat students' backgrounds as a resource for learning.

A key element of these approaches to instruction is teachers' belief that all of the students can and must excel. A common thread of the assessment strategies shared by Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (2004) is the linkage between these high expectations with student responsibility for learning. Gay notes that students may be involved in defining how their performance will be evaluated by teachers. Similarly, Ladson-Billings describes a teacher in her ethnography who assisted her students in developing their own academic standards and selecting evidence of mastery of their skills. Gay also cites an example in which students are taught the "cultural capital" of school success" (p. 33) which is inclusive of test taking strategies, self presentation techniques, and study skills.

Third, these instructional approaches are related to larger efforts to cultivate an empowering school culture and social structure (C.A.M Banks & J. Banks, 1995). Transforming teaching in ways that work optimally for low-income and racial minority students requires adults to confront racial, ethnic, and social class inequities present deep in the structure of schools. An empowering school culture and social structure is formed when the climate and organization of the school are transformed so that students from different groups may experience equal status. These involve school staff members' analysis of and deliberate response to the school's grouping and labeling practices, opportunities for extracurricular participation, inequality in achievement, enrollment in gifted and special education programs and the interaction among staff and students across ethnic, racial, and social class groups. As with efforts to make the curriculum speak more effectively to a diverse student population and to cultivate teachers' cultural responsiveness, whole-school transformation of this sort is not a focus of standards-based reform. While some state reforms take aim at the whole-school change, as in Kentucky (e.g., Foster, 2000), the emphasis of these efforts is likely to be placed on developing the school's capacity generically, as a decision-making unit, locus of professional development, and unit of accountability.

Research on multicultural education and standards-based reform indicates that these approaches share the vision of attaining educational equality among students from diverse racial, ethnic and social class groups. Yet the two bodies of scholarship attend to different aspects of the educational system and its implications for the learning of a diverse student population. While research on standards based reform presents it as a systemic approach coming from legislative policy, multicultural education emphasizes the roles and practices of teachers and schools in their efforts to serve diverse student needs. These two perspectives are useful when considering the case of a state that is grappling with the underachievement of students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

## Policy Context

Washington state has been described as “the vanguard of the standards movement” (Hill & Lake, 2002, p. 199). Modeled after David Hornbeck’s Kentucky consent decree that set in motion one of the early, comprehensive efforts to mount a state-wide standards-based reform, Washington’s package was passed in 1993.<sup>4</sup> Some stakeholders such as the National Business Roundtable saw Washington as one of four states that had enacted the most complete standards-based reform program at the time. Policy and business leaders in the state and other early adopters of standards-based reform assumed that establishment of a performance-based system would alter the behavior of teachers, parents, school administrators, and students. The Washington State Education Reform Act shares characteristics with a number of other states’ legislation, locating the rationale for educational reform in workforce needs (Sleeter, 2005) and positing that ambitious learning standards may be attained by all students:

The legislature finds that student achievement in Washington must be improved to keep pace with societal changes, changes in the workplace, and an increasingly competitive international economy.

To increase student achievement, the legislature finds that the state of Washington needs to develop a public school system that focuses more on the educational performance of students, that includes high expectations for all students, and that provides more flexibility for school boards and educators in how instruction is provided (Washington Laws, ch. 336, 1993).

The Education Reform Act mandated the development of new student learning goals, assessments of student learning, and an accountability system for schools. This initially led to the creation of Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in the areas of mathematics, reading, writing, and listening. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) was implemented first in grades four, seven, and ten over a period of several years to assess students’ mastery of the EALRs.<sup>5</sup> A striking characteristic of the state’s effort was the considerable involvement of teachers in crafting standards and the criterion-referenced assessments that were keyed to these standards (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Knapp & Meadows, 2005). Beyond the creation of the standards, however, the state has provided very little direction about how to teach to meet the new standards. Further, the state engaged in prolonged deliberations about the form of its accountability system (starting with a state Accountability Commission established in 1999), to offer rewards, supports, and sanctions for schools and districts that are tied to performance (Plecki & Loeb, 2004); the details of this system are only just being hammered out half a dozen years later.

During the last decade, Washington’s public school population has grown more diverse racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. The proportion of students of color among the population served by the state’s schools now stands at 31%, up 8% from eight years earlier (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), State Report Card, 2006). The increase in diversity reflects more than the racial or ethnic background of the student population because the percentage of students from low-income backgrounds has also increased. The proportion of children receiving Free or Reduced-Price lunches has risen from 31% to 37% since 1997. In Washington, as in other states, achievement data reveal that low-income and students from

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<sup>4</sup> The package was passed as House Bill 1209 (chapter 336) and named the Washington Education Reform Act (RCW 28A.150.210), establishing student achievement goals in core subjects.

<sup>5</sup> The Science WASL was implemented in the fifth and eighth grades in 2004 and 2003 respectively.

historically underserved racial and ethnic groups are less likely to meet standard on the state assessment than their White, Asian, and more affluent peers.<sup>6</sup>

The growing diversity of the student population is not matched, however, by corresponding changes in the teaching workforce. As in many states, the demographic configuration of classroom teachers in the state has remained remarkably stable over time: it remains largely White (93% in 2005, a figure that is virtually unchanged since 1997) (OSPI, *Personnel by Major Position and Ethnicity*, 1998; OSPI, *Personnel by Major Position and Racial/Ethnic*, 2006). In addition, the state's workforce is relatively stable. Recent research on teacher retention and mobility in Washington indicates that a majority of the state's teachers remained in the same school after the five-year period from 2000–01 to 2004–05 (Plecki, Elfers, Knapp & McGowan, 2007). In addition, close to 75% of teachers are still in the same districts. Only a fifth left the Washington education system altogether and of these, many were retirements, a pattern that put to rest a common perception that Washington is losing a disproportionate number of teachers from the workforce (Plecki et al., 2007).

This setting has some specific advantages for examining the soundness of standards-based reform assumptions: continuous and long-term pursuit of the reform by state policy, with relatively little distraction from other initiatives, as in some other states; a relatively stable and qualified teaching population; and a student population that is growing in diversity. While not providing generalizable insights into standards-based reform operating in other less advantageous settings, Washington's context affords a particularly good way of assessing the potential for such an approach under conditions that largely support such a reform.

## **Methods and Sources**

To understand teachers' work and how to support it in greater depth, it helps to get information directly from teachers and from the sites of their daily practice. As a means of hearing directly from teachers on various matters, including the issues discussed in this paper, a "fast response" survey system was constructed. Based on a survey system designed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the fast-response surveys are relatively short (completed in 20 minutes or less) and administered to a standing sample of teachers who have agreed in advance to participate in the survey series and receive a modest honorarium for doing so. Quick turnaround of questionnaires (approximately 6–8 weeks) and high response rates (in most instances, 90% or better) make this kind of a system especially useful for gathering accurate and representative survey data from teachers.<sup>7</sup>

We began the development of survey instruments by using an item bank of questions, some of which were borrowed from existing national, state, and local instruments, and some of which we created specifically for the Washington context. Each survey instrument was piloted with a group of elementary, middle, and high school teachers to review the item content and format. Instruments were prepared in two formats: paper and web-based. Recognizing that web-based surveys offer faster turn-around times, simple branch logic, and less data entry, we wanted to test this format as an

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<sup>6</sup> In Washington state, disaggregated data are not available about subgroups of Asian students. Thus it is difficult to tease out the ways different groups may be poorly served by the state education system.

<sup>7</sup> All three of the surveys deployed in the first year had a completion rate in excess of 90%. Survey 4 had a completion rate of 87% and Surveys 5 and 6 had a completion rate of 90%. Reminder phone calls were made to those completing the paper surveys and email messages were sent to those using the online system for those who had not completed the survey by the return date.

efficient means for gathering information from teachers. However, acknowledging not only that people differ in their comfort levels with web-based applications, and also that access to technology may be a problem for some, we allowed teachers to opt for a paper version (with identical items to the online version). Among respondents over the two year period, approximately 60% chose web-based surveys; 40% chose paper-based surveys.

During the 2003–04 school year, we mounted a series of three surveys which explored issues of assignment, certification, working conditions, and professional development, among a sample of approximately 400 teachers. In the following school year (2004–05), a similarly sized sample (half of whom had participated in the first-year surveys) replied to three more questionnaires concerning responses to state education reform, approaches to teaching a diverse student population, and stability and mobility in teachers' careers.

The 400 teachers in the standing sample were selected based on a stratified random selection of all Washington classroom teachers, by region of the state, experience level of the teacher, and poverty level of the school in which they teach (see Table 1). The sampling frame was generated using the state's personnel database (S–275) for the prior year. For example, from the database in 2002–03, we identified 57,247 classroom teachers, of which we were able to include 54,807 or 96% in the sampling frame. Using this kind of randomly generated sample also provided an appropriate representation of teachers across all grade levels. The fact that the characteristics of the survey participants closely approximate actual statewide statistics and the high response rates in all cells in the sampling grid, offer evidence that the sample is a reasonably accurate representation of the state's teachers.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1  
*Characteristics of the Teacher Sample (Stratification Variables)*

Variable	Category
Region	Central Puget Sound
	Eastern Washington
	Western Washington (outside of the Central Puget Sound)
Teacher Experience	0–4 years
	5–14 years
	15 or more years
School Poverty Indicator	0 to 20 % Enrolled in Free or Reduced Price Lunch program
	21 to 50 % Enrolled in Free or Reduced Price Lunch program
	51 to 100 % Enrolled in Free or Reduced Price Lunch program

*Note.* Region as represented by Educational Service Districts. Puget Sound region is represented by Educational Service District (ESD) 121. Western WA (not including ESD 121) is represented by ESDs 112, 113, 114 and 189. Eastern Washington represented by ESDs 101, 105, 123 and 171.

The data for this paper come primarily from two questionnaires, administered during the 2004–05 school year, the first seeking overall responses to reform, and the second (launched two months later) capturing teachers' approaches to working with students of color and English

<sup>8</sup> The survey sample closely reflected age, ethnicity and experience level of Washington's close to 53,000 teachers. Sampling along the selected criteria by region of the state slightly over-represents rural areas and slightly under-represents urban areas. In addition, respectively greater and smaller proportions of survey participants taught in Eastern Washington and Central Puget Sound. For more information about our sampling strategy, and the ways in which the sample reflected the teacher population, please see Elfers, Plecki, Knapp, Boatright, and Loeb (2004).

Language Learners.<sup>9</sup> Responses to other survey items in the series relevant to state reform provide additional anchor points, for establishing reliability of response and, in other ways, validating the data from the two focal surveys.

To analyze the survey data, we ran frequencies of teachers' responses and cross tabulations in which we compared items based on characteristics used to construct the sampling frame. Since gaps in achievement associated with race, ethnicity, and poverty are an issue in Washington state (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002), we analyzed teachers' responses based on the student populations they served, either by linking it to state data about Free or Reduced Price Lunch recipients or to teachers' reports of the students they served.<sup>10</sup> Teachers provided information about the racial and ethnic makeup of their classrooms, we compared responses based on reports of classrooms that are primarily White (10% or fewer children of color) with those that met and exceeded the proportion of children of color in Washington public schools (30%) in the 2004–05 school year.<sup>11</sup>

## Results

The survey data offer a fairly detailed picture of teachers' views of the reform, their classroom practices, their professional development experiences, and how they address the learning needs of racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse students in their classrooms. Two themes emerge from the analysis. First, as teachers describe their work and perceptions of the reform, *the assumptions about teachers' response to state education reform—prominently featuring teachers' and other local educators' attention to reform, adjustment of teaching practice to align with reform expectations, teachers' expectations for students' success, and teachers' access to professional learning opportunities—are sound in many respects.* Second, *the theory's assumptions about teachers serving, and being helped to serve, the increasingly diverse student population well, however, are not well supported.* Here, it appears that teachers are not optimistic about how well all of their students will do, especially in high-poverty schools, and they have had limited opportunities for learning how to help culturally and socioeconomically diverse students succeed. Furthermore, the ways teachers and their schools are approaching student diversity leave many avenues of support for student success untapped. These facts may offer some explanations for why the gap in achievement associated with race, ethnicity and poverty remains stubbornly in place in Washington.

### Theme One: Teachers Are Responding as the State's Reform Theory Presumes

The responses of these teachers offer evidence that the state education reform is achieving some of its intended results. In short, based on these survey responses, we can infer that the

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<sup>9</sup> This paper does not include our analyses of survey responses about approaches to serving English language learners (ELL students). We made this choice because a sizable proportion of teachers in Washington serve few or no ELL students. For the majority (78%), ten percent or fewer of their students are identified as ELL.

<sup>10</sup> Shannon and Bylsma (2002) provide information about a range of measures of student achievement by race and ethnicity. The authors report gaps between White and Asian students and those from other racial and ethnic groups on the WASL, the SAT, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Scholastic Achievement Test.

<sup>11</sup> While we hoped to investigate the responses of teachers in schools that had a larger proportion of students of color, our sample size was too small to further segment our data.

standards, assessments, and accountability system set up by the state reform process is achieving many of the intermediate outcomes assumed or implied by the theory of action—that is, they are shaping classroom practice and affecting student learning opportunities in ways that are apparently and plausibly linked to enhanced student learning itself (Assumptions 1-3 first discussed earlier). The state's reform theory implies that teachers' response to the reform will be present in their attention to the framework of aligned standards, assessments, and accountability requirements; in their attempts to follow its guidance and adjust classroom practice accordingly; and, ultimately, in measures of student learning.

*Relevance of state standards.* First, survey responses indicate that the great majority of teachers are familiar with the state standards and see them as relevant to their teaching. Ninety-nine percent of teachers indicate they are at least somewhat familiar with the EALRs in the subjects they teach, and nearly two-thirds (62%) indicate they are very familiar with them. EALRs, WASL, and Grade Level Expectations (GLEs)—the state's grade-level standards in academic subjects—have considerable relevance for teachers' daily classroom practice, as they see it. Teachers indicate a moderate or great deal of relevance for EALRs (84%), the WASL (73%), and GLEs (75%). In addition, 83% of teachers in high-poverty schools note that GLEs have a moderate or great deal of relevance to their classroom practice as compared with 71% of their colleagues in low-poverty schools.

*Administrator encouragement.* Second, teachers see school and district administrators, in particular, as actively encouraging teachers to improve their practice in line with the reform—78% of the teachers in the sample say that their principals are doing so a “moderate amount” or a “great deal,” and a comparable percentage (73%) report the same about their district's central office leaders or staff. In contrast, “parents of the students I teach” or “community members in this district” are far less frequently a source of encouragement for improving teaching practice in response to reform (20 and 18%, respectively reported by teachers).

*Adjustment of instruction.* Third, for the most part, teachers report adjusting their classroom practice to align with these standards and with the assessments that are mapped to the standards. Nearly four-fifths (79%) say they organize learning activities explicitly around state or state-derived standards. Teachers indicate that, instead of teaching a broader range of skills (only 28% do this), they focus more deeply on a smaller number of topics (62%). Nearly three-quarters of teachers (73%) report emphasizing problem solving and critical thinking more than they did in the past—a major thrust of the state's reform. For those who teach in subject areas and grades guided by state standards and grade-level expectations, 95% indicate their classroom-based performance assessments are somewhat or closely aligned to the WASL (90% see district-required assessments in the same way). However, at the same time, 63% of the teachers report placing more emphasis on teaching basic skills, an approach that receives less attention in Washington's reform effort.

Fourth, state reform has impacted the content of what teachers teach, as well as how they teach, especially in the elementary school grades, as shown in Table 2. Here, the education reform appears to be having the greatest impact on teachers and learners in the level of schooling which has had the longest continuous exposure to state reform expectations.

Table 2

*Sample respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about how state standards have affected their teaching (n=349)*

Teachers who say that they...	Elementary	Middle	High school
Focus more deeply on a smaller number of topics	67%	57%	52%
Organize learning activities more explicitly around state or state-derived standards	84%	77%	64%
Integrate assessments into classroom instruction more extensively	80%	70%	66%
Ask students to explain their thinking more often and in greater detail	87%	74%	69%
Use textbooks more selectively	66%	63%	48%
Adapt the content to match what is tested	82%	73%	67%

Moreover, it is clear that not only are teachers trying to incorporate assessment into their classroom practice, as the table suggests, they are taking assessment results seriously and trying to orient instruction towards state- and district-required assessments. As a result of state reform, over three-quarters of respondents indicate they pay more attention to assessment results (77%), adapt the content of their teaching to match what is tested (77%), or use instructional strategies that are compatible with WASL items (81%).

In some ways, this pattern of response to reform could be understood as “teaching to the test,” a common criticism of standards-based reform (e.g., Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). The ultimate question is whether doing so improves learning opportunities for students and has the effect of inducing better performance on measures of knowledge and skills that matter. While these surveys cannot provide complete evidence on this score, most teachers (at elementary and middle school levels, especially) believe that what they are doing in response to state reform is benefiting students, as summarized in Table 3. (A caveat is that close to half of middle and high school teachers do *not* think that the reform has brought a moderate or great deal of benefit to students with regard to increasing their performance.)

Table 3

*Sample respondents' judgment of the consequences of Washington state education reform (n=349)*

Survey item	Elementary	Middle	High school
Respondents who thought that Washington state reform has brought about a “moderate amount” or “a great deal” of benefit to students through...			
Clear expectations for student learning	71%	57%	52%
Increased rigor in student learning experiences	75%	73%	60%
Increased student performance	61%	50%	46%
Respondents who thought state reform had created a “modest” or “great” effect on these aspects of student learning in the following areas			
Have developed deeper understanding of certain topics in the curriculum	61%	50%	37%
Show increased skill in problem solving critical thinking	62%	53%	40%

The differences between levels of schooling reveal a cup half empty, with the benefits to students *least* in evidence at the high school level. At the same time, these differences suggest the



possibility that where the state reforms have been in place the longest (elementary schools), the effects on teachers' instructional practice, and ultimately students are strongest.<sup>12</sup> One other finding derived from comparing veteran teachers and novices reinforces the interpretation we offer above. Teachers who were in Washington classrooms *before* the reform's initiation in the early 1990s—and are therefore in a good position to compare teaching and learning under the state education reform initiative to what preceded it—are especially likely to report benefits from the reform. By comparison with teachers who have taught four years or fewer, these teachers (in classrooms for fifteen or more years) more frequently view the reform as having contributed to increased rigor in student learning experiences and gains in student performance. Other reported benefits are the better ways of demonstrating what students have mastered and the greater collaboration among teachers.

The fact that teachers' practice increasingly aligns with state reform and appears to be producing some learning benefits for students coincides with some evidence of significant complications. In short, the survey data make clear that as teachers see it, there are important costs and possibly an intangible toll on teachers and students who are trying to meet a demanding standard. Table 4 indicates that both students' special learning needs and policymakers' unrealistic expectations are prominent issues for teachers in Washington. Teachers also express concerns about the shift of the instructional focus to testing, and note that resources are not sufficient to carry out the reforms. These responses were strikingly similar in both high- and low-poverty schools and buildings serving larger and smaller numbers of students of color. There were also no significant differences based on school-level and teachers' years of experience.

Table 4

*Survey respondents who thought that Washington state education reform had "raised the following issues or concerns" (n=349)*

Potential problem with state reforms	Agree/strongly agree
Too much focus or time on testing	89%
Special learning needs not well served	85%
Not enough resources to do the job well	84%
Increased public misunderstanding of schools	81%
Too little instructional time to realize state reform goals	80%
Unrealistic expectations for teaching and learning	79%
Accountability system that is too inflexible	78%
Narrowing of the curriculum	75%

<sup>12</sup> State standards and assessments phased in at the elementary school level three years before the high school. That said, there is more involved in the comparison between high schools and elementary schools than the different length of exposure to the state standards and related assessments. The more complex, departmentalized structure of high schools and the prevailing professional cultures within them are among the other conditions that may have made the high schools less susceptible to influence by the state's reform efforts to date. In addition, not all high school teachers teach the specific subjects that are part of the state's assessment system.

**Theme Two: The State Reforms Have not Prompted or Assisted Teachers To Serve All Students Equally Well**

While survey data point to teachers' understanding of the standards and changes in their instruction, their responses concerning the education of students of color and students from low-income households indicate problems with important premises of the Washington reform's theory of action. In particular, the findings call into question the soundness of Assumptions 4 and 5 (concerning teachers' expectations of student success and adjustments to work effectively with struggling students, and access to and participation in relevant professional development).

To begin with, students of color and from low-income circumstances represent a rapidly growing proportion of the student population, so most teachers across the state face some demographic diversity in their work. We asked teachers in the survey about the populations they encounter in their classrooms as well as the challenges they face in serving their students. Their responses make it clear that, while not touching all teachers, the overall trends described earlier in the paper are affecting many classrooms. Close to half of the teachers (47%) in the sample indicate that their classrooms have become more diverse in the last five years. Nearly all teachers (93%) have students in their classrooms from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups. Two-thirds of the teachers report that at least 10% of their students represent a racial or ethnic minority.

In this context of growing diversity, teachers note explicit concerns about the state reform effort, especially in the areas related to serving special learning needs and supports for the reform. In addition, it appears that the survey respondents are not optimistic about the expectation of bringing all students to standard. Finally survey responses shed light on some areas of teaching and professional development that need attention given the reports of limited implementation of approaches advocated by multicultural scholars.

*Teachers predict that many students will not succeed.* While recent data from the WASL indicate a gradual increase in the number of students meeting standard statewide, persistent gaps in achievement persist between White and Asian students and those from African American, Hispanic, and Native American groups in all subjects at all grade levels since the 1996–97 school year (OSPI State Report Card, 2006). These gaps are mirrored in the survey responses as a majority of the teachers in the sample report that a substantial portion of their students—a fifth or more—would be unlikely to meet grade-level standard by the end of the school year. The percentages are even more striking for students in high-poverty schools and in schools in which students of color make up more than 30% of the population. As detailed in Table 5, teachers in both high-poverty and higher-minority schools raise greater concerns about student achievement. On average, teachers in these schools predict that at least 40% of their students would not reach grade-level standards. This trend was also reflected in the subjects of reading, mathematics and writing, albeit with smaller groups of teachers responding to this item.

Table 5

*Sample respondents' estimates of the percentage of students who would not reach grade-level standards (n=273)*

Teacher category	% predicted not to reach standards
Teachers serving...	
10% or fewer students of color	30%
30% or greater students of color	44%
Teachers in schools with...	
20% or fewer students receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch	31%
51% or greater students receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunch	46%
All Teachers	34%

It may be tempting to view teachers' predictions as statements of their belief in the basic capabilities of their students, thereby revealing self-fulfilling prophecies about students' success that have long been linked to the achievement gap. Both a deficit-based view and low expectations of students of color and those from low-income households have long been an issue (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Though low expectations may be part of what lies behind the survey responses, we have no way of distinguishing that from a putatively objective appraisal of the students' chances for success, given the students' progress at the time of survey response which occurred at the middle of the school year.

*Teachers' engagement in practices that are likely to be effective with a diverse student population.* When asked about practices advocated by multicultural scholars, teachers' responses suggested that these were used infrequently in their classrooms and schools. While culturally responsive teaching may mean different things to different teachers, only one-fourth claimed that this emphasis is a major part of their practice. Table 6 illustrates that less than one fourth of teachers strongly agreed that they employ practices associated with content integration and equity pedagogy. Teachers were most likely to report that these needs greatly affected textbooks and curriculum with multicultural content (24%) and that they emphasized content that has the greatest relevance to the home lives of their students (22%). In these cases, close to an additional third reported that the diversity of learning needs had a moderate effect on these types of practices. We also explored whether school context was associated with teachers' use of these practices and learned that teachers working in buildings with more than 30% students of color were no more likely to use these approaches a great deal.

When comparing teachers' responses about their own practice with the ways in which they characterized their schools, the buildings were even less committed to certain multicultural practices. Teachers reported that 18% of schools both place a great deal of emphasis on multicultural curriculum and explicitly address conflicts and other issues arising from the students' racial and ethnic differences. Eight percent provide a great deal of instruction or coaching in relation to the needs of a multicultural student population. We acknowledge two limitations with this data: Teachers' self-reports of their practices may overestimate their behavior, especially as they were responding to a survey focused on strategies aimed at diverse learners; and a single teacher's perception provides an incomplete picture of the building in which he or she works.

Table 6

*Survey respondents' perceptions of their own curriculum and diversity (n=316)*

Statement probed for extent of coverage	A moderate amount	A great deal
I emphasize content that has the greatest relevance to the home lives of the students I teach.	34%	22%
I make extensive use of textbooks and curriculum materials with multicultural content.	31%	24%
I teach topics that explicitly acquaint my students with cultures that are not represented in my room.	30%	21%
I teach topics that explicitly acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of students in the schools community.	29%	15%

*Teachers' preparedness for student diversity and access to relevant professional development.*

Patterns of teachers' practices raise an important question regarding their preparedness to serve their students. Only a third of teachers (34%) in our sample indicate that they feel "very prepared" to manage the diverse learning needs in their classrooms (as compared with 60% who feel "very prepared" to teach the official curriculum). We explored this issue further by asking about the kinds of experiences that had equipped them to work with students from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups. We learned that teachers had varying levels of exposure to these experiences, but had limited participation in what they regarded to be valuable forms of preparation, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

*Survey respondents statement of what prepared them to work with a diverse student population (n=316)*

What	% with this experience	% with experience who rate it as very helpful
My deep content knowledge in an academic subject	78%	41%
Formal preparation in a teacher education program	77%	24%
Having professional development over the years concerning work with a diverse student population	74%	22%
Long experience (5 or more years) working with a diverse student population	69%	61%
I lived or worked in a context in which I was not in the majority racial or ethnic group	37%	50%
Living in a country for more than 6 months in which English was not the predominant language	18%	70%

For most teachers, formal teacher preparation, professional development, and work experience are the means by which they have learned what they currently know about working with diverse student populations. For obvious reasons, veteran teachers are likely to have had more working experience with diverse student populations than their novice counterparts. On the other hand, newcomers to the profession are more likely to have had opportunities during their preservice teacher training to learn about working with diverse student populations. Nearly all novice teachers (92%) have had this chance, as compared with 61% of veteran teachers.

The most frequently available opportunities for learning to work effectively with student diversity are not necessarily the most valuable, as teachers see it. Teachers tend to regard their experiences in formal preparation programs as somewhat less helpful, on average, than those in which the teachers had either been in the role of outsider or had worked with diverse groups. While 24% rated their experiences in teacher preparation programs as very helpful, 70% of those who lived for at least six months in a country in which English was not the predominant language, and half of those who were living and working in a context in which they were not in the majority racial or ethnic group gave these experiences this “very helpful” rating. Over two-thirds (69%) of teachers also see long experience working with a diverse student population (i.e., five years or more) as a helpful way to prepare for these kinds of teaching challenges.

We also examined the professional development participation of teachers. While close to three fourths (74%) had engaged in professional learning activities related to working with a racially, ethnically and economically diverse student population over the years, only 22% of this group reported these activities as very valuable. Nonetheless, a sizable number of teachers recently (within the last three years) participated in activities focused on serving diverse needs in their classrooms. As Table 8 indicates, teachers reported with greater frequency that they had access to and participated in activities that dealt *indirectly* with race and ethnicity, with more than two thirds participating in professional learning focusing on conflict resolution, poverty or the achievement gap. Not surprisingly, the poverty measure of the schools in which teachers worked was a factor in professional development, since teachers in high poverty schools were more likely to participate in all of the activities in the table.

Table 8

*Survey respondents' identification of professional development focus (n=316)*

Topic	%
Strategies for addressing conflict, bullying, or harassment.	80%
The effects of poverty on student learning.	66%
The achievement gap and strategies to address it.	66%
Understanding and appreciating cultural differences.	62%
How to teach in a culturally responsive way.	48%
How to develop multicultural curriculum.	34%
The history of different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.	33%

These findings highlight the need for greater and more effective supports for serving students of color. While our survey research did not explicitly focus on low-income children, the responses of teachers working in high-poverty schools raise similar concerns about student achievement in these buildings. The overall pattern of survey responses raises questions about the progress of all students, instructional approaches and the quality of teacher preparation as Washington's reform effort has matured. In the section that follows, we discuss how teachers perceive the contradictions in the state's theory of action. On the one hand, teachers indicate that standards have become a routine part of their practice and communicate positive gains from the reform effort. On the other hand, teachers' expectations, practices, and preparation underscore the elusive nature of the aim of getting all students to a rigorous standard.

### Mixed Success in Realizing the State's Theory of Action

Because teachers are the central agents of standards-based reform (Cohen, 1990; Rowan, 1995), their views offer a critical vantage point on the assumptions about instruction embedded in the state's theory of standards-based reform. This survey data provides a glimpse into the complexity of reform implementation inside classrooms and schools. Our analysis of survey responses offers insight into the ways particular assumptions underlying the reform hold up across the state's teacher workforce. Further, this cross-sectional data reflect a specific moment in time, fall 2004 and winter 2005, a period in which the state effort was both relatively mature and responding to the strict accountability requirements of NCLB.

Strong evidence supports the first two instructional assumptions of the state's theory of action. Responses indicate *that teachers are paying attention to the reform and have become familiar with the standards and what they imply for practice*. An overwhelming majority of teachers report awareness of the standards and GLEs and note that these are tools commonly used in their instruction. Survey data also indicate *that teachers are taking the reform seriously, as do their supervisors and other local leaders, who are encouraging them to improve the quality of teaching and learning to meet the demands of the policy*. Teachers report that school and district administrators are actively encouraging them to improve their practice in line with the reform.

The third assumption that *teachers will adjust their instruction to align with the standards and associated assessments (including preparation for assessment)*—is also reflected in the survey data, although teachers articulate noteworthy concerns about the pressures that come with these changes. Most survey participants report they adapted their practice to align with these standards and with the assessments that are mapped to the standards. This adaptation is especially the case in elementary buildings, where the state reform effort was initially launched. However, the vast majority of teachers in the sample agree that the Washington's reform has set up unrealistic expectations about teaching and learning, contributed to the narrowing of the curriculum, and brought an accountability system that is inflexible. Moreover, 85% of survey respondents agreed that special learning needs are not well served in this effort.

Survey responses reveal that the fourth and fifth assumptions underlying Washington's reform theory may be its weakest elements, though our data is somewhat inconclusive in this regard. The fourth assumption asserts that *teachers will expect all of their students to succeed—and that they are capable of succeeding. Where students are likely to struggle, teachers will adjust their teaching practice to maximize the students' chances of success*. The survey offers no direct measure of teachers' expectations, but teachers' responses do indicate that, especially in classrooms with larger proportions of students of color or students in low-income households, teachers anticipated at least two-fifths of their students would not reach standard in the subjects that they taught. Such assertions may seem to teachers more a statement of fact about poor preparation in prior grades and what teachers believe students can realistically accomplish than a claim about students' ultimate capabilities.

Evidence also suggests that the fifth assumption about teachers' response to state reform may not be sound. Here, the theory assumes that *where teachers are not fully prepared to teach to the ambitious learning standards, they will seek out (and receive) appropriate professional learning opportunities*. The survey indicates that the kinds of professional development teachers had access to and participated in was associated with certain aspects of student learning needs more than others. While 80% had been recently trained in strategies to address bullying and harassment (thus reflecting the effects of the state's implementation of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act), only a third had engaged in professional learning activities concerning the history of different racial

and ethnic groups in the U.S., or the development of multicultural curriculum, despite the fact that 94% are working with students from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups. Learning how to teach a diverse student population involves far more than controlling bullying, yet teachers may not have had opportunities to engage in a broader, more appropriate range of professional learning.

The survey data do not help us to see how certain groups of students might be responding contrasted with others, and whether overall these students were motivated to succeed, or had access to appropriate learning opportunities as the assumption asserts. The findings do raise questions about whether these conditions hold for many students of color or students from low-income backgrounds.

### **What These Results Tell Us**

The varied soundness of these assumptions underlying Washington's reform theory of action alternately offers some hope that over the long term this kind of reform can "sink in" to instructional practice while raising questions about the logic and feasibility of standards-based reform. But before considering these implications, it is well to reflect on what this kind of data source can and cannot tell us. The survey responses represent teachers' perceptions of effect, and are only a proxy for actual observable effects in their classrooms. They are responses to structured survey items that give the respondent discrete categories in which to locate the far more complex nature of their experience. The surveys ask at one point in time for teachers to generalize across periods of time. As such, the surveys do not offer much depth, detail, or nuance in representing teachers' actual daily practice or their evolving understandings over time. Nonetheless, given the representative sampling and excellent response rates, these survey responses capture the full range of perceptions across the current teacher workforce in the entire state. The usefulness of these data lies in their capacity to complement the small number of cases that qualitative research has offered about how teachers experience the reform. The limitations of the survey as a source of evidence about teachers' responses to reform are just that—limitations. They do not obscure the fact that useful insights—at least at the level of propositions about reform effects—can be derived from them.

The results of the survey seem to be saying a few key things about the state's standards-based reform theory—first, that it is durable and workable; second, that it is uncomfortable for many teachers, and problematic in important ways from their point of view; and third, that it is incomplete and inattentive to the needs of student populations who have been historically underserved by public education. We will offer a few comments about each.

The fact that standards-based reform has continued in this state for more than a decade, and with apparently cumulative effect at the level of teachers is newsworthy. Teachers at the levels of schooling that have been longest exposed to the reform report the greatest benefits to students, as do teachers who have the longest time perspective on the effects of reform. The chain of events imagined or implied by the overarching theory of action appears to be playing out in many, if not most, classrooms across the state. Certain aspects of the state reform are largely working, according to teachers. Most are familiar with the standards, see them as relevant to their work, and report that they align their classroom practice to them and the related assessments. They report that the state reform has influenced the content of what they teach, as well as how they teach. They claim that they pay attention to assessment, take steps to incorporate assessment into their classroom practice, and try to prepare students for assessment. The outcomes that they describe in their teaching practices and for their students—e.g., greater critical thinking, problem solving and mastery of

concepts—may be the benefits of a longstanding investment of the state's grassroots reform strategy.

Given the relatively short half life of major state-level reforms in this nation, this pattern of gradually cumulating effects may indicate that the reform has some power to influence practice over the long term. The steadily improving performance of students on the state's standards-linked assessments across nearly ten years is a plausible outcome of the incremental changes in teaching practice. While this study has no way of confirming the relationship, it remains a provocative possibility. It would be worthwhile to investigate more deeply whether grassroots efforts like the one in this state may be a critical component of the theory of action in standards-based reform.

But there are also cumulative costs to this particular policy investment by the state that are intensively felt at the teachers' level. The underlying theme that teachers sense that too much is being asked of them (and of students), with too little support, is hard to avoid, coupled with concerns about excessive testing, inflexible accountability requirements, and what they see as a narrowing of the curriculum. This survey series can do little to weigh these costs against the benefits, nor to establish whether the costs are growing or diminishing over time. Some observers may believe that these results are positive indications: that teachers should feel pushed, and that the pressure they experience is testimony to the fact that the reform initiative is exerting the proper *leverage* over their actions and commitments. Whether that is so depends on one's vantage point and interests; however, it is hard to avoid the fact that many different concerns are held so consistently by the full range of teachers across the state, regardless of their level of experience and teaching circumstances. It is possible that the theory of action simply does not adequately address what it is taking out of teachers to achieve the effects that it intends.

One concern was that special learning needs are not well served, and this concern speaks directly to the incompleteness of the theory of action concerning mechanisms for ensuring that a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse student population gets what it needs from schooling. That students of color and those from lower income households are not effectively served by the schools is nothing new, and in some sense may not be surprising. But given the insistence of the reform theory that *all* students be helped to succeed, the lack of attention to this matter is striking.

Generally speaking, teachers indicate that they are relatively unprepared for this aspect of their classroom practice. Some powerful forms of preparation are within the reach of state and local policy, among them, helping teachers acquire deeper content knowledge in an academic subject, which four-fifths of the teachers claim they have had the chance to do. Other kinds of helpful experiences, which for the most part lie beyond the reach of professional development policy, may still figure into policies concerned with the recruitment and hiring of new teaching staff. Given that these kinds of life experiences are often seen as very helpful, states and localities, not to mention teacher development programs, might be more proactive in their search for individuals who have these characteristics in their backgrounds (Haberman, 1996). It is reasonable to conclude from this kind of analysis that adjustments to the theory of standards-based reform may be warranted. Furthermore, if these adjustments direct attention more single-mindedly to the needs of those students who have historically been least well served and least likely to succeed, the promise of this reform theory might be more fully realized.

That said, we acknowledge that a theory of standards-based reform may always be incomplete, in that, by itself, it will never address the inequities in housing, employment policy, health care access, and other life circumstances that collectively make educational goals more difficult to attain for certain members of society. In this sense, the gaps in service and achievement, together with growing student diversity in Washington's classrooms, not only raise questions about how to bolster teachers' sense of preparedness for this dimension of their work, but also suggest



that ongoing support for this aspect of their practice should come from policies beyond standards-based reform. Overall, this crucial feature of teachers' work in Washington state—finding ways to make education work well for the full range of students in the increasingly diverse student population—presents a continuing challenge to state policy, and to all who prepare or support teachers.

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