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### Are Local Policies Supporting Instruction Becoming Standardized?

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## **Are Local Policies Supporting Instruction Becoming Standardized?**

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*This study examined whether instructional policies at the local level are becoming standardized as a result of state and federal accountability initiatives. A stratified random sample of 21 Virginia school districts was used, and the policies reviewed covered seven topics: class size, student grouping, homework, remedial instruction programs, school-year programs for students who fail state tests, summer school programs, and retaking state tests. The authors found that the majority of the 21 districts adopted or amended policies in the wake of accountability initiatives instituted since 1995. Both similarities and differences were found in the districts' policies, but the differences did not appear to be substantial.*

Considerable attention has been devoted to educational policies since the passage of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Policymakers have taken aim at such crucial issues as desegregation, equal opportunity for all students, gender equity, and students with special needs. In recent years, policies have been adopted to promote greater educational accountability and improved student achievement (Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005). Educational policies have come to be regarded as an important component of efforts to turn around low-performing schools.

The spotlight generally has been focused on policymaking at the state and federal levels. Less is known about the efforts of local school systems to

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create policies in support of educational accountability and improved student achievement. One important effort to address this knowledge gap was a compilation of studies published in the book *School Districts and Instructional Renewal*. In the introduction, the authors note, “In the last few years, school districts have moved from being perceived as a bureaucratic backwater of educational policy to being seen as potent sites and sources of educational reform” (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 1). They go on to point out, however, that observers express diverging views concerning the significance of local policies.

To some, districts are best understood as implementers of laws, regulations, and policies, determined at higher state and federal levels . . . To others, districts are leaders and implementers, interpreters and originators of educational policies. (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 2)

Spillane (2005) believes that local school systems are more than mere implementers of policies passed down from above. He argues that school systems can be expected to respond to state policy initiatives by developing and adopting their own distinct policies:

Districts still enjoy much autonomy, and states generally rely on districts to implement state policy, lacking the financial and human resources to do so themselves. Because districts are both implementers of state policy and policymaking entities themselves, we can expect that state standards initiatives might stimulate district-level instructional policymaking. (p. 2)

Brooks (2000) was commissioned to examine state accountability initiatives in five states—California, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, and Texas—in order to provide guidance to Washington state policy makers. Among the important elements of accountability programs that she identified was “flexibility.” As she put it, “Schools must be able to make decisions about key inputs like instructional materials, financial resources, and the use of outside consultants or programs, if they are to feel accountable for the performance of their students” (p. vi). Her finding implies that state, and presumably school district, policies should not be so encompassing and constraining that they eliminate opportunities for school-based decision making. Wrapping local educators in a policy straitjacket, she suggests, can undermine their acceptance of accountability.

Sipple, Killeen, and Monk (2004) studied changes in New York state education policies related to student assessment and graduation requirements and the responses of local school systems. Among their findings was that most local decisions regarding staffing, professional development, student grouping, special education, and budget were made within the context

of the new state policies. There was no indication, in other words, that New York school districts had opted to ignore the state's efforts to raise standards and increase accountability. At the same time, however, the researchers found that there was substantial variation in the specific local responses to state policy initiatives.

New state and federal policies can lead to the promulgation of new school district policies. Ingersoll (2003) suggests that local education policies have the potential to influence the actions of teachers and administrators as much as, if not more than, policies from above. In light of this possibility, we decided to conduct an investigation of school system policies related to instruction.

In particular, we were interested in policies adopted in Virginia since the initiation of the state's far-reaching educational accountability initiative in 1995. Given the comprehensive nature of the Virginia initiative, which includes curriculum standards (Standards of Learning), standardized tests aligned to the Standards of Learning, Standards of Accreditation also linked to student achievement on state tests, and School Performance Report Cards designed to keep the public informed about every school's performance, it might be assumed that there is little room for variation in local policies. If the impact of the Virginia accountability initiative were not centralizing enough, certainly the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 had the potential to substantially limit the discretion of local school systems in the area of educational policy. Our investigation focused on the extent to which local policies related to instructional effectiveness and adopted or amended after 1995 reflect a common approach to good instruction. Is there evidence in the form of policy standardization that local control of education is eroding in the face of state and federal accountability pressures? Or are local policies still characterized by a high degree of variability, as had been found in the Rand change agent study during the mid-seventies (McLaughlin, 1990)?

## METHODOLOGY

Our investigation focused on two central questions:

1. Have Virginia school systems adopted new policies or revised existing policies related to instructional effectiveness since the inception of a comprehensive state accountability program in 1995?
2. To what extent do recent local policies related to instructional effectiveness vary across Virginia school systems?

Virginia consists of 133 school divisions, each division representing either a city or a county. The school boards that adopt the policies governing local school operations may be elected or appointed, depending on the jurisdiction. Virginia school divisions range in size from small rural systems

to the giant Fairfax County Public Schools, with 166,000 students. We reasoned that the size of a school division might influence its policymaking. Larger divisions, for example, have larger central office staffs and a greater capacity for developing policies to address their diverse needs. Smaller school divisions may be subject to greater pressure locally to address idiosyncratic concerns. Given smaller staffs, however, smaller divisions also may be inclined to copy policies developed by larger divisions or the state School Boards Association. To capture the range of school divisions in Virginia, 21 divisions were chosen to represent a stratified random sample. The 133 divisions were divided into those enrolling less than 10,000 students, from 10,000 to 20,000 students, and more than 20,000 students. Seven divisions were randomly chosen from each group. Table 1 contains each division and its enrollment as of the fall of 2004. Accomack is the smallest division, with 5,385 students, and Henrico is the largest, with 46,711 students.

Another factor that might influence local policymaking concerns student achievement. Presumably policies related to instructional effectiveness might be of greater interest to school divisions with low levels of student achievement. We reviewed the data on student achievement in each of the 21 school divisions to determine whether a range of performance outcomes were represented. Table 1 contains fifth-grade reading and mathematics pass rates (on state Standards of Learning tests) and dropout rates for each school division. Pass rates on the 2004–2005 Standards of Learning test in fifth-grade reading and language arts ranged from 71 percent in Buchanan and Roanoke City to 90 percent in Hanover and Rockingham. The range for the fifth-grade mathematics test was even greater—from 64 percent in Roanoke City to 86 percent in Amherst, Hanover, Henrico, and Rockingham. The dropout rate went from a low of 0.4 percent in Hanover to 15.3 percent in Richmond City.

Satisfied that the 21 school divisions fairly represented differences in student enrollment and student performance, we next considered the policy categories to be investigated. Our primary interests were policies that had the potential to directly impact the quality of instruction and learning in schools, especially low-performing schools. After reviewing the policy classification system endorsed by the Virginia School Boards Association and followed by many Virginia school divisions, we decided to concentrate on policies related to instruction in general and instructional assistance for low-achieving students.

Given our interest in the impact on local policymaking of Virginia's accountability measures and No Child Left Behind, we concentrated on policies adopted, amended, or adjusted after 1995 (when Virginia implemented the revised Standards of Learning). Policy manuals were either obtained online or through direct contact with school division officials. Copies were made of every policy that fit our criteria. Because of the substantial number of policies that were identified, it was decided to focus on several policies under each major heading. The specific policies that were chosen covered the following topics (see Tables 2 and 3):

**TABLE 1** Enrollment, Achievement, and Dropout Data for 21 Virginia School Divisions<sup>1</sup>.

District	Grade 5 SOL Pass Rates												Dropout Rate
	Enrollment			Reading/Language Arts						Math			
	2004-2005	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2003-2004	2004-2005	
Accomack	5,385	69	78	76	67	77	77	67	78	77	77	77	3.1%
Amherst	4,738	74	87	84	57	84	86	57	84	86	86	86	0.7%
Arlington	18,802	83	84	85	76	85	81	76	79	81	81	81	2.2%
Buchanan	3,570	58	68	71	49	71	69	49	55	69	69	69	4.1%
Danville	7,312	70	76	77	58	77	75	58	65	75	75	75	1.6%
Frederick	11,745	85	84	88	76	88	81	76	74	81	81	81	1.3%
Hampton	22,938	80	83	81	69	81	73	69	73	73	73	73	2.2%
Hanover	18,530	91	91	90	84	90	86	84	88	86	86	86	0.4%
Henrico	46,711	91	87	88	86	88	83	86	83	86	86	86	1.9%
Hopewell	3,908	76	82	84	74	84	86	74	79	86	86	86	2.6%
Lee	3,680	76	81	81	69	81	79	69	76	79	79	79	2.0%
Loudoun	43,991	88	90	89	81	89	85	81	86	85	85	85	0.9%
Lynchburg	8,620	79	81	85	71	85	75	71	74	75	75	75	9.3%
Newport News	33,122	73	79	79	65	79	75	65	72	75	75	75	0.4%
Portsmouth	15,843	78	77	78	59	78	73	59	66	73	73	73	2.1%
Richmond City	25,054	73	80	81	65	81	80	65	75	80	80	80	15.3%
Roanoke City	13,655	71	74	71	54	71	64	54	58	64	64	64	3.4%
Rockingham	11,249	90	87	90	85	90	86	85	89	86	86	86	1.4%
Spotsylvania	22,948	78	83	83	72	83	77	72	76	77	77	77	1.0%
Stafford	25,635	84	86	84	72	84	78	72	76	78	78	78	1.5%
Suffolk	13,772	83	86	83	69	83	75	69	73	75	75	75	3.4%

<sup>1</sup>Information collected from: <http://www.pen/ka12.va.us/VDOE/src/VASrc-reportcard-intropage.shtml>.

**TABLE 2** Post-1995 Policy Comparison of School Systems by Enrollment.

District	Enrollment 2004–2005	Instructional Policies				Instructional Assistance			
		Class Size	Student Grouping	Homework	Remedial Instruction Programs	Remediation Recovery Program	Summer School	Retaking State Tests	
More than 20,000 students									
Hampton	22,938	✓					✓		
Henrico	46,711	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Loudoun	43,991	✓							
Newport News	33,122		✓	✓					
Richmond City	25,054	✓					✓		
Spotsylvania	22,948	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Stafford	25,635		✓						
10,000 to 20,000 students									
Arlington	18,802	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Frederick	11,745		✓	✓	✓				
Hanover	18,530	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Portsmouth	15,843		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Roanoke City	13,655	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Rockingham	11,249	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Suffolk	13,772	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Less than 10,000 students									
Accomack	5,385	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Amherst	4,738		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Buchanan	3,570	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Danville	7,312		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Hopewell	3,908	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Lee	3,680	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Lynchburg	8,620	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓

**TABLE 3** Post-1995 Policy Comparison of School Systems by Academic Achievement.

District	Academic Achievement 2004–2005	Class Size	Student Grouping	Homework	Remedial Instruction Programs	Remediation Recovery Program	Summer School	Retaking State Tests
Accomack	Passing	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Buchanan	Passing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Danville	Passing		✓	✓			✓	
Hampton	Passing	✓					✓	
Lee	Passing	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Lynchburg	Passing	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Newport News	Passing		✓					
Portsmouth	Passing		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Roanoke City	Passing	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Spotsylvania	Passing	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Stafford	Passing		✓					
Suffolk	Passing	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Amherst	High		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arlington	High	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Frederick	High		✓	✓	✓			
Hanover	High	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Henrico	High	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Hopewell	High	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Loudoun	High	✓						
Richmond City	High	✓		✓			✓	
Rockingham	High	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	

Note: SOL assessment pass rates in fifth grade of 80% or higher on both Language Arts and Math in 2004–2005 are denoted as “High” academic achievement. SOL assessment pass rates of less than 80% on both Language Arts and Math in 2004–2005 are denoted as “Passing” academic achievement.

**Instruction**

- Class size
- Student grouping
- Homework

**Instructional Assistance**

- Remedial instruction programs
- Remediation Recovery program
- Retaking state tests
- Summer school

Each policy was content analyzed to determine the extent to which it resembled the policies of other school divisions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When variations in policy content were detected, judgments were made regarding the possible significance of the differences. The body of the paper contains a discussion of the findings for each policy category. The conclusion reflects generally on the findings and the extent to which they reveal an emerging policy environment characterized by instructional policy uniformity.

## REVIEW OF INSTRUCTIONAL POLICIES

While Virginia school systems have adopted a variety of policies related to instruction, three types of policy were judged to be especially relevant when teachers are faced with the need to raise student achievement in order to meet the demands of state and federal accountability initiatives. In this section we look at policies concerning class size, student grouping, and homework.

**Class Size**

Since 1995, three school divisions (Accomack, Lee, Roanoke City) have adopted identical policies regarding class size. The policy reads as follows:

(X) School Board will assign licensed instructional personnel in a manner that produces divisionwide ratios of students in average daily membership to full-time equivalent teaching positions, excluding special education teachers, principals, assistant principals, counselors, and librarians, that are not greater than the following ratios: 24 to one in kindergarten with no class being larger than 30 students; if the average daily membership in any kindergarten class exceeds 24 pupils, a full-time teacher's aide will be assigned to the class; 24 to one in grades one, two, and three with no class being larger than 29 students; 25 to one in grades four through six with no class being larger than 35 students; and

24 to one in English classes in grades six through 12. In addition, (X) School Board shall assign instructional personnel in a manner that produces schoolwide ratios of students in average daily memberships to full-time equivalent teaching positions of 21 to one in middle schools and high schools.

What is odd about this policy is the fact that the last sentence appears to contradict the 24-to-1 ratio requirement for English classes in grades 6 through 12.

Six school systems (Amherst, Danville, Frederick, Newport News, Portsmouth, Stafford) have not adopted or amended a class size policy since 1995 (see Table 2). Danville's policy, adopted in 1992, provides an indication of the amount of discretionary authority over class size that school boards exercised in the past:

The Board encourages the superintendent and the instructional staff to make such arrangements for use of facilities, materials, personnel, time and other resources as will, in the superintendent's and staff's professional judgment, provide the most favorable learning environment for students.

The Board will welcome recommendations as to ways by which it may assist in improving instructional arrangements, examples of which may include the following:

1. providing for adequate classroom and other instructional space
2. setting class size ranges
3. establishing satisfactory racial integration
4. aligning instruction with assessment
5. exploring options for increased time for student learning

Twelve school systems that have adopted new policy language have class size policies with distinctive wording. These policies range from the general to the specific. Arlington's policy is the most general: "The Arlington Public Schools ensures the provision of class sizes that support the effective delivery of the instructional program to all students" (Arlington School Board, 20–1). Three other school systems (Buchanan, Hampton, Rockingham) adopted general policies indicating that class size will be consistent with guidelines laid out in Virginia's Standards of Quality and/or the accreditation standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Class size policies for the remaining school systems are more specific, though not necessarily lengthy. Loudoun, for example, simply indicates that 25 students is the maximum class size for kindergarten. After referencing the Standards of Quality and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools guidelines, the policies for Hanover and Hopewell go further to specify additional guidelines. These guidelines state that,

1. Small classes are desirable at the primary level
2. Larger classes are permissible where large group instruction is appropriate
3. In courses requiring specially designed facilities and equipment, enrollment shall be limited on a priority basis to those students needing such courses in order to meet graduation requirements.

Henrico's policy goes into great detail about the definition of class size, how it is to be calculated, and what is to be done in the event that class sizes fall below certain numbers:

The class size shall be considered the number of pupils under the jurisdiction of a regular teacher at any one time. Average class size is determined by dividing the total enrollment in all regular classes by the number of regular classroom teachers. Regular classes are those instructed by regular classroom teachers and do not include those instructed by remedial or counseling specialists or by itinerant teachers.

When enrollment in a class, other than kindergarten, is less than 17 in an elementary school or less than 10 in a middle or high school, the principal must notify and discuss the circumstances with the appropriate director. Upon the advice and recommendation of the principal and director, the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction must approve the continuation of these classes. (Henrico County School Board, P7-08-001)

The policies for Lynchburg and Richmond reflect concern for these systems' at-risk students. In 2002 the Richmond School Board committed to reducing class size in Algebra I and Earth Science to no more than 20 students (students must pass state tests in these subjects) and no more than 25 students in all other math and science classes. Lynchburg's policy, which begins in the same manner as the policies of Accomack, Lee, and Roanoke City, goes on to establish the principle of differential support for low-achieving schools. In schools with high concentrations of at-risk students, class size may be held to 18 students, presuming funding is available. Schools with moderate concentrations of at-risk students may limit class size to 20 students. The determination of what constitutes "high" and "moderate" concentrations of at-risk students, however, is left to legislators in the Virginia General Assembly and their draft of the annual school appropriation bill.

## Grouping

Class size policies govern how many students are assigned to classes, but what happens instructionally to those students once they are in class often is a function of how they are grouped. Only five school systems (Frederick, Hampton, Loudoun, Richmond, Spotsylvania) have

adopted no specific policy concerning grouping since 1995 (see Table 2). The issues addressed by the school systems with grouping policies concern such matters as diversity, the circumstances under which homogeneous grouping can be used, pull-out programs, and who is responsible for oversight of grouping practices. The policies range from a single statement that all grouping practices must be approved by the principal (Rockingham) to a ten-paragraph policy covering grouping at every grade level (Lynchburg).

Nine school systems (Accomack, Amherst, Buchanan, Hanover, Hopewell, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City, Suffolk) adopted the same grouping policy, one that spells out five criteria governing instructional grouping:

The grouping of students within individual schools for instructional purposes shall be based solely on: 1) the best interests of the student, 2) the educational level, or achievement level of the student, 3) the availability of space, 4) the best educational climate for learning, and 5) the student's best chance for success. Grouping shall remain flexible in order to take advantage of the best educational research currently available.

While this policy appears to be reasonably comprehensive, it leaves a number of questions unanswered. Who, for example, determines the "best interests" of the student and by what process? What if some of the criteria are in conflict? It is possible, for instance, that the best environment for a student's learning is a small room free of distractions, but such space may be unavailable. Are certain criteria to take precedence over other criteria? If so, who makes such a determination? Finally, how is "success" to be defined when deciding how to group particular students?

Some of these questions are addressed in Lynchburg's policy, by far the most comprehensive and specific grouping policy of any school system in the study.

The school board supports grouping practices which meet the instructional needs of all students. Opportunities for acceleration and remediation will be utilized to meet the needs of all students.

All grouping practices must follow the parameters set forth in this policy and accompanying regulation. Students must be able to move up or down instructional levels based on need and progress. Grouping practices must not track students, that is, restricting or limiting students' opportunities to participate in acceleration classes.

The following parameters exist for instructional grouping decisions at the Kindergarten to grade 5 level:

- A. By August 1, each elementary principal will develop a grouping plan for each grade level and share this plan with the deputy superintendent, the assist superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and the director for elementary education. This grouping plan will be developed with the involvement of all appropriate grade-level teachers within the school and with input from the principal's parent advisory council.
- B. Kindergarten classes will include children from all ability levels. Small and large group instruction will occur within the classroom to meet the needs of all students. Direct pre-reading/reading instruction will be provided for all kindergarten students. As appropriate, students will receive their reading or math instruction within the class, the kindergarten unit, or in another grade.
- C. First through fifth grades will be grouped by ability for math and reading/language arts either within the classroom or within the unit to meet the needs of the students. Students will also be given the opportunity to work above grade level. In science, social studies, and in all other areas, instructional groups will include students of all abilities. Language arts and reading will be taught in a block to provide integrated reading and writing instruction.
- D. Kindergarten to fifth grade students may not be pulled out of the reading/language arts or main blocks for additional instruction in reading.

Instructional grouping decisions for sixth grade students will be based on the recommendation of the fifth grade teachers, fifth grade Standards of Learning test scores, standardized test scores, and parental input. Necessary adjustments in student placement may be made.

Instructional grouping decisions for seventh and eighth grade students will be based on student achievement in the preceding grade; and teacher, administrative and parental input. Necessary adjustments in student placement may be made.

Instructional grouping decisions for high school students will be made by the students' self-selection of courses, a process that typically includes assistance from counselors, and by the students' completion of any course-specific pre-requisites for the courses selected. Necessary adjustments in student placement may be made.

The Lynchburg policy takes a strong position against grouping practices that consign students to permanent ability groups or tracks. The issue of student grouping is so important in Lynchburg, a city with a large poor and African-American population, that all school-based grouping plans must be reviewed by central office administrators and parent advisory groups. Furthermore, the policy forbids limiting access

to accelerated learning opportunities. The policy also supports heterogeneous grouping and discourages pull-out programs in the elementary grades.

While their policies differ in various ways from Lynchburg's, Arlington, Henrico, and Stafford also adopted policies after 1995 that are designed to limit the practice of homogeneous grouping. Arlington's policy acknowledges concern over the possibility that grouping can lead to tracking:

The Arlington Public Schools encourages diversity within classes and avoids narrow range grouping that could result in tracking. When special class groupings are required to provide the most effective and appropriate educational opportunities, such classes will be planned and established. Written criteria for determining which students are more likely to be assisted by these classes will be developed and used in the assignment of students. Parents have access to information concerning grouping in Arlington Public Schools and its specific implementation in their child's school. (Arlington School Board, 20-1)

Stafford's policy asserts that heterogeneous grouping is to be the basis for assigning students at the elementary and middle school levels. The policy goes on, though, to permit "regrouping for instructional purposes" (Stafford county School Board, R6-40). Course selection is assumed to be the basis for grouping in high school. To safeguard against tracking, principals are required to monitor placements and "ensure balanced classes."

Henrico's policy includes provisions to ensure that groupings do not become permanent placements.

Grouping may be used to the extent that it facilitates teaching and learning and is based on pupil needs. Grouping within course offerings shall be minimal and shall be flexible enough to assure that: 1) Students are not permanently locked into a group with no opportunity to move to another one. 2) Students assigned to a particular group in one subject have the opportunity to be in a higher or lower group in other subjects, depending on their own individual needs. 3) Groups are wide enough to overlap with those on either side, facilitating movement from one group to another. (Henrico County School Board, P7-08-004)

Danville's policy mirrors the desire for grouping flexibility while specifying the basis for forming groups and, like Stafford, noting who is responsible for assigning students to groups:

The principal shall have the responsibility for pupil assignment in accordance with board regulations. The teacher shall have the responsibility

for grouping within the classroom to meet the needs of individual pupils. Grouping decisions shall be based on mastery of instructional objectives. Grouping should be as flexible as possible with provision for altering the grouping as often as necessary to fit the specific purpose involved. Acceleration in the learning of all students is desirable. Strategies will be employed to encourage racial and gender balance in all classes. (Danville School Board, P3250.00)

Newport News's grouping policy resembles Danville's in its recognition that homogeneous grouping is instructionally appropriate under certain conditions, but that students must be able to move freely from one group to another. In addition, the Newport News policy acknowledges the use of cooperative learning groups and includes as criteria for grouping "achievement, test results, and developmental characteristics of the students."

## Homework

Homework has been touted as one strategy for reinforcing classroom instruction and helping low-achieving students raise their level of academic achievement. Requiring students to do homework, however, is not without controversy (Duke & Canady, 1991, pp. 82–92). Some researchers believe that homework has little benefit, especially for students who lack home environments conducive to completing assignments. Fifteen of the 21 school systems had at least one new policy dealing with some aspect of homework, and a number of the policies were very detailed (see Table 2). Among the issues addressed by these policies were the purpose of homework, guidelines for assigning homework, time spent on homework, evaluation of homework, parental assistance of homework, making up homework after an absence, summer school assignments, use of homework as punishment, and responsibility for developing and monitoring homework guidelines.

Seven school systems (Arlington, Danville, Hanover, Hopewell, Richmond, Rockingham, Suffolk) open their homework policies with a discussion of the purpose or purposes for which homework should be assigned. While the wording varies, there is considerable overlap in the reasons given for homework. The most detailed discussion is provided in Hopewell's policy:

- A) Homework should be a properly planned part of the curriculum extending and reinforcing the learning experience of the school.
- B) Homework should help students learn by providing practice in the mastery of skills, experience in data-gathering, and integration of knowledge and an opportunity to remediate learning problems.
- C) Homework should help develop the student's sense of responsibility by providing

an opportunity for the exercise of independent work and judgment.  
(Hopewell City School Board, #2330)

Richmond's policy notes that homework should be designed to "increase student achievement." Arlington's policy recognizes the value of homework in strengthening communication between home and school. "Enriching and extending school experience" is the primary purpose designated by Hanover's policy. Suffolk's policy states that homework is meant to "reinforce and apply that which has been introduced and explained in the classroom."

Eight school systems adopted or amended homework policies after 1995 in order to specify guidelines for assigning homework. Six of these systems (Amherst, Buchanan, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City, Suffolk) possess identical guidelines, including the following:

- Homework should be assigned after introduction and thorough explanation of the skills necessary to successfully complete the assignment.
- Homework should be assigned in such a manner that it will be clearly understood by all students.
- Homework should serve a valid purpose and be closely related to classroom activities.
- A student's access to resource materials should be considered when making assignments.
- Teachers should seek to determine the causes if a student regularly fails to complete assigned work.
- Teachers should not avoid giving homework because they believe students will not do the work.
- Excessive homework, like the absence of homework, should be avoided.

Two other school systems (Hopewell, Rockingham) also have homework guidelines. Hopewell's guidelines are a truncated version of the preceding list. Rockingham's guidelines specify teachers' responsibilities, including provisions to ensure that homework is 1) reasonable in length, 2) directly related to classroom work, 3) well defined in advance and understood by students, and 4) reviewed by student and teacher daily.

Guidelines concerning the amount of time that should be spent by students on homework are specified by four of the 21 school systems (Arlington, Richmond, Rockingham, Spotsylvania). The higher the grade level, the more time a student is expected to spend on homework. Arlington's policy is the most detailed:

Grade K: maximum of 15 minutes plus an additional  
minimum of 15 minutes of reading or being read to

- Grade 1: maximum of 20 minutes plus an additional minimum of 20 minutes of reading or being read to
- Grade 2: maximum of 30 minutes plus an additional minimum of 20 minutes of reading or being read to
- Grade 3: maximum of 45 minutes plus an additional minimum of 20 minutes of reading
- Grade 4: maximum of 60 minutes plus an additional minimum of 30 minutes of reading
- Grade 5: maximum of 60 minutes plus an additional minimum of 30 minutes of reading
- Grades 6–8: maximum of 20 minutes a night for each course for a total of 90 minutes a night plus an additional minimum of 30 minutes of reading
- Grades 9–12: maximum of 30 minutes a night for each course for a total of three hours a night with the understanding that some advanced-level courses may require additional time to complete particularly the reading components of those courses

Some variance exists in the recommended amounts of time for homework across the four school systems. Rockingham, for example, recommends 15 to 30 minutes for grades 1 and 2; 30 to 60 minutes for grades 3 through 5; 60 to 90 minutes for grades 6 through 8; and 60 to 120 minutes for high school. Spotsylvania's policy calls for no more than 25 minutes of homework per middle school course and no more than 30 minutes of homework per high school course. Richmond's policy is presented in terms of aggregate minutes of homework per night: 30 minutes for grades 1 through 3; 60 minutes for grades 4 and 5; 90 minutes for grades 6 through 8; and 120 to 150 minutes for grades 9 through 12. Arlington's policy is the only one to designate time for reading in the early grades.

The evaluation of homework, curiously, is addressed in only three of the 21 school systems and then just in passing. Frederick's and Henrico's homework policies require each school to develop homework guidelines, including how homework will be checked and evaluated and, in the case of Frederick, "the weight homework will have in the evaluation of student progress" (Frederick County School Board 314-P). Spotsylvania's reference to evaluation is even briefer, stating simply that "all written homework should be evaluated and promptly returned with appropriate comments" (Spotsylvania School Board IKB).

Ten school systems address the role of parents in the homework process. Amherst, Buchanan, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City, and Suffolk call on teachers and administrators to “take appropriate steps to communicate with parents regarding the division’s homework policy and to solicit their support.” Henrico has a similar statement. Arlington’s policy calls on parents to provide “to the extent possible, reasonable time and space for their children to complete homework at home.” Furthermore, parents are asked to contact teachers in the event that children are spending “excessive amounts of time on homework” (Henrico County School Board, 20–2). Richmond’s policy expects parents “to provide satisfactory homework conditions—work space, good lighting, materials, and regular scheduling of study time” and to sign all homework assignments. In an appendix to Frederick’s policy, two pages of suggestions for ways parents can provide guidance and assistance on homework are provided (Frederick County School Board, 314-P). Besides creating time and space for homework and seeing that appropriate materials are available, Frederick parents are asked to check to see that homework has been completed and to offer help when children get stuck.

Frederick is the only school system to include a reference to missed homework assignments. Each school is expected to develop a guideline concerning how to make up homework when a student is absent.

Arlington is the only school system to provide a separate set of guidelines for summer assignments. The guidelines specify that each school is obliged to make available to students any resources or technology needed to complete assignments when school is not in session. Furthermore, teachers are cautioned against assigning so much work over the summer that it interferes with activities of students and their families.

Six school systems (Amherst, Buchanan, Hopewell, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City) have the identical policy concerning the use of homework as a punishment. The policy states that “homework should not be used for disciplinary purposes.”

Three school systems (Arlington, Danville, Henrico) specify who is responsible for monitoring homework practices and ensuring that policies are in place and enforced. In Arlington, principals and program administrators are charged with making certain that staff members and parents are aware of homework policies. Danville and Henrico have policies that require individual schools to develop homework policies.

## INSTRUCTIONAL POLICY ANALYSIS

Faced with a new state accountability program and eventually a new federal law regarding school effectiveness, most of the 21 school systems adopted or amended policies related to three key instructional issues—class size, grouping, and homework. In the case of each issue, some school systems

opted for the exact same language—three for class size, nine for grouping, and six for homework guidelines. Two school systems—Lee and Roanoke City—had common policies in all three categories. Nonetheless, policies reflected more variation than similarity in each case. At the same time, it should be noted that the variations seemed to be relatively subtle. In no case did policies in different school systems contradict each other or represent radically different approaches to instruction. There appears to be a general understanding that smaller class sizes are desirable, especially for younger students and at-risk students (Achilles et al., 2002; Nye et al., 2004); that grouping practices should be flexible and not lead to tracking (Castle et al., 2005); and that homework should reinforce classroom instruction and increase in time required to complete it as students progress to higher grades (Duke & Canady, 1991).

The districts with class size policies indicate recognition of the research suggesting that smaller class sizes are beneficial to students. However, in the 1985–1989 STAR (Tennessee’s Student Teacher Achievement Ratio) study upon which much of the research is based, a small class consisted of only 13 to 17 students (Achilles et al., 2002). None of the Virginia policies calls for a class of this reduced size. The smaller numbers appear in teacher-pupil ratio figures rather than class size figures. Achilles cautions against confusing teacher-pupil ratio with class size. It is small class size, rather than small teacher-pupil ratio, that has been shown to improve student outcomes, particularly for students at greater risk of academic failure (Achilles et al., 2002). The research has focused on small class size at the earliest grades, which is largely reflected in the district policies. More specifically, students should be in small classes beginning with kindergarten or pre-kindergarten, be in small classes for a minimum of three years, and be in those small classes every day of the school year (Achilles et al., 2002). An acknowledgement of the importance of all three of these small class size conditions is missing from the policies.

Most of the districts had modified their policies regarding grouping and these policies typically addressed the concerns that have arisen about the inequities of ability grouping over the past three decades. Lower tracks, most often populated by minority or lower SES students, are often taught with inferior resources and rarely are there opportunities for students to move up to higher tracks (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Though several policies address this concern, ensuring the permeability of group boundaries that have been historically impermeable would appear to require more than statements suggesting a flexible approach to grouping. According to one study (Rubin & Noguera, 2004), support for students previously underserved is a necessary component of detracking because heterogeneously grouped classes can devolve into circumstances as unequal as the tracked classes they replace. There is evidence that flexible grouping, when implemented well, has the potential to increase both student achievement and student confidence (Castle et al., 2005) but it requires more than a simple policy decision. According to Rubin, “It is necessary to go

beyond both the placing of students with different educational backgrounds in the same classroom and the implementation of progressive teaching strategies to build a structure and pedagogy explicitly designed to counter the effects of years of educational inequality” (2003, p. 569).

The four districts whose policies address time spent on homework are in accordance with the research, which supports less homework for students in lower grades and increasingly more as they advance through the upper grades. The designated amounts of homework assigned per grade level by these districts fall within recommended ranges (Marzano et al., 2001). Another important feature of the districts’ policies is the clear purpose(s) of homework; however, none emphasizes the importance of clear teacher articulation of the purpose of each specific homework assignment, which has been found to contribute to the relevancy of the work (Marzano et al., 2001). Parent involvement can be helpful in providing resources and structuring homework time for students (Duke & Canady, 1991), and numerous policies addressed this parental role. One of the most critical factors that determines the effectiveness of homework is written teacher feedback given in a timely manner (Walberg & Lai, 1999), but this was addressed in only three of the reviewed policies.

The large number of instructional policy additions and modifications since 1995 suggests a generalized effect of state and federal accountability initiatives. In only one case, however, is there a policy that specifically related to a particular aspect of these initiatives. Richmond’s policy to lower class size in Algebra 1 and Earth Science reflects the fact that students must take state end-of-course tests in these two subjects. It is somewhat surprising that other school systems do not limit class size in subjects for which students must take state tests.

## REVIEW OF INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANCE POLICIES

With the advent of high-stakes testing in Virginia and state and federal policies mandating high pass rates, it is reasonable to expect local school systems to adopt new policies and adjust existing policies concerning assistance for low-achieving students. Our review of policies in this area focused on four topics: remedial instruction programs in general, regular school-year programs intended specifically for students who fail state tests, summer school programs, and provisions for retaking state tests. We omitted policies designed expressly for special education and English as a Second Language students.

### Remedial Instruction in General

Four of the 21 school divisions (Amherst, Buchanan, Lee, Portsmouth) adopted identical policies on remedial instruction after 1995. The policy reads as follows:

The school board shall implement programs of prevention, intervention, or remediation for students who are educationally at-risk, including those that fail to pass any SOL assessment in grades three through eight or who fail an end-of-course test required for the award of a verified unit for credit required for the student's graduation. (IGBE)<sup>1</sup>

Six other school divisions (Accomack, Frederick, Hanover, Hopewell, Roanoke City, Rockingham) have policies similar to the above policy. In the case of Accomack, for example, the preceding policy is followed by a qualifying statement:

The program shall include, when appropriate, a procedure for early identification of students who are at risk of academic failure . . . Such student shall be provided appropriate remediation activities. (GBE)

Since 1995, five school divisions (Arlington, Henrico, Lynchburg, Spotsylvania, Stafford) have adopted distinctive policies regarding general remediation. Arlington, for example, substitutes three groups of students for the less specific label "educationally at-risk." Remedial instruction has to be available to students who are not progressing at expected rates, who are not expected to progress at expected rates, and who fail assessments required for graduation. Furthermore, Arlington's policy specifies that these students may be required to participate in an extended school day or summer school program (Arlington School Board, pp. 20–1).

Like Arlington, Spotsylvania and Stafford address the issue of eligibility for remedial services in their post-1995 policies. Spotsylvania's policy states,

Appropriate educational opportunities must be provided for disadvantaged students and students with low ability and/or low achievement . . . To be eligible to receive remedial services, the student must be at least one year below grade level in achievement in the required course(s) and need remediation and/or supplemental work to function successfully in those course(s). (IGBE)

Stafford's policy targets students who fail "applicable" SOL tests and those scoring in the bottom quartile of Virginia State Assessment Program Tests.

Stafford's policy goes on to define the characteristics of remedial programs:

Remedial programs will be characterized by: a) early identification and intervention; b) instructional or intervention strategies different

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<sup>1</sup> The designations following policies (IGBE, GBE, IKG, IGCA, IKH) represent the codes used by various school systems that follow a standardized policy code.

from those which have failed to produce results and designed to accelerate the student's learning; c) additional time for learning, including, but not limited to, summer school; d) intensive instruction in English/language arts, reading, mathematics, science, and history/social science as evidenced by student need; e) appropriate staff development for classroom teachers, specialists, and administrators; and f) an active parent outreach component. (Stafford County School Board, #6-30)

Henrico zeroes in on remediation in mathematics as well as reading:

Services to remediate mathematics deficiencies may be provided to augment the regular program of mathematics instruction. Such programs are consistent with the curriculum objectives and skills continuum in mathematics. (Henrico County School Board, 7-11-001)

Henrico goes on to endorse the use of learning centers for remediation:

Learning centers may be provided, as appropriate, to meet individual needs in all curriculum areas. Remedial programs may be included in these centers. (7-11-003)

Lynchburg, like Henrico, chose to focus remediation policy on reading and mathematics. Its policy describes five programs provided by the school division: Alternative Basic Skills Program for Elementary and Middle Schools, Middle School Alternative/Developmental Reading Program, Middle School Mathematics Program, High School Alternative Reading Program, and High School Mathematics Program. (Lynchburg City School Board, P 6-30.1)

Six school divisions (Danville, Hampton, Loudoun, Newport News, Richmond City, Suffolk) have not adopted policies since 1995 that deal specifically with general remediation programs (see Table 2).

While ten of the 21 school divisions have policies on general remediation that use the same or similar language, five divisions address the matter in relatively distinctive ways. Variations in policy content concern who is eligible to receive remedial services and the nature of the services. Perhaps the most interesting policy is that of Stafford County, which provides a comprehensive set of guidelines that should characterize remedial programs. Of special interest is the provision that remediation must not consist of strategies that have failed to yield positive results. Such a provision presumably prevents students from being consigned to ineffective programs for extended periods of time. The decision by Henrico and Lynchburg to concentrate remediation in the areas of reading and mathematics reflects a desire to direct costly services to areas where the potential impact of assistance may be greatest.

## Remediation Recovery Program

The Remediation Recovery Program refers to efforts to assist students who have failed one or more SOL tests and various provisions governing retaking the tests. The program is a direct outgrowth of the state's accountability initiative. Four divisions (Accomack, Amherst, Buchanan, Hopewell) adopted identical policies, while Roanoke City's policy was very similar. The policy reads as follows:

Students eligible to participate in such program will include students in kindergarten through eighth grade who have failed the SOL assessment in the areas of English (Reading, Literature, and Research) or mathematics, and students at the high school level who have failed to pass an SOL assessment in mathematics. Students who retake an SOL test must have participated in some form of remediation, including the remediation recovery program, to be eligible for retesting. Also, students who participate in the remediation recovery program are expected to retake the applicable SOL test at the next regularly scheduled administration of the test, and may only be counted in remediation recovery once for one grade/SOL test. At the high school level, students may continue to retake end-of-course tests as many times as necessary to earn verified credit. (IKG)

When a student passes a retake of an SOL test, an adjustment is not made to the pass rate for his original cohort. Instead, his passing score is counted with the current year's students taking the test for the first time. In other words, a student who failed the reading test last year in the third grade and retook and passed the test in the fourth grade this year will have his score counted for this year's third grade scores, not the previous year's. As a result, the pass rate for some grade levels where great improvements have been made could exceed 100% because of the addition of Remediation Recovery students.

Arlington is the only division with a policy that substantially differs from the other five. The remaining 15 divisions do not have a specific policy regarding Remediation Recovery (see Table 2). Arlington's policy specifies that the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction is responsible for the program and principals are tasked with implementing the program. No reference is made in Arlington's policy to participation of high school students in Remediation Recovery.

## Summer School Programs

After 1995, 17 of the 21 school divisions adopted or adjusted a policy of some kind regarding the purpose of summer school and eligibility to attend summer school (see Table 2). In eight cases, the policy on eligibility is the same (Accomack, Amherst, Buchanan, Hanover, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City, Suffolk). One other division, Rockingham, has almost identical wording. The policy reads as:

The division superintendent may require students who are educationally at risk to take special programs of prevention, intervention, or remediation in summer school if the superintendent determines that remediation of the student's poor academic performance, literacy passport test performance, if applicable, performance on the Standards of Learning assessments in grades three, five or eight, or promotion necessitates the student's attendance in summer school. (IGCA)

Eight school divisions have summer school policies that differ in various ways from the above policy. Three of these divisions (Hampton, Lynchburg, Spotsylvania) have no explicit policy on summer school eligibility, but they do have a policy that states the purpose of summer school. In the case of the other five divisions, Arlington's policy simply states that it conforms to the state's regulations; Danville's policy limits summer school attendance to students currently enrolled in its schools; Hopewell's policy indicates that students not passing one or more SOL tests in grades three, five, or eight may be required to attend summer school or participate in another remedial program; Henrico's policy focuses on high school seniors who need two units to graduate (they are permitted to take two new subjects in summer school with the permission of their principal); and Richmond's policy opens summer school enrollment to "adults, non-residents, and war veterans" in addition to currently enrolled students.

Besides eligibility, summer school policies sometimes contain references to the purpose of summer school, the extent and quality of summer school offerings, and guidelines concerning summer school credits.

Four main purposes for summer school programs are specified. They include remediation (Accomack, Amherst, Buchanan, Danville, Hanover, Lee, Portsmouth, Roanoke City, Spotsylvania, Suffolk), the opportunity to earn credits needed for graduation or promotion (Henrico, Hopewell, Lee), the opportunity to take courses that cannot be scheduled during the regular school year (Henrico), and "enrichment" (Danville, Hanover, Hopewell, Lynchburg, Spotsylvania, Suffolk). Arlington's policy explicitly notes that summer school opportunities are available for elementary, middle, and high school students, but it does not specify particular purposes to be served by these opportunities. Five divisions (Accomack, Buchanan, Lynchburg, Portsmouth, Rockingham) include a statement to the effect that summer school courses have to be "comparable" to courses offered during the regular school year. It is unclear in these instances whether comparability is based on clock hours, content, expectations, or some combination. Amherst and Lee allow principals to enable students to earn a full credit for a reduced number of clock hours (70 hours or less) in class. Hampton, on the other hand, insists that one credit in summer school requires 140 clock hours. Students in Hampton are limited to earning no more than one credit per summer session. Lee's policy does not allow summer school offerings to yield academic credit, except for seniors who would need to return to high school for a fifth year if

they were unable to take English 12 and/or Government. Henrico's policy indicates that summer enrichment courses are non-credit courses.

### Provisions for Retaking State Tests

Given the high stakes associated with passing new state tests, school divisions might be expected to have enacted policies after 1995 regarding the conditions under which students can retake tests that they fail. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that only seven out of 21 divisions (Accomack, Amherst, Arlington, Buchanan, Hopewell, Portsmouth, Roanoke City) adopted such a policy (see Table 2). Six of the seven have the same policy, one that pertains to expedited retakes of end-of-course tests at the secondary level.

Eligible students may qualify for an expedited retake of an end-of-course SOL assessment to earn a verified credit where the student meets the criteria established by the Virginia Board of Education. (IKH)

Arlington's policy for retaking state tests is more detailed and comprehensive:

The only students who will retake the SOL test, other than those in Remediation Recovery . . . , are those who are retained in Grades 3, 5, or 8 and who failed the SOL test the previous year. Students will retake an End-of-Course SOL test if: he or she failed the course and the test and is retaking the course, or he or she passed the course but needs the verified credit for graduation. (Arlington School Board 20-1)

## INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANCE POLICY ANALYSIS

More so than the policies on class size, grouping, and homework, those dealing with instructional intervention seem to derive directly from changes related to state and federal accountability initiatives. Intervention is clearly intended for students who do not pass the new state SOL tests and who, therefore, are at risk of not graduating from high school. Only three of the 21 divisions failed to adopt any kind of instructional intervention policy after 1995. Divisions with new or revised policies frequently adopted the same or similar language, suggesting, as in the case of instructional policies, that they followed policies recommended by the Virginia School Boards Association. Some variation in the content of policies was found in the cases of general remedial instruction and summer school. These variations tended to concern the focus of remedial instruction, eligibility for remedial instruction, and the purpose of summer school remediation. Arlington may be considered an outlier of sorts, in that its policy on each of the four topics was distinctive.

Most research on remediation practices in schools tends to be program specific; however, Walberg and Lai (1999) reported an effect size of 0.555 for “special programs,” suggesting that a moderately strong influence of various remedial efforts on student achievement. The specific strategy of summer school as a remedial intervention is well supported in the research. Whether summer schools focus on “lessening or removing learning deficiencies” or “acceleration of learning,” they have been found to “have a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants” (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000, pp. 89–91). The policies in these districts do not, however, address an issue more specific than simply the presence of a program: how instruction is organized. Cooper et al.’s metaanalysis found that “summer programs that provide small-group or individual instruction produced the largest impact on student outcomes” (2000, p. 92).

A number of questions arise from this review of policies. Does actual practice in the area of remedial instruction vary significantly among divisions with identical policies or between these divisions and those with different policies? How are issues related to remedial instruction addressed in divisions with pre-1995 policies or with no formal policies at all? Is this latter group of school divisions characterized by substantial variation in practice across individual schools? And what of the practical implications of policy variation? Can a case be made that certain instructional remediation policies are more effective than others? Or is there little discernable impact of these policies on the quality of teaching and learning?

An interesting study might involve identifying all students in several divisions who do not pass one or more state tests in a given year. Researchers would follow these students for an entire year, recording all efforts to provide them with remedial instruction and opportunities to retake state tests. Once a year’s data had been compiled, researchers then could determine (a) the extent to which remediation practice varied within and among divisions and (b) the extent to which remediation policies varied among divisions. In this way, it might be possible to assess the impact of remedial instruction policies on instructional practice and student outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the local policy response to post-1995 state and federal accountability initiatives. Prior to this time period, Virginia had been recognized as a “longtime bastion of local control” (Kirst, 1994, p. 380), but stronger state control of education was exercised with a series of policy mandates. It is clear that the majority of the 21 school divisions adopted or amended policies related to instruction and instructional intervention in the wake of these initiatives. In particular, school divisions appear to be more intentional about remediation both during the school

year and with summer school programs. These policies reflect both similarities and differences. The differences, for the most part, however, do not appear to be substantial. Policies concerning class size reflect a commitment to keep classes for younger students relatively small. Grouping policies permit some degree of homogeneous grouping by ability, but not to the extent that students become “locked in” to particular groups. Homework policies call for assignments that support classroom instruction. They also recognize the importance of parents’ roles in supporting homework efforts. Instructional intervention policies reflect the obligation of school divisions to provide special assistance to struggling students, particularly those who fail state standardized tests.

The findings of this study certainly do not demonstrate that local control of education in Virginia is a thing of the past. At the same time, there is little evidence in the case of instructional policies that local control produces dramatic policy variations. There were no instances, for example, where one division forbid the use of homogeneous grouping while another forbid the use of heterogeneous grouping or where class size policies varied substantially in the maximum number of students per class. It is difficult to determine the significance of having no policy, as was the case with some school divisions for each type of policy in the study. As a follow-up to the present investigations, it would be interesting to assess the extent to which actual practice in divisions with no stated policy varies from stated policy, as well as actual practice, in divisions whose policies do address particular instructional issues.

We know that the 21 school divisions in this study vary in terms of student outcomes. The ultimate question for policy makers is whether these differences are influenced at all by local policies. The authors of at least one study of local education policy in three urban school systems conclude that instructional policies have little impact on classroom instruction (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005). They found that policies aimed at improving teaching and learning had little relationship to actual classroom practice, in part because “their tools and mandates were not informed by school level expertise and were not accompanied by the kind of support and capacity building necessary to change instruction” (p. 3). The policies reviewed in the present study of Virginia school divisions clearly have the potential to influence teaching and learning but it is questionable whether the policies we reviewed had the attributes of “consistency, specificity, authority and power” (Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005, p. 5) which are associated with effective policy. There is considerable research linking class size, grouping strategies, homework, and instructional interventions to student achievement, but the mere presence of policies regarding any of these specific practices does not ensure success. More research is needed to determine whether the policies under review are actually being implemented “at the chalk-face” and, if so, whether they are associated with student learning.

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