

Academic Atrophy

The Condition of the Liberal Arts
in America's Public Schools



geometry

00111000101101100101011011010100101001010100

astronomy

$E=mc^2$

mathematics

music

there's no sun up in the sky, Storm-y Weath-

dance

art

ARCHITECTURE

History

science

foreign languages

$$y = \ln x$$

Note: $\ln e = 1$, $\ln 12 = \ln(3 \times 4) = \ln 3 + \ln 4$
Also note that the gradient of the curve at each
This graph maintains its shape under size resca



Council for Basic Education

Championing a Quality Liberal Arts Education

Academic Atrophy

The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America's Public Schools

Claus von Zastrow

with Helen Janc

Council for Basic Education, March 2004

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About the Council for Basic Education

Founded in 1956, the Council for Basic Education works to ensure all elementary and secondary school students an excellent education in the basic liberal art subjects—English, history, science, mathematics, the arts, civics, geography and foreign language. While serving as an independent and influential voice for challenging standards and high-quality instruction, CBE works closely with schools of education, states, districts and schools to strengthen teaching and learning in the liberal arts.

Acknowledgements

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June Million of NAESP and Joan Masterson at NASSP set up focus groups of elementary and secondary school principals from across the country. Steve Farkas of Public Agenda led both focus groups.

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Executive Summary

American education has reached a moment of great opportunity and substantial risk. On the one hand, implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act has fueled a vital national conversation on how to improve education for all students. The law reflects a growing consensus that high academic expectations are necessary prerequisites to high achievement. It has prompted widespread discussion about what students should learn, and when they should learn it. Most important, it reflects a strong commitment to closing achievement gaps between white and minority students.

On the other hand, No Child Left Behind may well contribute to a significant danger that has not received the attention it deserves: At a time when school budgets are under extraordinary stress, the exclusive focus of the law's accountability provisions on mathematics, reading, and eventually science is diverting significant time and resources from other academic subjects.

Examining Student Access to the Liberal Arts

To address this concern, the Council for Basic Education undertook a study of American K-12 students' access to a curriculum in the liberal arts: a curriculum that includes mathematics, science, social studies/history, civics, geography, the arts, and foreign language. With a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York—and considerable help from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Federation of School Administrators—CBE surveyed public school principals in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York about what was happening to the curriculum in their own schools.

Our survey uncovered both good news and bad news. The good news: We found strong evidence of growing commitment to mathematics, reading, writing, science, and secondary social studies. The bad news: We also saw ample evidence of waning commitment to the arts, foreign language, and elementary social studies. What's more, we found that the greatest erosion of the curriculum is occurring in schools with high minority populations—the very populations whose access to such a curriculum has been historically most limited.

More specifically, our study revealed:

Increases in instructional time and professional development for reading, writing, mathematics, and science.

- About three-quarters of all principals reported increases in instructional time for reading, writing, and mathematics. Similar proportions reported increases in time for professional development in these three areas.
- Close to half reported increases in instructional time for science, and even larger proportions projected such increases over the next two years.

Decreases in instructional time for the arts, especially in high-minority schools.

- 25% of all principals surveyed reported decreases in instructional time for the arts; 8% reported increases.
- 33% of all principals anticipated future decreases in instructional time; 7% anticipated increases.
- 36% of high-minority school principals reported decreases in instructional time for

the arts; of these 36%, well over a third reported large decreases. By contrast, only 11% reported increases, and a mere 1% reported large increases.

- 42% of high-minority school principals anticipated future decreases in instructional time for the arts; over a third of these 42% expected large decreases. 10% anticipated increases, and only 1% anticipated large increases.

In high-minority schools, decreases in instructional time and teacher professional development for foreign language.

- Roughly equal numbers of principals in low-minority schools reported decreases (9%) and increases (11%) in instructional time for foreign language.

- By contrast, 23% of principals in high-minority schools reported decreases. Most principals reporting decreases indicated that instructional time for foreign language had decreased greatly. Only 9% reported any increases.

- 29% of principals in high-minority schools anticipated future decreases, and close to half of these 29% expected these decreases to be large. By contrast, 8% anticipated moderate increases, and none expected large increases.

In elementary (K-5) schools, decreases in instructional time for social studies, civics, and geography. Again, this trend is especially evident in high-minority schools.

- Overall, 29% of elementary principals reported decreases in time for social studies; 21% reported increases.

- A full 47% of high-minority elementary school principals reported decreases, while 16% reported increases.

In grades 6-12, considerable increases in instructional time and professional development for social studies, civics, and geography.

- Overall, 37% of middle- and high-school principals reported increases in time for social studies; 7% reported decreases.

- Similar percentages reported increases in professional development for social studies.

- On this measure, we found little difference between low- and high-minority schools.

In Maryland schools, especially large decreases in time and professional development for the arts and foreign language, as well as for elementary social studies, civics, and geography.

- 39% of all Maryland principals foresaw future reductions in instructional time for the arts, while only 2% expected increases. A full 56% of high-minority school principals anticipated decreases. No high-minority school principals in Maryland predicted increases in instructional time for the arts.

- More than half of Maryland principals reported reductions in time for elementary social studies, whereas only 4% reported increases.

In New York schools, by contrast, increases in time and professional development for elementary school social studies, civics, and geography.

- 36% of elementary (K-5) principals in New York state reported increases in time for social studies, while 22% reported decreases.

- Even in New York State, however, principals of high-minority elementary schools were considerably more likely to report declines than increases in instructional time for social studies.

Why Worry About the State of the Liberal Arts?

Life in the twenty-first century has become very complex, and the educational requirements for success have grown accordingly. A glut of information reaches us through television, the internet, and other electronic media. Multimedia technologies bombard us with images and sounds. Job skills are changing at an accelerating rate. Political and economic events across the globe have a profound effect on our prosperity and security at home. Retirement and health care options are growing ever more complicated. Because the liberal arts span the domains of human experience, they afford the best foundation for the diverse challenges that confront us in this rapidly evolving world. At the same time, a liberal arts education returns us to first principles, fostering an understanding of what it means to be human, an understanding that transcends limiting conceptions of occupation, social class, race, or nationality. An education once reserved for the most privileged students has therefore become a necessity for all students.

The Question of Educational Equity

The possibility that minorities are more likely to experience a narrowing of the curriculum raises important questions of educational equity. Truly high expectations cannot begin and end with mathematics, science, and reading. Even while schools undertake crucial interventions designed to improve some students' literacy and mathematics skills, they must maintain a long-term vision of what constitutes educational excellence, one that both incorporates and moves well beyond literacy and numeracy. Though we must certainly strive to close racial achievement gaps in mathematics and reading, we run the risk of substituting one form of inequity for another, ultimately denying our most vulnerable students the full liberal arts curriculum our most privileged youth receive almost as a matter of course.

Ensuring Universal Student Access to a Rich Liberal Arts Curriculum

Educators and policymakers should therefore take steps to secure the liberal arts curriculum's pride of place in school reform. They should:

1. *Integrate the liberal arts into school improvement strategies.* Quality instruction in the liberal arts disciplines enhances learning in reading, writing, and mathematics. By teaching these skills in a liberal arts context, schools can foster fundamental academic skills without narrowing students' course of study.
2. *Better Prepare Teachers to Integrate the Liberal Arts into Reading Instruction.* Many teachers lack the training to integrate instruction in the liberal arts with instruction in reading. Together with high-quality professional development programs, changes to teacher education programs can provide teachers this training.
3. *Incorporate all liberal arts courses into standards and accountability systems.* Ensuring strong standards and challenging assessments in all the liberal arts subjects will help preserve the integrity of the curriculum.
4. *Maintain high goals for excellence in the liberal arts, and track progress towards those goals.* We cannot take the health of the liberal arts curriculum on faith. Rather, we must articulate a vision of educational excellence that incorporates every liberal arts subject, and then monitor our long-term progress towards that vision.

Why This Study?

Educators and non-educators alike are expressing growing concern that the combined force of budget cuts and recent education reforms are narrowing the academic curriculum in our nation's public elementary and secondary schools. Because the No Child Left Behind Act holds schools accountable for student performance in only mathematics, reading, and eventually science, they worry, the law may be compelling states and districts to neglect other important subjects. The recent budget crises that have gripped almost all 50 states are likely compounding this problem.

Until recently, there has been little research to confirm or allay these fears. Though largely anecdotal reports suggest that states and districts are already cutting academic disciplines currently exempt from federal and state accountability provisions—disciplines such as history, civics, the arts, and foreign language—more comprehensive data on the status of these disciplines have been very difficult to come by.

A liberal arts education fosters an understanding of what it means to be human, an understanding that transcends limiting conceptions of occupation, social class, race, or nationality.

The Need for Information: What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us

During the fall of 2003, the Council for Basic Education undertook a study of American K-12 students' access to a complete curriculum in the liberal arts. With a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York—and considerable help from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Federation of School Administrators—CBE surveyed principals about what was happening in their own schools. This report presents the major findings of that survey.

We surveyed 956 elementary and secondary school principals in Illinois, Maryland, New York, and New Mexico about recent and anticipated changes to their academic curriculum—in particular, changes to the status of reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, foreign language, and the arts.¹ The CBE survey asked principals to report on relevant measures of the curriculum's status, such as trends in the number of teachers and amount of instructional time allocated to each discipline. We intended our four-state study to highlight issues that warrant serious investigation nationwide, especially given the national scale of No Child Left Behind. To establish a national context for these issues, we also raised them in focus groups of elementary and secondary school principals from states across the country.

Why the Liberal Arts Curriculum?

A well-taught liberal arts education equips us to make sense of the world in all its variety. Every American child deserves such an education, which comprises challenging, standards-based instruction in English, mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, foreign language, and the arts. While honoring diverse cultures and beliefs, this curriculum spans the basic domains of human knowledge and inquiry. Ultimately, a liberal arts education fosters an understanding of what it means to be human—an understanding that transcends limiting conceptions of occupation, social class, race, or nationality—and makes us active and ethical participants in the world around us.

Finally, by encouraging necessary breadth and adaptability in times of accelerating change, a well-taught, challenging curriculum in the liberal arts offers the best possible vocational preparation. As many jobs evolve—and others disappear entirely—any given set of purely technical skills is doomed to irrelevance before too long. By its very nature, an education in the liberal arts survives the occupational trends that can so quickly outpace the creation of new technical or vocational credentials. Given expectations that most Americans will have multiple careers over the course of

Universal access to a liberal arts education is a largely unacknowledged prerequisite to equal opportunity.

Figure A Selected Examples of Cuts in K-12 Academic Programs

Anne Arundel County, Maryland lost 23 middle school art teachers. Kimberly Marselas, "Fine Arts Panel Warns of Eroding Arts Program," *Annapolis Capitol Gazette*, June 26, 2003

The Rosenberg Public Schools in Oregon canceled seventh- and eighth-grade foreign language classes. Anne Marie Chaker, "Schools Say 'Adieu' to Foreign Languages," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2003

The Arizona legislature cut \$7 million in arts funding to schools and other groups. Geraldine Sealey, "Just the Three R's?" *ABCNews.com*, August 25, 2003

Milwaukee, Wisconsin has lost nearly 9% of its art, music and physical education teachers. Del Stover, "Budget Cuts Threaten Core Programs," *School Board News*, December 16, 2003

Providence, Rhode Island eliminated elementary science and technology-enrichment classes. National Education Association, "Cuts Leave More and More Public School Children Behind," Dec. 2003/Jan. 2004

Holland Township, New Jersey substituted videos for foreign language teachers in grades four through seven. "Cuts Leave More and More Public School Children Behind," Dec. 2003/Jan. 2004

their lives, every high school graduate requires the broadest possible academic basis for lifelong learning.

CBE believes that universal access to such an education is a largely unacknowledged prerequisite to equal opportunity and therefore an essential birthright. All further learning builds upon the academic foundation established by English, math, science, history, government, geography, languages, and the arts. As soon as we sacrifice one or more of these subjects to budgetary constraints, or to simple apathy, we limit students' opportunities after graduation. In a society founded on equality, such sacrifices are unconscionable.

Cause for Concern

The fact that so few American students follow a rigorous course of study in the liberal arts is worrisome. Despite dramatic gains in course-taking throughout the '80s and early '90s, only 56% of American high school students pursue even the minimum curriculum recommended by *A Nation at Risk*, the landmark report that invigorated education reform 20 years ago: four years of English, and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies. Add foreign languages to the list, and the proportion drops to just over 40%.² Though minority course-taking has also made substantial gains, it still lags behind that of white students.³

Student academic performance has remained accordingly disappointing. Commentators on education frequently cite American students' mediocre NAEP scores in math, science, and reading. Though they have received far less publicity, scores in other subject areas are equally alarming. Between 1998 and 2001, only 26 percent of 12th graders demonstrated proficiency in civics, 25 percent in geography, and a mere 11 percent in U.S. history.⁴ Taken together, these results do not bode well for the health of our democracy, which depends more than ever on a well-informed citizenry.

In light of these realities, the prospect of declining commitment to disciplines other than mathematics, science, and reading is hardly reassuring. Citing the joint effects of federal accountability reforms and budget cuts, the media have recently reported examples of curricular erosion in states and districts nationwide. Most of these reports point to cutbacks in the arts and foreign languages, though some cite reductions in social studies and science. See Figure A for selected examples of such reductions. Our study's findings lend support to the overall thrust of these anecdotal accounts. What's more, our findings suggest that poor and minority students are bearing the brunt of this erosion.

The Question of Educational Equality

Motivated by a concern that some attempts to close math and reading achievement gaps between white and minority students might actually exacerbate curricular erosion in schools with high-minority populations, our study was especially attentive to potential disparities between high-minority and low-minority schools.

Unless we remain attentive to the entire curriculum, we risk defining success in very narrow terms and thus institutionalizing long-term academic mediocrity and inequality. No Child Left Behind and state accountability systems may turn out to be Pyrrhic victories if we define expectations too narrowly and also fail to examine their full impact on different racial and economic groups. Though we must certainly strive to close racial achievement gaps in mathematics and reading, we run the risk of substituting one form of inequity for another, ultimately denying our most vulnerable students the full liberal arts curriculum our most privileged youth receive almost as a matter of course.

Be Careful What You Ask For: Defining True Success

Truly high expectations cannot begin and end with mathematics, science, and reading. Even while schools undertake crucial interventions designed to improve our most troubled students' literacy and mathematics skills, they must maintain a long-term vision of what constitutes educational excellence, one that both incorporates and moves well beyond literacy and numeracy.

The Principal's Dilemma

The principal's dilemma is difficult. While the understandable pressure to raise student achievement in mathematics and reading may compel principals to direct more resources to those two subjects, many are reluctant to take time or money away from other areas. One principal interviewed for CBE's study likened his own predicament to that of a mother forced to choose between her children.

Many principals have trouble finding sufficient time in the school day to accomplish all their academic objectives, especially as they face the need to increase student performance in mathematics and reading. As one elementary principal reported, "In our particular building plan, we allocate 90 minutes a day to reading and writing....You don't have a lot of time for...other things." The shortage of funds may worsen problems caused by the shortage of time. In a recent national survey, elementary and secondary principals overwhelmingly cited insufficient funding as the most daunting challenge they confront.⁵ This challenge can become particularly acute in poor and high-minority schools—the Education Trust reports that many of these schools still receive less per-pupil funding than do their low-minority counterparts.⁶ Add to these obstacles the growing numbers of federal, state and district mandates schools must satisfy, and principals are left with limited room to maneuver as they make curricular decisions.

But many school principals are finding innovative ways to honor the liberal arts curriculum while working within their financial and legal constraints. For example, some are incorporating reading and mathematics into other classes, from social studies to the arts. Principals interviewed for our study credited this strategy with focusing their teachers on a shared academic vision and thus inspiring them with true unity of purpose. These principals claimed to strengthen reading and mathematics instruction by placing them in fuller context and highlighting their relevance. When entirely divorced from the context provided by literature, the arts, history, public affairs, or natural science, reading and math can seem hollow and unrewarding exercises that offer television reality shows or video games little competition.

Yet the findings of CBE's survey suggest that even the most innovative principals—especially those in high-minority schools—are fighting an uphill battle as they strive to expose their students to a complete curriculum. Without the help of policies and programs that support the liberal arts, principals may prove unable to prevent curricular erosion.

Without the help of policies that support the liberal arts, principals may prove unable to resist curricular erosion.

Survey Findings: Good News & Bad News

Figure 1
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for mathematics

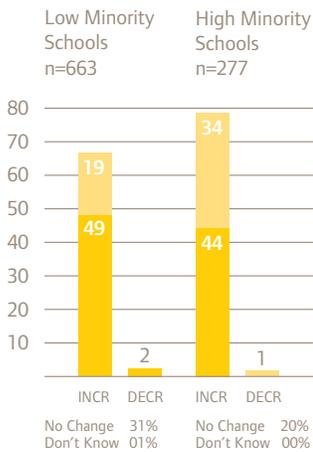
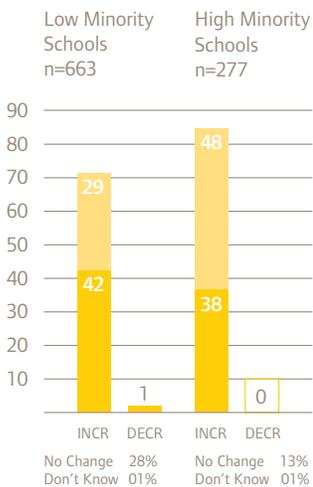


Figure 2
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for reading



In late 2003, The Council for Basic Education surveyed elementary and secondary school principals in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York about the state of the liberal arts curriculum in their public schools. Their responses reveal that school curricula have undergone profound changes since 2000—some encouraging, others worrisome. Mathematics, reading, science, and middle- and high-school social studies are on the rise. The arts, foreign language, and elementary school social studies are by contrast in decline. The fact that declines in these latter three subjects seem most pronounced in high-minority schools affords special cause for concern.

About this Study

CBE's survey asked principals about the amount of time and number of resources available for each of 9 academic areas: the arts, foreign language, mathematics, science, reading, writing, social studies, civics, and geography. In particular, the survey prompted principals to supply information on:

- the amount of instructional time allocated to each of those academic areas;
- the amount of time devoted to professional development in each area; and
- the numbers of teachers in each area.

Most of these questions asked principals to address changes that had occurred since 2000, though some invited them to anticipate changes that might occur in the coming two academic years. (For an on-line copy of CBE's survey, please visit www.c-be.org/pdf/PrincSurv.pdf.)

We also conducted two focus groups with exemplary principals from states across the country: one group with elementary principals, and another with secondary principals. The purpose of these focus groups was to provide background and context for the issues raised in the survey, as well as anecdotes that might illuminate survey data. Quotations from the focus groups appear throughout this report.

How We Present Our Data: a Focus on Racial Gaps

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education decision to strike down laws prescribing school segregation, persistent disparities between the educational experiences of white and minority students have become an especially timely topic. Accordingly, our presentation of data places special emphasis on differences between high-minority and low-minority schools.⁷ All the differences we discuss in this report are statistically significant. Although the substantial overlap in our sample between high-minority and high-poverty schools reflects national data on the high concentration of minority students in the most impoverished districts and schools, we do not attempt to separate the effect of income from that of race.⁸

To present our results as concisely as possible, we lay out aggregate results for all four states first, followed by summaries of specific areas where individual states departed materially from these aggregate results. In all but three of these specific areas, which we shall note, the departures we document are statistically significant. While each state's results are largely consistent with those for the aggregate sample, specific differences between individual states are illuminating, revealing compelling correlations between state policy and curricular change.

The Question of Educational Quality

In focusing on indicators such as numbers of teachers, time for professional development, and instructional time allocated to each subject, we do not claim to offer the last word on educational quality. In any given school, smaller numbers of excellent

teachers will likely do more good than large numbers of mediocre teachers; students will probably learn more in an effective 45-minute class than in an ineffective 90-minute class; and some professional development programs may do very little good. Still, the loss of teachers, instructional time, and professional development devoted to subjects such as the arts or elementary social studies is almost certainly bad news for the overall health of these subjects. While we certainly need to learn much more about issues such as the current quality of classroom instruction or curricula in all subjects, this survey provides an important overview of what is happening to the broad liberal arts curriculum in elementary and secondary schools.

Mathematics, Science, Reading, and Writing

Increases Across the Board: Mathematics, Reading, and Writing

Not surprisingly, overwhelming majorities of principals who participated in our survey reported moderate or, in many cases, large increases in instructional time dedicated to mathematics, reading, and writing. Approximately 7 in 10 principals from low-minority schools have seen increases in these three areas. For high-minority school principals, this ratio rises to about 8 in 10, with a full 86% reporting growth in reading. Similar percentages of principals expected increases in the coming two years. Only a handful of principals—no more than 15 out of the 956 we surveyed—had observed any decreases in time for either math, reading or writing. An even lower number anticipated any decreases. **Figures 1, 2, & 3**

Large majorities of principals we surveyed recorded growth in time allotted to professional development in mathematics, science, reading, and writing. **Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8**

Faring Well: Science

While smaller than the proportion of

Figure 3
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for writing

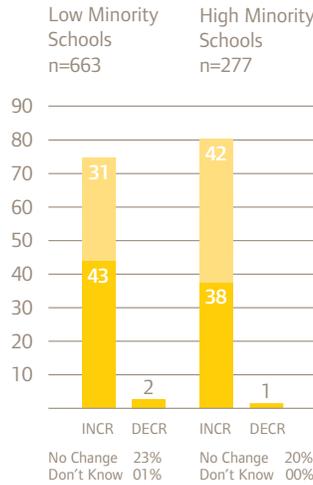


Figure 6
Percent of principals reporting changes in time spent on professional development in reading

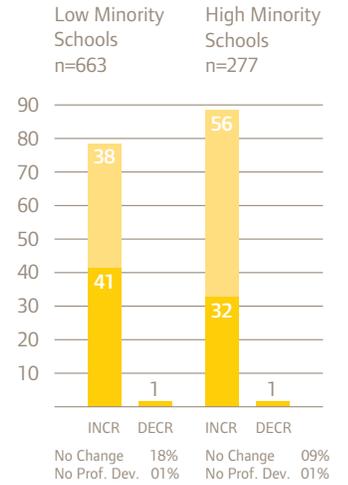


Figure 4
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for science

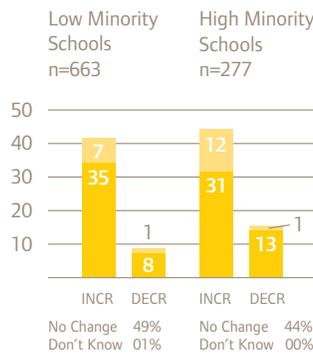


Figure 7
Percent of principals reporting changes in time spent on professional development in writing

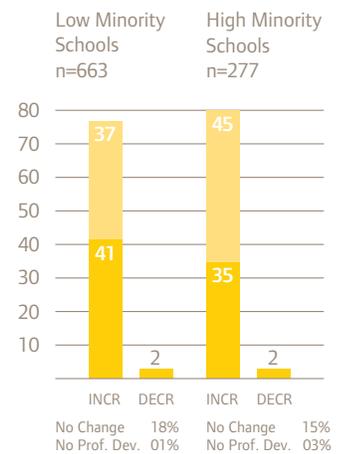


Figure 5
Percent of principals reporting changes in time spent on professional development in mathematics

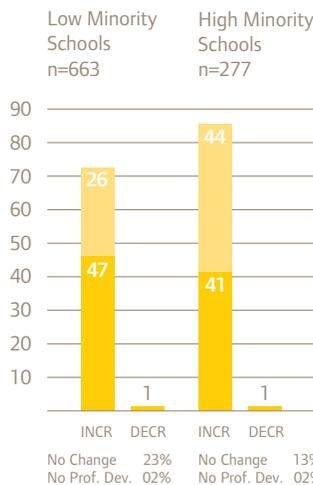
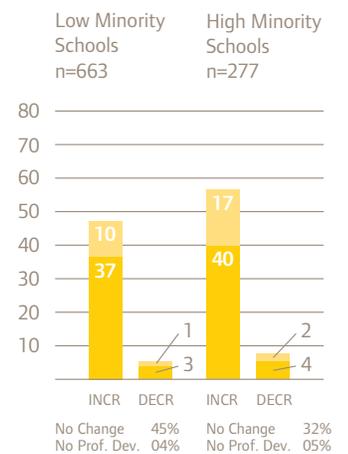


Figure 8
Percent of principals reporting changes in time spent on professional development in science



Moderately Greatly

Figure 9
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for the arts

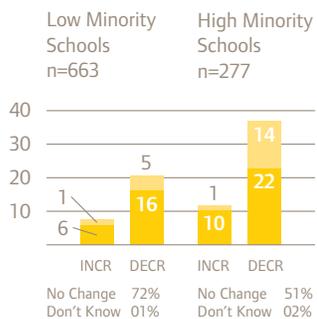


Figure 10
Percent of principals anticipating changes in instructional time for the arts

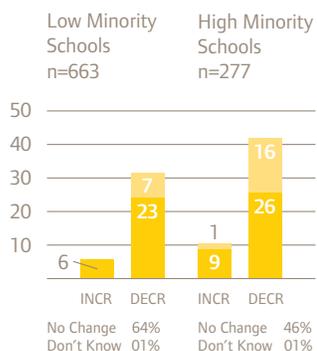
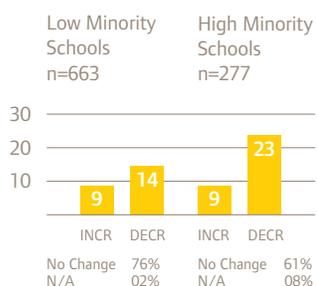


Figure 11
Percent of principals reporting changes in the numbers of arts teachers



principals reporting increases in math, reading or writing, a substantial share of principals we surveyed reported increases in science. On this measure, findings for low- and high-minority school principals differ very little (42% vs. 43%). [Figure 4](#) When asked to predict what might happen in the next two years, however, a greater percentage of principals from high-minority than from low-minority schools foresaw an increase in science (60% vs. 49%).

The Impact of Federal Accountability Measures on Mathematics, Reading, Writing, and Science

Our data clearly attest to the national focus on mathematics, reading and writing, and science. Nowhere is this focus more evident than in No Child Left Behind. Enacted in January 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) in a number of performance measures, most notably their students’ mathematics and reading scores. Beginning in 2007, schools will become responsible for student performance in science as well. If a school consistently fails to meet AYP goals established by the states, the school district must restructure that school: For example, the district can replace the school’s staff, or place school operations under private or state control. The strong majority of principals both reporting and anticipating increases in instructional time and professional development for mathematics, reading, and writing likely reflects the mounting pressure to meet annual yearly progress goals in these subject areas. While the focus on reading and mathematics predates No Child Left Behind in most states, the new federal law has raised the stakes considerably.

The influence of No Child Left Behind seems equally apparent in our findings regarding science. The fact that principals were less likely to report increases in science than in math, reading, or writing is hardly surprising, given the timetable for introducing new accountability provisions in science. Appropriately, principals were more likely to foresee future increases than report past ones. The disproportionate increases projected for high-minority schools might suggest that these schools are even more responsive to national accountability reforms than are their low-minority counterparts.⁹

Of particular concern to CBE—and, we believe, to the nation—are signs that the growing attention to mathematics, reading, writing, and science may well be coming at the expense of other academic subjects, including the arts and foreign language.

The Arts and Foreign Language

Of all the academic subjects included in our survey, the arts and foreign languages seem at greatest risk, especially in schools that serve mostly minority students.

The Arts: In Decline

Overall, 25% of principals reported decreases in instructional time allocated to the arts, whereas 8% reported increases. While principals of both high- and low-minority schools reported reductions in instructional time allocated to the arts, a much higher proportion of high-minority than low-minority principals pointed to declines (36% vs. 21%). A sizable share of high-minority school principals (14%) stated that instructional time for the arts had decreased greatly. [Figure 9](#)

Even more principals predicted decreases in the coming two years. Thirty-three percent of all principals we surveyed anticipated future decreases, while a mere 7% anticipated increases. Again, these decreases appear especially pronounced in high-minority

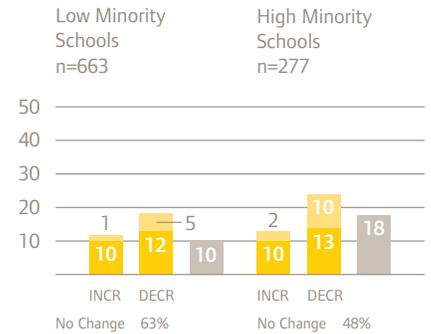


schools, whose principals anticipated declines at a greater rate than did their peers in low-minority schools (42% vs. 30%). Moreover, more than twice as many high-minority principals as low-minority principals expected time for the arts to decrease greatly (16% vs. 7%). [Figure 10](#)

While high- and low-minority school principals were equally likely to report that they had added arts teachers since 2001, a substantially larger share of high-minority than low-minority principals pointed to declines in the number of art teachers (23% vs. 14%). [Figure 11](#)

A similar pattern characterizes our findings regarding professional development for the arts: Principals of high-minority schools were considerably more likely than their peers to report either that their schools offered no professional development for the arts, or that they had reduced the amount of time set aside for such activities. [Figure 12](#)

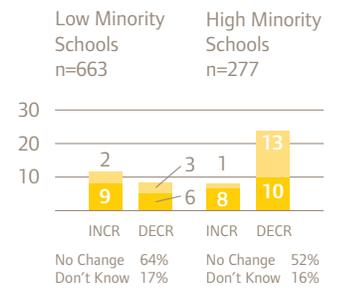
Figure 12
Percent of principals reporting changes in time for teacher professional development in the arts



Foreign Language: A Widening Gap Between White and Minority Students

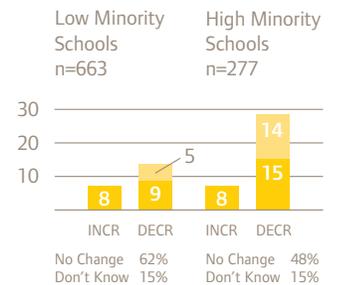
While less dramatic, our survey data on foreign language follow a similar trend: High-minority schools in particular appear more likely than their low-minority counterparts to experience declines in instructional time. As a group, principals responding to our survey did not paint a very dire picture of recent declines in foreign language: 10% reported increases in instructional time, while 13% reported decreases. When disaggregated by race, however, the data present a more troubling picture. While low-minority school principals were slightly more likely to report increases than decreases in instructional time devoted to languages (11% vs. 9%), high-minority school principals were significantly more likely to report decreases than increases. (23% vs 9%) [Figure 13](#)

Figure 13
Percent of principals reporting changes in instructional time for foreign language



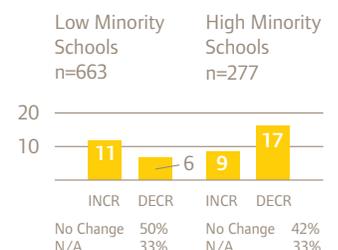
As with the arts, prospects for foreign language threaten to worsen in the coming two years. While 8% of all principals anticipated increases, 19% expected declines. Again, differences between schools were pronounced. More than twice as high a share of high-minority as low-minority school principals (29% vs. 14%) predicted declines. What's more, a full 14% of high-minority school principals foresaw large decreases. [Figure 14](#)

Figure 14
Percent of principals anticipating changes in instructional time for foreign language



Disparities between high-minority and low-minority schools were also evident in the numbers of teachers and the amount of professional development devoted to foreign languages. While principals of low-minority schools offering foreign language instruction were somewhat more likely to report increases than decreases in the number of teachers and amount of professional development time devoted to foreign language, high-minority school principals were more likely to report decreases than increases in both areas.¹⁰ [Figures 15 & 16](#)

Figure 15
Percent of principals reporting changes in the numbers of foreign language teachers



Lax Requirements in Arts and Foreign Language

Even before accountability reforms took hold in the 1990s, arts and foreign language were often among the first casualties of school budget cuts. This comes as no surprise: Most states lack strong policies to protect these subjects against such waning commitment.

According to a recent report by the National Association of State Boards of Education, state requirements for the arts “fall far below those of other core subjects. In many states, only 1/2 credit may be required of students in order to graduate from high school, and in some cases related coursework (such as industrial arts) may be substituted.”¹¹ In general, colleges and universities merely exacerbate this problem by

Moderately
 Greatly
 No Professional Development

Figure 16
Percent of principals reporting changes in time for teacher professional development in foreign language (includes only principals of schools that report offering any teacher professional development in foreign language)

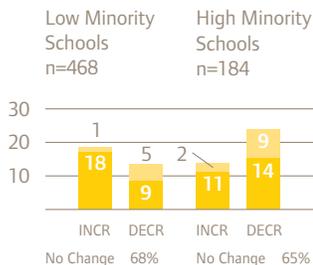


Figure 17
Percent of elementary (K-5) principals reporting changes in instructional time for social studies

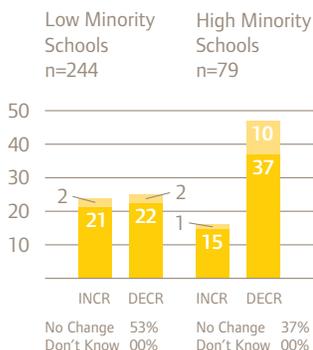
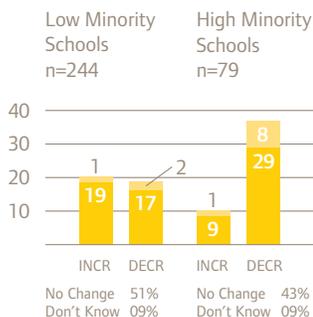


Figure 18
Percent of elementary (K-5) principals reporting changes in instructional time for civics



providing high school students little incentive to take arts classes seriously. A National Art Education Association Study found that 65% of university admissions departments did not include arts grades when calculating grade point average, and that 39 states had no statewide arts requirements for college admission.¹²

While the most selective universities generally expect students to have taken foreign language, many states do not require high school students to take language courses, and few have created state-wide foreign language assessments.¹³ Those selective universities that include foreign language in their admissions requirements generally demand only two years of coursework, even though few students can master a language in such a short period of time. Despite ample evidence that language learning should begin in the early grades, moreover, about two thirds of American elementary schools do not offer foreign language instruction.¹⁴

Deepening Inequities in Access to Arts and Foreign Language

Evidence that high-minority schools are more likely to reduce time for the arts and foreign language is especially troubling in light of already existing inequities in access to the arts and foreign language education. A 1999 study by James Catterall found that “children from high SES [socio-economic-status] families are more likely than low SES children to be consistently involved in arts activities or instruction.”¹⁵ A 2002 U.S. Department of Education study produced similar findings: Elementary schools with low concentrations of minority students are much more likely than those with high concentrations to have special school facilities or district curriculum guides for the arts. Low-minority secondary schools were also more likely to receive external funding for music programs and to employ two or more full-time visual arts teachers.¹⁶ As of 2000, African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students were less likely than white students to graduate with credits in foreign language.¹⁷

Social Studies, Civics, and Geography

Asked about time devoted to social studies, civics, and geography, principals offered both good news and bad news. The good news is that both low- and high-minority secondary schools seem to be reserving more instructional time for these subjects. The bad news: Elementary principals point to a very different trend in their schools, where the commitment to social studies and related subjects appears to be in decline. As with arts and foreign language, principals of high-minority schools were most likely to report such declines.

Declines in High-Minority Elementary Schools

Taken as a whole, elementary principals participating in our survey were somewhat more apt to report declines than growth in instructional time for social studies (29% vs. 22%) and civics (24% vs. 18%). In geography, roughly as many elementary school principals reported decreases as increases (22% vs. 20%).

Yet closer inspection of the data reveals very large gaps between low- and high-minority schools. Principals in low-minority elementary schools were about as likely to report increases as decreases in instructional time for social studies, civics, and geography. By contrast, almost half (47%) of principals in high-minority elementary schools reported either moderate or large decreases in time devoted to social studies; well over a third (37%) reported decreases in civics; and a somewhat lower proportion (35%) reported decreases in geography. Much smaller proportions of these principals reported increases in any of the three areas. Figures 17, 18, & 19 Survey data indicate

that the trend in high-minority elementary schools’ treatment of social studies, civics, and geography will continue. Substantial—if somewhat smaller—percentages of principals from these schools anticipated decreases in the next two years. Interestingly, the data suggest that even low-minority schools might dedicate less time to instruction in social studies and civics over the next two years. [Figures 20 & 21](#)

Increases in Middle and High School

In the middle and high school grades, by contrast, the general commitment to social studies, civics, and geography appears to be on the rise in both low- and high-minority schools. Considerable percentages of principals in both types of schools reported increases in time devoted each of these academic areas. [Figures 22, 23 & 24](#)

The Effect of September 11th

Principals in our focus groups cited the experience of September 11th and the war in Iraq as possible causes of the growing attention to social studies and related subjects at the middle- and high-school levels. These events have prompted considerable introspection concerning what we currently teach our students about our democratic process, civic responsibilities, and history, as well as about the culture and history of other countries. The condition of social studies and civics education in particular has garnered significant national attention in recent years.¹⁸

The State of Secondary School Standards, Assessments, and Course Requirements

Changes to state policies nationwide might be helping to fuel a growing commitment to social studies at the middle- and high-school levels. High-school graduation requirements in social studies have risen greatly since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983; most states now require high school graduates to have completed three

Figure 19
Percent of elementary (K-5) principals reporting changes in instructional time for geography

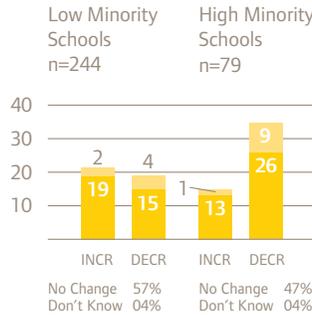


Figure 20
Percent of elementary (K-5) principals anticipating changes in instructional time for social studies

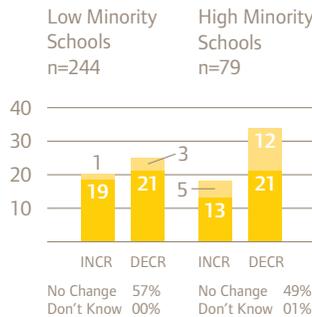


Figure 21
Percent of elementary (K-5) principals anticipating changes in instructional time for civics

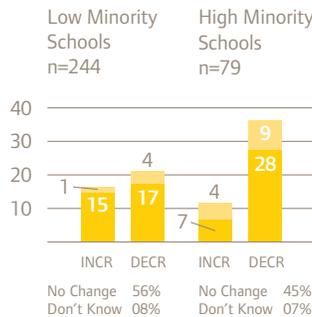


Figure 22
Percent of 6-12 principals reporting changes in instructional time for social studies

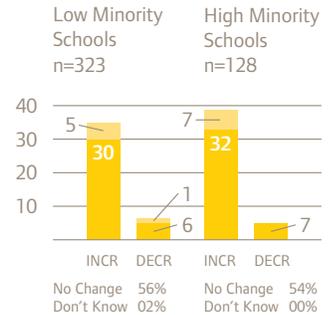


Figure 23
Percent of 6-12 principals reporting changes in instructional time for civics

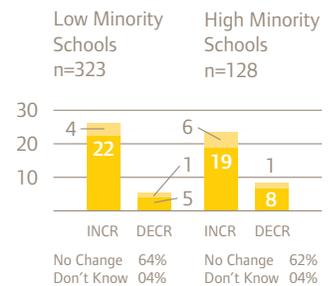
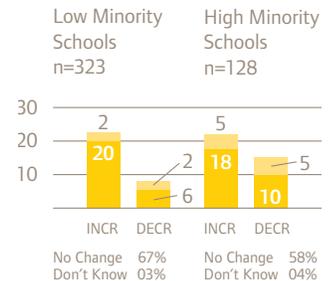


Figure 24
Percent of 6-12 principals reporting changes in instructional time for geography



credits in the subject. The last five years in particular have witnessed enormous progress in the creation of new social studies standards in states across the country. In 2000, the American Federation of Teachers reported that only 19 states had clear and specific social studies standards at the high school level.¹⁹ By contrast, the AFT now reports that 35 states—including all four states in our study—have such standards.²⁰

While standards creation may have supported the tendency to increase instructional time in social studies, civics, and geography, however, weakness in other state accountability areas may threaten schools' ability to sustain this tendency over the long term. Only 22 states use social studies assessments aligned with standards—a number that has changed little since 2000²¹—and even fewer include substantial civics and geography content on these assessments. Apparent increases in time allotted middle- and high-school civics courses come on the heels of a long decline in civics education. According to a 2003 report published by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), “most formal civic education [in high school] today comprises only a single course on government—compared to as many as three courses in civics, democracy, and government that were common in the 1960s.”²² Geography requirements are particularly light. Only eight states require high school graduates to have taken any geography, and only two require stand-alone geography courses.²³ Despite some promising recent trends, the strength of social studies, civics, and geography in American middle and high schools is by no means secure.

Understanding the Decline of Social Studies at the Elementary Level

CBE's findings regarding the loss of instructional time for social studies, civics, and geography in the primary grades confirm a long-term national trend. From 1988 to 1998, the proportion of fourth graders who reported receiving social studies instruction on a daily basis fell from 49% to 39%.²⁴ The lagging commitment to elementary social studies is evident in the paucity of strong state standards and assessments in this area. Only 12 states have developed “clear and specific” social studies standards at the elementary level, and only 16 have elementary social studies assessments aligned with standards. As a group, the states we studied seem in this regard representative of the nation as a whole: Illinois, Maryland, and New Mexico do not have clear and specific standards at the elementary level; Maryland and New Mexico do not have assessments aligned with standards.²⁵

Trends in Individual States

Though federal education policies—particularly No Child Left Behind—are likely to have a large effect on student access to a complete curriculum, individual state policies still have an enormous impact on the breadth and quality of the education their K-12 students receive. Our survey data for the different states involved in our study bear this out: While all of them show evidence of a waning commitment to some subjects currently exempt from federal accountability provisions, there are significant differences within particular subject areas. Whereas a large percentage of Maryland principals point to declines in instructional time for elementary social studies, for example, their peers in New York State are far more likely to report growth. Our interpretation of the data attempts to account for the existence of such discrepancies among different states. Despite the importance of state policy, however, evidence that each state included in this study has narrowed its curriculum should prompt us to pay attention to the impact of federal reforms over the coming years. For as one principal participating in our focus groups argued, some state-level accountability reforms are at least a decade old, “but No Child Left Behind put the teeth in [them].”

Illinois and New Mexico: Following the Trend

Our survey data for Illinois as well as for New Mexico do not differ very substantially from the aggregate data for all four states. Mathematics, reading, writing, and (to a lesser degree) science fare the best on measures of instructional time, time for professional development, and numbers of available teachers. Foreign languages, and especially the arts, fare the worst. In Illinois, the results for social studies, civics, and geography were mixed, with elementary (K-5) schools reporting decreases in instructional time and middle and secondary (6-12) schools reporting increases. Illinois schools with high-minority populations were most likely to register decreases in time for elementary social studies, civics, and geography, as well as for the arts and foreign language at all levels. Because we received only 56 surveys from elementary and secondary principals in New Mexico, we can present only preliminary findings for this state—our sample was simply too small to permit reliable analysis of findings for subgroups such as high- and low-minority schools.

Projected Changes to Illinois' and New Mexico's Accountability Systems

While both Illinois and New Mexico have retained their current social studies and science assessments in elementary, middle, and high school, both will have to expand their testing of mathematics and reading to comply with No Child Left Behind. In 2005, Illinois also plans to introduce mandatory arts assessments in grades five and 8. Though Illinois principals were considerably more likely to predict declines than growth in professional development and instructional time for the arts, the actual effect of the projected assessments on the commitment to arts instruction in Illinois schools deserves careful study in the coming years.

Maryland: Dramatic Curricular Erosion

In the areas of science, the arts, social studies, civics, and geography, our survey findings for Maryland depart markedly from our aggregate data. These findings indicate especially pronounced curricular erosion in areas for which neither the state nor the federal government currently holds schools accountable.

Changes to the Maryland Assessment Structure

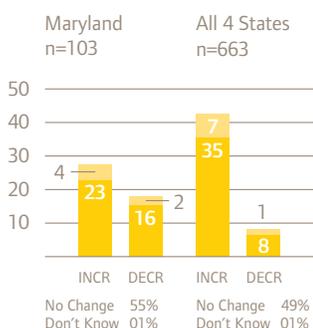
In contrast to Illinois and New Mexico, Maryland has dramatically narrowed the focus of its state-wide tests for the elementary and middle grades. In 2002, the state replaced the Maryland School Performance Assessment program (MSPAP) with the Maryland State Assessment (MSA). The MSPAP tested third, fifth, and eighth graders in mathematics, reading, writing, science, and social studies. The MSA, by contrast, tests only reading and mathematics—it will begin testing science in the spring of 2005.

At the high school level, Maryland plans to expand its testing program. In 2004, the state will replace the Maryland Functional Tests, which tested high school students in mathematics, reading, and writing, with the "High School Assessments," which will test English, algebra, biology, and government. While the status of future high school assessments is not entirely clear, the Maryland State Department of Education anticipates future tests in earth science, chemistry, physics, U.S. history, and world history. Most important, the greatest evidence of curricular erosion occurs in those areas for which Maryland has dropped its testing requirements.

Changes In Instructional Time For Science

Trends in instructional time for science seem to reflect Maryland's decision to discontinue its earlier science assessment in 2002, as well as its plan to implement a

Figure 25 A
Percent of low minority school principals reporting changes in instructional time for science: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

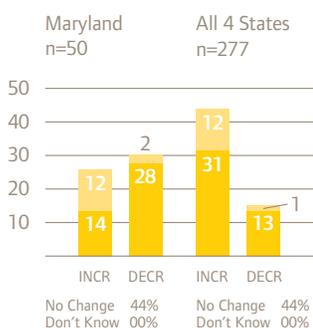


new one in 2005. While Maryland’s results for reading and mathematics were consistent with results from the four-state sample, as a group Maryland principals were considerably less likely to report increases in instructional time for science. Among high-minority school principals, the discrepancy between Maryland’s results and the aggregate results was especially distinct. **Figure 25 A & B** When asked to anticipate trends in instructional time for science, however, Maryland principals generally fell in line with principals from the other states: 52% of low-minority school principals and 56% of high-minority school principals projected increases in the coming two years. The corresponding percentages from the aggregate sample are 47% and 60%, respectively.

Reductions in the Arts

The arts appear to be at particular risk in Maryland’s high-minority schools. Well over half (56%) of the high-minority school principals we surveyed in Maryland projected declines in time for the arts, and none projected increases.* **Figure 26**

Figure 25 B
Percent of high minority school principals reporting changes in instructional time for science: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

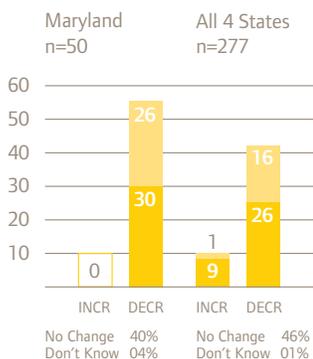


Reductions in Social Studies

Dramatic reductions in instructional time for elementary social studies, civics, and geography have accompanied the loss of state assessments in those areas. Maryland elementary principals were far more likely than elementary principals in the aggregate sample to report decreases in all three subjects. **Figures 27, 28, and 29** Similar proportions of elementary principals foresaw decreases in the coming two years. Maryland’s lack of “clear and specific” social studies standards for the elementary grades threatens to exacerbate this trend.²⁶

Principals of Maryland middle and secondary schools were less apt than their peers in other states to report increases in time for social studies. In geography, they were more likely to report decreases than increases in instructional time. In this tendency, they departed significantly from principals in the four-state sample, many more of whom pointed to increases than to decreases. **Figure 30**

Figure 26
Percent of High Minority school principals anticipating changes in instructional time for the arts: Maryland vs. aggregate sample



These findings reinforce the results of a recent informal study examining social studies education in Maryland. In interviews of district officials in 8 Maryland counties, the Maryland Humanities Council found cuts in instructional time, professional development resources, and instructional materials devoted to social studies.²⁷

The Pressure on High-Minority Schools

Disparities between Maryland’s high- and low-minority schools may be the unintended consequence of well-meaning attempts to correct funding inequities that have long separated the state’s poorest and wealthiest schools. In an effort to offset such inequities, Maryland’s Bridge to Excellence Act of 2002 pledges to distribute 74% of state aid in inverse proportion to local wealth. To receive this funding, jurisdictions must demonstrate how they plan to bring their students up to mandated federal standards in mathematics, reading, and science over the next five years.²⁸ Absent high-quality assessments in all subject areas, schools with the highest concentration of poor and minority students will have a particularly strong incentive to focus their resources on those three subjects at the expense of the broader curriculum. Though efforts to

* Differences between results for Maryland high-minority schools and those for high-minority schools in the aggregate sample were not statistically significant, yet they deserve further examination with larger sample sizes of principals.

achieve funding equity among all schools are vitally important—especially in Maryland, where local property wealth still has an inordinate influence on district funding levels²⁹—such efforts’ effects on curriculum in the poorest schools deserve close attention over the long term.

New York State: Bucking the Trend
Increases in Elementary Social Studies

As with Illinois and New Mexico, our data for New York principals are largely consistent with data from the aggregate sample. The notable exceptions to this rule occur in principals’ accounts of elementary social studies, civics, and geography, all of which appear to be gaining strength in elementary schools. While principals in Illinois and Maryland registered declines in instructional time for the three subjects, more New York principals reported increases than decreases in all three.* Figures 31, 32, 33 Somewhat smaller—but still considerable—proportions predicted future increases in instructional time.

Giving Social Studies a Place at the Table

An explanation for this apparent growth in social studies and related subjects may lie in New York’s standards and assessments. Unlike most other states, New York has allowed social studies to assume its place among other subjects included in its accountability system. As *Education Week’s 2004 Quality Counts* issue reports, “The Empire State is the only state to have clear and specific standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies/history at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and to have tests aligned with those standards in each of the subjects for every grade span.”³⁰ More to the point, New York is one of only three

Figure 27
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for social studies: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

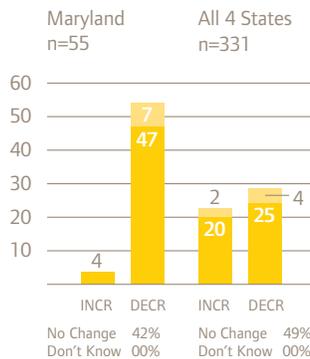


Figure 28
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for civics: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

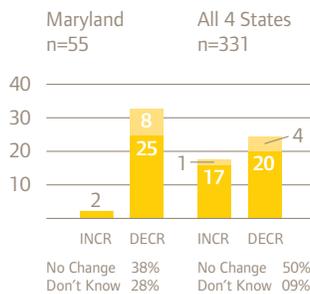


Figure 29
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for geography: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

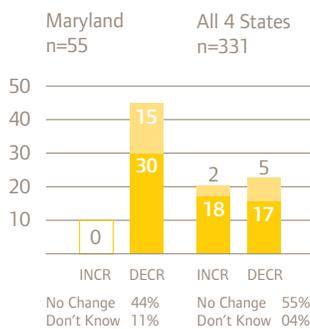


Figure 30
Percent of 6-12 principals reporting changes in instructional time for geography: Maryland vs. aggregate sample

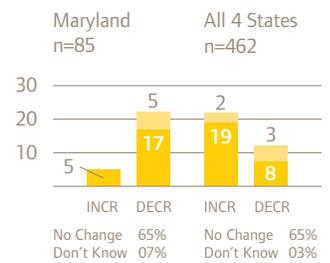


Figure 31
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for social studies: New York vs. aggregate sample

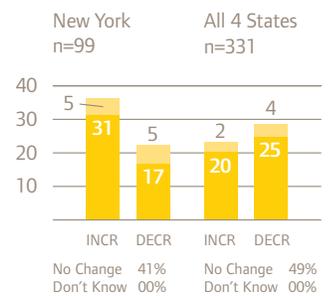
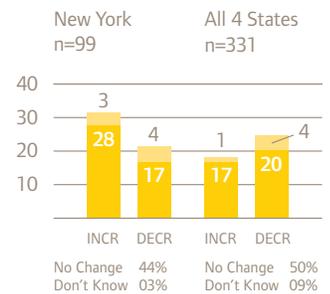
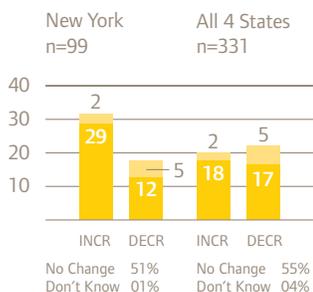


Figure 32
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for civics: New York vs. aggregate sample



* In the area of social studies, differences between our New York data and our aggregate data are statistically significant. In the areas of civics and geography, the differences are not statistically significant. That said, they do point to possible trends that warrant further investigation.

Figure 33
Percent of K-5 principals reporting changes in instructional time for geography: New York vs. aggregate sample



states with clear and specific social studies standards at the elementary level, as well as tests aligned with those standards. The state’s social studies standards have in fact received high marks from several organizations.³¹ Adopted in 2001, New York’s state-wide fifth-grade social studies test assesses third- and fourth-grade content, offering elementary principals and teachers an incentive to concentrate on social studies.

A number of other factors might contribute to the apparent growth in elementary social studies and related areas. For example, New York specifically includes civics and geography items on its elementary assessment, and it has recently added social studies resource guides for elementary teachers. Indeed, schools in the state seem to have made a priority of supporting teachers in this area. Elementary principals in the state were considerably more likely than principals in the aggregate sample to report increases in professional development time for social studies (43% in New York vs. 25% of the four-state sample). A mere 4% of New York elementary principals reported declines in this area.

An Important Caveat: High-Minority Schools

Even in the area of social studies, however, we found evidence of large gaps between high-minority and low-minority elementary schools. While our small sample size of 24 high-minority elementary school principals precludes any definitive conclusions, the fact that large proportions of these principals reported decreases in instructional time for social studies, civics, and geography merits further investigation at the very least.

As in Maryland, efforts to strengthen foundational skills in urban schools may contribute to inequities in the breadth of education available to students of different racial and economic backgrounds. As part of a new curriculum mandated by the New York City Department of Education, for example, city middle schools must devote over half of their weekly instructional periods to reading and mathematics—a curricular change that will not affect over 200 of the city’s top-performing schools. According to a recent New York Times article, city educators have observed a pronounced falling off in the amount of time and number of resources available for instruction in social studies, the arts, or foreign language.³²

While the need to boost poor and minority students’ mastery of foundational skills certainly justifies strong measures, we still know far too little about the long-term effects of a system that denies these students access to a liberal arts curriculum. But in any case, the prospect of a two-tiered curriculum—liberal arts for the privileged, fundamental skills for our most vulnerable students—should give us pause.

Conclusion: A Moment of Risk and Opportunity

Although No Child Left Behind and similar state laws threaten to narrow the curriculum in our nation's elementary and secondary schools, the movement from which these laws emerged does create some unique opportunities for promoting a liberal arts curriculum. To be sure, the threat to the liberal arts is real. The fact that high-minority schools are most likely to divert time and resources from liberal arts subjects such as the arts and foreign language raises the specter of a new opportunity gap between white and minority students.

A Sense of Academic Purpose

For all their dangers, however, these laws have sparked an important conversation about school improvement that, if properly directed, could strengthen the liberal arts. Certainly, principals who participated in our study aired many objections to No Child Left Behind: For example, they frequently characterized it as inadequately funded, overly reliant on standardized tests, draconian in its adequate yearly progress requirements, and unrealistic in its short-term achievement goals for special education students. On the other hand, participants in our focus groups freely acknowledged some of the law's more positive effects. Some credited the law with promoting a national focus on school improvement while fostering greater unity of purpose among school teachers and administrators. "We are all in this together," a high school principal observed. "I think that's a healthy thing for a school community.... 'Phys. ed.' teachers, music teachers, math teachers sharing the load makes it all possible." Rather than relegating teachers of some subjects to the margins, schools can include every subject area in a unified vision for school improvement.

Creating a Coherent Curriculum

A number of principals praised the standards movement in general for its ability to create greater curricular cohesion. While driving principals to reexamine the coherence and effectiveness of their school curricula, No Child Left Behind has helped generate a national discussion of what all students should learn, and when they should learn it. Educators have a chance to promote the liberal arts not as a collection of disparate courses, but rather as a unified curriculum that supports the mastery of foundational skills such as reading and mathematics while preparing students for the complexity of the world around them.

Ensuring the Primacy of the Liberal Arts

To ensure that the focus on standards, assessments, and accountability supports rather than undermines the vision of a complete education, educators and policymakers should take steps to secure the liberal arts curriculum's primacy in education. They should:

1. Integrate the liberal arts into strategies for improving mathematics and reading skills.
2. Better prepare teachers to integrate the liberal arts into mathematics and reading instruction
3. Incorporate standards and accountability systems into all liberal arts courses.
4. Maintain high goals for excellence in the liberal arts, and track progress towards those goals.

Rather than relegating teachers of some subjects to the margins, schools can include every subject area in a unified vision for school improvement.

Instead of taking time from math and science instruction, a rich liberal arts education curriculum can enhance instruction in those areas.

1. Integrate the Liberal Arts into Strategies for Improving Mathematics and Reading Skills.

Because there are only so many hours in the school day—and so much money in a school’s budget—the admonition to preserve time and resources for all liberal arts subjects might seem impracticable to principals and teachers under mounting pressure to raise student achievement in mathematics and reading. Far from allowing courses like social studies or the arts to recede into the background as “extras,” however, educators and policymakers should recognize these subjects’ importance to any school improvement plan. Rather than taking time from math and science instruction, a rich liberal arts curriculum can actually enhance instruction in those areas, both in elementary and in secondary schools.

Motivating Readers Through Liberal Arts Content

For students from all grade levels, a rich liberal arts curriculum can enhance the motivation to master essential academic skills. Disciplines such as social studies, civics, geography, and the arts provide relevant, vital material for even early and remedial reading instruction. According to John Guthrie, the tendency to divorce reading instruction from such academic content knowledge detracts from student engagement in reading.³³ Quite simply, reading exercises devoid of substantive content and relevant context can quickly become *dull*. As one urban school principal put it, “You talk about the dropout rate. You talk about students at risk. You talk about why kids aren’t interested. They’re bored half to death. We’re competing with technology and all those other things out there.”

The Importance of Content to Reading and Writing Instruction at the Elementary Level

While children must of course master the mechanics of reading before they can independently gain subject matter knowledge from written texts, they are unlikely to develop strong reading comprehension skills in a knowledge vacuum. As Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown write, “Reading is not content-free; readers read *about* something.”³⁴ The substance of what they read *about* supports the acquisition of reading skills. Content knowledge promotes reading fluency, because it helps readers recognize vocabulary, draw inferences, and understand context, all processes that support comprehension. Those who lack essential knowledge and understanding of liberal arts subjects generally fall behind as soon as they encounter even intermediate texts, which generally presume knowledge of vocabulary and at least some prior grasp of context.

The need to build content knowledge across the academic curriculum is especially urgent for low-income children, who often have fewer opportunities to gain knowledge and vocabulary skills at home.³⁵ E. D. Hirsch finds evidence of this problem in the so-called “fourth-grade reading slump,” during which the reading scores of low-income children begin to lag far behind those of their peers. Even disadvantaged children who have successfully learned the mechanics of reading are likely to lose ground as soon as they progress to more complicated reading assignments, Hirsch argues. One principal participating in our focus groups offered a similar claim: “When you are teaching children to read, you are working to build on their prior knowledge,” she told us. “When you have low-income children or children from diverse cultures and you are working to build that prior knowledge, [to] leave out the liberal arts [is to] create more of a problem than we already have.”

Even as they use strategies such as phonics to teach reading in the early grades,

therefore, teachers should begin to introduce informational text from a variety of subject areas. Before children are able to read informational texts on their own, teachers can reinforce their vocabulary and comprehension skills by reading such texts to them.³⁶

Using the Content Areas to Reinforce Reading Skills in Middle and High School

Just as elementary schools can use subject area content to support reading instruction, high schools can bring reading instruction into the subject areas. Especially in middle and high schools that enroll large numbers of remedial readers, all teachers should use their course content to reinforce fundamental reading and writing skills.

Secondary school principals we spoke with stressed the importance of integrating reading and writing instruction into every classroom. “Every teacher is responsible for reading. Every teacher is responsible for writing,” a high school principal explained. “Language Arts cannot be the sole responsibility of the Language Arts department.”

Another principal described an example of this sort of integration at her school: When English classes introduce the compare/contrast essay form, science classes at the same grade level assign the same kind of essay on a topic from the science curriculum. While helping unite the school’s staff around clearly articulated curricular goals, such strategies can at once strengthen fundamental skills and promote a deeper understanding of subject-area knowledge at the secondary school level.

Using the Arts and Foreign Language to Promote Achievement in Mathematics and Reading

The arts and foreign language can play an integral role in school improvement programs by enhancing student learning in other academic areas. *Champions of Change*, a report released by the Arts Education Partnership in 1999, collects research into the broader academic and social effects of arts instruction. Among the findings of the studies presented in the report: Active involvement in arts education correlates with higher performance in mathematics and reading, even when other factors such as income level are held constant.³⁷ Research into the effects of foreign language instruction on learning in other areas supports claims that study of a second language develops critical thinking, supports cognitive development, and improves native language reading and writing skills.³⁸ Some of the most compelling research into the positive effects of arts and foreign language instruction suggests that both can help close gaps between white and minority students’ performance on mathematics and reading assessments.³⁹

“The Arts are the Hook”

In supporting arts education, researchers and educators make a powerful appeal to common sense: The arts also offer at-risk children a reason to go to school and become fully engaged in learning. One elementary principal participating in CBE’s study described how enhanced arts education programs had helped him transform his school—once the district’s lowest-performing—into the school with the district’s highest reading scores in the first, fourth, and sixth grades. “The arts are the hook,” he concluded. “You have to give the kids something that they can come to school for.” The tendency to sacrifice time for the arts to extend time for mathematics and reading may ultimately prove counterproductive, especially for students at greatest risk of becoming disengaged from school.

“Every teacher is responsible for reading. Every teacher is responsible for writing. Language Arts cannot be the sole responsibility of the Language Arts Department.”

2. Better Prepare Teachers to Integrate the Liberal Arts into Reading Instruction

Many teachers lack the training to integrate instruction in the liberal arts with instruction in reading. Together with high-quality professional development programs, changes to teacher education programs can provide teachers this training.

Equipping New Elementary Teachers with Sufficient Content Knowledge

Because instruction in the primary grades must span the core academic content areas, elementary teachers should receive a strong background in the arts and sciences. Unfortunately, research indicates that too few of these teachers acquire a solid grounding in the liberal arts.⁴⁰ No Child Left Behind goes some distance in addressing this problem, requiring new elementary teachers to hold at least a bachelor's degree and to pass a state test in "subject knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and other areas of the basic elementary school curriculum." As states and schools of education define these "other areas," they would do well to specify a broad knowledge base in the liberal arts, along with the pedagogical skills that can help teachers use that knowledge to reinforce children's reading, writing and mathematical abilities.

Critics of current teacher education programs contend that their tendency to operate too independently of schools of arts and science contributes to the neglect of content knowledge in the preparation of elementary teachers. To enhance the content preparation of these teachers, schools of education should collaborate more closely with schools of arts and science to design programs that better align teacher education with K-12 academic standards in the content areas.⁴¹

Equipping New High School Teachers—Regardless of Discipline—to Teach Reading

Even teachers who are highly qualified in their subject areas frequently lack the qualifications of good reading and writing teachers.⁴² This problem can become especially acute in middle or high schools whose students still struggle with fundamental skills. By preparing these teachers to teach fundamental skills, schools of education can prevent the need for remediation from drawing too much time and too many resources away from instruction in liberal arts disciplines.

Helping In-Service Teachers Integrate the Liberal Arts Into the Teaching of Fundamental Skills

In-service teachers who require more content knowledge or better training in reading instruction should receive high-quality professional development in these areas. Professional development programs that include groups of teachers from different disciplines—or even an entire school faculty—are especially promising, as they can foster unified school achievement goals while combating the tendency to privilege some disciplines over others. If sufficiently long-term and truly embedded in a school's academic culture, such programs foster sustained teacher collaboration around strategies to promote literacy and numeracy. At the same time, they can support a truly well-rounded curriculum.

3. Incorporate Standards and Accountability Systems into All Liberal Arts Courses

As our survey data suggest, schools in states that lack standards and mandatory assessments in specific academic areas are most likely to decrease instructional time for

those areas. Therefore states should create standards and mandate assessments for every liberal arts subject.

In fact, some districts are actively discouraging schools from focusing their improvement efforts on areas other than mathematics or reading. As one principal told us about her school improvement objectives, “I built in science and [the district] sent it back to me. I had to take...science out.” To combat this sort of pressure, over the coming years both state and federal governments can phase in further accountability measures for social studies, civics, geography, the arts, and foreign languages. Without becoming draconian, such measures can encourage districts and schools to allocate attention and resources to the whole curriculum.

Developing Strong Standards and Curricula In All the Liberal Arts Subjects

The past decade has witnessed a great deal of progress in the creation of standards and curricula in all the liberal arts subjects. Still, progress on social studies, foreign languages, and arts standards lags behind in many states. Only seven states have clear and specific standards for mathematics, English, science, and social studies in elementary, middle, and high school.⁴³ Those standards that do exist do not always win widespread approval. Many state standards in areas such as history and civics, for example, draw substantial criticism for lack of clarity and focus.⁴⁴ Much more work remains to be done.

Creating Challenging State-Mandated Assessments in Each of the Liberal Arts Subjects

The existence of state-mandated assessments in any given subject has an enormous influence on schools’ attention to that subject. As our survey results from Maryland attest, the elimination of all but mathematics and reading assessments is likely to have a profound effect on time and resources devoted to other subjects. In New York State, by contrast, a state social studies test coupled with strong standards and support for teachers appears to have strengthened schools’ commitment to elementary social studies, civics, and geography. Unfortunately, as noted in the previous chapter, too few states have assessments in social studies, the arts or foreign languages.

States should be careful not to rely too heavily on easily scored assessments that privilege multiple-choice or short-answer questions over questions requiring students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. To incorporate multiple measures of student achievement into their assessment system, states and districts should also explore ways to evaluate portfolios of student work.

Changes to Federal Policy

Federal policymakers should make an explicit, long-range commitment to an accountability system that fosters improvement in all academic areas. By their very existence, federal accountability requirements present an influential vision for what constitutes educational excellence. Even if it spanned decades, a federal timetable for mandating further assessments in the liberal arts would give voice to a compelling vision for academic improvement.

4. Maintain High Goals and Track Progress Towards Those Goals

Educators, policymakers, and parents must adopt a common, long-term goal for all children: a high quality liberal arts education comprising mathematics, science, English,

arts, foreign languages, social studies, civics, and geography. It goes without saying that we cannot reach this goal overnight—the challenges some schools face are simply too daunting to allow a quick fix. Given what's at stake, however, we cannot abandon the goal.

Monitoring the Status of the Liberal Arts Curriculum in Elementary and Secondary Schools

As we work towards that goal, we should keep a close watch on the status of the liberal arts curriculum in elementary and secondary schools. CBE's survey of principals affords only a preliminary glimpse of how the liberal arts curriculum is faring in American elementary and secondary schools. It is too early to know for certain how No Child Left Behind will influence children's educational opportunities over the long term. Yet our study's early evidence of curricular erosion suggests that we cannot take the long-term health of a well-rounded curriculum for granted. To the contrary, researchers should carefully monitor the long-term effects of No Child Left Behind and associated reforms on student access to the liberal arts. In particular, they should continue to study the possibility of disparate impact on poor and minority students.

As a nation, we cannot claim the success of our reform efforts if we place our most disadvantaged students on an intellectual starvation diet that excludes basic domains of human experience and inquiry.

Endnotes

¹ Portions of CBE's survey were adapted from a survey by Joseph Pedulla, Lisa Abrams, George Madaus, Michael Russell, Miguel Ramos and Jing Miao, published in *Perceived Effects of State-Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers* (Boston: National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, 2003), Appendix A.

² National Center for Education Statistics, *The 1998 High School Transcript Study Tabulations: Comparative Data on Credits Earned and Demographics for 1998, 1994, 1990, 1987, and 1982 High School Graduates* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001).

³ See Paul Barton, *Parsing the Achievement Gap. Baselines for Tracking Progress* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 2003), p. 8.

⁴ See the National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card*. Retrieved on December 19, 2003 from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

⁵ Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett, *Rolling Up their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 2003), p. 11.

⁶ See Kevin Carey, "The Funding Gap: Low-Income and Minority Students Still Receive Fewer Dollars in Many States," special report (Washington: The Education Trust, 2003).

⁷ For the purposes of this study, we define "high-minority schools" as schools whose student populations are less than 50% white. Conversely, "low-minority schools" are schools whose student populations are 50% white or more. Survey data point to a significant degree of racial segregation in the schools we sampled. Nearly 78% of "low-minority schools" reported white student enrollment in excess of 75%. By contrast, over 57% of "high-minority schools" reported white student enrollments of 25% or less. Minority students in high-minority schools were overwhelmingly African American or Hispanic. Fewer than 5% of principals in these schools reported Asian or Pacific Islander enrollments exceeding 25% of their student body. Fewer than 3% had student bodies consisting of more than 25% American Indian or Alaskan native.

⁸ Due at least in part to this overlap, gaps between low- and high- minority schools were largely consistent with gaps between low- and high-poverty schools. In our sample, 64% of the high-minority school principals surveyed reported that at least half of their students received free or reduced-priced lunches, and a full 58% reported that their students were of "mostly low" socioeconomic status. Among low-minority school principals, 32% reported that at least half of their students received free or reduced-price lunches, and 14% reported that their students were of "mostly low" socioeconomic status.

⁹ The fact that high-minority schools seem more responsive to federal accountability funds might reflect their greater reliance on federal Title I funds, which No Child Left Behind links to school performance in accountability areas.

¹⁰ Because many—and possibly most—schools reporting that they do not offer professional development to foreign language teachers do not offer foreign language instruction, we have excluded such schools from our examination of time devoted to professional development in foreign language.

¹¹ Lori Meyer, *The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in American Schools* (Alexandria, VA: National Association of School Boards of Education, 2003), p. 12.

¹² National Art Education Association. "Where's the Art?" brochure retrieved December 16, 2003, from <http://www.naea-reston.org/news.html>.

¹³ Meyer, p. 16.

¹⁴ Nancy C. Rhodes and Lucinda Branaman, *Foreign Language Instruction in the United States: A National Survey of Elementary and Secondary Schools* (McHenry, IL and Washington, D.C.: Delta Systems and the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1999). While percentages of elementary schools offering foreign language remain low, they did rise significantly from 1987 to 1997.

¹⁵ Richard L. Deasy, ed. *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (Washington, DC: The Arts Education Partnership, 2002), p. 71.

¹⁶ Nancy Carey, et. al., *Arts Education in Public Elementary Schools 1999-2000*, NCES 2002-131 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), p. 89.

¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2002* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), Table 142.

¹⁸ The federal judiciary's recently formed Subcommittee on Civic Education has issued a resolution urging all educational institutions to make civic education a priority, and several national education and policy organizations have released high-profile reports on the current status of social studies and civics education. See for example Sheldon Stern, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A Report Card* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003); Cynthia Gibson and Peter Levine, eds., *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York and College Park, MD: Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003); Paul Gagnon, *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core* (Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute, 2003); and J. Leming, L. Ellington, and K. Porter, *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003).

¹⁹ *Education Week: Quality Counts 2000*, vol. 19, no. 18 (January 2000), p. 72. The Quality Counts assessment of state accountability standards relies in part on AFT evaluations of state standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies.

²⁰ *Education Week: Quality Counts 2004*, vol. 23, no. 17, p. 104.

²¹ *Quality Counts 2004*, p. 105.

²² Gibson and Levine, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, p. 14.

- ²³ Ryan Daley, "No Geographer Left Behind: A Policy Guide to Geography Education and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," policy brief prepared for the Geographic Education National Implementation Project (May 2003), p. 27.
- ²⁴ Andrew W. Weiss, Anthony D. Lutkus, Wendy S. Greigg, and Richard G. Niemi, *The Next Generation of Citizens: NAEP Civics Assessments—1988 and 1998*, NCES 2001-452 (U.S. Department of Education, June 2001), p. 25.
- ²⁵ *Quality Counts*, 2004, pp. 104-105.
- ²⁶ *Quality Counts*, 2004, p.137.
- ²⁷ Maryland Humanities Council, "History and Social Studies Education in Maryland: A Cause for Concern," position paper, April 22, 2003. Retrieved December 3, 2003 from <http://www.mdhc.org/documents/paper.pdf>.
- ²⁸ Maryland Humanities Council, "History and Social Studies Education in Maryland," p. 2.
- ²⁹ According to *Quality Counts 2004*, "Maryland ranks last in its wealth-neutrality score, a measure of how much local property wealth is related to the state and local revenue available to districts." *Quality Counts 2004*, p. 137.
- ³⁰ *Quality Counts 2004*, p. 144.
- ³¹ See the American Federation of Teachers' 2001 Issues Brief, "Developing a Standards-Based System in New York," in *Making Standards Matter*. Retrieved December 22, 2003 from <http://www.aft.org/edissues/standards/MSM2001/downloads/states/ny.pdf>. See also Stern, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A Report Card*, pp. 63-64.
- ³² David M. Herszenhorn, "Basic Skills Forcing Cuts In Art Classes," *New York Times* (July 23, 2003).
- ³³ John Guthrie, "Contexts for Engagement and Motivation in Reading," in M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, P. Pearson, and R. Barr, eds., *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III* (New York: Erlbaum, 2000). Retrieved January 11, 2004 from http://readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html.
- ³⁴ Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown, "Comprehension: the Sine Qua Non of Reading," in S. Patton and M. Holmes, eds., *The Keys to Literacy* (Washington, DC: Council for Basic Education, 2002), p. 54.
- ³⁵ Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe: the 30-Million Word Gap," *American Educator*, spring 2003. Retrieved December 16, 2003 from http://www.aft.org/American_Educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html.
- ³⁶ Beck, 58-59. E.D. Hirsch, "Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge—of Words and the World," *American Educator*, spring 2003, p. 21. Retrieved January 2, 2004 from http://www.aft.org/American_Educator/spring2003/AE_SPRNG.pdf.
- ³⁷ See Edward B. Fiske, ed, *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*. (Washington, DC: The Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 1999), pp. 1-18. For a more recent compendium of studies on the effects of arts education, see Deasy, ed. *Critical Links*.
- ³⁸ Meyer, p. 9.
- ³⁹ Myriam Met, ed., *Critical Issues* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1998). Cited by Meyer, p. 9.
- ⁴⁰ Over 58 percent of elementary teachers studied only education, with no specialization in any academic subject area. Another 18 percent were education majors with subject area specializations such as mathematics education. See the National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2002* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), Table 32.2.
- ⁴¹ Administered jointly by CBE and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the Standards-based Teacher Education Project (STEP) currently facilitates such collaboration at over forty universities in seven states. STEP helps arts and science faculty work with education faculty to design teacher education programs that effectively promote teachers' content knowledge and teaching ability. Such programs encourage schools of education to align themselves with federal teacher quality requirements while potentially supporting a broader, more integrated curriculum in elementary and secondary schools.
- ⁴² See Patricia L. Anders, James V. Hoffman, and Gerald G. Duffy, "Teaching Teachers to Teach Reading: Paradigm Shifts, Persistent Problems, and Challenges", in Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, and Barr, eds., *Handbook of Reading Research Vol. III*, pp. 719-742.
- ⁴³ *Quality Counts 2004*, p. 127.
- ⁴⁴ For a recent review of state civics standards, see Gagnon, *Educating Democracy*. For a recent review of history standards, see Stern, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History*.

Methodology

CBE's study of the liberal arts combined a mail survey of 956 elementary and secondary public school principals in four states with focus groups of principals from across the country.

In October 2003, CBE mailed surveys to a stratified random sample of 3000 principals in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico and New York. Each survey was accompanied by a cover letter explaining its purpose. Principals in our sample also had the option to complete the identical survey on line. In early November, CBE sent a reminder card to all principals in its sample.

CBE's sample included a representative selection of urban, suburban and rural principals in each target state. The databases from which the sample was drawn were supplied by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Federation of School Administrators.

956 principals returned surveys, yielding a response rate of approximately 32%: 417 surveys were returned from Illinois, 155 from Maryland, 56 from New Mexico and 310 from New York. The remaining 18 surveys included no information about state of origin and were not included in the state-by-state analyses. Because the sample size for New Mexico is very small, this report offers only preliminary findings for that state. Each graph in this report displays the sample size on which it is based.

CBE's data analysis devoted particular attention to differences between high- and low-minority schools, as well as to differences between individual states involved in the study. All such differences discussed in this report are statistically significant, unless explicitly noted otherwise.

In November 2003, CBE conducted two focus group sessions in Washington, DC: one with elementary school principals and one with secondary school principals. Comprised of principals from states across the country, the focus groups engaged participants in open discussions concerning recent changes to their school curriculum. Transcripts of these discussions contributed to the qualitative framework for CBE's analysis. Steve Farkas of Public Agenda led the focus groups.

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