

**EVALUATION OF THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF
ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS
YEAR FOUR REPORT**

Co Principal Investigators

Lizanne DeStefano

Nona Prestine

Project Director

George Stanhope

**Report to the
Illinois State Board of Education**

August, 2002

Evaluation of the Implementation of Illinois Learning Standards

Year Four Report

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

The Evaluation of the Implementation of Illinois Learning Standards Project has been a four-year endeavor funded by the Illinois State Board of Education to assess the extent to which local districts are implementing Illinois Learning Standards (ILS), to identify factors which enhance or inhibit implementation, and to investigate the relationship between ILS implementation and student achievement. The project began on January 18, 1999, and ended its fourth and final fiscal year of operation on August 20, 2002. This report contains the findings of the fourth and final year of the study and a summary for the entire grant period.

The study has two components:

1. **Survey of Practitioners.** During Year Four, 2,642 teachers in a stratified random sample of 61 schools were surveyed to determine the extent to which they were implementing ILS in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Teacher survey data were used to place schools at various levels of implementation, assess ILS implementation at the state level, and examine the relationship between ISAT performance and ILS implementation. A parallel Administrator Survey was developed and sent to 137 building principals. The Administrator Survey was used to assess principals' perceptions of ILS implementation.
2. **Qualitative Component.** In Year Four, six districts with one to two schools from each district were selected for intensive case study. The districts selected for inclusion vary in student enrollment, district organization pattern, community size, and geographic location. Specifically, one district located in the southern part of the state is a unit district (K-12) that serves a largely urban population. Current student enrollment is just over 11,000 students. A second, an elementary district (K-8) located in a mid-sized city in central Illinois, has a student enrollment of approximately 4,100 students. The third is a high school district (9-12) located in a suburban community in the northern part of the state; student enrollment is approximately 2,800 students. The fourth, also a unit district (K-12), is located in a small rural

community in central Illinois and has a student enrollment of just over 1,000 students. A fifth, a unit district (K-12) that is part of a central Illinois metropolitan area, has an enrollment of approximately 5,700 students. The sixth district, a small rural district (K-12) in southern Illinois, serves just over 1,100 students. The nine schools selected from the six districts that agreed to participate in this study include three elementary schools, three middle/junior high schools, and three high schools. Over the past year, more than 20 site visits to district offices and individual schools were conducted for the purpose of data-gathering activities—especially intensive, open-ended, and focused interviews. Respondents included superintendents, associate superintendents, curriculum coordinators, building principals, deans, department chairs, grade-level chairs, and district curriculum committee members.

In addition to the longitudinal case studies, ten site visits and twelve telephone interviews were conducted with “High-Performance, High-Poverty” schools for the purpose of identifying successful strategies for ILS implementation. These schools were selected on the basis of high ISAT scores as well as high-poverty indices. Data gathering activities on site visits included interviews with principals, teachers, and parents; classroom observations; and document review.

This report summarizes findings and offers recommendations based on the four years of operation. Descriptions of procedures used and detailed findings are included in the two reports that follow this summary.

Findings

In this section, findings from both the Survey of Practitioners and the Qualitative Study are summarized:

◆ **Implementation has remained steady during the past year.**

For the first time since 1999, there was no increase in implementation activities of districts and schools during the past year—a finding confirmed by both the qualitative and quantitative components. From the survey data, it appears that forty-three percent of the responding schools were judged by their teachers to be

in Level Three, the third stage of implementation as described by our five-stage model. This is consistent with 2001 Survey findings. Level Three is defined as “Transition to an ILS-Led System.” It is characterized by:

- ◆ Established plans, policies, and timelines for ILS implementation that are well known at district, school, and classroom levels;
 - Apparent linkages between district curriculum and ILS;
 - Teachers and administrators who are convinced that ILS are the “way to go” to improve student learning;
 - Widespread ILS impact on teaching, lesson planning, evaluation of student work, textbook selection, resource allocation, and professional development;
 - University preservice and continuing education programs that incorporate ILS;
 - Evidence that new academic programs and policies are shaped by ILS;
 - Beginning student awareness of ILS; and
 - Beginning community awareness of ILS.

Although the majority (56%) of the schools surveyed received an average score that placed them within Level Two Implementation (Awareness and Exploration of an ILS-Led System), total scores on several dimensions of implementation were more characteristic of Level Three practice. For example, the dimensions of Affective Response (M = 3.23), Curriculum Development (M = 3.36), District/School Infrastructure (M = 3.20), Instruction (M = 3.17), and Professional Development (M = 3.44) all had means that placed them well into Level Three. One school in the sample (1.6%) was found to be at Level Four Implementation.

Elementary and middle schools exhibited similar levels and patterns of implementation. High schools continue to show lower implementation than the other levels (M = 2.57).

These findings would seem to indicate that, statewide, schools have remained steady in their

progress toward implementation of the Illinois Learning Standards during the past year. Schools in the state are exhibiting strong evidence of transition to a standards-led system (Level Three) in most, if not all dimensions of implementation. In Level Three schools, standards are well known and accepted by most teachers and administrators, who consider them to be an effective means to raise student performance. Teachers have spent considerable time aligning district curriculum with ILS and have begun to change what and how they teach in consideration of the content and performance standards. In Level Three schools, most teachers are involved in implementation, and ILS serves as the basis for academic programs and personal evaluation. This is evident in lesson planning and textbook selection. While substantial changes in student learning are not detectable, teachers are beginning to reference ILS in their assessments and reports of student progress. Professional development concerning ILS implementation is available to and accessed by teachers and administrators in Level Three schools. Students and parents are developing an awareness and an understanding of ILS.

Data from our site visits and longitudinal case studies indicate that principals and teachers in many Level Three schools are generally satisfied with their progress and do not have either a clear sense of how to further ILS implementation or a strong desire to do so. The benefits and consequences associated with further implementation are not apparent. Level Four Implementation implies that ILS form the basis of instructional and local assessment decisions, are used routinely to represent and communicate student performance, and are well understood by parents and students. Only one school in our survey sample displayed this level of implementation. The question at this point becomes: Should we expect the majority of schools to reach the highest levels of implementation, or does Level Three “meet standards?” If the state wants to promote greater emphasis of ILS at the local level, efforts must be made to create a system of rewards for implementation and clear directions and support for doing so.

The emphasis on standards throughout the P-16 system continues to increase as institutions of higher education were perceived to be playing a larger role in professional development on standards

implementation for teachers and administrators. We also found more evidence indicating that colleges and universities were expanding their role in standards implementation to include consideration of ILS in preservice teacher preparation programs. Preschools have also begun to examine ILS as they shift to a more academic program focus.

- ◆ **Professional development, curriculum development, and district/school infrastructure are the most highly implemented dimensions. Instruction and affective response also reflect Level Three Implementation.**

As evidenced by both survey findings and case study results, the predominant implementation activities were teacher professional development concerning ILS, curricular alignment, and integration of ILS into district or school policies and procedures. The percentage of teachers reporting access to ILS professional development continued to increase. More than 70% of teachers reported that curricular change was occurring in their schools as a result of ILS implementation. Teachers associated the adoption of the following with ILS implementation: expansion of afterschool tutoring (26%), increased summer school options (26%), and block scheduling (20%). These percentages represent a slight decline from last year, again suggesting that implementation may have reached a plateau. Teachers' attitudes about ILS and motivation to implement them (Affective Response, $M = 3.23$) and the impact of ILS on instruction ($M = 3.17$) were also reflective of Level Three.

- ◆ **Community and stakeholder involvement is low at all levels, though it has increased from 1999.**

Survey and qualitative data revealed that community and stakeholder involvement in ILS implementation was low ($M = 1.43$) at all levels (elementary, middle, high, and special). Respondents indicated that parents, school boards, and the community had limited awareness and understanding of the ILS and limited access to information and educational opportunities about them. In cases in which parents and the community were meaningfully involved in standards implementation at the local level, we found that the school staff often used grade-level objectives or some other translation of ILS to make the standards more understandable.

- ◆ **Relationships between ISAT performance and ILS implementation are beginning to emerge.**

In the initial years of this evaluation, limited range of ILS implementation and changes in the state testing program prevented us from conducting a thorough investigation of the relationship between ILS implementation and ISAT performance. In Year Three, no significant statistical relationship was evident, but our qualitative findings began to suggest that the connection between ILS and student performance was becoming more apparent to teachers and administrators.

This year, we have begun to identify significant correlations among overall ILS implementation and certain dimensions and student ISAT performance in specific content areas.

Regression equations using 2002 ILS implementation to predict 2001 ISAT scores and controlling for poverty and mobility revealed some significant relationships. Students attending schools with higher overall ILS implementation levels scored higher in grade 3 reading, grade 5 math, and grade 8 math. Likewise, schools with higher district and school infrastructure supportive of ILS produced greater numbers of students in meets and exceeds categories in grade 3 reading and grade 5 writing. Finally, greater professional development is associated with lower performance of students in grade 5 writing. In the latter case, it may be that schools with lower-scoring students may be instituting more professional development in an effort to raise writing ISAT scores.

- ◆ **Stakeholders identify four effects of standards implementation.**

By far, the most significant and most frequently mentioned effect of efforts to implement ILS is that the standards have brought a new focus and clarity to school improvement efforts. The focus is critical as it promotes serious systemic alignment, helping to bring all elements of schooling into a cohesive, comprehensible, connected whole. The ILS have also allowed the focus of improvement efforts to move to instructional issues rather than the plethora of distractors that can undermine change.

ILS implementation has also promoted more meaningful involvement and engagement of teachers' and administrators' work toward the goal of student learning. As teams of educators worked to align local curriculum with ILS, they developed a greater understanding of the "big picture" of student learning and a stronger commitment to shared goals. Respondents also associated ILS implementation with a growing acceptance and understanding of standards-based reform. As indicated by both the survey and qualitative findings, resistance to ILS is low among educators. There is a general acceptance and appreciation of ILS. The state's relative stability and constancy concerning the ILS has provided legitimacy and credibility to implementation efforts at district and local levels.

Finally, local educators report that ILS provide a means of assuring a more equitable education for all students by asserting that schools are accountable for certain levels of content mastery for all their students. We have found many examples of the use of ILS to identify equity concerns for student learning. Unfortunately, adequate means for addressing the concerns remain elusive.

◆ **Local implementation efforts face pressing challenges.**

Major areas of concern within school and district implementation efforts include: understanding and using data, changing curriculum and instructional practices, and addressing parent and community awareness. Local educators need support directed at increasing their capacity to understand and interpret complex data and to engage in data-driven decision making on a systemic basis. They also express concern that although district and school curricula are now aligned with standards, changes in classroom instruction and assessments have not followed suit. Content has changed, but instruction has not. Finally, local stakeholders acknowledge that parent and community awareness of ILS is low and do not see a clear course of action to improve it.

◆ **Concerns regarding ISAT, ISBE, and teacher preparation hinder local implementation.**

For many of the educators we surveyed and interviewed, there currently exists a tenuous relationship between ILS and ISAT. Most schools and districts in the study were struggling to understand how ISAT and PSAT data relate to the learning standards and benchmarks. In addition, the timeline and format for reporting

results create perceived barriers to local use of test results. ISAT and PSAE results are viewed as having significant consequences by local educators, yet their credibility and utility are questioned.

The cancellation of the Quality Assurance program, numerous personnel changes, and other ISBE actions have been perceived by local educators as threatening to the standards reform movement in Illinois. Though ISBE's "stay the course" stance on ILS was acknowledged, recent turmoil at the state agency has given our respondents doubts about the future of the standards.

Finally, although survey data indicate that teacher education programs are beginning to incorporate ILS into preservice curricula, local administrators still report that novice teachers are not well versed in ILS.

Recommendations

In the past, we have advised the state to "stay the course" with regard to ILS implementation. Qualitative and survey findings in the early years of the study indicated that ILS implementation was hindered by a common perception among local educators that "this too shall pass" and the state would abandon standards-based reform as it had so many other reform initiatives. The data from 2001 suggest that the "wait and see" attitude had given way to more enthusiasm for and commitment to ILS. In 2002, although positive attitudes concerning ILS prevailed, implementation did not increase significantly. We have learned from our research that standards implementation takes time and demands focused and sustained attention on the part of educators, legislators, the Illinois State Board of Education, and institutions of higher education. We continue to recommend that ISBE stay the course with ILS, set explicit expectations for local ILS implementation, assist local educators in data use, and clarify the relationship between state assessments and ILS.

◆ **The state should continue to promote the central role of ILS in state accountability and assessment.**

As new leadership takes the helm at ISBE, it is important for state leaders to communicate to districts and schools that the ILS are still central to the state's educational accountability system. Stressing the role of ILS in school improvement and other initiatives such as Title I and Reading First will reinforce this centrality

◆ The state should set explicit expectations for local ILS implementation.

Considerable numbers of schools have made sizable gains in ILS implementation over the last four years, but few have reached the highest levels of implementation. It seems that some districts and schools simply do not have a clear idea of how to go about effective implementation once they move beyond the basics of curriculum alignment and professional development, and many are satisfied at their current level. The Indicators of Implementation that serve as the basis for this study have demonstrated utility to measure progress. The ten characteristics of advanced implementation schools that were developed in the Year Three Report provide benchmarks for implementation. It may be time for the state to use these resources to set clear expectations for “acceptable” levels of local ILS implementation. Using an assessment analogy, it may be time to identify schools that “meet or exceed” the standards for ILS implementation and target those districts that do not for special assistance.

◆ The state should foster and support capacity building at the local level for effective standards implementation, focusing on data-based decision making and instructional change.

If schools and districts are to move to higher levels of ILS implementation, they will require assistance in the collection, analysis, and use of student performance and other relevant data to guide decision making. They also need assistance in understanding the ways in which instruction should change to promote student learning and how to achieve those instructional changes on a widespread basis. These topics should feature prominently in any professional development or leadership training sponsored by the state.

◆ The state should clarify the relationship between state assessments and ILS.

Although ISAT/PSAE performance is widely recognized by local educators as a means of judging school quality, the relationship between the state assessments is not clear to them. To clarify the relationship

between ISAT/PSAE, the state should:

1. Publish the results of content validity studies that demonstrate alignment between ISAT/PSAE and ILS;
2. Make clear to LEAs the areas in which local assessments must address ILS not covered by the state assessments;
3. Revise the ISAT/PSAE reporting strategies to align more closely with ILS.