

Promoting more Coherent and Balanced Accountability Systems

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Introduction

During recent years in American public education, we have witnessed the growth and ultimately the dominance of test-based accountability, heavily—in some cases entirely—directed by federal and state systems. While we acknowledge that both the inclusion of assessment results and influence from the federal and state governments have an important role in school accountability, we argue that contemporary accountability is largely ‘out of balance’ and this imbalance could be stifling productive local efforts toward meaningful and lasting improvements in student learning. A particular concern is the scarcity of strong local accountability initiatives, which we think have been both overshadowed and constrained by onerous federal and state test-based emphasis. We suggest a system that is both vertically and horizontally more coherent, flexible, and balanced. Such a system should allow and equip local education agencies to better meet the needs of the students they serve.

What is school accountability?

From the outset, it may be useful to describe what we mean by *school accountability*. Broadly, school accountability can be thought of as a system that 1) signals what outcomes are valued, 2) provides information about school performance with respect to those outcomes, and 3) prescribes a system of supports and interventions based on performance. The high-level theory of action behind accountability systems is that improvement occurs by incentivizing the right kinds of behaviors and actions, shining a light on areas where improvement is needed, and providing targeted supports to those areas (Perie, 2007; Landl et al., 2016).

That may sound straightforward enough, but this simplistic portrayal is built on scores of assumptions and a vast network of actions and interactions. Consider, for example, the range of training, support, and resources necessary to help improve instruction of text dependent analysis, cultivate strong formative assessment strategies, or develop differentiated instructional approaches for students with special needs.

We think accountability systems can play a role in an overall plan to promote student success, but they are not a holistic prescription for education reform. Accountability systems may highlight goals and benchmarks and provide some useful information to guide actions, but real educational progress always has been pegged to the practice of teaching and learning that occurs daily in classrooms. In the best case, accountability systems can help focus initiatives, direct resources, and otherwise create the conditions for quality teaching and learning. Accountability may be necessary, but it’s far from sufficient.



Accountability: An unfulfilled promise?

Throughout its twenty-year history, the Center staff have worked with states to develop education accountability systems. From NCLB to ESSA, from status to growth models, from standard to innovative assessment implementations, the Center consistently has been at the forefront of assessment and accountability system design and implementation. From this vantage point, the promise of education accountability has been a means by which evidence, primarily in the form of large-scale assessment outcomes, can be used to bring about improvements in the education system and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Given two decades of efforts to conceptualize, implement, correct, refine, and improve educational accountability in myriad ways, we take this opportunity to reflect upon the entire endeavor. To what extent has education accountability fulfilled its promise? Are we simply engaging in an Einsteinian effort of insanity?

For example, the Obama administration's Race to the Top fiscal stimulus gave assessment and accountability unprecedented monetary and policy priority. The Center worked with more than two dozen states on their assessment and accountability systems during this era. Looking back on these efforts and our work with the immensely talented and enthusiastic professional staff tasked with building these systems, the outcomes associated with educational accountability seem mediocre if not downright discouraging. There are certainly bright spots, for example, improvements in the performance of students with disabilities. In general, however, the outcomes have not been commensurate with the enthusiasm and promise with which these efforts began.

If, as we argue, educational accountability systems can play a role in an overall plan to promote student success, it seems clear based upon efforts from the last two decades that modest tweaks to past efforts will remain lacking. Adding "fifth indicators," such as student growth or adjusting indicators for demographics, likely are insufficient to change the mediocre record of educational accountability. Efforts to help accountability fulfill its promise will require a broad rethinking of the endeavor.

The Federal, State, and Local Role

Federal

Federal accountability has always been about equity. The landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was regarded as an initiative to improve educational opportunities for students in America, especially for the disadvantaged. One needs only to look at the original heading for Title I to understand the clear intent of lawmakers, "Financial Assistance To Local Educational Agencies For The Education Of Children Of Low-Income Families" (ESEA, 1965)¹. While ESEA has grown in scope over the years, the core of the legislation retains a focus on equity of opportunity, which most will agree is rightly the province of the federal government.

¹ Title I in ESSA bears the heading, "Improving Basic Programs Operated by State and Local Educational Agencies."

Early accountability provisions associated with ESEA focused primarily on compliance and inputs. That began to change with the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) which emphasized state requirements to measure progress toward standards with uniform state assessments. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) conspicuously elevated accountability requirements even more. This reauthorization of ESEA marked the first time the federal government mandated annual grade-level testing in states accompanied by state-managed, but federally constrained, school accountability systems based on results of those tests. More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has continued this emphasis on annual testing and an expansion of school accountability systems developed and managed by states, reflecting an extensive and proscriptive federal blueprint.

Ultimately, the role of federal accountability in education reform has become oversized and out of balance. While ensuring equity in access to effective schools and rigorous content is clearly within the purview of federal agencies, making the necessary improvements to meet equity goals is largely the responsibility of states and districts.

State

In contrast with the federal government, state educational authority is addressed specifically in each state's constitution. States have responsibility and authority for a range of requirements from the legislature, state board, and other policy-making bodies. Not coincidentally, the state role has grown over the years, in no small part due to the need to administer an expanding range of federal programs, such as the aforementioned ESEA as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) among others.

But perhaps no state education responsibility is more important than establishing both the content and the rigor of the academic standards for the state's public schools. This also implies a responsibility to provide support and resources for these standards. This role is prominently reflected in Weiss and McGuinn's (2017) five "essential roles" for state education leaders:

- Articulating vision, priorities and goals
- Implementing the state's standards and assessments
- Designing and implementing the state's accountability system
- Administering, implementing, and overseeing state and federal funding and other programs
- Communicating about critical educational issues with stakeholders across the state

Local

Given the substantial influence that federal and state agencies have on education, one might be forgiven for overlooking the fact that education is fundamentally a local responsibility. At the local level, school boards and district leadership govern schools. A brief and incomplete list of these local responsibilities include:

- Creating an appropriate environment to support learning for all students in the community
- Hiring and supporting all educators and staff
- Establishing and implementing the curriculum
- Establishing budgets and raising necessary funds
- Providing professional development
- Managing day-to-day operations such as facilities, transportation, and nutrition

Obviously, the business of teaching and learning, central to student success, occurs under the auspices of districts and schools. Clearly, a local information and reporting system that provides insights regarding the effectiveness of local practices has the potential to have greater impact in the classroom than any blunt and distant state or federal system.

The past 20 years have shown us that using a federal spotlight and hammer to identify low-performing schools and coerce them into improvement has not proven to be overwhelmingly successful. Instead, we would like to offer a new lens to view school accountability and reform, one that gives more credence to local improvement processes.

Promoting Coherence and Balance

While there is certainly a place for federal and state accountability, the degree of emphasis and attention is out of balance. State and federal systems can provide useful information at the program and policy levels, but local systems have the power to more effectively inform local practice. We propose that local accountability systems can be designed to effectively work within and around the constraints of state and federal systems to create a coherent picture of school quality and student success for their communities and their own improvement purposes. In this way, not just one accountability system matters. Rather, the relationships among federal, state, and local systems are important in creating a coherent and balanced system.

We suggest five core areas that should be addressed to move toward more effective accountability practices:

- **Principled Design:** Is each level in the system intentionally and demonstrably designed to privilege a clear and appropriate priority?
- **Reciprocity:** Does the system address the shared and inter-related responsibilities at each level?
- **Distinct District Measures:** Does the system address the unique role and contributions that districts make to promote student success?

- **Differentiated Local Systems:** Does the system include local accountability initiatives tailored to the unique mission and attributes of the schools?
- **Evaluation and Ongoing Improvement:** Is there a comprehensive and ongoing plan to evaluate, refine, and improve the effectiveness of the system?

Principled Design

In the preceding section we introduced the idea that there are central priorities for the federal, state, and local levels. However, currently federal accountability requirements are simply too proscriptive and top-heavy which constrains the potential effectiveness of state and local roles. The federal system tries to do too much which makes it difficult to do any one thing particularly well and obscures the facet that should be most privileged—equity.

As one example, consider the School Quality Student Success (SQSS) provision of ESSA. The examples of indicators provided in the law under this requirement include innovative ideas such as student and educator engagement and school climate and safety. The law requires states to adopt a(n) SQSS measure(s) that is, “valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide (with the same indicators or indicators used for each grade span” (ESSA, 2015) and, additionally, can be disaggregated at the student level by subgroup. The authors intended for this requirement to broaden accountability systems beyond test-based measures, a worthy goal, but one might ask whether the requirements support or degrade this objective. While many states have pursued innovative options in earnest, the overwhelming majority end up relying on student-level chronic absenteeism as the single SQSS indicator in the state system to meet federal requirements. These states may have recognized that state accountability, under the constraints of the federal law, is not the most appropriate place to pursue more innovative indicators. States that are on the forefront of more innovative practices with respect to SQSS measures are doing so outside of the federal system, which we believe is a rational choice.

In the end, it’s not clear that ESSA promotes the kind of accountability outcomes the authors intended or whether the results further the equity focus of state systems. It’s fair to ask whether this requirement should be addressed at the federal level at all.

In the same way, we question the reasonableness of other federal requirements such as:

- states must annually test at the student level in English language arts and mathematics at each grade (as opposed to grade span testing or producing results at the school level)
- state tests must comply with the criteria operationalized by federal peer review
- state accountability systems are prohibited from differentiating systems for exceptional schools (e.g. alternative schools)

We have focused on the federal requirements so far because they have so much influence on accountability downstream. Our broader point is that federal requirements and state systems (which could be the same or different as a system designed to meet federal requirements) should be developed chiefly to honor core design principles in keeping with the federal and state roles. Further, these systems should avoid being more expansive or proscriptive than is necessary to mitigate the likelihood that these principles will be diluted or that aspects best addressed at the local level are not stifled. We provide some examples to elaborate this point in the next section.

Reciprocity

Of course, accountability systems are much more than a collection of indicators or a set of performance classifications. As noted previously, effective systems should specify, develop, and sustain the conditions under which success is thought to occur and the kinds of supports determined to be appropriate when schools fall short of performance expectations.

This idea of specifying and supporting conditions for success is not new to accountability. It follows the principle of ‘reciprocity’ described by Richard Elmore (2002). He explains:

For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance (Elmore, 2002, p.5).

In other words, for every performance requirement in a school accountability system, there is a responsibility to make sure that the personnel charged with that performance are equipped with the knowledge and resources to meet the expectation. We advocate for specifying these assumptions, responsibilities, and conditions in a comprehensive theory of action that can be used to help develop, monitor, and evaluate the efficacy of the system.

The reciprocal responsibilities at the federal, state, and local levels are distinct but, hopefully, complementary. For example, Weiss and McGuinn (2017), whose ‘five essential roles’ for state leaders we cited earlier, suggest some additional possible roles for the state which seem to correspond with the ideas of reciprocal accountability. They are:

- Accelerate sharing and learning across the state
- Turn-around low-performing schools and districts
- Support the development of a high-quality educator workforce
- Provide professional learning opportunities
- Drive innovation

In the following table we summarize the essential role for federal, state, and local levels of accountability and suggest some examples of expectations and responsibilities associated with each.

Level	Essential Role	Primary Accountability Expectations	Reciprocal Responsibilities
Federal	Promote equity: ensure opportunities for all, especially traditionally underserved students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State and local compliance with federal requirements - States establish and measure state specific academic standards in ELA, math, and science - States report performance for all schools and groups - States track proficiency, growth, and/or achievement gaps - States use federal funds to support schools most urgently underperforming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide federal funding - Support research on effective strategies to improve student learning, especially for disadvantaged and traditionally underserved students
State	Define academic expectations: determine what all students must know and be able to do, measure and support these objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Federal funding for all Title programs - Local compliance with all federal and state requirements - Locals teach state-adopted academic standards with fidelity - Locals administer state-adopted annual assessments - Locals determine and track performance with respect to diploma eligibility criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide state funding - Disseminate research on effective strategies to improve student learning - Provide reliable and valid state level measures of core academic areas - Curate and disseminate best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment - Encourage and reward innovation

Local	Establish and implement the full curriculum: determine and operationalize efforts to help all students meet state and district performance expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Federal and state funding to support mandated programming - Flexibility to manage school programming and curriculum in a way that best serves local needs - Resources and training regarding research-based best practices for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide required funds and resources to support safe, effective, learning environments - Hire and train highly effective teachers - Provide opportunities for parent/community engagement - Track performance in areas that are local responsibilities such as financial stewardship, educator/leader development, and school climate and safety
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Distinct District Measures

District accountability at the state level, if it exists at all, is typically an aggregation of school accountability. That is, most systems treat districts like one ‘super-school’ in which performance for all students enrolled in the district is considered collectively against the same criteria used for individual schools in the district. This is not ideal. First, this can create counterintuitive results, such as when the state deems district performance satisfactory overall even though one or more schools may be failing. Such outcomes can occur when higher performance in some schools offsets lower performance in others. Second, and perhaps more importantly, district leaders have different responsibilities than school leaders which should be taken into account in the system design.

States have an opportunity to work with superintendents and other district leaders to identify indicators that would be valuable for public reporting alongside school accountability results. These indicators can be used as a signal to the state education agency and the public about the overall effectiveness of the management of the district and also can be used to incentivize district-level best practices that are not already accounted for in the school accountability system. As mentioned, useful indicators will vary by state and should be developed with district superintendent input, but examples may include:

- Adequate funding—district budget in place
- Principal and teacher qualifications

- Principal and teacher turnover
- Climate and safety reports
- Curriculum reviews and ratings
- Investment in plant and water testing
- Advanced coursework
- Access to arts, music, and physical education
- Parent/Guardian outreach and engagement efforts

Differentiated Local Systems

As discussed in the preceding sections, education is fundamentally a local responsibility. Districts and schools are central agents in promoting improved educational outcomes and should play a key role in designing and implementing accountability initiatives at the local level that address the unique mission and attributes of the schools they serve. We believe this can complement—not contradict—the role of federal and state accountability.

While federal and state accountability systems are typically designed to be “tight on outcomes” but “loose on methods,” local systems represent a means to address the methods. For example, state systems typically rely on data from end-of-year summative assessments that are designed primarily to provide classifications such as “proficient” or “advanced.” However, districts and schools have access to all kinds of local information about instruction and learning that is not accessible or useful for state or federal accountability purposes. When local leaders invest time and resources on particular inputs (e.g., completing a new teacher induction program, commercial curriculum or assessment programs, drop-out prevention programs, extra professional learning time), it can be highly informative for these inputs to be monitored and evaluated within a local improvement system.

Additionally, local systems can and should include indicators that reflect the unique characteristics of the schools. For example, a school or district may wish to prioritize accomplishments related to preparing students for careers in technology, achievements in the visual or performing arts, or demonstrations of leadership or service. Such indicators may be based on established local initiatives, such as a partnership with a local corporation that provides students an opportunity to earn an industry credential before graduation. Alternatively, schools might be inspired to develop new programs or initiatives to produce measures that matter most at the local level, such as completion of a capstone research or service project.

Evaluation and Ongoing Improvement

As noted from the outset of this paper, the central purpose of any accountability system should be to help improve educational outcomes. A failure of many accountability systems is the belief that their purpose is simply to report an accountability rating or score, based on the assumption that providing data alone is the key to improvement. This is an impoverished reform agenda. Regardless of the number and type of indicators, the various disaggregations, or even the presentation of data in attractive displays or dashboards, reporting data alone is unlikely to promote valued outcomes. Too many schools and districts are simply becoming more 'data rich' but 'information poor.' The promise of accountability is much more.

Designing a system to privilege effectiveness starts by clearly identifying the conditions, actions, and supports that are thought to provide students an opportunity to learn and produce desired results. A theory of action, logic model, or similar approach can be a vehicle for this exercise. Whatever the approach, the central claims and assumptions on which the system is built must be revisited regularly and revised as appropriate based on evidence.

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