

# A Framework for High School Accountability

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# Introduction and Background



# Thinking differently about high schools

- Most current high school accountability systems treat high schools merely as extensions of K-8
  - The obvious exception is the increased focus on student accountability in the form of graduation exams
- Unless schools and other educational units do not matter once students reach high school, I argue that the difference between elementary/middle and high school accountability systems should entail more than shifting the accountability responsibility to the students (e.g., graduation tests)
- Many others (e.g., Achieve, 2004; Reville, 2005; Vander Ark, 2004) have been arguing for significant changes for high school education and accountability very visibly in recent years

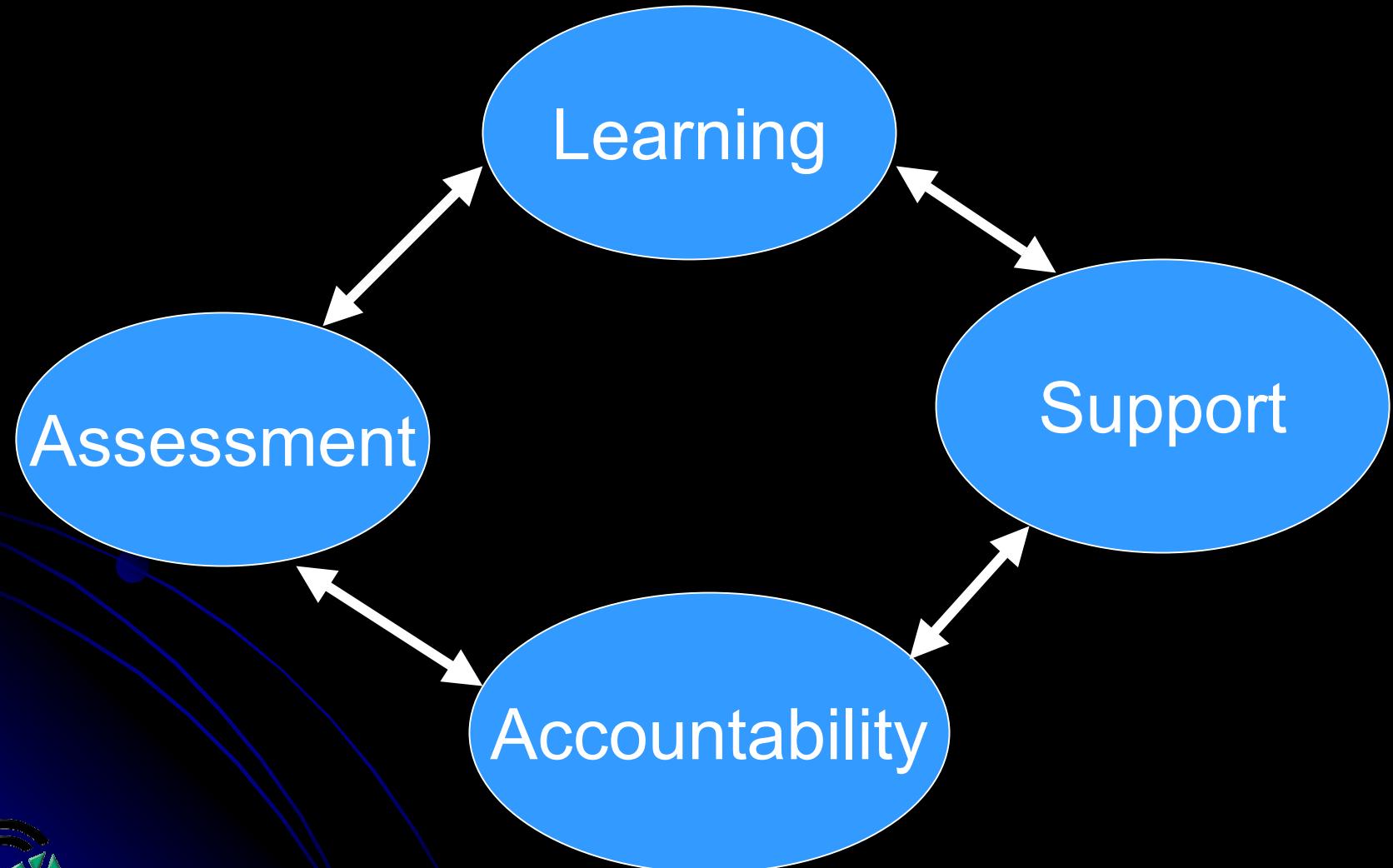


# Why High School Accountability?

- Does it work?
  - It depends what we mean by “work”
- Evidence from Carnoy & Loeb (2002), Goertz & Massell (2005), and Roderick, Jacob, & Bryk, (2002) suggests that schools “respond” to high-stakes accountability systems
  - Score increases
  - “Test prep” or meaningful learning?
  - Variable quality of response across states, districts, and schools



# Accountability System Components



# Overview of the Framework

- I provide a very general overview of this framework in the next four slides
- I then offer considerably more detail for each component by the various levels of the educational system



# Learning

- Agreed upon goals and values
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Student and teacher learning
- Diversification and opportunity to learn



# Assessment

- Multiple measures
- Tied to goals, curriculum, & instruction
  - Deeper understanding
  - Process/skills and content
- High quality
- Used to inform accountability and instruction



# Accountability

- Must consider the special nature of HS
- Valid for the purposes intended
- Aligned across the various levels
  - State
  - District
  - School
  - Student



# Support

- Encompasses the full range of approaches designed to help meet the goals of the system
  - Equality of opportunity to learn
  - Interventions for students
  - Curricular and instructional reform
  - Professional development for leaders and teachers
- Must be designed along with accountability, not as an afterthought and aligned across the multiple levels of the system



# A Coherent & Aligned Framework

- Accountability structures comprised of the four main components across multiple levels of the educational system may help to bring about the intended changes in student outcomes:
  - The programs, features, and structures within each of the components of the system need to be coherent across levels of the educational system
  - The components (learning, assessment, accountability, and support) need to aligned with one another



# Levels of Education and Accountability



# Multiple levels and stakeholders

- Responsibilities for student learning are not limited to students and teachers, but also include, among others:
  - Students
  - Teachers
  - Districts
  - Policy Boards
  - Legislatures
  - Parents
  - Schools
  - Universities
  - State DOE



# Some Constraints

- In order to focus on what might be achieved in the near term, i.e., within the next five years, this presentation will focus on accountability considerations for:
  - Students
  - Schools
  - Districts
  - States
  - Interactions among the four levels/systems
- Validity evaluations require us to ask how the systems are working to fulfill the systems' goals.



# Students

- If students are more than just recipients of curriculum and instruction, I argue that they should be held accountable for their role in the system
- This often gets instantiated as passing a single test for promotion/graduation



# Student “Learning”

- States/districts/schools should make explicit their goals for student learning and those for which they are willing to hold students and others accountable
  - Democratic purposes—economic competitiveness?
  - Basic skills—Deep understanding?
    - Minimum requirements—College/work ready?
  - Skills/process—Content?
  - Specialization—Broad introduction?
- Although content standards are important, these statements should be more visionary than the specifics of standards



# Student “Assessment”

- Laurie outlined many options for assessing high school students
- The type of assessments and the content/skills to be assessed should be guided by the goals for student learning
  - My own view is that students should be expected to collect and evaluate evidence against standards over time



# Student “Accountability”

- Must be tied to the goals for learning, but based on what we've heard, students should be accountable for more process and metacognitive skills than is typically the case with current graduation exams
  - Students could be held accountable for some “core” knowledge as well as demonstrating deeper understanding in certain areas
  - This could mean that students might have to choose how to present evidence of their graduation readiness to a public audience



# Student “Support”

- Students should be provided opportunities to increase the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they will need in order to graduate
- If these opportunities are provided, students (and perhaps their parents) should be accountable for participating in these offerings

- More on this in the school section



# Schools

*The business of schools is to invent tasks, activities, and assignments that the students find engaging and that bring them into **profound interactions with content and processes** they will need to master to be judged well educated [emphasis added].*

Schlechty, P.C. (2001) *Shaking up the schoolhouse*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass



# School “Learning”

- Schools are clearly the locus of student learning
- Responsible for:
  - instantiating high quality curriculum
  - monitoring and mentoring instruction
  - providing systematic professional learning experiences for teachers and leaders
- School leaders must ensure that the diversity of student programs all lead to meaningful post-secondary options



# School “Assessment”

- Should involve more than implementing state and district assessments
  - e.g., curriculum-based assessments
- Information for improving programs and adjusting instruction, especially as students enter high school
- Develop indicators other than test scores to document processes related to learning
  - e.g., teacher quality
- “Assess” the quality and effectiveness of professional learning experiences for educators



# School “Accountability”

- Teachers accountable for providing standards-based instruction
- Students must be enrolled in courses so they have access to the full range and depth of standards
- Schools should be held accountable for promoting deep understanding of important content and for encouraging students to be learners—e.g., college & work ready
  - If this requires a fundamental shift in the assessment systems being used, then that should be part of the discussion
  - This will likely require an accountability design that relies on more than once/year large-scale assessments



# School “Accountability (2)”

- High schools must be accountable for moving towards 100% graduation
  - Not simply “transferring” lowest performing students to “alternative” schools
  - This responsibility should be shared by middle and elementary schools, as well as the district office
- Schools should be held accountable for successful post high school transitions for all students



# School “Support”

- Start with carefully (re)designed curricular offerings
- Must provide a supportive and caring environment for all students
  - Small high schools initiatives
- Must provide early intervention for new students and/or those struggling from middle school
  - Supplemental reading instruction
- Provide struggling or otherwise not-on-track students with ongoing support and monitoring
- Provide intensive interventions for students most at risk for failure



# Districts

- While most consider schools to be the locus of student learning, districts are the locus of resource decisions, including:
  - Curriculum and materials
  - Staffing
  - Professional development
  - School calendars
- District personnel are responsible for curricular and instructional leadership to support school efforts
- In an aligned system, the district is still expected to focus on student learning, but instead of being held accountable only for student achievement, district leaders should be accountable for intermediate goals as well



# District “Learning”

- Districts are almost always the diploma-granting authority and therefore the level responsible for graduation requirements
- “Time-on-task” research makes clear the importance of the school calendar on learning
- Most districts either directly decide or guide curriculum and material selection
- Professional development is often controlled directly or indirectly (resources) at the district level (if it is not currently, it certainly could be)



# District “Assessment”

- Assessment leadership and literacy for schools
- District assessment systems should be designed to evaluate equality of opportunity-to-learn across schools, programs, and subgroups
- Should provide the depth of coverage and formats not available on state assessments



# District “Accountability”

- Districts should be accountable for:
  - Prioritizing resources for student learning
  - Providing curricular focus
  - Implementing effective professional development programs
  - Supporting/leading local assessment development
  - Evaluating and mentoring school leaders
  - Increasing the graduation rate and supporting effective dropout prevention



# District “Support”

- Curricular articulation across multiple levels of the system (middle school, college, & work)
- Research-based programs for assisting students at-risk for failure
- Resources and leadership for school-based support programs
- Professional development for teachers and school leaders to learn how to:
  - Address the needs of most at risk students
  - How to personalize the high school experience
  - How to redesign curriculum and instruction



# State “Learning”

- Content and performance standards
- Minimum graduation requirements
- In many cases, textbook adoption lists
- Minimum school days or contact hours
- Teacher qualification and recertification requirements



# State “Assessment”

- State assessments are the most visible and therefore tend to have the most influence on school practices
  - Can provide a lever for reform
  - Audit district graduation practices
- In states with graduation tests, this is clearly the case especially for lower performing students



# **State “Accountability”**

- Responsible for ensuring that its school and district accountability systems are valid
- Responsible for reviewing the results of the assessment and accountability systems to prioritize resources
- Accountable for supporting data systems that can allow for a realistic determination of dropout rates and postsecondary transitions



# State “Support”

- Must direct, secure, and evaluate the use of resources to allow the goals of the system to be met
- Create and/or disseminate model programs
- Create linkages with teacher education institutions to increase teacher and leader quality
- Support focused professional development initiatives
- Continually evaluate the full system



# Accountability Indicators



# Focusing on Accountability

- We argue that there should be a range of indicators across the different levels to further the goals of the system
- Ultimately the state needs to help ensure coherence of accountability systems
  - For example, supporting local systems to foster higher-order outcomes while mandating a state basic skills graduation test could be seen as contradictory



- I outline a set of potential accountability indicators by educational level and then offer a few recommendations for getting started
- Tomorrow, Brian will provide considerably more detail about a variety of classes of indicators



# Student Indicators

- If we fully trusted course grades, we would not need any additional student level high school accountability
  - Audited Transcript Model is an interesting extension
- Nevertheless a growing number of states feel the need (e.g., political pressure) to use externally imposed assessments
  - Single point in time
  - End of course exams
  - Collection of evidence
- Graduation decision is the ultimate student accountability indicator



# School Indicators

- Reducing the “true” dropout rate to zero should be the ultimate criterion for high school accountability
- Additionally, ensuring that graduates have legitimate post secondary options should be an equally important criterion
- College remediation rates
  - Could matter more to high schools if they counted!
- But, we also need more proximal indicators



# School Indicators-2

- The Chicago Consortium (Allensworth & Easton, 2005) has developed an “on-track” indicator to provide a way for school leaders to better intervene with at-risk students
  - # of classes failed and # core credits earned in 9<sup>th</sup> grade are very strong predictors of subsequent dropping out of school
  - Students must have accumulated 5 full course credits and has failed no more than one semester of a core course
  - While this sounds intuitive, the Consortium now has the data to back it up



# School Indicators-Growth

- We and others have been very interested in student longitudinal models, but most of this effort has been focused at K-8
- The content differentiation across grades (e.g., biology, chemistry) has led to inferential concerns
  - Problematic with a vertical scale
- As long as the relative demands associated with the cutscores across different content domains are similar, there are other options for measuring growth



# District Indicators

- All of the same ones as at the school level in terms of students outcomes
- District should also be responsible for process and other intermediary goals



# District Indicators (2)

- Examples of district intermediate goals:
  - Curricular focus
    - Does the district select curriculum on the basis of empirical evidence? Is it focused on clear learning goals?
  - Teacher quality
    - Do the PD programs follow research-based approaches (sustained, focused, job-related)?
    - Has the district implemented measures to retain the highest quality teachers?
  - Local assessment development
    - Has the district supported/led the development of a local assessment system to enable teachers to get more timely and relevant feedback about student learning?
- The intermediate goals must specify how the district should fulfill its role for supporting schools.



# State Indicators

- Do the state's content standards represent the highest priority knowledge and skills and are they teachable in a year (or less)?
- Can the state demonstrate a shift in resources (if necessary) towards the highest needs?
- Has the state supported professional development programs to help districts and schools meet the system goals?



# Bringing it all together

- The learning goals, assessment system, accountability indicators, and support/intervention network must be specified and implemented in order to have a valid accountability system
- This framework also illustrates the multiple levels of responsibility for student achievement
  - Not always clean distinctions among levels, but that becomes an important conversation



# Power and Control

- The lower (less powerful) levels should not have high-stakes consequences imposed until the levels above have fulfilled their responsibilities
  - e.g., students should not be required to pass graduation exams until they have had adequate OTL
  - This is not an all or nothing requirement
  - Who decides?
- Tension between support and control
  - e.g., state support for materials and professional development could be seen as an effort to control curriculum and instruction
  - Including intermediary indicators could become “bureaucratized” so that all schools end up having to follow the same lock-step processes—this isn’t our intention here!



# Some initial steps

- Start by clearly specifying the goals
  - Compare those to existing (often implicit) goals and current resource levels
  - Estimate the additional resources required
    - e.g., if the dropout rate was reduced to zero, the system would minimally require an additional 20-30% in spending (more if “proficiency” was required)
- Examine the relationship among the specified goals and existing data (assessments)
  - Revise assessment system, if necessary, to collect appropriate data



# More initial steps

- Consider current accountability system indicators and revise if necessary
  - Good news—in the near future, many state data systems will be able to support a much broader and more valid range of indicators than is currently the case
- Most importantly, there must be structures in place to support and improve schools, students, etc. below acceptable levels on accountability indicators



# But what about NCLB?

- Obviously, NCLB constrains resources and accountability options
- However, because Title I funds are generally spent at younger grades, most high schools are almost immune from NCLB sanctions
- Many states, realizing the shortcoming of NCLB, are designing their own accountability systems
- Therefore, it is crucial to think systematically about our goals for high school reform



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