



THE CASE FOR STATEWIDE SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment

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Statewide school accountability systems have been required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for more than 20 years. However, many states implemented school accountability systems well before federal requirements, demonstrating a recognition of their role in supporting school improvement.

As a new administration takes office with a pledge to reduce the federal government's role in education, there is growing uncertainty about oversight of ESEA's requirements. What if states have increased latitude to implement statewide school accountability systems? Should accountability as we know it be dismantled?

In this brief, we make the case that states should continue to implement high-quality school accountability systems—regardless of the level or nature of federal oversight—and also pursue opportunities for innovation and continuous improvement. We contend this is a bipartisan position that elevates shared priorities for improving educational outcomes for America's public schools. To support this assertion, we adapt and extend the principles we described in our companion brief, [The Case for State Testing](#).

States should continue to implement high-quality school accountability systems regardless of the level or nature of federal oversight.

Statewide school accountability systems are vital for:

1. Building public trust and engagement
2. Signaling what's important to district and school leaders
3. Monitoring group, school and district performance
4. Supporting school improvement initiatives.

BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST

Public education is one of the most substantial investments that states make. We strongly believe in the value of public education and its potential to improve outcomes, not just for the students and families who are directly served but for the broader communities in which they live and work.

However, public support for education comes with a responsibility to provide transparent, clear information about student and school performance. High-quality, statewide school accountability systems are an important mechanism for upholding that responsibility. Accountability systems help people understand whether investments in education are leading to meaningful improvements and which schools need additional support. Obscuring this information risks eroding confidence in the education system.

A commitment to transparency in statewide reporting will not only help build public trust, but also foster engagement by encouraging schools and districts to be responsive to community needs. This engagement should be coupled with systemic, intentional efforts by school districts to build local accountability that facilitates trusted relationships with students, educators, families, and community members and can help inform and sustain improvement.

SIGNALING WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Statewide school accountability systems play a crucial role in keeping a focus on the state's prioritized education outcomes. Certainly, state systems do not address every valued outcome—nor is that a desired objective. But statewide accountability emphasizes core priorities, even as schools and districts throughout the state address additional areas appropriate for the students and communities they serve. Statewide shared priorities should address outcomes such as meeting academic expectations in mathematics and language arts and earning a meaningful high school diploma that prepares students for post-secondary success. It would be hard to argue that any school in the state should overlook these priorities, even as districts and schools work to support their own locally tailored sets of educational goals.

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We also know that some educational experiences are more effective than others. Accountability systems can incentivize and reward these rather than asking districts and schools to reinvent the wheel. For example, students who encounter high-quality courses in high school, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment, are better prepared for the academic demands of college. Similarly, students are better prepared for career success when they complete high-quality career pathway coursework or attain an industry certification in high school.

Without a statewide structured accountability system, educational priorities in districts and schools can become fragmented, making it more challenging to promote core practices and measure key outcomes across districts. Clear performance goals reinforce state priorities and help align state-, district- and school-level efforts with a shared vision of success.

MONITORING GROUP, SCHOOL AND DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

The state plays a vital role in supporting quality public education; in fact, it's specifically named in almost every state constitution. To fulfill that responsibility, policymakers and education leaders need the tools to monitor a broad range of educational opportunities and outcomes.

Monitoring school performance through accountability allows states to identify disparities in areas such as academic achievement, academic growth, English language proficiency, college and career readiness, and graduation rates, among others. Disaggregating results by student groups based on consistent data from across the state allows education leaders to highlight gaps in opportunities, resources, or outcomes based on factors such as economic disadvantage or disability status. This level of transparency ensures that educators do not overlook any group of students and can take action to address disparities.

Why is it important to have a state system instead of leaving accountability fully up to districts and schools? A consistent statewide system is uniquely well-suited to support meaningful comparisons across schools each year and over time. Without at least a core standardized framework for tracking performance, it would be difficult to evaluate whether a low-performing school is improving or whether interventions are working as intended. For example, if districts and schools designed their own growth models instead of using a consistent approach statewide, it would be impossible to meaningfully track and compare progress over time across schools and districts.

Consistent accountability data helps education leaders evaluate and refine initiatives, allocate funding more effectively, and better promote prioritized outcomes. Moreover, accountability data, in combination with contextual information about local, regional, and statewide conditions of learning, can be used to identify and highlight promising practices, which can serve as models to scale and sustain improvement across the state.

SUPPORTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

One of the most significant benefits of statewide school accountability systems is their ability to help allocate scarce resources and inform strategic planning for school improvement efforts. While there is room for reasonable disagreement about the extent to which school accountability can meaningfully differentiate school performance for all schools across the full spectrum of performance, we argue that it is uncontroversial to leverage accountability information to identify schools most urgently in need of support.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to identify, at a minimum, the lowest performing five percent of schools for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI). It offers more flexibility to provide targeted support for schools with consistently low-performing student groups. While the specific methods and criteria for identifying schools for support could be debated, we contend that the policy intentions of ESSA are well-founded and should be reflected in any credible statewide school accountability system.

Accountability is not solely about identifying schools that need support; it is also about fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

In short, states should have a trustworthy accountability system to identify schools and groups that consistently underperform on key indicators, and use it to deploy evidence-based supports. We acknowledge that states don't always provide the support for improvement that they should, and that needs to change. But when support is provided, we've seen evidence these initiatives can work. For example, recent work that we've done in one state showed that schools identified for CSI improved at faster rates.

Importantly, accountability is not solely about identifying schools that need support; it is also about fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Schools that demonstrate progress on accountability metrics can receive recognition, helping to identify promising practices and promote excellence that can be shared more broadly.

Accountability systems are particularly effective at supporting school improvement when they include high-quality reports that provide good information about context, opportunities, and outcomes. We encourage states to think of reporting not as a one-and-done event, but as an ongoing, interactive process that engages them in supportive conversation with districts. We've seen growth in promising practices in this area: states are producing guides to support understanding and use, coordinating interactive workshops to share insights and promising practices, and providing digital tools that allow users to create custom reports. In this way, accountability reporting serves as a flashlight that can help policymakers, leaders, and educators identify and make informed decisions about support strategies that are likely to be most beneficial.

Finally, when states and districts disseminate accountability results that are well aligned to shared values in schools and communities, they create opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Schools that engage with their communities in conversations about performance can build collaborative relationships, leading to stronger support for sustained improvement initiatives.

SUMMARY

Statewide school accountability systems are an important mechanism to ensure that public education remains focused on key priorities, fosters continuous improvement at all levels of the system and builds public trust. Specifically, statewide school accountability is a vital tool to monitor student and school performance on a broad range of important indicators related to opportunities and outcomes and is instrumental in supporting school improvement initiatives.

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Even if federal oversight of education accountability diminishes, states must remain committed to implementing and refining high-quality state accountability systems with support for school improvement. Education is one of the most significant public investments, and states have a responsibility to ensure that schools are effectively serving students and communities. Without a consistent and high-quality accountability framework, there is a risk of fragmented priorities, inequitable outcomes and reduced transparency.

We acknowledge that [there are real challenges associated with contemporary statewide school accountability systems](#) and how well they've been used for school improvement. If the policies of the new administration provide more state autonomy for accountability, we strongly encourage states to leverage that flexibility to explore innovations to improve system effectiveness while staying grounded in the principles and purposes discussed in this brief.

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