RECLAIMING ACCOUNTABILITY:

From Measurement and Labeling to Learning and Improvement

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INTRODUCTION

Yes, accountability is flawed. But why?

Accountability systems in education have long been the subject of debate, with critiques focusing on their high stakes, limited usefulness for school improvement, and negative unintended consequences (Domaleski, et al., 2023; Polikoff, 2021). While these concerns are valid, they often stem from a deeper issue: the design flaws embedded in accountability systems. These flaws are not merely a result of political pressures or technical limitations; they are rooted in the limited way we imagine accountability itself.

For more than two decades, state and federal accountability systems have operated under a narrow set of assumptions—assumptions that were largely shaped by the constraints of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 and carried forward, in part, by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Koretz, 2008). These systems have relied heavily on measuring student outcomes, aggregating them into performance labels, and applying pressure through public reporting and improvement mandates (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). But as our understanding of educational effectiveness has evolved, it has become increasingly clear that these approaches do not consistently provide the insights or support necessary for meaningful improvement (O'Day & Smith, 2016).

Importantly, we still need strong, comparable, transparent systems of "Big A" accountability—those required under ESSA and other federal frameworks as well as by law in some states. They have a vital role in elevating systemic disparities and signaling where support is needed. However, as outlined in the Center for Assessment's recent paper, *The Case for Statewide School Accountability Systems* (Center for Assessment, 2025), these systems alone are insufficient to motivate and inform sustained change. Without parallel investments in capacity, coherence, and continuous learning structures, traditional accountability will continue to fall short of its intended goals. And without broader perspectives about accountability, the design and implementation of these systems will continue to prioritize high-stakes determinations over actionable information, often to the detriment of school improvement.

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There is no design solution that will sufficiently address shortcomings of accountability when the underlying assumptions erroneously presume that the very actors who are responsible for improving student outcomes—teachers, school leaders, and district administrators—will know what to do in response to high-stakes determinations. In reality, these actors often find themselves, for myriad reasons, unable to use accountability data in ways that lead to sustainable change (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In essence, high-stakes accountability as we know it may be necessary to monitor system-level progress toward improving educational outcomes, but it is woefully insufficient to describe how we enact change that will actually improve those outcomes.

This paper builds on two recent Center for Assessment contributions that collectively reexamine the role and purpose of statewide accountability systems. In *The Path Forward for School Accountability* (2023), Domaleski and colleagues outlined actionable steps states can take to strengthen their accountability systems within the constraints of current federal law, emphasizing that meaningful progress need not wait for legislative change. In *The Case for Statewide School Accountability Systems* (2025), the Center argued that statewide accountability serves four critical functions that remain essential, even if federal mandates were to disappear. Together, these papers underscore both the urgency and the opportunity to rethink how accountability can serve improvement. Our contribution builds on this foundation by pinpointing the assumptions and beliefs that underlie current accountability systems and arguing that these must be confronted and changed if real and lasting improvement is to occur.

In this paper, we pinpoint the assumptions and beliefs that underlie current accountability systems and argue that these must be confronted and changed if real and lasting improvement is to occur.

Specifically, we argue that accountability should not be seen as a static system of measurement and labeling, but rather as a dynamic system that facilitates improvement. This is not to suggest that the functions of identification and improvement must reside within a single system, but rather that they must operate coherently. Accountability cannot end at identification; it must extend to how improvement occurs and the respective roles that states, districts, and schools play in that process. In the sections that follow, we define the problem with current accountability structures, articulate a broader vision of accountability aligned with educational improvement, and provide practical recommendations for rethinking the design of systems that support this vision.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM: WHY TODAY'S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS FALL SHORT

The fundamental issue with today's accountability systems is not simply that they fail to capture a complete picture of school performance, but that they are incomplete systems. That is, there are structures that identify where problems exist without providing the support necessary to address them. Most state and federal accountability models were never designed around a credible theory of action for improvement. Instead, they rely on a limited set of assumptions about measurement, motivation, and capacity that both shape their structure and constrain their potential. These

assumptions, long embedded in policy, define accountability as a mechanism for identifying and labeling low performance rather than equipping educators and leaders to act on that information.

Faulty Assumption #1: Measurement Alone Drives Improvement

One of the most persistent myths in accountability is the belief that measuring performance and publicly reporting results will, by itself, motivate schools and educators to improve. This assumption, embedded in federal and state policies for decades, has resulted in systems that prioritize identifying and labeling low performance over facilitating school improvement (Shepard, 2000).

While measurement can illuminate where inequities and challenges exist, it cannot, on its own, explain why those challenges occur or what actions are needed to address them. Accountability pressures may sharpen attention to outcomes, but they rarely provide the necessary guidance or direction for improving them (Baker and Linn, 2002). Schools labeled underperforming are often left with a mandate to act but without sufficient tools, capacity, or support to do so (Atchison & LeFloch, 2023).

This reflects the broader incompleteness of current accountability systems: they stop at identification. The assumption that motivation alone (whether through labels, sanctions, or recognition) will drive improvement ignores the fact that meaningful change requires capacity to understand root causes, a strategy to address them, and resources to sustain the work (Fullan, 2011).

Faulty Assumption #2: Accountability Systems Define Roles Clearly

Current accountability models tend to focus on institutional designations (e.g., state education agencies, local education agencies, identified schools) rather than the roles of the people within those institutions (Elmore, 2004). This leads to a disconnect between the information provided by accountability systems and the improvement actions that educators at different levels of the system can take.

For example, a school receiving a "low-performing" designation under ESSA may have access to additional resources and requirements for school-level improvement planning, but the designation rarely clarifies what individual educators (e.g., teachers, principals, district administrators) should do differently to enact meaningful change. The result is a system that assigns responsibility without agency, creating frustration and resistance among the very people who are expected to improve outcomes (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

Faulty Assumption #3: Reporting Alone Is Sufficient to Support Decision-Making

Current accountability structures rest on the belief that simply making data available will lead to informed decision-making. In reality, myriad barriers, from background knowledge to time and support, affect educators' and school leaders' ability to interpret and act on accountability data. The way information is reported (typically through dashboards, rankings, and standardized reports) fails to provide actionable insights that connect performance outcomes to practical strategies for improvement (O'Day & Smith, 2016).

Moreover, educators at all levels often enter the profession with little training and preparation to engage with school improvement data and planning processes (Hock, et al., 2024; Mandinach & Gummer, 2013). And, as Baker and Linn (2002) point out, the capacity to act on accountability data varies widely across schools and districts. Some institutions may have robust data teams and access to expert analysis, while others lack the resources to translate data into meaningful action. Without intentional design elements that connect measurement to improvement, accountability systems

risk, at worst, exacerbating differences in school capacity and, at best, becoming compliance exercises rather than tools for meaningful change.

Pushing Accountability Forward

Accountability, in its current form, is not designed to support the kinds of changes needed to improve learning conditions and student outcomes. The issue is not with the concept of accountability itself but with how it has been structured and implemented. By relying on flawed assumptions, accountability systems have failed to empower the educators and leaders who are most critical to improving schools (Century, 1999).

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To move forward, we need to rethink accountability as a system that actively and dynamically supports learning, rather than simply measuring and labeling performance. This means shifting away from punitive, compliance-driven, and/or measurement-focused models and toward an approach that integrates measurement with meaningful support, clearer role definitions, and actionable insights. The following sections of this paper will outline how we can develop accountability systems that work in service of improvement, rather than barriers.

THE START OF A SOLUTION: EXPANDING OUR PERSPECTIVE

A shift from traditional accountability systems to a model of reciprocal responsibility is necessary to foster collaboration among schools, districts, and states, ensuring that each entity plays a role in enhancing student learning (Elmore, 2004; Marion, 2024). This approach emphasizes shared responsibility rather than punitive measures.

This shared responsibility necessitates ownership and understanding of what we are measuring and why. For accountability to go beyond labeling schools as successful or failing, it must provide actionable insights that drive learning, growth, and systemic improvement. To do so, we must differentiate key concepts—learning, growth, improvement, and performance—to ensure that educational systems prioritize meaningful progress over compliance-driven outcomes. Further, we must clarify and connect roles across the educational spectrum to better engage and support those key actors in systems intentionally designed to support continuous improvement.

The remainder of this section presents three shifts in perspective that respond to the flawed assumptions we named earlier. Within each perspective shift, we briefly describe what each shift means, what this looks like in practice, and the benefits of these shifts.

Perspective Shift #1: Clarifying Learning, Growth, Improvement and Performance

A reimagined accountability system must begin by differentiating between learning, growth, improvement and performance to ensure that educational systems prioritize meaningful progress rather than superficial measures of success (Koretz, 2008). We offer a brief description of some key concepts in the table below.

Table 1. Describing Key Accountability Concepts

Key Concept	Description
Learning	The process through which students acquire knowledge, skills and competencies that prepare them for future success (Shepard, 2000). Learning is not simply about mastering a set of standards, but about deep engagement with content and critical thinking.
Growth	The progress students make over time, particularly in relation to their starting points (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). Unlike traditional performance measures that focus on proficiency, growth indicators emphasize how well an educational system supports all students in advancing their knowledge and skills. It is also important to note that growth refers to the progress that *individuals or cohorts of students make over time,* moving beyond snapshots of performance (see Betebenner, 2009; Castellano & Ho, 2013; D'Brot, 2017).
Improvement	Systemic efforts by educators, schools and policymakers to enhance instruction, curriculum and learning environments (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). Improvement initiatives should be rooted in evidence-based strategies that address student needs and create sustainable change. Additionally, improvement is typically conceptualized as the changes in year-over-year performance, without accounting for individual or cohort-based changes (see Betebenner, 2009; Castellano & Ho, 2013; D'Brot, 2017).
Performance	The demonstrable outcomes that result from learning and improvement processes (Baker & Linn, 2002). While performance metrics are necessary for accountability, they should be used as part of a broader system that prioritizes growth and continuous refinement. Additionally, performance typically refers to single point-in-time snapshots of student outcomes that can be aggregated to various levels (see Betebenner, 2009; Castellano & Ho, 2013; D'Brot, 2017).

To reconceptualize accountability and design systems to support each of these ideas, we must focus on assessments and reporting structures that provide actionable insights (O'Day & Smith, 2016). This means prioritizing dynamic, formative practices that inform instruction, guide improvement efforts, and support a more complete understanding of student success over static, summative assessments. That is not to say that formative assessments and their related processes should have a role in formal accountability. Rather, each type of assessment should have a role in informing improvement efforts, and accountability systems should be clear about what each assessment measures and what it does not, as well as what they can and cannot be used for.

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What Does This Shift Look Like in Practice?

Accountability systems that take these distinctions seriously define and communicate clearly how each concept is measured and what it signifies. Reports and dashboards highlight whether results reflect student progress, systemic action, or static achievement, reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Assessment systems are designed to include both formative and summative components, ensuring that each metric is used for its intended purpose and not stretched beyond its capacity to explain performance (O'Day & Smith, 2016).

What Are the Benefits of This Shift?

The benefits of this approach are substantial. Differentiating among learning, growth, improvement and performance fosters a shared understanding among educators, policymakers and the public about the meaning of accountability metrics. It prevents misinterpretation of outcomes, reduces misplaced blame, and allows systems to balance short-term performance pressures with long-term goals for growth and systemic improvement (Fullan, 2011).

The table below summarizes the practices and benefits of this first shift.

Table 2. Shift #1 at a Glance

Practices	Benefits
Define and communicate distinctions among learning, growth, improvement and performance	Builds shared understanding of metrics
Highlight distinctions in reports/dashboards (growth vs. improvement vs. performance)	Reduces misinterpretation and misplaced blame
Use formative + summative assessments with clarity about use/limits	Balances short-term pressures with long-term improvement goals

Perspective Shift #2: Recognizing Connections Among Roles Across the Educational System

For accountability systems to function effectively, all levels of the education system—schools, districts and states—must have clearly defined roles and responsibilities that contribute to student success (Elmore, 2004). Rather than focusing solely on compliance, a system built on reciprocal responsibility ensures that each actor is empowered with the necessary resources, autonomy and support to foster continuous improvement.

Schools. Schools serve as the frontline of student learning and improvement. Their role extends beyond test administration and compliance with state mandates (Fullan, 2011). Effective schools foster environments that support student engagement, deliver high-quality instruction, and implement evidence-based interventions tailored to student needs (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Schools should also be responsible for using data to drive internal reflection (understand root cause) and inform continuous instructional improvement.

Districts. Districts bridge state policies and school-level implementation (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). They provide resources, guidance and professional learning opportunities that support school leaders and educators in making informed instructional decisions. In addition, districts hold primary responsibility for curriculum, finances and personnel—core levers that shape teaching and learning across schools. Through these functions, districts play a pivotal role in

ensuring coherence across schools, aligning improvement efforts with accountability insights, and building the capacity needed to strengthen instructional practice and student outcomes (O'Day & Smith, 2016).

States should focus on creating conditions where accountability serves as a tool for learning and system-wide enhancement, rather than as a mechanism for punitive actions.

States. States establish broad educational standards, allocate funding and oversee the implementation of accountability systems (Koretz, 2008). However, their role should also include providing meaningful support structures that enable districts and schools to act on accountability data (Baker & Linn, 2002). This includes developing resources for school improvement, delivering professional development activities, and working toward a more equitable distribution of funding and resources. States should focus on creating conditions where accountability serves as a tool for learning and system-wide enhancement, rather than as a mechanism for punitive actions.

By clarifying these roles, accountability shifts from a top-down, compliance-driven model to one where all levels of the system contribute actively to student success (Fullan, 2011). However, clarifying roles must also extend beyond systems to educators, decision-makers, and other staff within these systems. This requires adults to engage in shared ownership and understanding of the information provided by accountability systems as well as appropriate responses to the information.

The following table summarizes each shift in terms of practice and benefits for various roles in the system.

Table 3. Practices and Benefits for Shifts in Perspectives by Role

Actor	What it Looks Like in Practice	Purpose/Benefit
Schools	Use accountability data for reflection and root cause analysis; adapt instruction based on local data; implement evidence-based interventions tailored to student needs.	Empowers frontline educators to act directly on accountability information.
Districts	Provide coherence across schools; create professional learning networks; offer instructional coaching; align resources and support with accountability findings; establish curriculum, and; offer training and support to educators.	Builds systemic capacity and ensures schools aren't left to act in isolation.
States	Set broad standards; allocate resources; ensure equitable funding; provide diagnostic tools and professional development aligned to accountability insights.	Creates enabling conditions and coherence across the system; reinforces equity.
Individuals (teachers, principals, district staff)	Translate institutional responsibilities into concrete actions (e.g., teachers focusing on and adjusting instruction, principals leading improvement planning, district staff coordinating supports).	Clarifies agency, avoiding responsibility without action.

What Does This Shift Look Like in Practice?

Reimagining accountability requires a move from compliance to reciprocal responsibility. At the school level, this means treating accountability data as a tool for reflection and diagnosis, enabling educators to identify root causes of challenges and adjust instruction accordingly (Fullan, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Districts serve as the connective tissue across schools, translating accountability insights into coordinated instructional and organizational action. They provide coherence across schools by aligning curriculum, instructional support, and resource allocation with identified improvement needs. In addition, districts offer professional learning, build data-use capacity, and ensure that supports are responsive to the goals surfaced through accountability findings. Through these functions, districts bridge policy and practice, which helps ensure that accountability drives learning rather than compliance (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

States, in turn, must not only set broad standards and oversee compliance but also create enabling conditions where they allocate resources equitably, support professional development, and ensure that schools and districts have the appropriate tools to act on their accountability designations (Baker & Linn, 2002; Hargreaves et al, 2014; O'Day & Smith, 2016).

What Are the Benefits of This Shift?

Clarity about these roles transforms accountability from a static designation system into an actionable framework. When schools, districts and states know and own their respective responsibilities and understand how those roles connect, accountability becomes a system of support and coherence. It clarifies agency, distributes responsibility more equitably across levels, and ensures that actions taken in one part of the system reinforce, rather than contradict, those taken in another (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves et al, 2014).

The table below summarizes the practices and benefits of this second shift.

Table 4. Shift #2 at a Glance

Practices	Benefits
Schools: Use data for reflection, root cause analysis, and instructional improvement	Clarifies agency and supports educator action
Districts: Provide coherence, professional learning, data-use capacity, and coaching	Distributes responsibility, reducing compliance burden on schools
States: Set standards, allocate resources, fund PD, and provide diagnostic tools for data	Reinforces equity and coherence across the system

Perspective Shift #3: Designing Systems That Support Continuous Improvement

For an accountability system to be effective, it must be designed to support continuous learning and improvement at every level (O'Day & Smith, 2016). This means integrating structures that allow schools, districts and states to work collaboratively in refining policies and practices that enhance student learning (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

Collaborative goal-setting. Effective accountability systems prioritize goal-setting that includes input from educators, policymakers, families and communities (Elmore, 2004). Schools and districts

should engage in data-informed conversations to set realistic yet ambitious targets for student learning and school improvement. These goals should be flexible, allowing for adjustments based on emerging data and feedback (Fullan, 2011).

Capacity building. Schools and educators need sustained support to improve instruction and learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2007). This includes investments in professional development, coaching, and instructional resources that align with accountability findings (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). It also includes building understanding and infrastructure to facilitate root cause analysis informed in part by accountability results. Finally, states and districts should ensure that schools can access research-backed strategies and interventions that drive student growth (Baker & Linn, 2002).

Responsive feedback mechanisms. Traditional accountability systems often operate on rigid timelines, with little room for real-time adjustment (Shepard, 2000). A more effective approach involves establishing iterative feedback loops that provide timely, actionable insights. To avoid the limitations of constraining data use to information provided via end-of-year summative assessments, schools should gather formative data that informs instruction throughout the year (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Additionally, districts and states should facilitate platforms for cross-school and cross-district collaboration, enabling educators to share best practices and learn from each other (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

Contextualized accountability measures. No single metric can capture the complexities of student learning and school performance (Koretz, 2008). Therefore, accountability systems should integrate multiple measures—such as student growth, school climate, engagement, and access to advanced coursework—to provide a more comprehensive view of school effectiveness (Fullan, 2011). These measures should be designed to guide action rather than simply label schools (Baker & Linn, 2002).

By embedding these principles into the design of accountability systems, states and districts can ensure that accountability is a tool for improvement rather than a source of fear or compliance (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Instead of focusing solely on identifying shortcomings, systems should be structured to facilitate meaningful learning, professional growth, and sustainable progress across the education ecosystem.

What Does This Shift Look Like in Practice?

In practice, this begins with collaborative goal-setting that engages educators, policymakers, families and communities in identifying priorities for improvement. These goals should be flexible and adaptable, allowing for recalibration based on new data and emerging evidence (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2011). Equally important is sustained professional learning and coaching aligned to accountability findings, ensuring that educators and leaders have the capacity and resources to respond effectively (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

However, these improvement efforts depend on more than strong processes; they require the conditions and resources that create equitable opportunities to learn. Inputs such as adequate and stable funding, access to high-quality instructional materials, and sufficient staffing and time are prerequisites for meaningful improvement. Without attention to these enabling conditions, even the most well-designed accountability systems risk reinforcing existing inequities rather than addressing them (Darling-Hammond, 2007; O'Day & Smith, 2016).

A system oriented toward continuous improvement also requires iterative feedback loops, supported by formative and contextualized data that go beyond annual summative assessments (Shepard, 2000; O'Day & Smith, 2016). These feedback loops must provide timely, actionable information that schools can use to make mid-course adjustments and to learn from their efforts in real time. Finally, accountability measures must be multi-dimensional, reflecting not just test scores but also growth, school climate, student engagement, and equitable access to learning opportunities. These measures provide a more comprehensive picture of student success and help guide targeted improvement strategies (Koretz, 2008; Fullan, 2011).

What Are the Benefits of This Shift?

When accountability systems are designed with these elements, they become adaptive and responsive to context. Rather than driving compliance, they integrate with professional learning and provide sustainable pathways for schools and districts to act on accountability insights as part of their daily practice. This shift positions accountability as a mechanism for system-wide growth and coherence rather than fear or fragmentation (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007; O'Day & Smith, 2016).

Table 5. Shift #3 at a Glance

Practices	Benefits
Collaborative goal-setting with educators, families, communities	Builds adaptive, responsive systems
Professional learning and coaching aligned to accountability findings	Connects accountability with support, not just compliance
Iterative feedback loops using formative/ contextualized data	Enables real-time adjustments and learning
Multiple measures (growth, climate, engagement, access, and opportunity to learn conditions)	Creates sustainable, comprehensive improvement pathways and the conditions that enable them

Taken together, these three shifts illustrate how accountability can move from a static mechanism of judgment to a dynamic system of support. They show what accountability must look like in practice when redefined around learning, roles, and continuous improvement. Illustrative practices, while important for grounding the concepts, are not enough. Realizing these shifts requires intentional system design—structures, supports, and conditions that ensure the vision is translated into daily action across schools, districts, and states. The next section turns to these system-level applications and considers what it takes to make such shifts sustainable in practice.

THE BENEFITS OF AN IMPROVED PERSPECTIVE: ENACTING RECIPROCAL RESPONSIBILITY

The proposed shift in how we design and use accountability systems offers more than a critique of what's broken. But it must be rooted in reciprocal responsibility, clear role definition, and continuous support. It charts a way forward that enables better educational outcomes, stronger professional practice, and a more coherent system of improvement. By realigning accountability with learning, rather than compliance, systems can create the conditions necessary for effective teaching, leadership, and student support.

This section outlines the three major benefits of adopting this improved perspective: (1) a more holistic approach fosters better understanding of how learning happens and what influences it, (2) restructured systems promote more authentic and inclusive engagement, and (3) clear expectations and strategic supports enable more active and impactful action across levels of the system.

Benefit #1: A Better Understanding to Improve Learning

One of the most immediate benefits of a redesigned accountability system is its potential to improve our collective understanding of what is—and isn't—working to support student learning. When accountability is anchored in nuanced, formative, and context-rich data, it shifts the purpose of measurement from judgment to understanding. This enables all levels of the system to ask and answer the right questions: What learning opportunities are students experiencing? Where are students making meaningful progress? What conditions are most supportive of that progress?

By reframing learning as a systemwide responsibility, educators and leaders can move beyond surface-level outcome metrics and toward an inquiry stance that investigates causes and conditions for student growth (Fullan, 2011; Shepard, 2000). When schools are expected not only to produce results but also to understand and explain their strategies, strengths, and challenges, it fosters a more professional, evidence-informed culture of improvement (Elmore, 2004; Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

Moreover, systems that incorporate multiple measures create a more complete and actionable picture of learning (Koretz, 2008; O'Day & Smith, 2016). This deeper understanding enhances the system's ability to provide targeted supports and accelerates the feedback loops that help schools learn from their own data.

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More complete accountability systems can create the opportunity for richer insights into what may be driving or constraining student outcomes. When a school or district identifies a mismatch between outcome indicators and perceptual or contextual data, that should prompt a deeper investigation into local practices and conditions. Rather than waiting for annual results to determine next steps, systems should encourage the iterative use of information, such as examining whether students who report lower engagement are experiencing instructional models misaligned with their needs or whether absenteeism trends point to systemic barriers. These insights should then inform improvement planning, targeted professional learning, or shifts in resource allocation, even before outcomes decline. In this way, richer data does not just explain performance; it proactively supports improving learning conditions.

Benefit #2: More Effective Engagement

A second benefit of shifting toward reciprocal responsibility is that it encourages deeper, more authentic engagement among those closest to the work of teaching and learning. Rather than treating educators and communities as passive recipients of data or external judgments, this perspective sees them as essential agents of change—individuals whose voices, expertise, and context are critical for interpreting and responding to accountability information.

In traditional accountability systems, data are often delivered to educators in static formats—percentile rankings, status indicators, and summative scores—with little support for understanding what the information means or how it connects to instructional practice. A reimagined system prioritizes capacity-building efforts that help educators understand and use data to identify root causes, adapt strategies, and strengthen collaboration within and across schools (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007; Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

When educators are engaged in the design and use of accountability information, they are more likely to see the system as credible, relevant, and useful (Fullan, 2011). Engagement also means designing tools and processes that are transparent and accessible to families and communities, ensuring that accountability conversations are not confined to compliance offices or state departments but extend to the classrooms and communities most affected by policy decisions.

Effective engagement thus moves beyond participation and into active co-construction of goals, data interpretation, and next steps. In doing so, systems cultivate trust, foster agency, and enable the kind of collaboration needed for sustained improvement (Elmore, 2004; Marion, 2024).

Benefit #3: More Engagement Leads to More Meaningful Impact

The most powerful outcome of this reoriented approach to accountability is that it improves understanding and engagement and expands the capacity for meaningful, sustained action. When roles are clearly defined and systems are designed to be responsive, educators and system leaders are better positioned to act on the insights generated through accountability processes.

Action becomes more impactful when those involved understand not only what needs to change but also why and how to make the change. This is made possible when accountability is integrated into a broader learning and support system. For instance, rather than simply identifying a school as underperforming, a more active system would provide diagnostic tools to understand root cause and related needs, access to targeted professional learning communities, and coaching aligned to specific areas of need (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fullan, 2011).

And this means diagnosis—not just labeling a problem, but also providing early insight into contributing conditions and translating that into action. This might include helping schools interpret engagement or absenteeism data alongside academic outcomes to identify systemic barriers to engagement or presence; providing guidance on which instructional adjustments have been effective in similar contexts; or matching schools with improvement supports based on their unique needs and stage of readiness. When accountability systems make these kinds of practical, embedded supports a routine part of their design, the actions that follow are more likely to be focused, feasible and impactful.

At the same time, accountability systems must ensure that actions are aligned across levels. States can better coordinate resources and policy levers, districts can tailor supports to local context, and schools can implement change with confidence that their efforts are being reinforced, not contradicted, by other parts of the system (O'Day & Smith, 2016; Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

In this sense, the true power of accountability lies not in its ability to rank or sort, but in its potential to catalyze coherent, needs-aligned action. It creates the space and the imperative for everyone in the system to contribute actively to improvement in ways that are contextually grounded and strategically supported.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE? CRITERIA FOR MORE EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY DESIGN

The conceptual framework of reciprocal responsibility and continuous support must be translated into tangible system design features. This section outlines how a reimagined accountability system can operationalize its goals by establishing structural clarity, building effective support mechanisms, and enhancing communication across all levels of the educational ecosystem. Each of the following subsections focuses on design roles, infrastructure, and communication, and describes how these design features can enable the conditions for better accountability. These are not technical recommendations in isolation; they reflect core commitments to clarity, coherence, and capacity-building, and help ensure that accountability drives learning, action, and sustainable improvement, rather than compliance or blame (Polikoff, 2021).

Criterion #1: Be Clear About Roles

To transition from a compliance-oriented system to one grounded in reciprocal responsibility, we must first address a critical design challenge: the lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for what and how those responsibilities intersect. Accountability systems often center on institutional designations, like “state” or “school,” without sufficiently articulating the roles of the individuals within those institutions. This lack of specificity leads to confusion, fragmented efforts, and missed opportunities for targeted support and collaboration.

A more effective design recognizes that clarity in roles is a precondition for effective collaboration. When educators, school leaders, district personnel, and state agency staff understand not just their responsibilities, but how their work intersects with others', they are better positioned to act toward a common goal. This requires intentional communication structures, clearly defined expectations, and feedback loops that enable adjustments to practices based on shared data and collective insights (Elmore, 2004).

Moreover, system designers must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Different actors in the system—whether classroom teachers, building leaders, or policy staff—have distinct access to information and varying scopes of influence. Recognizing these distinctions enables differentiated support, ensuring that each role is both empowered and accountable in ways appropriate to its context (O’Day & Smith, 2016).

What this means for system designers is that clarity of roles must translate into differentiated guidance and support structures. The roles of educators, school leaders, district staff, and state policymakers differ not only in scope but also in the types of decisions they can influence. Effective accountability design, therefore, requires recognizing these distinctions and providing role-specific tools, resources, and feedback. For example, improvement guidance for schools might focus on instructional conditions and opportunity-to-learn factors, while guidance for districts and states might center on systemic resource allocation, staffing, and policy coherence.

Clearer role definition is not about prescribing rigid responsibilities. Rather, it is about ensuring shared understanding, enabling coordinated action, and reinforcing the idea that improving student outcomes is a collective effort. With a clearer understanding of roles and interaction points, accountability becomes a tool for coherence and capacity-building rather than a mechanism for blame.

Criterion #2: Accountability as a Capacity Building System

To create accountability systems that drive improvement, we must ensure that the structures supporting schools are as intentional and aligned as the expectations placed upon them. While many accountability systems emphasize identification and public reporting; far fewer focus on the capacity-building responsibilities of state and district agencies. The challenge isn't just that schools are expected to improve—it's that they are often expected to do so in isolation.

More effective systems are designed to distribute responsibility and support across all levels of the education system. At the state level, this means developing tools and resources that help districts and schools interpret accountability data, diagnose root causes, and design targeted improvement strategies. At the district level, support systems might include instructional coaching, professional learning networks, and infrastructure for data use and continuous improvement cycles (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007; O'Day & Smith, 2016).

These systems should also be adaptive. That means they must be capable of evolving in response to shifting conditions, emerging research, and the lived realities of educators and students. Adaptive systems are not rigid; they are intentionally designed to be responsive to their environment. They include mechanisms for ongoing feedback, structures for local adaptation, and policies that allow flexibility without sacrificing coherence. This adaptability ensures that accountability systems remain relevant, timely, and actionable. That is, they not only reflect what matters, but help practitioners act on results when and where it matters most.

Ultimately, building more effective systems means shifting the design logic of accountability. Rather than using performance data to judge, sort, or penalize, systems should use that data to prompt inquiry, learning, and shared problem-solving.

Improvement efforts cannot succeed in rigid environments that fail to accommodate local context or emerging needs. States and districts can develop processes for listening to educators, iterating on support, and providing differentiated assistance based on individual needs and capacities. This includes offering varying levels of technical assistance and matching resources to a school's or district's readiness for change (Fullan, 2011).

Ultimately, building more effective systems means shifting the design logic of accountability. Rather than using performance data to judge, sort, or penalize, systems should use that data to prompt inquiry, learning, and shared problem-solving. When systems are structured to support growth, they become instruments of change—not just measurement. That also means that there may need to be supplemental systems that exist beyond high-stakes accountability to support reciprocity and practical next steps.

Criterion #3: Communication at the Core

Even the most well-designed accountability system can falter if it fails to communicate its goals, processes and findings in a clear and meaningful way. Effective accountability requires more than just producing accurate data; it demands that information be conveyed in ways that promote shared understanding, build trust, and support action.

At present, communication in many accountability systems is often technical, opaque and disjointed. Reports are designed for compliance officers or analysts, not educators, families or the public. The result is a disconnect between what systems intend to convey and what users are able to understand and act upon (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

A more effective system treats communication as a central design feature, not an afterthought. This includes using plain language, multiple formats, and storytelling approaches to make data more accessible. Equally important, however, is designing communication as a two-way process rather than a one-time broadcast. Good communication creates channels for inquiry, clarification and feedback. This can include webinars, interactive data tools, help desks, and interpretation guides that allow educators and communities to ask questions and deepen understanding. This reciprocal exchange ensures that communication builds capacity, not just awareness, and strengthens the partnership between those who produce accountability information and those who act upon it.

A more effective system treats communication as a central design feature, not an afterthought.

States and districts must invest in building the capacity of local leaders to facilitate conversations about data in ways that lead to collective sensemaking and shared responsibility (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007). In fact, we have written about this explicitly in a new report, offering practical actions across five key strategies to support the use and communication of assessment and accountability reporting (D'Brot, 2025).

Good communication not only supports but also helps push systems toward greater coherence. By aligning messages across different parts of the system, educators receive consistent guidance, families are not confused by mixed signals, and the public understands how accountability supports broader improvement goals. Ultimately, transparency is necessary, but insufficient to being better communicators. We must also empower people to use information well.

MAKING IT HAPPEN IN PRACTICE

The previous sections laid the conceptual foundation for why our accountability systems need to evolve and what they could look like when designed for reciprocal responsibility, shared understanding, and meaningful action. But these ideas only matter if they can be translated into practice. This section addresses what states and districts can do to move from theory to action. While every context will require customization, we offer a set of strategic considerations and system characteristics that can help leaders put the core ideas of this paper into motion.

We begin this section by exploring how accountability systems can influence and support changes in behavior for educators, leaders, and policymakers. Building on the ideas of shared responsibility and capacity-oriented design, we examine how systems can encourage sustained, values-aligned action. We then describe the specific design characteristics, such as the clarity of roles, infrastructure for improvement, and effective communication, which make such behavioral shifts more likely and enduring.

Consideration #1: Supporting Changes in Behavior

Changing behavior across an education system requires more than mandates and performance labels—it requires systems that clarify expectations, foster ownership, and enable collective action. Recent insights from behavioral science highlight that sustainable behavior change often depends on contextual cues, social norms, and the alignment of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. For instance, research in applied behavioral economics and cognitive psychology underscores the importance of simplicity, timely feedback, and framing effects in influencing decisions and actions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Milkman, 2021; Duckworth, 2016). If accountability is to serve as a tool for improvement, it must influence the daily decisions of educators, school leaders, and system administrators in ways that are coherent, supported, and contextually grounded.

If accountability is to serve as a tool for improvement, it must influence the daily decisions of educators, school leaders, and system administrators in ways that are coherent, supported, and contextually grounded.

A reimagined accountability system must support behavior change in several key ways:

- **Clarifying purpose:** Educators are more likely to respond positively to accountability efforts when the purpose is transparent and improvement-oriented. Systems must be clear that the goal is not to punish low performance, but to learn from it and take action.
- **Establishing shared ownership:** Accountability should not be something that is done to educators, but something that is co-constructed with them. Behavior change is more likely when educators are involved in goal setting, data interpretation and root cause analysis, and the design of interventions (Fullan, 2011).
- **Fostering relational trust:** Research has shown that trust among colleagues and between schools and system leaders is a critical precondition for meaningful change. Trust is built through transparency, consistency, and support—not surprise consequences or shifting expectations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).
- **Aligning support with expectations:** If schools are expected to change practices, they must be equipped with the resources and training to do so. Behavior change is far more likely when systems provide actionable data, relevant professional development, and a network of peers who are pursuing similar goals (Elmore, 2004).
- **Creating feedback-rich environments:** Continuous improvement depends on the availability of timely, actionable feedback. Systems should ensure that the data they collect is returned in ways that educators can use, and that structures exist for reflecting on and responding to feedback (Shepard, 2000).

Together, these conditions help shift accountability from an external pressure to an internalized commitment. This aligns with more recent developments in motivation theory, such as research by Angela Duckworth on grit and self-regulation, and Katy Milkman's work on behavior change strategies that incorporate implementation intentions, social support, and habit formation (Duckworth, 2016; Milkman, 2021). When educators see accountability as aligned with their

professional values and supported by their system, they are more likely to act; not out of compliance, but out of shared responsibility.

Consideration #2: Characteristics of Better Systems

Below are key characteristics of these better systems.

- **Coherence across actors and actions:** These systems are intentionally designed so that expectations, support structures, and feedback mechanisms reinforce one another across state, district, and school levels. This coherence helps minimize duplication, misalignment and confusion.
- **Flexible and adaptive infrastructure:** Better systems are not rigid or overly prescriptive. They are built to evolve in response to new data, local context, and emerging needs. This responsiveness ensures that the system remains relevant and effective over time.
- **Actionable information at every level:** Rather than overwhelming educators with data, these systems prioritize the collection and dissemination of information that is timely, targeted and usable. They support the day-to-day decisions that move learning forward.
- **Embedded supports for continuous improvement:** Instead of isolating accountability from professional development and instructional improvement, better systems integrate these functions. They embed supports such as coaching, learning networks, and resource repositories directly into the accountability infrastructure.
- **Inclusive design and engagement:** Better systems are built with input from educators, families, and community members. This inclusion not only improves the system's relevance but also increases interest-holder buy-in and trust.

When educators see accountability as aligned with their professional values and supported by their system, they are more likely to act; not out of compliance, but out of shared responsibility.

Consideration #3: From Principles to Practice: Practical Implications for States and Districts

This final subsection offers concrete recommendations for state and district leaders aiming to bring the ideas in this paper to life. While every context will require customization, the following list outlines strategic moves system leaders can make to align their accountability systems with the principles of reciprocal responsibility, capacity-building, and continuous improvement.

The ideas and design principles outlined in this paper are meant to guide system leaders from theory to implementation. For states and districts, this means building accountability systems that do more than comply with federal requirements. They must clarify expectations, build trust, and create the conditions for collective learning and action. Doing so requires intentional investments in data infrastructure, adult learning, and a culture of inquiry.

Specifically, state and district leaders should consider the actions presented in Table 3.

Table 6. Practical Recommendations for States and Districts

Recommendation	Key Idea
Conduct cross-role analyses	Clarify responsibilities and intersections across system levels (Elmore, 2004)
Revise reports and and provide a system of support for interpretation and use	Focus on interpretation and action, not static labels (O'Day & Smith, 2016)
Establish continuous improvement networks	Create collaborative structures for shared learning (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007; Fullan, 2011)
Align supports with identified needs	Tie technical assistance, funding, and professional development directly to diagnostic findings (Baker & Linn, 2002)
Collect and act on feedback	Center educator and community perspectives, especially in underserved contexts (Marion, 2024)

These actions are not exhaustive, but they reflect the types of systemic moves needed to activate the principles of reciprocal responsibility and continuous improvement outlined throughout this paper.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The vision articulated in this paper challenges us to move beyond traditional, high-stakes accountability models shaped by ESSA and its predecessors. While those systems helped establish transparency and spotlight inequities, they have fallen short in building the trust, coherence, and capacity required for lasting school improvement. Future generations of accountability must be grounded in reciprocal responsibility, where every level of the system has a role in creating the conditions for learning. This must go beyond setting expectations for schools.

This is not a call to abandon accountability, but rather to reclaim it. By clarifying roles, supporting action, and aligning measures with the realities of teaching and learning, we can design systems that empower rather than penalize. These systems will not rely on performance labels or static dashboards to drive change. Instead, they will be dynamic, responsive, and fundamentally centered on learning—both for students and the systems that serve them.

The ideas here are not theoretical. States and districts across the country are already experimenting with more balanced assessment systems, more nuanced measures of school quality, and stronger supports for professional learning. The work ahead is to learn from these innovations, scale what works, and hold fast to a broader purpose: building accountability systems that serve as engines for equitable access and improvement.

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