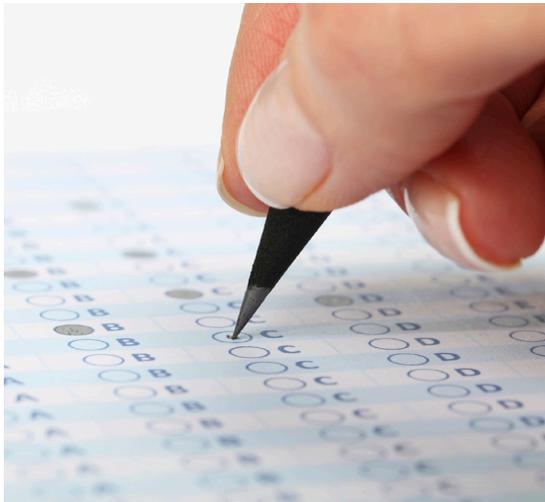




# Rethinking Educational Accountability



BY LEE POSEY

As schools across the country implement new academic standards, college- and career-ready assessments, and new or refined teacher assessment systems, states are seeking better aligned systems of assessment and accountability. Discussions about what those systems should look like are taking place in states and at the federal level.

More sophisticated curriculum and assessments, more equitable and adequate resources, greater capacity among schools and educators to teach this more challenging content to an increasingly diverse group of students (deeper learning pedagogy) and a more effective model for change and improvement are all potentially parts of such systems.

The last reauthorization of the main federal education law—the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

## Federal Discussions about Accountability

On October 15, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Council of the Great City Schools announced their principles for assessments that are high-quality and used responsibly. While noting the importance of annual assessments in allowing educational leaders to have information on which students are learning and which need greater attention, the two groups pledged to continually improve assessment systems based on the following principles:

- **Assessments should be high quality**
- **Assessments should be part of a coherent system**
- **Assessments should be meaningful**

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan supported the announcement and added: “Assessments must make good use of educators’ and students’ time. Yet in some places, tests—and preparation for them—are dominating the calendar and culture of schools and causing undue stress for students and educators.” This statement and a subsequent Washington Post op-ed indicated that while the department is not backing down on assessment requirements, it is open to providing states some flexibility.

(ESEA), known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—went further than earlier versions by putting specific federal requirements on the work already taking place in states on college- and career-ready standards and assessments measuring student performance. Not only are states and districts responsible for monitoring the academic achievement of students, including specific subgroups of students, but they must take action to turn around low-performing schools or risk losing

federal funding. Going beyond more restrictive federal law, policymakers see the possibility of developing comprehensive accountability systems that address all parts of the system—schools, teachers, students—to ensure that their students are truly college- or career-ready. The goal is an accountability system that can actually improve education.

But what exactly does accountability for college- and career-readiness look like? Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit and Linda Pittenger's new report *Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm* attempts to define it. The report starts with the premise that an accountability system should raise expectations not only for individual schools but for the functioning of the system as a whole—and trigger the intelligent investments and change strategies that make it possible to achieve these expectations. The three pillars of an accountability system are a focus on meaningful learning, enabled by professionally accountable educators, supported by adequate resources that are well-used. The whole system must be built on continual improvement.

A focus on meaningful learning is a key element, and that means assessments that include more open-ended items and classroom-centered performance tasks (science investigations, written and oral presentations, and research, for example). These performance assessments provide a measurement of critical abilities not assessed by standardized tests. The authors of the report envision a system in which state standardized tests that include performance components complement local performance-based assessments and portfolios.

*Next-Generation Accountability Systems: An Overview of Current State Policies and Practices*, a new report co-authored by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Center for American Progress describes current state efforts in several broad themes building on the paradigm described by Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit and Pittenger:

- **Measuring progress toward college and career readiness**

States are seeking better and multiple measures of what students are learning that benchmark students by progress, not grade level. Some states are incorporating locally developed annual student performance assessments into their accountability system. New Hampshire, for example, is preparing to pilot the Performance Assessments of Competency Education (PACE) system, which includes external validation of performance assessments through the new statewide summative assessments in grades 4, 8 and 11. High school diplomas in Maine include demonstrations of proficiency in the Maine Learning Results academic standards and guiding principles. Recognizing that

standardized tests don't give a complete picture of student achievement, some states are measuring the growth of student proficiency to get a more accurate portrait of the progress made by schools and districts. These might include ACT or SAT scores or actual measures of post graduation success in higher education.

- **Diagnosing and responding to challenges through school-based quality improvement**

A school quality improvement process may include an inspection team with expertise in school practice and diagnostic inquiry, a peer review to promote multiple perspectives, and robust quantitative and qualitative data analysis. While formal school inspectorates tend to be used in the U.S. only after a school has been labeled poorly performing, they can be a proactive school improvement strategy, especially if tied to the school accreditation process. Kentucky uses a robust process of diagnostic review for schools that are struggling, and also has a program-review system to assess the quality of programs in the arts and humanities, writing, and practical living and career studies. Kentucky is also the only state to use teacher effectiveness as part of its evaluation of school and district performance. The CORE (California Office to Reform Education) ESEA flexibility waiver, which covers a number of California districts, contains a School Quality Improvement System, with a School Quality Improvement Index that has weighted measures in three domains: academic, social and emotional, and school and district climate and culture.

- **State systems of support and intervention**

States are using a variety of strategies to work with low-performing schools including school support teams, pairing schools with high levels of academic growth with low-performing schools, creating a network of low-performing schools, engaging external providers of support services, the use of recovery districts (Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee), and building district capacity for school support.

- **Resource accountability**

Education expenditures are a large part of state budgets, so state policymakers are focused on the best use of resources. Some states and districts have looked at a student-funding model that provides more money for programs to support low-income students, English language learners, or students in special education. Maine's Essential Programs

and Services school funding model uses school enrollment and demographic data to establish the amount of funding each district needs to ensure that all students, including high needs students, can meet the state's learning standards. Maine calculates the ability of local districts to support essential school programs as defined by the state formula, targeting more money to poorer communities. The Baltimore Public Schools recently implemented Fair Student Funding. This formula allocates a base level of funding, then supplements it with weights for students in particular categories or circumstances.

- **Professional accountability**

The *Next Generation Accountability Systems* report by the Center for American Progress and CCSSO notes: "From teacher preparation and licensure to teacher evaluation and tenure, there has been a sea change in policy as it relates to the education profession." States are changing teacher preparation by raising the selectivity of programs, encouraging robust clinical training, providing programs with better data about their graduates, and immediately using that data to improve preparation programs. Georgia has a tiered licensure model that includes a three-year preservice certificate and a five-year professional license, and an advanced certificate with pathways for master teachers and lead professionals. Licenses require the ability to maintain proficient or exemplary ratings on evaluations. States and districts are also focusing on professional development and retention efforts. For example, North Carolina has a computer based module that provides detailed information on each of the evaluation standards and its indicators. The Denver Public School system has enhanced the capacity of its central office to coach and support school principals, and developed a Denver School leadership framework.

## Federal Requirements for Intervention in Low-Performing Schools

Under the ESEA flexibility waivers granted by the U.S. Department of Education, states are required to identify both focus and priority schools as targets for intervention. The 10 percent of schools with the largest within-school achievement gaps or with the lowest overall achievement level of subgroups in the state must be identified as focus schools. The schools in the bottom 5 percent of performance in terms of overall student achievement or graduation rate must be identified as priority schools. The state must also identify any Title I high school with a graduation rate of less than 60 percent as either a focus school or priority school. States are required to establish a system of accountability and intervention to serve the other 85 percent of schools. The federal criteria for schools needing intervention are limited to test scores and graduation rates, but states have gone beyond these criteria with school improvement, teacher evaluation, and school grading systems.

States are making progress on this ambitious agenda of education reform, according to the report, despite "complex and interconnected barriers" that include transitioning to new assessments, developing richer measures of student and school success, staffing school improvement teams, creating resource accountability systems, and strengthening the teaching profession. The report concludes that states should implement promising accountability reforms with attention to how various aspects of the system interact to improve student outcomes.

### Acknowledgments

*This publication was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. NCSL is grateful to the foundation for supporting the project and recognizing the important role of state legislatures in education policy.*

*This is the second publication in a series focused on state policy options to improve college and career readiness and 21st Century learning and skills.*

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