



ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

PROBLEM

The best accountability systems in any field have a few things in common. They set clear goals for people to rally around—goals that are meaningful, challenging, and achievable. They provide regular information to guide the work. And they inspire people to aim higher, while providing them with support when they need help.

This is just the kind of system we need in public education, where overall achievement is too low and gaps separating low-income students and students of color from their peers are far too big. The data speak for themselves:

- Under a third of our nation's fourth-grade students are proficient in reading. Another third lack even basic reading skills. Fewer than one in five low-income students are proficient; over half are below basic.
- One in four students who start ninth grade will not graduate four years later. Nearly 40 percent of African-American and Latino students will not graduate on time.

Thankfully, we know these patterns can be changed because there are schools across the country that are educating all students, including low-income student and students of color, to high levels right now. Unfortunately, the current accountability system does not do enough to provide either the challenge or the support schools and districts need to make high achievement for all the rule rather than the exception.

The work states are doing to develop college and career-ready standards and assessments will go a long way toward clarifying where we want all students to be. But without strong accountability for actually getting students there, college and career-ready graduation will remain no more than a hollow promise for too many students.

SOLUTION

Differences in state standards and assessments and their timelines for transitioning to new, higher ones mean that there will have to be differences in state accountability plans. But Congress should be clear that all state plans—both before and after the transition—must be built around common elements for what's being measured, what's being expected, and what's being done as a result.

Measures

Educators, parents, and the public need a broad mix of data on schools, including data used to make accountability determinations and data that informs improvement efforts.

Accountability determinations should be based on the following:

- Statewide, summative assessments of reading, mathematics, and—at states' discretion—science and/or social studies; and
- Additional indicators of high school success, including graduation rates as codified in 34 CFR 200.19(b)(1) and entry rates into postsecondary education.

Success on these indicators should be evaluated by looking at both current-year achievement and changes in achievement over time, meaning individual student growth toward standards and/or school-level improvement.

There are many other important indicators for assessing school quality and informing improvement efforts that should be collected and reported. These include indicators like the following:

- Measures of school climate and safety;
- Student and teacher absences;
- Student, staff, and parent surveys; and
- Evidence of high school rigor, such as advanced course completion, early college-credit completion, and postsecondary remediation rates.

While these kinds of indicators do not have the reliability and validity necessary for inclusion in accountability determinations, they are instrumental for parents deciding what school is right for their child and for educators seeking to improve achievement.

Goals

Accountability systems, both before and after the transition, must set aggressive but achievable stretch goals for all schools and districts. These goals must reflect the following:

- Increased achievement for all students;
- Substantial, sustained gap closing between groups of students; and
- Consistent progress.

Specifically, we recommend that Congress require states to submit to the Secretary accountability systems aimed at a clear target: reducing the percentage of students in each school not meeting standards by half, overall and by student group, within six years.

Our analysis suggests that this goal will result in annual improvement targets that are aggressive but within the range of what the highest-gaining schools are currently doing. And it will require bigger improvement targets for the student groups that are furthest behind, thus promoting gap closing.

For example, in Massachusetts, where overall average reading and math proficiency among elementary and middle schools was 58 percent in 2009, meeting this goal would require annual improvement of 3.5 percentage points. Currently, the top-gaining 10 percent of schools for students overall are improving over four percentage points annually.

The state's African-American students, who are currently at 37 percent proficient on average, would need to improve by about five percentage points annually. The top gainers for African-American students are currently improving by almost seven percentage points per year.

Of course, this goal will play out differently in different states. In Florida, where overall average reading and math proficiency among elementary and middle schools was 69 percent in 2009, meeting this goal would require annual improvement of 2.5 percentage points. This is less than the nearly 4 percentage points a year improvement the top-gaining 25 percent of schools for students overall are making now.

For Florida’s low-income students, who are currently at 62 percent proficient on average, this goal would translate into gains of just over 3 percentage points annually. The top gaining 25 percent of schools for low-income students are improving nearly 5 percentage points annually.

Incentives and Consequences

Schools and districts that consistently meet or exceed their stretch goals should be rewarded with resources, recognition, and autonomy. These incentives can help create an environment in which schools and districts perceive accountability goals as something to strive for, rather than requirements they must meet to avoid punitive sanctions.

Schools and districts that do not meet their goals should face meaningful consequences. State accountability plans should detail how needs in these schools will be assessed, what supports they’ll be offered, and what consequences they’ll face if, after receiving support, they do not improve.

For persistently low-performing schools—and the districts they sit in—Congress must be clear that the status quo is unacceptable. These schools, and the students stuck in them, need big goals. To meet these goals, schools need conditions that will enable them to dramatically change how they operate. (See *Turning Around Our Lowest Performing Schools*.)

Moving to New, Higher Standards and Assessments

The transition to new, higher standards and assessments poses two big accountability-related challenges: (1) How can all states start aiming higher now so that students and schools are better-prepared when the new tools come online; and (2) What should accountability goals look like once the new tools are online?

To spur better preparation, we recommend that all states, as part of their accountability plans, provide information on how they will support schools through the transition.

- For all states, this should include information on how they plan to use both federal and state funds to develop and disseminate instructional tools aligned with higher standards. (See *Instructional Supports for Teachers*.)
- For states with standards and assessments pegged at such low levels that most students already meet them, an accountability goal of reducing the percentage of students not meeting standards for proficiency by half would lead to minimal improvement expectations, and students would be stuck waiting until the new, higher standards come online until their schools are pressured to move. Students cannot wait that long, so transition plans in these states should include plans to ratchet up accountability expectations on tools that are already available, such as the following:
 - Setting accountability goals for the percentage of all groups of students growing toward or performing at the “advanced” achievement level on current assessments;
 - Setting accountability goals for measures of college readiness that are already in place in a growing number of states, such as the ACT college-readiness benchmarks; or
 - Incorporating “modular” assessments of higher-level skills and thinking into the current assessment system.

Once the new, college and career-ready standards and assessments are fully implemented, we recommend the following:

- Leading states that moved fastest should be given flexibility to reset accountability goals for achievement on the new assessments, provided that these new systems reflect the elements of measuring what matters, gap-closing stretch goals, and meaningful incentives and consequences specified above.
- States that do not move to new standards and assessments until 2017-18 should be required to set accountability goals of a 10-percent reduction in the percentage of students overall and in each group not meeting college and career-ready standards annually. (For more information on time frames for adopting and implementing college and career-ready standards and assessments, see *Standards and Assessments*.)