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## **An Open Letter On School Accountability To State Superintendents of Education and Governors**

Meeting under the auspices of the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) and the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#), a group of scholars and policy experts has reviewed the current debate about K-12 school accountability. In most states, accountability policy is in flux, due to conflict around the Common Core State Standards, uncertainty about whether and how to hold teachers accountable, and teacher and (more limited) parent resistance to testing.

We identified serious problems and internal contradictions in current accountability policies, which can and must be solved. These include:

- State accountability systems serve a range of different purposes, which can conflict with or limit each other's impact.
- New expectations and assessments have increased burdens on students and schools, without providing enough actionable information in return.
- Rigid requirements can stifle innovation and lead to efforts to game the system rather than foster systemic change.

These problems warrant serious work, not abandonment of accountability. States that give in to proposals to abandon or postpone school accountability are abdicating their responsibility to children, parents, and taxpayers, and for our nation's civic and economic future.

We offer this paper as a starting point for defining the public purposes of state accountability systems and rebuilding them on sound principles. In the next six months we will convene meetings that include senior state officials and prominent critics of current accountability systems, to refine these principles and help states launch accountability redesign efforts.

### **Why is accountability important?**

Accountability is about making sure children—who have a great deal to master in the few years they can be full-time students—learn what they need to be independent adults and contributors to their communities. (In this sense, “accountability” should be taken as a synonym for performance management, or for government's due diligence in a situation

where it compels students and their families to receive a particular service.) In modern America, this means graduating from high school able to choose between entering college without the need for remediation, or taking a career-ladder job that will support a family. It also means having the analytical capacity and free time to be an informed voter and an engaged citizen. In this, the whole community shares an interest with the child and his or her parents.

So that children can learn, states require parents to surrender their children several hours a day for 13 years, and create local entities that tax residents to pay the costs of education and hire individuals to teach in and manage schools. Each of these parties—the state, local officials, and those hired to educate children—have their own interests, which are not perfectly identical to those of children. Communities that don't always absolutely trust even parents to protect their own children certainly can't blindly trust that government officials and educators will always do their best for the children in their charge.

The state, community leaders, families, taxpayers, and educators all need to know whether the schools to which they are sending their children are effective in preparing students for success in college, careers, and life. Parents and citizens would be negligent to trust unconditionally, never demand evidence, or never ask whether a different method has produced better results under similar circumstances elsewhere. Parents and citizens need to be shown, when not all students are being fully prepared, that no option is ruled out in improving school quality and students' opportunities. This is particularly the case in communities where large numbers of children, year after year, quit school or finish unprepared for higher education or career-linked jobs.

### **What is an accountability system?**

An accountability system is a set of standards, measures, judgments, and actions all meant to:

1. Ensure that public schools are judged, sustained, and changed based on whether children learn what they need to succeed in higher education, work, and adult roles in family and community.
2. Give adults with stakes in children's learning the assurance that that is the case.
3. Give everyone concerned about the child's welfare the information they need to accelerate his or her learning.
4. Press for continuous improvement of the schools available in any community.

To pursue these ends, an accountability system includes measurements of results, and remedies for children who are at risk of not learning what they need. These, however, are means not ends. The goal of an accountability system is neither to punish teachers nor shield teachers from consequences, to promote competition or sustain existing schools, nor to subject students to performance pressure or relieve them from it. *The goal is to ensure that children in public schools are given the opportunity to succeed in life.*

While research demonstrates some of the pitfalls and unintended consequences of poorly designed accountability systems, it also shows that accountability can spur desired behavioral changes and result in meaningful improvements in student success. Differently designed accountability systems use different methods, and these can have different costs and benefits. A system that is biased in favor of one means or another (e.g., punishing or insulating teachers, favoring or hamstringing new school providers) will not serve the interests of children well.

## **Principles for the design of accountability systems**

To start a more productive discussion about accountability we propose eight principles, on which we think scholars and groups seriously concerned about protecting children's opportunities can agree:

1. All parents need to know immediately when their children are not learning at a rate that makes it highly likely they will graduate high school, enter and complete 4-year college, or get a rewarding, career-ladder job.
2. No family should be required to place or keep a child in a school in which she is unlikely to learn what she needs. Every family should have the choice among public schools that are demonstrably capable of educating a child like theirs.
3. To enable parents to act effectively in their children's interest, states should provide them valid, reliable, and easily understood data on individual student progress. Parents and other stakeholders in the community should have information on the learning rates of different groups of children in all schools. The standards used to assess school performance should be tightly linked to these outcomes, and applied objectively and uniformly to all schools.
4. Student test scores provide indispensable information, but they should be used in a way that provides trend data for individual students and for schools, and be combined with other valid evidence of student progress (e.g., course completion, normal progress toward graduation).
5. Because science, technology, and the economy are constantly shifting, the standards used to assess schools must not be set in stone but must adapt and possibly become more demanding over time.
6. Because a student's level and pace of learning in any one year depends in part on what was learned previously, the consequences of high and low performance should attach to whole schools, not only to teachers in grades tested. In evaluating teachers, school leaders should have the fullest possible information about individual teachers and be free to consider additional factors (e.g., classroom observations, contributions to school professional climate, and parent or student surveys).
7. School leaders must have enough freedom to lead their schools and take responsibility for implementing instructional improvement strategies. This requires control over staffing, instruction, and making financial tradeoffs.
8. States and school districts must have and exercise multiple options with respect to a school where children learn at low rates that threaten their adult opportunities. This must include supporting teacher improvement, changing school staffing, assigning schools to new operators, and allowing families to opt for other school options.

These principles can ground a productive debate. There is still plenty to argue and worry about, and to submit to objective test. For example:

- Whether and how to combine test scores and other outcome measures in ways that refine, rather than obfuscate, the facts about student and school performance.
- How a state or locality can assess student progress and identify children falling behind, without specifying outcomes so exhaustively that schools are unable to innovate and solve problems.
- How to coordinate federal, state, and district demands for data so that a given school must respond to one, not several different, accountability systems.
- How to prevent public officials and educators from falsifying data or hiding results for individual students and for historically underserved groups.
- How to protect children while ensuring that school leadership and teaching remain desirable occupations.
- How to help students understand that they stand to gain or lose more than anyone else from diligence in their studies and earnest effort on performance assessments.
- How to try out new ideas about educating the children most at-risk or with distinctive needs, without causing a constant churn in their educational experience.
- How to adjust measurement and accountability to innovations in instruction, including those introduced by technology-driven mastery- and unit-based learning.

We offer to work with state officials and accountability critics to develop solutions. Though advances in measurement and data display might ameliorate some of these problems, full solutions will require new policies and governmental capacities. Issues of design and implementation issues must be addressed, carefully and through disciplined trials. But it is time to stop mandating whatever measures can be pushed through legislatures, and start working through the problems of accountability, with discipline, open-mindedness, and flexibility.

It is also time to assess the consequences of accountability systems objectively and generally, in terms of student gains and increased availability of seats in high-performing schools. Cherry-picked results, whether about imaginative use of performance data in one school or excessive emphasis on test preparation in another, only sustain controversy. This will require serious investments by foundations and government.

### **What needs to happen next**

Both supporters and critics of current accountability systems include policymakers committed to educating all our children, and competent analysts who can devise and rigorously assess alternative designs.

What is needed is a sustained dialog, crossing ideological and professional lines, about how to put the eight principles outlined here into practice. We propose a series of invitational working conferences, insulated from immediate news reporting, that can develop:

- Areas of consensus about the design of accountability systems.
- Areas where competing views cannot yet be reconciled.
- Proposals for disciplined trials of different accountability systems in particular localities or states, and for rigorous analysis of those trials.
- Areas of remaining technical uncertainty, and needs for new research and development.
- Proposals for state legal frameworks and capacity investments.

We are reaching out to a broader group of scholars and policymakers, and hope this document will spark a productive give and take in the near future.

**Signed,**

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