

ACCELERATING ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATION

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES LEADING THE FUTURE OF STUDENT-CENTERED SCHOOL QUALITY SYSTEMS

The promise of K-12 assessment and accountability systems is to create public transparency and equip stakeholders with important information to improve the quality of public education. However, these systems in their current forms have not lived up to this promise.

A decade of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows little overall progress in improvement of student outcomes and persistent disparities between student subgroups – disparities that worsened under the global COVID-19¹ pandemic. Further, the pandemic revealed the weaknesses of the system by eliminating the main input used to determine school quality: standardized summative assessments. Schools, districts and states are increasingly seeking innovative learning models to drive deeper learning and find traditional assessments a consistent barrier to implementation. Now more than ever, parents and the public want consistent access to meaningful data about how schools are serving young people. This moment is an inflection point for the nation’s approach to understanding the quality of schools.

States are uniquely positioned within this work. While states have both the authority and responsibility for the provision of public education, much of what governs a state’s actions around assessments and accountability is mandated by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Though the reauthorization of this law is not yet imminent, it is on the horizon. That means now is the opportune moment to rethink state assessment and accountability systems. State leaders should understand that federal lawmakers are seeking examples of states leading this work as well as asking questions about what states need to truly innovate within their assessment and accountability systems. Actions that states take now will support improvements in the near term and serve as critical proof points for federal leaders as they develop the next major iteration of national education law.

We invite state leaders to think differently about assessment and accountability to build a visionary foundation for the future.

DRIVING QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATION

- » How could today's assessment and accountability systems evolve to better measure school quality and ensure stakeholders have valuable information to improve student outcomes?
- » What current opportunities or barriers exist in federal and state law that advance or hinder assessment and accountability improvements? How can policymakers remove barriers and expand these opportunities to accelerate promising ideas?
- » What additional capacities do state and local leaders need to leverage these opportunities such as resources, technical advisors and learning networks?
- » How can the nation harness valuable lessons and insights by convening innovative states to inform the design of future assessment and accountability systems through reauthorization of ESEA?

The following set of recommendations will help state leaders develop a strategy to make current approaches to school accountability more meaningful while also building proof points and coalitions to inform improvements to assessment and accountability requirements in the next reauthorization of ESEA. While federal policy change is necessary to support student-centered learning systems at scale, states can begin laying the groundwork to creatively and collaboratively advance significant student-centered and holistic approaches to assessment and accountability within existing federal requirements. By engaging in this work now, states will provide policymakers with the examples and networks they need to shape the national learning agenda for the next reauthorization.

REORIENT THE WAYS IN WHICH STAKEHOLDERS WORK TOGETHER

When redesigning assessment and accountability systems, stakeholders must be actively engaged in the process. Current assessment and accountability models were developed and implemented top-down, without sufficient efforts to build public trust. As a result, many concerns have emerged about their quality and usefulness.

Common Stakeholder Concerns about Current Opportunities for Collaboration:

- » Current assessment and accountability systems were developed with little input from those closest to the classroom (students, families, teachers)
- » State leaders often operate in silos
- » Reporting is neither timely nor organized in ways that are useful
- » Stakeholders have little input on what happens as a result of assessment and accountability ratings

States may address the above concerns by forming new relationships and mechanisms for collaboration to determine and improve school quality. In this reimagining, decision-making centers those closest to the classroom: students, families and teachers. System leaders begin to function more as facilitators and conveners to support local communities in the process of understanding school quality. State leaders are responsible for maintaining a system-wide lens for quality implementation and the equitable allocation of resources and supports. States are also well positioned to establish and support statewide learning communities, so that local communities may gather to learn from each other.

Recommendations for Reorienting Collaboration within the System

- » Build structures to continually generate and incorporate solutions that come from those closest to the classroom (students, parents, teachers). Ensure that this feedback is incorporated into state law, regulation and guidance. These structures could include standing committees, regular surveys, data teams, public engagement and robust public comment opportunities. Statutorily require that the information gathered through these processes be included in decision-making processes.
- » Develop a new (or support an existing) publicly funded intermediary organization to establish and support a statewide learning community focused on policy and practice related to assessment and accountability. Legislators may consider a dedicated funding stream to ensure stability of this work.
- » Align internal teams at the appropriate state entities (e.g., state board, state education agency (SEA)) around accountability and assessment. Offices within the SEA responsible for standard setting, professional learning, assessment, accountability metrics and improvement should regularly collaborate around the local experience of accountability.
- » Develop a multi-state coalition to co-create a learning agenda, share best practices and advocate for federal policy improvements.

By building new infrastructure for collaboration around school quality, states will have a more authentic sense for how to make school quality and improvement efforts more meaningful for the local learning community. If leaders take up this work with intention, states can develop a new approach to assessment and accountability built on public trust and deep collaboration with those closest to the work.

IMPROVE AND EXPAND INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Federal law requires states to assess all students annually in grades three through eight; once in high school in reading and math; and once at the elementary, middle and high school levels for science. To meet these requirements, states have turned to standardized summative assessments citing their cost-effectiveness and alignment with federal peer review guidelines for technical quality. Specifically, standardized tests are valued under current guidelines for their provision of validity, reliability and comparability.

However, stakeholders have increasingly questioned the value of these assessments, pointing to unintended consequences such as lost instructional time and narrowing of the curriculum. Though states must still comply with federal requirements, there are key actions they can take now to make current assessment systems more meaningful and begin to build a case for future federal improvements.

Common Stakeholder Concerns About State Summative Assessments

- » Standardized test items do not capture deeper levels of knowledge and skills
- » Assessment results do not provide a full picture of student mastery or school quality
- » Curriculum has narrowed toward rigid test preparation
- » Data is not actionable for instruction and data from the classroom is not valued
- » Instructional time is lost to test preparation and test administration
- » Assessments are not culturally or linguistically inclusive²
- » Students experience testing stress

Current assessment systems must evolve to live up to their original promise as a tool for helping educators and leaders improve the quality of classroom instruction. States have already begun to explore innovative assessment approaches that can reduce overreliance on summative standardized tests, provide a more meaningful assessment experience for students and produce the data that teachers need to inform instruction.³ The following set of recommendations aims to provide states with key actions to improve assessments in compliance with federal law.

Recommendations for States on Innovative Assessments

- » Convene local stakeholders and technical experts to identify challenges within the current assessment system, study innovative approaches emerging in other states and provide recommendations for assessment innovation.
- » Consider a systems approach to assessment whereby the footprint of state assessments is reduced, allowing for a deeper focus on local assessments to drive classroom instruction.
- » Provide professional learning around formative assessment, performance assessment design, assessment literacy and competency-based education. Create dedicated time for teacher and leader capacity-building and teacher professional collaboration.
- » Develop state frameworks for essential skills / competencies. Align standards frameworks and performance assessment, portfolio or capstone systems to these competencies.
- » Develop performance assessments, portfolios or capstones in place of standardized requirements for graduation. Where these opportunities already exist, audit these opportunities to ensure that their expectations align to those articulated in frameworks for essential skills / competencies.
- » Replace a standardized assessment in an area not mandated by federal regulation like history or civics with a performance assessment.
- » Reduce the footprint of summative assessments by streamlining assessment items or exploring matrix sampling (where different standards or students are assessed in different years).⁴
- » Pilot collaborative scoring along shared competency frameworks to increase the comparability and reliability of teacher scored assessments without relying on standardizations of the assessments themselves.⁵
- » Apply for the Competitive Grants for State Assessment (CGSA) to support planning and testing of innovation assessment systems.
- » Apply for the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) to explore the use of innovative assessments that emphasize student-centered teaching and learning approaches.
- » Actively explore opportunities to engage with the philanthropic community to develop innovative assessment designs.

States can begin to build innovative assessment systems that reduce the footprint of state summative tests – making room for local assessment that equips educators to drive meaningful, student-centered learning. By building assessment literacy for educators, states can work to infuse the system with technical quality (validity, reliability, comparability, etc.) without relying solely on standardized assessments. By thinking creatively about the articulation of competency-aligned standards, states can develop assessments aligned to real-world skills with greater flexibility in the assessment design process.

At the same time, truly innovative approaches can be built and tested in graduation requirements as well as state-issued assessments that are not bound by federal law. This may include the exploration of performance assessments or administering assessments using innovative sampling techniques. States may also consider refining approaches to collaborative scoring to increase teacher professional collaboration and ensure reliability within the assessment system.

By advancing these strategies, states can drive a necessary learning agenda to bolster the case for new ways of assessing learning.

EXPLORE NEW APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

States are required to report to the public on the quality of schools as well as to identify and provide supports to schools in improvement. These requirements are rooted in several decades of federal accountability reform that most recently requires states to identify the lowest performing schools in the state and oversee school improvement processes. After a 20-year investment in this strategy, evidence shows that results have not gotten better and, in fact, that disparities between student subgroups have gotten worse.⁶ At the same time, there is evidence that the data produced by these systems contributes to stigmatization of the communities it was intended to serve.⁷

Common Stakeholder Concerns about School Accountability Systems

- » Required indicators rely heavily on standardized assessment data and do not represent a comprehensive picture of school quality
- » The heavy emphasis on student outcomes masks important inputs that play a significant role in student opportunity to learn⁸
- » Communities do not have the ability to incorporate measures that align to their visions and local values
- » Districts are not held accountable for performance despite the significant role they play in managing school quality
- » Access to data and supports is not timely and often comes too late to help students when challenges emerge
- » School identification strategies can stigmatize communities

While conversations about the need to redesign accountability systems have grown in recent years, they are now at a boiling point due to the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions which suspended standardized testing data – the historically favored source of information on school quality – at a time when families and communities craved more information about schools.

States have an opportunity to turn immense public energy around school quality into momentum to redesign state accountability systems. By moving to a more holistic approach, accountability systems can locate specific strengths and weaknesses of each school, making improvement efforts more meaningful.

To be successful in this effort, it is imperative for states to think creatively and ensure broad collaboration with the public. Creativity is critical as states navigate existing federal law with increased public demand for a richer picture of school quality. At the same time, public demands for transparency around school performance have never been louder; states must ensure that those closest to the work are included in every stage of design and implementation of the new system.

The following series of recommendations provide initial strategies states can take as they begin to create a new path forward.

Recommendations for Reimagining State Accountability

- » **Develop a statewide vision for student and system success after engaging in extensive and meaningful discussions with communities regarding their priorities for school quality**
 - Consider developing a statewide list of essential skills, such as a Portrait of a Graduate, and strive to include characteristics that are not subjective or difficult to develop and measure
 - Align graduation requirements and accountability measures with the vision for student success
- » **Emphasize holistic accountability systems**
 - Seek a greater emphasis on system inputs to create balance with the current focus on system outputs
 - Develop infrastructure to collect new sources of school quality data identified as essential through the state's stakeholder engagement process (such as observations, interviews, surveys, etc.)
 - Overhaul school report cards to enable users to understand strengths and successes in addition to flagging areas for growth
 - Create dashboards that provide a holistic picture of school quality and reduce or eliminate the aggregation of data into single scores or letter grades; ensure dashboards provide custom reports where data may be viewed in a variety of configurations and, thus, meet the needs of a variety of users
 - Improve access to data for system leaders, teachers and families by developing visually clear data dashboards and providing supports for interpreting data
- » **Redesign the process for school identification and improvement**
 - Consider a reporting model in which strength and growth areas are publicly identified for all schools and direct comparison along a single scale is not available in the reporting system
 - Provide funding and technical assistance to schools and districts to launch data teams who analyze school performance data and work with state leaders to develop improvement plans
 - Consider launching an inspectorate model, where personalized coaching teams observe teaching and learning firsthand and provide schools with expert feedback along a range of school quality areas; deeper levels of analysis and support are activated as areas for improvement in the data are identified
- » **Launch and fund a district accountability pilot to give local leaders the ability to identify new ways of measuring, reporting and leveraging data to improve school quality. Examine the results and explore ways to spread high-impact strategies to other districts in the state.**

States are required by federal law to design accountability systems that measure school performance across a range of key indicators disaggregated by subgroup student populations.

However, states do have some autonomy within these requirements to determine school quality and student success indicators, how much various components of the system are valued, how the data are reported to the public and what actions happen as a result of accountability information. Even within the current federal requirements, states can design systems that provide the public with richer information as well as significantly more meaningful school improvement processes.

A number of states are beginning to consider improvements to their accountability systems to better reflect their vision for teaching and learning. States should consider networking with others to identify promising practices and serve as national thought leaders in the conversation about accountability redesign.⁹

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the flaws of a system that relies on limited and inflexible data points to drive the most critical decisions about education. The public is demanding transparency and educators are working with student populations at dramatically different places in their learning. Within the boundaries of current federal law, states can undertake key actions to begin exploring more holistic approaches to assessment and accountability. States can demonstrate to federal leaders a strong desire for improvements in the next iteration of the nation's K-12 education law.

The systems that are built today will be the foundation upon which the next reauthorization of ESEA is built. The time is now for innovative leaders to begin building the infrastructure for the assessment and accountability systems of the future.

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