

Rethinking State Accountability to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in K-12 Education

Issue

Rethinking Accountability. What could accountability look like to better support transparency of outcomes and improvements in practice toward high-quality education systems?

This issue brief will explore how policymakers could begin to think about redesigning accountability systems in order to move from compliance to continuous improvement in K-12 education to:

- » Support students to reach new definitions of success with personalized, competency-based learning;
- » Drive continuous improvement at every level of the system;
- » Provide transparency on multiple measures aligned to comprehensive student success outcomes; and
- » Ensure that students have the supports they need, when they need them, to master the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for success in college, career and civic life.

Next generation accountability designs will provide transparency and help build capacity for innovative practices through personalized, student-centered, competency-based learning.

Background

Education systems should reflect families' and communities' hopes for student success in school, work, life and society. States can articulate a statewide vision for student success and align accountability systems to ensure every student has what they need to succeed. Next generation accountability systems can empower states, districts and schools with timely, relevant information and provide the capacity to analyze and continuously improve on their practice.

Accountability systems provide the underlying structure for school and district support and improvement.

Accountability systems for K-12 education could empower stakeholders with the information they need to help students succeed, providing the right information to the right stakeholders at the right time.

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states gain considerably more authority and autonomy over the design of school accountability systems. ESSA provides an opportunity for states to transform accountability with models that advance equity and align to student-centered learning. This shift in responsibility creates the opportunity for states to reimagine new accountability models that align to goals of college and career readiness for all students and to move from a culture of compliance to one of continuous improvement.

CLARIFYING THE PURPOSE OF STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Next generation accountability models require a reframing of the concept of accountability as a tool for transparency that supports and empowers rapid and constant improvement in student learning to support a more comprehensive definition of success.

The prevailing approach in state accountability systems is based on compliance. Accountability systems have been designed to sort and identify the lowest 5% performing schools in each state. Compliance-based accountability entails narrow, time-based metrics of student achievement, cohorts of students with groups and sub-groups, after-the-fact use of data, and a one-size-fits-all approach. Compliance-based accountability is about collecting, reporting and using information because it is required by laws and regulations, rather than because it supports student success.

Next generation accountability models require a reframing of the concept of accountability as a tool for transparency that supports and empowers rapid and constant improvement in student learning to support a more comprehensive definition of success.

Continuously-improving education systems use evidence-based practices to improve learning and monitor progress of students, schools and systems in real-time. In response to ongoing feedback and data, it drives change to improve and evolve practice, culture and structures to ensure that students get the supports they need, when they need them, for growth and success.

Accountability as Continuous Improvement

How can accountability align to incentivizing what is best for student learning for growth and development? Next generation accountability focuses on designing systems that are adaptive, iterative and continuously-improving. Using multiple measures, accountability systems can provide greater transparency to all stakeholders in order to inform and enable effective school improvement strategies.

An accountability system based on continuous improvement requires:

- » Creating a new, more holistic definition of student success that reflects the comprehensive range of knowledge, skills and dispositions students will need to succeed in higher education, the workforce and civic life;
- » Benchmarking using multiple metrics for the new definition of student success;
- » Providing transparency around mastery, gaps and depth of student learning so educators can ensure that learning gaps are filled and all students have the opportunity to learn at deeper levels of knowledge;
- » Identifying and engaging assets for wrap-around supports;
- » Monitoring student pacing and on-track progress;
- » Employing evidence of what works best to improve student learning;
- » Tracking both student proficiency in relation to time-bound targets,¹ evaluating progress on the trajectory of growth along learning progressions towards the next level of proficiency, and monitoring the relative performance on these metrics between student subgroups; and
- » Designing systems for equity, with the necessary resources and supports to ensure equal outcomes for students, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability or English language proficiency.

Reciprocal Accountability

How do we incentivize good practice and build trust with communities through rethinking benchmarks and goals that are in the best interest of students?

A core concept in next generation accountability systems is building capacity, trust and professionalism toward the powerful idea of reciprocal accountability. In *Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement*, Harvard Professor Richard Elmore explains this concept:

How do we incentivize good practice and build trust with communities through rethinking benchmarks and goals that are in the best interest of students?

Accountability must be a reciprocal process. For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance. This is the principle of "reciprocity of accountability for capacity."²

¹ Time-bound targets enable progress tracking by breaking learning objectives into chunks of work that can be completed over time.

² Elmore, R. (2002). *Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement*. Albert Shanker Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/bridging-gap-between-standards-and-achievement>.

In reciprocal accountability,

“Each level of the system — from federal and state governments to districts and schools — should be accountable for the contributions it must make to produce high-quality learning opportunities for each and every child. States and districts must be accountable for providing the resources, supports and incentives that result in well-staffed, effective schools. Schools must be accountable for using these resources wisely and enabling strong teaching. Educators must be accountable for teaching the standards in ways that respond to their students’ needs. Everyone must be accountable for continuous learning.”³

With reciprocal accountability, accountability does not fall disproportionately or unduly on the shoulders of any one stakeholder group and collaboration is prioritized. As a first step, states can begin to engage with diverse stakeholders at different levels of the system, thinking about how reciprocal accountability designs can increase equity and improve outcomes for every student.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR NEXT GENERATION ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Transparency in next generation accountability systems is about providing a comprehensive understanding of student readiness and progress towards future success in college, career and civic life. Next generation accountability systems can empower educators to know where students are in their learning regardless of grade level and inform timely allocation of effort and resources so that educators are always able to give students the supports they need, when they need them, in order to succeed. New systems can provide a multi-faceted understanding of how students are progressing towards success on graduate profiles.

Policymakers designing new accountability models should give ample consideration to supports that will be required to build the capacity of educators and leaders to access, interpret and use data to support student success in personalized, competency-based educational environments.

Multiple Measures Reporting

Better accountability systems based on multiple measures could address the different information needs of states, localities, schools and communities. They could also drive more meaningful and timely identification of schools for improvement. In designing next generation accountability systems, states should consider how multiple measures of student learning and school quality could be clearly presented with advanced data visualization to provide families and communities with rich, easy-to-understand information and supports for educators. Additionally, policymakers should consider how accountability systems could provide timely information to the appropriate stakeholders for equity and transparency, ensuring the data can be aggregated or disaggregated to meet different needs.

³ Darling-Hammond, L., Wilhoit, G., & Pittenger, L. (October 2014). *Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE). Retrieved from <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/accountability-college-and-career-readiness-developing-new-paradigm.pdf>.

Accountability for Continuous Improvement in Vermont

Under Vermont's ESSA State Plan, school performance will be measured using indicators aligned to five priority areas: safe, healthy schools; high-quality staffing; investment priorities; academic proficiency; and personalization.⁴ These priorities are aligned to Vermont's Education Quality Standards, a series of policy guidelines requiring all schools to provide "educational opportunities which are substantially equal in quality, ensure continuous improvement in student performance... and annually report to the community."⁵

For each of the five measures, the Vermont Agency of Education provides a series of guiding accountability questions and proposed reporting measures. The Agency will use a rating system from "near target" to "on target" to weigh each measure against the state's five core priorities.⁶

Annual Snapshot: Multiple Measures

In Vermont, one way that we look at education quality is by examining numerical data displayed through an Annual Snapshot. These data have been selected by the Agency to represent common data collected across all Vermont public schools that address some, but not all, aspects of the Education Quality Standards. Each of these measures is evaluated by a specific method of calculation and from reliable data sources.

Academic Proficiency

1. Content Standard Performance
 - A. English Language Arts
 - B. Mathematics
 - C. Science
 - D. Physical Education
2. English Language Proficiency
3. Graduation Rate
4. Career and College Ready
 - A. Assessments
 - B. Post-Secondary Outcomes

Note: All of the Academic Proficiency items are also used to satisfy federal requirements under ESSA.

Personalization

1. Student Participation in Flexible Pathways
3. Flexible Pathways Offerings
2. Personalized Learning Plans

High Quality Staffing

1. Licensed Teachers
2. Education Staff Stability
3. Staff Satisfaction
 - A. Professional Development
 - B. Evaluation

Safe, Healthy Schools

1. Disciplinary Exclusion
2. School Climate
 - A. Student Survey
 - B. Staff Survey

Investment Priorities

1. EQS Staffing Ratios
2. Per Student Expenditures
3. Return on Investment

<http://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools/education-laws/essa>

(Source: Vermont Agency of Education)

ESSA requires all states to identify the lowest performing five percent of schools in a state for comprehensive school support (i.e., school improvement or turnaround). Vermont will use its rating system to identify its low-performing schools if they are performing "off-target" on a three-year cycle on the state's first priority, academic outcomes.⁷

Vermont's rating system encourages a culture of continuous improvement. School leaders and educators will receive guidance on how they can move closer to achieving the outcome target for their school and students. Vermont's school rating system - while conforming with ESSA's requirement to identify the lowest performing schools for improvement - stands in contrast to models of accountability that rely on a single, summative rating of school performance.

⁴ ESSA Vermont State Plan. Vermont Agency of Education. Retrieved from http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/essa-state-plan-one-pager-overview-final-accessible_o.pdf.

⁵ Series 2000 - Education Quality Standards. Vermont State Board of Education. Retrieved from <http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-state-board-rules-series-2000.pdf>.

⁶ Annual Snapshot: Multiple Measures. Vermont Agency of Education. Retrieved from <http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/essa-state-plan-one-pager-snapshot-multiple-measure-final-accessible.pdf>.

⁷ ESSA Vermont State Plan. Vermont Agency of Education. Retrieved from http://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/essa-state-plan-one-pager-overview-final-accessible_o.pdf.

COMPREHENSIVE AND TARGETED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND SUPPORTS

Comprehensive school improvement is the process required in ESSA for states to intervene in the lowest-performing five percent of schools in a state. *Targeted support* is required for schools where subgroups of students are not meeting school performance benchmarks. Schools identified for improvement and support must conduct a needs assessment to guide the selection of evidence-based improvement models. Policymakers can support the development of school redesign and improvement models that are competency-based. They can do so by defining criteria for improvement models that align to student-centered learning, and by examining barriers and opportunities in state policy to build competency-based systems.

Building capacity of educators and leaders to effectively lead school redesign efforts is an essential consideration for policymakers. Educators need the opportunity to develop the skills required for next generation learning environments, while leaders at all levels need capacity to lead the transformation of school models. As policymakers identify new models for school improvement, they need to consider investing in the requisite educator and leader capacity and supporting professional learning communities for quality improvement processes. Policymakers can address the need to build educator capacity through:

- » Identifying clear, specific educator competencies needed for personalized learning environments, student-centered models and competency-based education structures;
- » Creating multiple, high-quality pathways to educator credentials and development;
- » Supporting professional learning communities with best practices for continuous improvement;
- » Building an understanding of assessment literacy; and
- » Using learning sciences research to inform evidence-based practices.

Recommendations for State Policymakers to Build Next Generation Accountability Systems

Next generation accountability systems can move state accountability systems from a compliance mindset to focusing on strengthening schools and empowering educators and learners with the data and support they need to succeed. It replaces summative school performance rendered as a single indicator with multiple summative and formative indicators delivered as comprehensive school profiles. States can articulate a statewide vision for student success, and align next generation accountability systems to hold stakeholders accountable to this shared vision. An example of this is by creating a “Profile of a Graduate” that articulates what students should be able to know and do to ensure success in postsecondary education, career and civic life by the time students graduate.

State leaders can begin to transform state accountability systems to better support student learning, provide greater transparency and allow districts and schools the capacity to analyze and continuously improve on their practice. Policymakers may want to consider the following recommendations, and take

advantage of the opportunities in ESSA, to move toward building student-centered learning systems in the state.

- » **Action Step #1:** Convene diverse stakeholders to [redefine student success](#). The definition should reflect the knowledge and skills that all students will need to succeed in college, career and civic life.
- » **Action Step #2:** Determine the measures the state will use for accountability purposes. The multiple measures should be aligned to the state's vision for student success, provide transparency with timely data and empower stakeholders to drive continuous improvement, identify schools for improvement and target supports and resources where they are needed most.
- » **Action Step #3:** Engage with education stakeholders to develop or support professional learning communities across schools and districts and create a culture of continuous improvement where educators and leaders from across the state can learn and grow.
- » **Action Step #4:** Empower communities and build trust by developing a framework for reciprocal accountability, to ensure that resources and supports are responsive to the needs of local communities, districts and schools.
- » **Action Step #5:** Identify school improvement models to support student-centered learning with personalized, competency-based education and to advance equity. States have the flexibility under ESSA to empower communities to determine school improvement models that work best for them as opposed to prescriptive models under No Child Left Behind.

As states begin to consider and design next generation accountability systems that are dynamic and responsive to stakeholders, they should remember they can submit a request to the U.S. Department of Education to amend their state accountability plans at any time.

Learn More

- » [iNACOL - *Fit for Purpose: Taking the Long View on Systems Change and Policy to Support Competency Education*](#)
- » [iNACOL Issue Brief - *Redefining Student Success: Profile of a Graduate*](#)
- » [iNACOL Issue Brief - *State Policy & K-12 Competency-Based Education*](#)
- » [iNACOL Issue Brief - *Redesigning Systems of Assessments for Student-Centered Learning*](#)
- » [iNACOL - *Meeting The Every Student Succeeds Act's Promise: State Policy to Support Personalized Learning*](#)
- » [iNACOL - *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning*](#)
- » Follow us on social media: [@nacol](#), [@SusanDPatrick](#), [@mariaworthen](#), [@DaleKFrost](#), [@ntruongedu](#)

Contact Information

For more information or technical assistance, contact the authors of this issue brief:

- » Susan Patrick, CEO, iNACOL and Co-Founder, *CompetencyWorks*: spatrick@inacol.org
- » Maria Worthen, Vice President for Federal and State Policy, iNACOL: mworthen@inacol.org
- » Natalie Truong, Policy Director, iNACOL: ntruong@inacol.org
- » Dale Frost, State Policy Director, iNACOL: dfrost@inacol.org



December 2017

The mission of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. iNACOL is a non-profit organization focusing on research, developing policy for student-centered education to ensure equity and access, developing quality standards for emerging learning models using competency-based, blended, and online education, and supporting the ongoing professional development of school and district leaders for new learning models. [Visit our website](#), [like us on Facebook](#), [connect with us on LinkedIn](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).



Please refer to this paper as Patrick, S., Worthen, M. & Truong, N. *Rethinking State Accountability to Support Personalized, Competency-Based Learning in K-12 Education*, iNACOL, 2017. Content in this report is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.