

Core Principles for New Accountability in Education



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*“Designing Next Generation
Accountability and Support
Systems: Implications for Federal,
State, and Local Policy”*

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PROGRAM

Background

This publication is the product of a workshop on accountability policy held in Aspen, Colorado in July 2009. The issue of accountability was chosen because of the need to take stock of lessons learned in the latest round of policy implementation and research, especially as the conversation resumes regarding ESEA/NCLB reauthorization.

The topic of core principles was early on the workshop agenda and intended as a prelude to more focused discussions regarding system design and ideas for building capacity at the various levels of government. But the discussion of principles captured the group's interest -- and more time on the agenda -- than originally anticipated. The workshop participants pursued a set of core principles as a helpful frame for future conversations about the next generation of accountability policies in education.

The workshop participants were acutely aware that accountability policies are not the sole or even the primary means for improving public education. Indeed, many of the participants stressed the need for a more intensive focus on building the capacity of educators and education systems as a necessary complement to smarter accountability policies. They also recognized, however, that accountability policies play an increasingly important role in shaping educational practice and perceptions of our public schools, and that the policies we have in place aren't providing the information or incentives we need to get the schools we want and need.

What follows is a recommendation for a set of core principles, which is informed and inspired by the workshop deliberations.

Core Principles for New Accountability in Education

INTRODUCTION

Accountability policies in education are overdue for an update. The federal policies that set important context for state and local efforts have been in place since January 2002, and scheduled for reconsideration and reauthorization since 2007. More important, preparing all students for college and career options is now widely recognized as the core mission of public education, but the measures and targets in current accountability policies are not aligned to this goal.

The challenge is to think expansively enough to see new opportunities while protecting the core principles of strong accountability that are just taking root. But what are those principles? As policymakers consider the next generation of accountability policies for public education, a set of principles against which proposals can be evaluated could help identify common ground and clarify the trade-offs in addressing contentious issues.

The need to re-think current policies shouldn't diminish the historic and positive changes ushered in by NCLB: The focus on results, the priority on achievement gaps, and the urgency of dramatic interventions in the lowest-performing schools are now widely accepted ground rules for moving forward. Given that NCLB represents the first attempt at creating

overarching accountability policies for the 50 states and 15,000 school districts, it is inevitable that weaknesses and unintended consequences would be discovered during implementation.

It is also important to remember that some of the policy options being advocated now were not available as options when NCLB was enacted: many states had no meaningful accountability for school performance and lacked the assessments and data systems needed to measure student progress over time; only a couple of states focused accountability on achievement gaps; and students and schools that failed to meet goals were routinely left to languish without meaningful assistance or intervention.

The context today is very different. The fundamentals that were once controversial are accepted as essential. The last five years has seen an explosion in new state and district approaches to the whole range of accountability policies, from measurement to identification to intervention. Local and state leaders with a vision for dramatically improving education have been buoyed by the attention and urgency NCLB has brought to key issues, and a new breed of entrepreneurial start-ups have brought renewed energy and

creativity to the sector. It is critically important not to lose the focus that has been galvanized by NCLB.

At the same time, we must attend to the fact that, in some ways, NCLB has been reduced to a caricature of its original intent:

- the resistance to any federal review of states standards has meant 50 different yardsticks and downward pressure on test quality and rigor;
- tight federal control over accountability determinations combined with little control over the improvement process has allowed for a disconnect between identification of schools and the capacity to actually help them;
- schools that are making solid growth with disadvantaged children can be labeled underperforming while schools with advantaged students can coast to undeserved accolades.

These and other counter-productive developments in response to NCLB were not inevitable, but they are real and need to be addressed. As policies are revisited, the downsides of current implementation should inform new rules.

The challenge is to unleash the creative and innovative thinking in the field while holding fast to the most important advances of the NCLB era. The principles in this publication are offered as one set of guidelines for achieving that balance.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Education accountability systems should:

1. Set Clear Outcome Goals and Progress Targets

- ▲ Whole system is aligned to overarching goal of preparing all students for postsecondary success
- ▲ Accountability determinations are based on a limited set of indicators that are robust enough to measure whether students are on-track and ultimately achieving college- and career-readiness
- ▲ Focus is on student performance measures that include current achievement (status) *and* progress (growth), with targets for students and schools all along the achievement continuum

2. Account for All Groups of Students

- ▲ Disaggregates data by student groups
- ▲ Requires progress on closing achievement gaps

3. Employ Multiple Sources and Types of Evidence

- ▲ Recognizes that standardized test scores in reading and math are necessary but not sufficient indicators for assessing school quality
- ▲ Uses inspections or other analysis of school context and practice to provide insights that guide improvement efforts.
- ▲ Validates performance measures with external outcomes (e.g., NAEP and other measures) that aren't used in accountability system and seeks to identify/correct distortions and "gaming" of the system

4. Communicate Clearly to All Stakeholders

- ▲ Promotes public knowledge and engagement
- ▲ Performance indicators and targets are clear and understood by all stakeholders

5. Motivate People at All Levels of the System

- ▲ Establishes goals and progress targets for each level that has responsibility within the system, from states to students
- ▲ Utilizes a range of incentives and rewards in addition to negative consequences

6. Work within a Comprehensive System to Improve Outcomes

- ▲ Designed as part of comprehensive system to change and improve school performance
- ▲ Encourages comprehensive, systemic reforms; minimizes likelihood that responses will seek to "game" system or focus inordinately on short-term gains

1. Set Clear Outcome Goals and Progress Targets

- ▲ Whole system is aligned to overarching goal of preparing students for postsecondary success
 - ▲ Accountability determinations are based on a limited set of indicators that are robust enough to measure whether students are on-track and ultimately achieving college- and career-readiness
 - ▲ Focus is on student performance measures that include achievement (status) and progress (growth), with goals for students and schools all along the achievement continuum
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The mission of public education has evolved from a focus on access and basic skills to the goal of preparing all students for postsecondary education, career opportunities, and active civic engagement -- but the measures used in accountability systems haven't yet been updated to reflect this goal. Currently, accountability is based on low-level expectations in reading and math, and entirely leaves out other important indicators of postsecondary readiness, which include other subjects and outcome measures in addition to test scores.

All over the country, states and districts are grappling with what it takes to fully prepare students for postsecondary success, and what measures/indicators are needed to gauge progress along the way. A consortium of almost all the states, led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, is revisiting reading and math standards to align them with college- and career-readiness. To impact accountability, this process will need to result in assessments that measure whether students are on-track for success in college and career opportunities.

The focus on postsecondary readiness is also forcing consideration of essential elements beyond reading and math tests. For example, many states have recently enacted policies to ensure more students take a broad and rigorous high school curriculum, but these measures have not yet been included in school accountability formulas. There also is concern that some vital competencies for success in college and career opportunities are not assessed adequately by current, on-demand assessments (e.g., conducting research and synthesizing information from multiple sources), and questions about how to develop appropriate assessments of sufficient quality and consistency for use in accountability systems.

The challenge, to quote Albert Einstein, is to make accountability systems "as simple as possible, but not more so." If additional indicators are added to accountability determinations, an index or some other system of combining multiple indicators might make sense. An index can accommodate additional measures of school performance, while different weights within an index can help to "keep the main thing the main thing."

Measures of current performance are important, but we also care about the rate

of progress, so accountability systems should establish expectations for improvement in all schools and with all students. To fairly distinguish between schools based on their effectiveness, targets should account for growth and/or progress in addition to status levels. Schools should be evaluated largely on the basis of how far they take

their students toward proficiency and beyond, with growth expectations for all students, all along the achievement continuum. This means that tests have to be designed to assess students who are far below and far ahead of grade-level proficiency expectations to support accurate growth estimates.

1. Set Clear Outcome Goals and Progress Targets

What Are the Key Questions?

1. Are tests being used for accountability measuring the right knowledge and skills – and with sufficient rigor – to signal readiness for the next grade and, ultimately, for postsecondary success? What evidence should be used to evaluate the quality and rigor of content and performance standards?
2. Do the tests provide for measures of students' growth over time, and for estimates of the value added by the education system? How should accountability systems combine measures of progress/growth with measures of current status in making determinations? How much progress is enough?
3. Given that, are there knowledge and skills that are essential to students' preparation for postsecondary opportunity, but that aren't covered by current measures? How should accountability systems account for other subjects and/or other important outcomes while maintaining a focus on the foundational academic knowledge and skills of reading and math? What measures in addition to test scores would improve accountability determinations? If measures other than statewide standardized tests are factored into accountability determinations, what are the best ways to assure the quality and comparability of these measures across districts, schools, and classrooms?
4. How should transitions be managed from the current accountability systems, where goals are pegged to proficiency on low-level tests in reading and math, to systems pegged to college/career readiness?

2. Account for All Groups of Students

- ▲ Disaggregates data by student groups
- ▲ Requires progress on closing achievement gaps

Accountability must serve the vital function of ensuring all students are valued. This does more than protect private rights, it protects society's interest in ensuring that every individual has the opportunity to lead a productive life and contribute to the economic and social health of the Nation. Focusing on equity in accountability mitigates the systematic denial of high expectations and meaningful opportunities to students from racial/ethnic minority groups, students with disabilities, students with limited-English proficiency, and students from low-income backgrounds.

The continued need for a focus on equity could hardly be more compelling: the gaps between groups in our public schools are very large, bigger than in peer countries, and aren't effectively addressed as students progress through school. The yawning gaps in achievement and graduation rates stunt the opportunities of millions of America's young people and undermine the economic, social, and civic fabric of our democracy. Moreover, while these gaps clearly have roots in inequality outside of school, opportunity *within our public schools* is pervasively skewed in ways that reinforce and exacerbate the inequality that exists outside of school.

Current accountability systems, when they are modified, must be modified in ways that continue the commitment to

equity. This means including all students in assessments, reporting results by group, and holding schools and systems accountable for closing achievement gaps.

Current accountability policies ostensibly place an overriding focus on equity, but define the goals narrowly and at levels of achievement that are too low to signal equal access to meaningful opportunities. As the focus turns to a measuring college- and career-readiness -- requiring higher performance expectations and indicators beyond reading and math test scores -- accountability systems will get more complex. Whatever these criteria, they can and should also be applied to groups of students.

Challenges will arise, however, in combining group results into an overall school/system accountability determination. As schools and systems are arrayed along a continuum of performance and progress against college and career-readiness measures and no longer rated on a binary "yes or no" scale, accountability design may benefit from new thinking about how to prioritize equity in making accountability determinations. It may be that a school's lowest-performing group still should define the school's accountability rating, but there may be additional ways of keeping the focus on equity with a broader range of accountability ratings.

2. Account for All Groups of Students

What Are the Key Questions?

1. How should accountability for the performance of each group of students be maintained as additional measures and targets are added (e.g., subjects in addition to reading and math, college-going rates, etc.)?
2. How can systems strike a proper balance between taking account of past performance and ensuring the accelerated progress that's required to catch-up historically under-served groups? Should states or districts be permitted to set different interim targets for groups if they set more aggressive growth/progress targets for students and groups that have been undereducated in the past?
3. What is the appropriate mix of consequences – negative as well as positive – to ensure schools focus on serving all groups of students? What should be the consequences for schools or systems that persistently fail to meet targets for a group (or groups) of students that constitute a relatively small share of total students? Should they be the same rewards and sanctions applied to schools that fail to meet performance targets overall, or are different rules needed to ensure schools and systems focus adequate attention and resources on closing their internal achievement gaps?

3. Employ Multiple Sources and Types of Evidence

- ▲ Recognizes that standardized test scores in reading and math are necessary but not sufficient indicators for assessing school quality
- ▲ Uses inspections or other analysis of school context and practice to provide insights that support improvement efforts.
- ▲ Validates performance measures with external outcomes (e.g., NAEP and other measures) that aren't used in accountability system
- ▲ Identifies/corrects distortions and "gaming" of the system

The straightforward goal of college- and career-readiness is actually a complicated collection of knowledge and skills. Since the purpose of accountability systems is to change behavior in pursuit of success as defined by the accountability system, it's important that the measures we use capture the kinds of performance we want to see.

It's not enough to hope that schools will go above and beyond the goals we have set for them; accountability systems should reflect the academic experiences and outcomes that we want students to have. If there are things that are deemed essential for students to learn in school, they should be included in accountability determinations. The challenge is to combine measures that signal the breadth of teaching and learning expected while continuing to focus greatest attention on the most important indicators of achievement.

Standardized tests are tremendously useful because of their reliability across different schools and systems, but additional measures could improve accountability. For example, performance measures may be better suited to assessing important skills that don't lend themselves to standardized tests; this is especially important because we expect schools to teach these skills even though aren't currently

considered in accountability. While there would be more variation in expectations and scoring than on current measures, this might be an acceptable trade-off to ensure coverage of essential areas that aren't on state tests. In addition, participation in a rigorous curriculum and exposure to college-level work while in high school are strong predictors of college success, but right now these don't factor into school quality ratings in most places.

Moreover, while accountability *determinations* should be based predominantly on outcomes, accountability *systems* need a lot more information to distinguish good practice from bad, to diagnose problems within schools and systems, and to ensure front-line educators have useful information. Comprehensive assessment systems should include development and training in the use of diagnostic assessments within the school. There is a need for capacity outside of schools for examining and evaluating schools and system practices to help educators understand what is contributing to successes and failures. In other countries, like England and the Netherlands, a school inspectorate complements quantitative outcome measures with a qualitative evaluation of school practices. Exploring this and other options for diagnosing *the reasons* for

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strong and weak performance in schools would augment the power of current accountability policies.

As reliance on state tests for accountability determinations has grown, so has concern about the quality of tests and the occurrence of “score inflation.” In one important way, mandatory state participation in NAEP is alerting us about these concerns, but knowing about the problem is, of course, not enough. Failure to address the concerns about current tests undermines the integrity of the accountability measures and is terribly unfair to teachers and students who don’t get credit for the results they are achieving. Capacity to create and maintain high-quality assessments, and to conduct independent audits of the quality, reliability, and validity of accountability tests is essential and must be strengthened. Responsibility for these audits must be outside the education system that’s being held accountable. In addition to greater quality control

focused on tests, we also need more attention to the external indicators that can bolster confidence in accountability measures. Longer-term outcome measures should be used to validate accountability indicators by looking back on education results in the context of students’ subsequent success in college and career pursuits.

Every system that seeks to motivate changes in human behavior is susceptible to gaming. Above and beyond the validity of the assessment measures we must look for weaknesses in the system and seek to fix them; ignoring the potential or incidence of gaming demoralizes educators who are taking the hard path to meaningful improvements and undermines the likelihood of long-term success. Creating a structure for educators to raise concerns about unintended consequences is an important way to honor knowledge within the system and to address problems before they undermine the integrity of the system.

3. Employ Multiple Sources and Types of Evidence

What Are the Key Questions?

1. What are the most efficient and practical ways to ensure accountability tests are of the high quality? Are high-quality tests an adequate basis for assessing student achievement and school quality? If not, how do we develop other measures that have the credibility to be included in accountability determinations? How should additional outcome measures be combined with test scores to get the right balance between breadth and “keeping the main thing the main thing”?
2. How can human judgment be used to augment outcome measures and improve accountability systems? Since this capacity is largely absent in current systems, where should it be developed – in districts, states, or nationally? Within public agencies or in partners/intermediaries? How can inspections be used to better understand and improve the performance of districts and states, in addition to individual schools?
3. Should inspection reports or other forms of characterizing school practices be part of accountability determinations, or reserved for use in crafting improvement plans?
4. What are appropriate, external outcome measures that can be used to validate accountability test scores? Where should the system seek to build the capability to audit and validate test results, so that stakeholders can have confidence in the comparability of test results and progress measures over time? Are longitudinal data systems in K-12 being designed so that they can be merged with data sets from higher education and workforce?
5. What protocols can be designed to detect gaming and other unintended consequences? While having more varied and robust measures will help, are there mechanisms that would help surface unintended consequences so they could be corrected more quickly?

4. Communicate Clearly to All Stakeholders

- ▲ Performance indicators and targets are clear and understood by all participants
 - ▲ Promotes public knowledge and engagement
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Data is the lifeblood of meaningful accountability, and getting the right data to the right people in a way that is useful and credible is really what accountability is about if it is to drive positive change. The process begins by reaching consensus on a set of key performance indicators and articulating clear targets so that every system, every school, every teacher, every parent, every student knows how much progress is expected, and in what areas. Students, teachers, and administrators should be able to assess progress toward short- and long-term goals with the click of a mouse.

Making information accessible means more than putting data tables on a website. The key objective is timely communication that fosters a common public understanding that in turn motivates action. Information should be presented in a compelling manner that encourages stakeholders to engage in a conversation about school improvement. For parents this begins with a clear

understanding of how their children are doing individually and in the context of their school, district, and state. For education systems, this means new attention to knowledge management and the infrastructure for networking so that educators are encouraged and supported in learning with and from one another.

For systems to work on a continuous improvement principle they need more – and more useful – data. Within K-12 systems, student performance data should be merged with data on course-taking patterns, participation in special programs and interventions, and finance data to get a clearer picture of effectiveness and efficiency. Beyond K-12, information on postsecondary outcomes -- entry and success in college, participation in workforce training and employment, and service in the military - - need to be integrated with academic achievement and graduation measures to create a more accurate picture of success.

4. Communicate Clearly to All Stakeholders

What Are the Key Questions?

1. Is the data system infrastructure adequate to support accountability goals – can it produce information on outcomes and progress at the system, school, classroom and student levels? Does the data system include information on areas of strong and weak performance at levels of detail/specificity that assist in diagnosis and improvement?
2. Does the accountability data system generate unique information regarding the performance and growth trajectory of each individual student? Is this information provided to teachers and administrators? Is it provided to parents and students? Are clear connections between achievement measures and readiness for postsecondary opportunities established and communicated to students and families, so that each student knows whether s/he is on-track to meeting college-readiness standards?
3. Does the accountability data system provide information on achievement and growth trajectories to state leaders, district administrators, and school principals?
4. Is school and district performance easily accessible to the public, in a format that is easy to understand? Does the accountability system facilitate meaningful comparisons across districts and schools?

5. Motivate People at all Levels of the System

- ▲ Establishes goals and progress targets for each level that has responsibility within the system, from states to students
 - ▲ Utilizes a range of incentives and rewards in addition to negative consequences
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All the contributors to student achievement – up and down the system – need a stake in the accountability system. This means it's important to develop accountability for the system role, so that districts and states are accountable for creating the necessary conditions, providing the necessary resources, and not hamstringing schools' ability to meet the goals. And it means that principals, teachers, and students need goals, measures, and targets by which they are held accountable, too. There isn't one right way to apportion accountability, but leaving out actors with significant responsibility undermines the strength of the whole system.

The challenges in setting targets for systems and for individuals are quite different:

For states systems, there is no strong tradition or much experience in holding them accountable for performance. Accountability has been largely based on compliance with grant conditions. Scrutiny of states' approach to educational accountability and improvement, the quality of their implementation, and their outcomes has been virtually non-existent.

The four assurances required by the ARRA, and the specific queries in the Race to the Top applications in particular, assess the states' responsibilities more directly by looking at each state's education policy

framework, including whether standards and assessments are aimed at college and career readiness, whether the state cultivates and rewards effective teachers, whether the state intervenes in chronically low-performing schools, and whether the state has an adequate data system. This may provide the context for a new federal-state relationship, but to shift the focus of accountability from past compliance to likelihood of future gains will require new relationships between states and the federal government. New performance targets must be devised, and – just as important to success – prescriptive compliance regimes that do not contribute to accountability must also be dismantled.

The challenge in devising accountability for districts is similar: states have built capacity to monitor compliance with state and federal programs and accounting rules, but little capacity to examine outcomes and guide improvement efforts. In the cases where states have developed capacity to diagnose problems, identify best practice, and intervene, it has most often been focused on low-performing schools, by-passing districts almost entirely. Little to no work has been done to hold districts accountable for their performance in creating conditions for successful schools.

For teachers and students, accountability already exists in lots of ways, both formal and informal, but they are not aligned with the goals of the

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accountability system. Teachers, for example, are evaluated, earn tenure, and have ways in which they can increase their compensation (e.g., graduate-level courses and degrees, fixed-benefit pensions based on longevity), but these are unrelated to a teacher's contribution to student or school success. Students are held accountable for taking the right courses and for their performance on college entrance exams, but these aren't areas covered by school accountability. The challenge is integrating the measures and accountability systems for schools, teachers, and students into a whole, coherent system.

The challenge in crafting accountability policies isn't only about exercising adequate control; just as important is to ensure that those with responsibility for implementing the policies "own" the problem and feel responsible for achieving the goals. In this context, it is important to recalibrate the mix of incentives and rewards within the system. Avoiding negative consequences can focus the efforts of low-performers, but is weaker than incentives and rewards in inspiring the highest levels of

performance and in motivating creative new ways of work.

The Race to the Top competition is a striking example: the opportunity for recognition as well as additional funding is driving real competition among the states to be at the vanguard of reform. The contrast with NCLB, which more often occasioned grudging compliance or outright gaming, could not be more pronounced. To motivate average performers to improve, and to move from good to great, will demand a different mix of levers than are currently employed.

While negative consequences should be used more sparingly, their application when warranted must be more certain. Schools that don't do a good job educating students – and there are far too many of them – must be overhauled or closed and new ones opened. This same reasoning must apply to employees of the system, too; without this, accountability is just a paper tiger. There is no meaningful accountability if students persistently fail to meet their goals but no adults in the system fail to meet theirs.

5. Motivate People at All Levels of the System

What are the Key Questions?

1. How should the federal government hold states accountable? Should the Race to the Top application process serve as a model for a new relationship, where the federal government relies more on incentives, and assesses states' commitment and capacity to improve performance? How should federal policy distinguish between states – based on policy commitments or outcomes, or a combination? Should the U.S. Department of Education publish state report cards? And how would the U.S. Department of Education need to change to fulfill such a role?
2. How should states hold districts accountable? If states are expected to manage and help improve the performance of districts, what capacity needs to be developed? What role should intermediaries/outside providers?
3. Can the historical reliance on compliance indicators be diminished in exchange for more meaningful measures of performance and capacity? What areas of compliance monitoring could be discontinued or streamlined – and what would states/districts need to demonstrate to be eligible?
4. How can rewards and consequences for teachers and students be aligned with targets for schools? What are the positive consequences in addition to money – e.g., recognition and status, access to opportunities – that are most likely to motivate high performance? Are positive incentives for students, such as admissions and placement in college and workforce apprenticeship programs, based on achievement measures upon which systems, schools and teachers are held accountable? Who should make such decisions, and how much flexibility/discretion is appropriate at the state, district and school levels?
5. What are the biggest structural and political obstacles to implementing meaningful consequences for persistent failure? How can they be overcome?

6. Work within a Comprehensive System to Improve Outcomes

- ▲ Designed as part of comprehensive system to manage performance and improve outcomes
 - ▲ Encourages comprehensive, systemic reforms; minimizes likelihood that responses will be counter-productive and focused inordinately on short-term goals
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On their own, accountability systems don't do the heavy lifting required to improve student achievement – instead, they tell us where goals are being met and where they aren't, and provide sanctions and rewards to motivate improvement. Actual improvements in educational outcomes, however, are driven by things that are much harder to change than accountability formulas. Getting accountability right – important as it is – will not solve many of the problems in public education.

Accountability system design needs to be part of a comprehensive strategy for continuously improving school and educator practice, with all the components reinforcing one another. Teachers should get concrete assistance in understanding and meeting the goals - with access to curriculum and instructional materials; model lesson plans; short-cycle, diagnostic assessments; and annotated examples of student work -- all aligned to the assessments and other measures used for accountability. The investment in teacher and school support should be commensurate with accountability placed on them.

Creating and sustaining the capacity for continuous improvement –either within systems of public education or through strategic partnerships with external organizations – should be a major

concern of policymakers who expect schools to meet accountability goals. There are structural and cultural components that need to be addressed. For example, if schools are going to be held accountable for outcomes, they need some autonomy over how to allocate inputs. In addition, human resource policies often constrain hiring and assigning personnel in ways that respond to student and school needs. It will take more than freeing up resources and renegotiating contracts, however, to foster innovation and sharing of lessons learned; systems must be deliberate about supporting and incentivizing educators to learn from the successes and failures of their peers.

Education systems offer rewards and sanctions outside the accountability system, and it's important for these to be coordinated, too. Just as we have learned that teacher incentives and pay-for-performance do not *on their own* improve student achievement, so, too, we need to understand that accountability policies are one aspect of a performance management system in which the many components must aim toward a common goal. The ways in which teachers are inducted, supported, evaluated and paid should serve to reinforce the system goals as articulated in the accountability system. The resources that teachers are provided to help them develop as professionals

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should also help them contribute to students and schools meeting their accountability targets. Likewise, resource allocation and organizational structure should be adjusted in the service of systems meeting accountability goals.

Thinking about accountability in the larger framework of performance management raises sticky issues about the level at which certain decisions are made. Under the current policies, states operate under prescriptive rules with regard to setting targets, but unfettered discretion regarding the standards and tests; as a result, standards and tests have been manipulated to control the impact of the external accountability rules, and few states have built systems with appropriately rigorous expectations.

There is a paradox in education accountability that needs to be approached anew: states and districts need to feel ownership and responsibility for their accountability systems – that’s what motivates meaningful accountability – but the historical record is replete with examples of state/district abdication on

many of the most fundamental issues. So accountability policies have been established by the federal government to force states to own up to their responsibilities (and to get states to force districts and schools to own up to theirs), but these accountability policies have less impact precisely because they are set by the federal government. A central challenge in crafting the next generation accountability policies is to calibrate the most advantageous balance between federal rules and state/district discretion.

Policymakers should consider the trade-offs of allowing more flexibility in accountability system design in exchange for demanding greater coherence, commitment, and capacity-building from states and districts that seek such flexibility. Since states and districts are more directly responsible for establishing and managing school systems, seeking stronger partnerships with states and districts in their management of public education – including serious efforts to strengthen and augment the capacity of state departments and districts – must become top priorities for federal policy.

6. Work within a Comprehensive System to Improve Outcomes

What are the Key Questions?

1. How are accountability policies integrated with other strategies (e.g., curriculum development and professional development; compensation; public engagement) to achieve goals?
2. How do policies in human capital/personnel either support or hinder public education's ability to meet accountability goals, and how can the tensions be resolved?
3. Where should federal policy be tight and where should it be loose? In what areas is national consistency important and in what areas should state/local discretion play a greater role? How can states and districts that are trying to strengthen accountability be treated differently from those who are trying to avoid or weaken accountability – in terms of identification and flexibility?
4. How can rewards/sanctions/incentives operating in other aspects of public education be aligned with accountability goals and metrics?

CONCLUSION

Historically, public schools reserved meaningful opportunity for a select few, while pushing some students out and sorting many more into low-level, watered down curriculum. Orienting public education toward educating every child for college and careers will require big changes in lots of areas, including accountability measures and progress targets.

The importance of situating accountability in a larger set of policies aimed at improving teaching and learning cannot be overstated. The education policy conversation tends to focus inordinate attention on getting the accountability just right, with the tacit assumption that the targets, incentives, and sanctions are the key to raising student achievement. Our challenges, however, have as much or more to do with capacity as they do with motivation; smarter accountability can help point the way, but cannot substitute for a substantive improvement agenda. At every level, accountability policies need to be joined with investments in capacity and authority of educators to meet the goals.

Calibrating the right mix of pressure and support is complicated in our system of divided school governance, because it is difficult to coordinate across the systems. Under current rules, one level

establishes the overarching accountability goals and targets (federal), another sets the standards and assessments upon which the determinations will be based (state), and yet another (district) is charged with performance management and technical assistance to low-performing schools – and all three control elements of resource allocation. And schools, where much of the responsibility for meeting accountability goals rests, often have little discretion over fiscal or human resources and spend excessive time and energy on compliance activities that are disconnected from improving performance. Accountability policies should be cognizant of the tensions inherent in setting policies across these levels and seek to maximize the comparative advantage of each.

The time is right for reconsidering some of the old assumptions and bargains that have shaped accountability policies. Experience with standards-based reform and accountability policies offers lessons on which to build. There is public recognition that we need to improve education outcomes and that accountability plays a role in that, but also a sense that we need new policies (and new standards, teaching supports, and assessments) to make good on the promise of standards-based reform. Hopefully, the principles set out in this document can facilitate that process.