



Designing State Accountability Systems for Continuous School Improvement: A Call to Action

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Are we ready to make the changes necessary to establish a system of educational accountability that is structured to drive continuous improvement (CI)? Are we ready to build a system of continuous improvement that lifts every learner, teacher, leader, and community? Our nation is at a crucial crossroads that, depending on the path we choose, will either reinforce the status quo of previous actions and accountability legislation or assertively pivot us toward a future that embraces real and sustainable improvement, thereby transforming the lives of millions of learners and their communities.

Over the past 60 years, we as a nation have sought to improve our education system and focus on equity, excellence, school choice, and standards and accountability.¹ Each wave of reform has been led by different combinations of leaders and stakeholders: government officials, educators, parents, and activists (focused on equity); business leaders and policymakers (focused on excellence/accountability); and parents (focused on choice and pushing back against assessment). Each has had its own bogeymen—from “inadequate funding” to “unfunded mandates,” from “anything-goes” curricula to “lack of choice” in schools, from “bad teachers” to over-testing.

Through the years, federal law and state accountability systems—and occasionally the courts—have served as a potent force for change. From the desegregation of schools as a civil rights issue in the 1950s to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided new resources and programs to better educate low-income children in the 1960s, we have struggled to right history’s wrongs. In the 1980s, the report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, put the onus on state leaders to bolster regulations about the course of study required to graduate. More recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act sought to hold students and schools accountable to achieve high academic standards measured by high-stakes testing. The Obama Administration, using its leverage from the Race to the Top Fund, sought to encourage states to adopt new standards and hold teachers accountable for student performance on tests.

Yet, since the 1980s, our nation has failed to find the right alchemy to convert chosen accountability measures into desired outcomes. Mechanisms to drive improvement through our system of schooling have been at times too weak, too centralized, or have foisted one-size-fits-all solutions on schools, or sparked unintended and oftentimes negative consequences. With the best of intentions, we have committed to the highest of aspirations but failed to establish systems that support achieving them. In order to achieve such high aspirations, we must abandon failures of the past and address the difficult, persistent questions confounding our education system: Why do children of poverty continue to struggle and experience limited success in school? Why do communities with a high concentration of families living in poverty feel alienated from and abandoned by the educational system?

Under NCLB-era accountability, too much focus was placed on a single measure (student assessment), casting a spotlight on too narrow a band of students (low-performing students near proficiency) rather than sparking higher performance by all students. Federally mandated sanctions were overly prescriptive, and the use of high-stakes test scores for students and schools as a proxy for measuring teacher quality had a disastrous effect on teacher morale. And all the tough tactics did little to halt the widening of the performance gap between institutions serving

low-income communities and their higher-income neighbors. In fact, across every demographic, students from higher-income families experienced larger improvement rates than those from low-income families.

In the words of Marc Tucker, president and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy:

The test-based accountability system now universally mandated in the United States...has had 10 years to prove itself. The result is very low teacher morale, plummeting applications to schools of education, the need to recruit too many of our teachers from the lowest levels of high school graduates, a testing regime that has narrowed the curriculum for millions of students to a handful of subjects and a very low level of aspiration. There is no evidence that it is contributing anything to improved student performance, much less the improved performance of the very low-income and minority students for which it was in the first instance created.²

One of the worst parts of the law was the fact that its accountability system was completely divorced from local culture and context, so it did not recognize the many factors that influence performance or diversity in performance. NCLB did not account for rapid progress in low-performing schools, lack of progress in high-performing schools or the effects of school closings on local communities. Nor did it provide any insight into or credit for the kinds of things that happen every day in individual school buildings that can be tinkered with to maximize performance. Many sanctions foisted on schools and communities—such as school takeovers—also had no basis in research.

Meanwhile, some argue that the hyperfocus on standards and testing has undermined the development of talent and creativity, entrepreneurship, and the ability to prepare all students for global citizenship. Ironically, many of the countries that are achieving better results than the United States on international tests, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), are trying to find ways to recreate the intangibles found in American schools prior to our adoption of such a test-centric system. In the words of Yong Zhao of the University of Oregon:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the *misguided policies that threaten democracy, turn American children into robotic test takers, narrow and homogenize our children's education, encourage standardization instead of helping the needy children and stimulating innovation, value testing over teaching, and scapegoat teachers*, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have squandered the opportunities brought about by technology, ignored research evidence, and paid no attention to what the future needs...³

Schools, like students, must be given room to make their own journey to mastery and success. Doing so requires them to develop their talent, culture, execution skills, and use of knowledge to make decisions that will improve the performance of students and the school as a whole. Standards and assessments have their place in identifying what students know, but they should serve as tools for improvement, not as the overarching indicators of success for students or schools. Without changing the extensive focus on testing found in today's accountability systems, we will be unable to preserve the intangible benefits of our system that critics like Zhao argue we are in danger of squandering.

A New Approach to Accountability for a New Era

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) attempts to address some of the flaws of NCLB. While the law still holds states accountable for focusing resources on low-performing schools and subgroups of traditionally underserved students who consistently demonstrate low academic performance, it focuses more on improvement than punishment. It empowers policymakers to take a critical look at all aspects of the school that influence learning by requiring public reporting on outcomes

and opportunities to learn for all students, including per-pupil expenditures, access to rigorous coursework, and measures of school climate. More importantly, the law cedes power back to the states to determine what accountability should look like, requiring each state to establish a statewide accountability system and related school support and improvement activities by the 2017-18 school year (**See pages 9 to 11 for more detail on specific components of ESSA**).

By limiting the federal role in defining accountability systems, ESSA opens the door for states to develop an accountability framework with continuous improvement at its core and the local context as its foundation. This provides an unprecedented opportunity to move beyond the NCLB-era approach to accountability that, in too many cases, created a compliance culture of blame and an inequitable system of winners and losers.

To create an accountability system that actually sparks student and school improvement, states need to move beyond limited or arbitrary measures of student learning to rate schools and impose punitive measures—measures that rarely helped schools improve during the NCLB era. To ensure that accountability doesn't impede improvement, each state needs to find the right mix of measures that come together to tell a holistic story about how schools and their students are performing—and those measures must provide enough meaningful information to help states plan and implement appropriate and targeted supports.

In the words of Linda Darling-Hammond at Stanford University:

“If the goal of an accountability system is to improve education, it must raise expectations not only for individual schools but for the functioning of the system as a whole—and trigger the intelligent investments and change strategies that make it possible to achieve these expectations...”⁴

“ESSA opens the door for states to develop an accountability framework with continuous improvement at its core and the local context as its foundation.”

An accountability system must be much more than setting expectations. It must establish the processes and conditions to reach such expectations. Put another way, if as a nation we are serious about achieving success for every learner, we must create systems that are responsive to the personal journey every learner experiences. We need accountability systems that do not forestall improvements in school quality, teacher effectiveness, and student learning but rather guide, support, and ensure continuous improvement.

These changes are in sync with the views of the public, state leaders, and educators. People want their schools—students and school personnel—to be assessed fairly and comprehensively, and for such assessments to include a broad measure of indicators. With public concerns about the amount of time students spend taking achievement tests, the quality of those tests, and the ways in which they are used to evaluate teachers, administrators, and schools, Americans have become increasingly worried that their public schools focus too narrowly on tested subjects and grades; spend too much time on testing and test preparation; and spend too little time teaching interesting, relevant content and higher order skills.

Moreover, while Americans generally support the idea that schools, students, teachers, and administrators should be assessed regularly and held accountable for their performance, they worry that existing accountability systems assess performance in ways that are often limited, inaccurate, and unfair. ESSA offers an opportunity to address these concerns and improve accountability at all levels, but the road ahead is not unambiguous.

Moving to a Next-Generation Accountability System

Because ESSA offers states flexibility without imposing set structures, absent deliberate and intentional action, it is entirely possible that we may wind up where we began—with the same kinds of NCLB-era accountability systems that do nothing to create sustainable change and institutional improvement in our nation's classrooms, schools or districts. Expedience should not lead us to recreate what we had or choose indicators based on what is easiest to measure. We need to create a system that gathers information about all aspects of what

schools do (from teaching and learning to resource allocation to governance), reveals root causes of underperformance, and reflects the relationships between the strategies or actions that are implemented and the results they achieve. By developing information systems and feedback structures that identify strengths and weaknesses within schools and districts across these areas, states can set the stage not only for identifying what is working but also for changing educator practice where it matters most—at the classroom level.

Broadening accountability systems in this way is the practical means by which states can raise expectations for student learning beyond the basic reading and math skills existing achievement tests emphasize. But without rethinking the overall purpose for such a system, even better, richer assessments and data collection will leave many important questions unanswered. State monitoring of academic scores and measures are merely illusory indicators that are too easily manipulated to create a false image of success. An accountability system designed to have sustained impact must look at the factors that lead to success or are impeding the improvement efforts so that successful strategies may be further scaled and failing approaches may be modified or abandoned.

For example, how engaged are students in their learning? What is the informal culture and climate of the school, and how does it affect student learning and engagement? What are school leaders doing to build the morale of students, teachers, and staff? What kinds of activities are students asked to do in the classroom, and how well do those activities align with the intended curriculum? How well are school initiatives being implemented? What does the school do to support its lowest-performing students and keep all students engaged? Is there over-representation of any student group in the most advanced courses or in remedial courses? How are teachers hired, given their teaching assignments, and supported in their early years? What does the school do to ensure that teachers have meaningful opportunities for ongoing professional development? How are textbooks and other classroom materials selected? How wisely does a given school or district allocate its resources? Are system resources equitably distributed? How active are parents in school governance? What is the school's reputation in the larger community?

Such questions are not addressed by achievement tests or answered by looking at graduation rates. However, they speak volumes about a school's performance and its capacity to empower and engage the entire school community, and they invite the analysis and discussion that is absolutely critical to the success of any school improvement effort. No state, and very few schools or districts, have the capacity to follow up on such questions, find answers, and share the implications with local educators. Looking to the continuous improvement movement that has become prevalent in a wide range of fields provides a potential road map for states seeking to deepen their accountability systems.

Continuous Improvement and Accountability

Organizational leaders from nearly every sector have been using continuous improvement models and improvement science for years to improve products, services, and processes. These efforts gain power—and greater efficiencies and improved performance—through the ongoing and continuous examination of performance, problem identification, design change, and ongoing review that are all key components of the continuous improvement cycle.

Though continuous improvement processes are not new in education practice, they are relatively new in the state policy arena. In the past, state-level strategies for improving educational outcomes at the school and system levels were driven by federal and state requirements and centered largely on the development of one or more annual “improvement plans” that were used to chart a course of action and investment. Statewide systems of school improvement and support were focused largely on compliance and sanctions based on bald, end-of-year data that provided little evidence of how results were achieved and moreover, were not useful for making decisions at the school and system levels. Plans were typically long documents with a focus on compliance and a goal structure with unrealistically short timelines. To be effective, improvement plans and expectations must be concise, span school years not school months, and set the

path. Improvement efforts that have a strong impact on student learning show an understanding of the nuisances of the journey. We must embrace that and move from a focus on the structure of the plan to the capacity to execute the plan.

Embedded, systemic continuous improvement is based on multiple sources of evidence. It focuses on what is happening across the many functions of schools and systems that ultimately affect student outcomes, including teaching and learning, resource allocation, school climate and culture, governance, and management. Information is used to make immediate changes and develop long- and short-term plans that are continually adjusted by the communities within schools and districts.

Accountability for continuous improvement enables all actors and stakeholders to know at all times what affects the culture of the system, the talent it musters, its ability to execute what it wants to accomplish, and the extent to which knowledge is used to strengthen performance (*See page 11*). This information is rich in context and connects to outcomes across all aspects of what schools do.

The goal of a continuous improvement accountability system is to leverage multiple inputs and processes to achieve desired outcomes. There always will be room for improvement, but the following success criteria can serve as a guide for system development. A system is considered effective when:

- Various processes and components of the system are connected and aligned so that they work together as part of a complex whole in support of a common purpose.
- System improvements are driven by a process of continuous measurement and feedback with a focus on collecting and sharing data that informs and transforms.
- System actors understand and engage each other and the system successfully.
- System outputs are of the desired quality and produced within the desired time frame.

Within schools, districts, and systems, this approach translates to a system that:

1. **Acknowledges and adapts** to the realities, complexities, and uniqueness of schooling.
2. **Employs a systemic approach to actively assess, monitor, and improve** at all levels with regard to key education factors and high-quality standards.
3. **Ensures a holistic understanding of education quality through myriad reliable data and pieces of information**, and uses these data to continuously drive and evaluate improvement actions and support services.
4. **Provides transparency and accountability** through a valid multi-metric, non-punitive representation of data and information.
5. **Identifies, acknowledges, and engages** all stakeholders.
6. **Provides constant and consistent reinforcement, guidance, and accountability** of all stakeholders and factors toward a shared vision.

In a recent book chapter, Jennifer O’Day of the American Institutes of Research and Marshall Smith—a senior fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching who served as a key advisor at the Department of Education during three administrations— summarizes what the research literature says continuous improvement does and how it differs from recent approaches to accountability. In “Quality and Equity in American Education: Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions,” the authors write that continuous improvement is focused on system outcomes for a defined population of beneficiaries and the processes that lead to those results. Continuous improvement sees variation in performance (including “failure”) as an opportunity for improvement and learning and takes a system perspective, recognizing that systems are designed to get the results they produce. In other words, if you want to change the results, you have to change the system. Unlike recent policy changes, continuous improvement is based on evidence that includes outcomes, processes, and resources, and embeds measurement into the day-to-day work of the system and its participants. Typically, continuous improvement efforts involve a coherent methodology and processes, such as the Plan-Do-

Study-Act (PDSA) cycle used by engineers.⁵ The authors also identify four ways in which CI differs from typical approaches to accountability used by state education systems. Continuous improvement does the following:

1. **Focuses on root causes, not just outcomes.** Rather than focus exclusively on collecting and analyzing data on student outcomes without information about what happens in the system to produce those outcomes, CI provides detailed information about particular practices to identify important connections between actions and results. By understanding root causes, educators are able to assess the true impact of their actions in order to change what they do to alter the outcomes.
2. **Sees failure as a means to improve, not a reason to assign blame or sanctions.** Rather than seeing failure as an opportunity for blame and negative consequences, CI uses failure as a means to identify needed assistance and learning. In CI, Smith and O’Day note, “Mistakes and failures are expected; they are both the basis for identifying the focal problem of practice and are opportunities for collective learning about how to make things better.”
3. **Enables informed decision-making based on rich context and evidence.** Rather than mandate solutions about what should be done when something fails without considering what caused the problem or the strength of the evidence, continuous improvement approaches allow educators to make decisions based on context that enables those within the system to understand which solutions are likely to work for whom and under what conditions.
4. **Places the source of accountability and decisions about action for improvement within the system.** Rather than placing the source of accountability far from the district and school and not allowing local actors to set goals and identify solutions to problems, the main source of accountability in a continuous improvement approach resides within the system—with key players within the organization focused on the practices and feedback loops they have put in place.⁶

What a Continuous Improvement Accountability System Needs to Do

Building an accountability system based on this approach requires state education agencies (SEAs) to start with a vision of what a successful education system looks like and how it performs. As described in more detail later in this paper, this vision is informed by the best thinking about what students need to know and what schools need to do to ensure that all students are college- and/or career-ready.

Accountability systems should be designed to emphasize equilibrium, balancing school responsibility to do what states require with state responsibility to provide needed resources and support in schools.⁷

An accountability system also needs to recognize that schools are multifaceted organizations, shaped by the interplay of any number of actors (including teachers, administrators, students, parents, policymakers, and others) and all kinds of in- and out-of-school variables (from instructional quality to curriculum design, leadership, scheduling, budgetary decisions, state policies, community engagement, neighborhood violence, economic changes, etc.). In short, state accountability policies must be based on the recognition that every school is a complex ecosystem. We have learned that, in education, piecemeal and one-size-fits-all reforms never work. School improvement efforts cannot succeed unless they are guided by a nuanced understanding of the subtle ways in which that system's many parts fit together.

In a continuous improvement system, data, test scores, and outcomes are used as evidence of performance but are not goals for the system or a main driver of accountability. That is because the information is not actionable, as it does not provide adequate evidence required to make improvements. Moreover, when benchmarks become goals, it is too easy for states to either change the targets or cut scores for success, and then declare victory without any meaningful change in the system.

Today, SEAs need to rethink the purpose of accountability. In fact, "victory" in a continuously improving system is the ability

of leaders and educators in all schools to identify and remedy their blind spots and make regular changes in how they work based on constant feedback on performance that increases the likelihood of school and student success.

An accountability system based on continuous improvement changes reporting from a compliance activity to a process that enables positive change at a local level. It is important for all districts and schools to receive comprehensive feedback and learn what they do well or do poorly. Positive results reaffirm for schools what they are doing well and enable educators to build on their good work and do better. Negative feedback based on real evidence makes it easier for superintendents and principals to identify the causes of under performance and justify the need for improvement in those areas and push leadership to provide more consistency, clarity, and coherence around school improvement.

Reporting on and analyzing a broad range of indicators identify where revised resource allocation or targeted programs, such as support for new teachers and professional development, might make a difference. These actions provide opportunities for districts to update their processes and procedures to ensure better coherence across the system; help formalize baseline expectations around key processes; and force districts and their schools to pay more attention to every aspect of what they do.

The continuous improvement process not only shows educators where their schools stand, but also empowers them to move forward. It forces all schools to improve, including those whose high test scores mask complacency. It also can address what happens to a school or district that is performing at a high level but begins to drift. In these cases, we often discover that student engagement has plummeted, achievement has tailed off, teacher morale has declined or leadership has faltered.

And it is not just a process that begins and ends once a year. The continuous improvement process helps schools take continuous action as enrollments grow and shrink, teachers come and go, curricula change, technology evolves, and educational standards rise. Any or all of those factors may demand that a school or district adjust, rethinking the policies and practices that worked so well in the past.

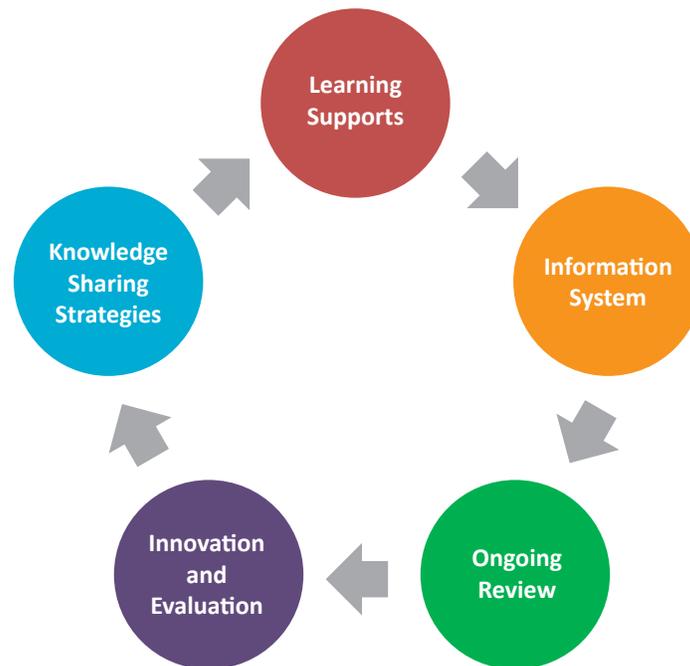
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What a Continuously Improving System Looks Like

Linda Darling-Hammond, the Stanford scholar, and David Plank of Policy Analysis for California Education have created a conceptual model to depict the key features of a continuously improving system based on changes in California that have emerged following the introduction of a new school finance system and continuous improvement accountability during the past few years. Key features include:

- **Learning supports** (materials and professional development) for the continuous improvement of curriculum, teaching, assessment and student support strategies;
- **Information systems** for keeping track of what schools and districts are doing and to what effect;
- **Ongoing review** of school and district efforts and outcomes, including self-assessment and review by experts and peers;
- **Thoughtful innovation and evaluation**, so teachers, schools, and school districts experiment with promising policies and practices in ways that are a) informed by existing knowledge about those practices, b) designed to support serious evaluation of their implementation challenges and effects, and c) intended to support broader adoption of successful approaches and abandonment of unsuccessful ones;
- **Knowledge dissemination strategies** (through a central repository of research and exemplars, convenings, networks, and leveraged supports) so that successful practices become widely known and supported in their wider adoption/adaptation.

ELEMENTS OF A CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING SYSTEM



Source: Darling-Hammond and Plank, Supporting Continuous Improvement in California's Education System⁸

ESSA Provides Opportunities to Introduce Continuous Improvement Accountability

The new federal law gives states increased flexibility, greater local control, and the ability to innovate and design local policies and systems that ensure the success of all students. This flexibility gives SEAs room to set their own goals and introduce CI accountability. However, SEAs will need to be decisive about doing so, because the law provides only the most basic framework for what states need to do.

In state accountability plans that must be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education for review, SEAs also can expand on the list of required school performance indicators, focusing not just on academic indicators but also incorporating a broad range of other measures that provide actionable information that schools can use to improve all dimensions of quality and assess their progress over time. There are general guidelines but no hard and fast rules about how SEAs are to work with school districts to determine what will happen with chronically low-performing schools.

Following is a brief analysis of some key provisions of the law:

STANDARDS

Under Title I, ESSA continues the NCLB requirement that states have in place academic content and achievement standards in reading or language arts, mathematics, and science. These must be the same standards for all public school students in the state and, unlike under NCLB, must align with the entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the state's system of public higher education, as well as with applicable state career and technical education standards. As under NCLB, the achievement standards must define at least three levels of achievement.

States also must have in place English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards (derived from the domains of speaking, listening, reading and writing) for English Learners (ELs) that are aligned with their academic standards. This is largely a restatement of similar language that was in Title III of the previous law, though the ELP Standards now must address the different English

proficiency levels of ELs, as opposed to the single definition of proficiency permitted under NCLB. It is important to note that under ESSA all the standards, assessments, and accountability for ELs is housed under Title I, not Title III. This change is a significant shift from previous law.

ASSESSMENTS

While testing provisions still include annual testing and disaggregating data in reading and language arts in grades 3-8, and one-time testing in reading and language arts in high school, the law also allows states to use federal resources to improve tests and experiment with performance-based assessments, as well as limit the number of tests and amount of time for testing. Also, states can elect to administer a series of tests throughout the year that aggregate to an annual test rather than an end-of-year summative test. States must provide for an annual assessment of English proficiency, aligned with their ELP Standards, for all ELs.

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

In place of NCLB's "adequate yearly progress" provisions, each state must implement a state-designed accountability system that includes long-term goals and annual indicators based on those goals for all students, including student subgroups. The annual indicators must specifically include indicators of students' academic proficiency in reading/language arts and math, as measured through state assessments, rates of high school graduation, one or more academic indicators applicable to elementary and middle schools, ELs' progress in attaining proficiency in English, and at least one school quality or student success indicator.

The two major changes from NCLB are the required inclusion of an English proficiency indicator and the requirement to include at least one school quality or student success indicator. These could include measures of school safety, student engagement, or educator engagement, as well as access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, and other factors that can be measured statewide. There is actually no limit on how many indicators states might include.

LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

SEAs will annually differentiate the progress of their schools using an accountability index or other mechanism that gives “substantial weight” to all indicators but “much greater weight,” in the aggregate, to the achievement indicator, the high school graduation rate, the elementary and middle school other academic indicator, and the EL proficiency indicator.

SEAs are required to identify the lowest-performing five percent of schools in the state that receive Title I funding, all public high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students, and schools where any subgroup of students consistently underperforms. However, rather than punish schools that have significantly underperforming subgroups, states and districts will work with school leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders to target support and improvement. District-approved improvement plans must be based on all indicators in the state plan, and strategies must be evidence-based. Once the plans are approved, their implementation must be monitored by the district. If schools do not meet state-defined criteria after four years of support, the state can take action, including intervening in school-level operations.

ESSA also requires each state to reserve seven percent of its Title I-A allocation to serve schools implementing these kinds of comprehensive and targeted support and improvement plans. Improvement plans are required to identify and address resource gaps and also require state monitoring of local spending.

TEACHER AND LEADER EQUITY

ESSA contains several provisions designed to ensure equitable access to high-quality teachers and school leaders. Under ESSA, Title I State Plans must show that low-income and minority children in Title I schools are not served at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers, and define measures to be used to evaluate and publicly report progress. In addition, states are required to publicly report on this requirement. Furthermore, states are empowered to use Title II set-aside funds to improve equitable access to effective teachers. Additionally, pre-existing (NCLB) Teacher Equity Plans remain in effect for the next school year.

Establishing a State Framework for Continuous Improvement Accountability

Some SEAs may be tempted to do the bare minimum to meet the new requirements, continuing the same testing regime and adding a survey or two here and there to gauge what’s happening in schools. Some states will add a few extra measures but still not go beyond a compliance checklist with some additional accountability. These SEAs may (or may not) earn federal approval, but they are unlikely to improve results.

Instead of modifying or improving on existing systems, states should take this opportunity to acknowledge lessons learned, wipe the slate clean and envision a forward-thinking education system.

DEFINING PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

To map out the parameters of a new system, the visioning process must begin with a clear purpose and direction. This information helps SEAs provide a reference point for innovation and decision-making as the demands and complexities of the system evolve.

While education systems can serve multiple purposes, the most critical is to continuously drive and create improvement so that every learner succeeds. The primary purpose of the education system should not be to simply improve student achievement scores; that is merely one of many system outcomes that should be monitored. Simply monitoring outcomes will never provide clarity for observed trends or create an environment in which the emphasis is not solely on monitoring but on improving the factors and conditions that will improve those outcomes. The purpose and direction individually defined within all levels of a state system do not need to be the same stated purpose and direction. However, the purpose and direction at all levels need to be aligned to accomplish the larger goal of college and/or career readiness for all of our nation’s learners.

Effectively measuring, monitoring, and improving the complex conditions of any system (whether education, healthcare and hospitals, the economy, or the criminal justice system) requires information about a multitude of internal and external factors

and how they change over time. This collection of indicators is benchmarked to determine progress, and/or compared with industry standards or other similar entities as a means of making judgments.

To identify what they need to track to capture the desired qualities of schools and the state education system, SEAs should consider the following steps:

1. **Establish a shared vision of learner success.** Describe what a “successful student” looks like upon exiting the education system in 2030.
2. **Identify the key actors** of the education system who play a role in achieving this vision.
3. **Identify the environments/systems** in which these actors operate.
4. **Determine the core set of factors within these environments/systems that influence the actors** and their ability to achieve the desired vision.
5. **Define the desired level of quality** expected for each of these factors and the criteria by which the level of quality can be determined.
6. **Establish a process for continuous improvement** through which the quality of these factors and the related environments/systems are assessed and improved.
7. **Identify the indicators and outcome measures** that best determine the overall effectiveness of this improvement process.
8. **Develop a system of accountability that leverages these indicator data** over multiple years to highlight successes, identify institutions in need of improvement, and target interventions and support services based on reliable diagnostic data.
9. **Provide transparency and encourage shared ownership of student success** through public reporting of action and outcome measures, as well as qualitative information that accurately characterizes the education system and its effectiveness.

STRATEGIC DATA GATHERING

To deepen understanding of what is happening in schools, SEAs must be sure to capture crucial information about schools and districts across four areas:

- **School culture**, which helps ascertain the school’s underlying expectations, norms, and values; the depth of student engagement and efficacy; teacher and stakeholder engagement; school leadership; the quality of the learning environment; and school safety and student well-being.
- **Talent**, which helps determine the school’s ability to recruit, induct, support, and retain staff and provide opportunities for professional learning and growth. These are often the first things cut by districts.
- **Execution**, which identifies how well schools are implementing plans and strategies; the fidelity to a course of action; what school leaders, superintendents, and SEAs do to ensure plans and strategies are producing results, including monitoring and adapting strategies to consistently improve; and how effectively districts and schools allocate resources to meet identified needs and to achieve desired results.
- **Knowledge**, which determines what schools and districts do with the wealth of data that they have and whether they actually are using it to improve results; whether the information is used broadly and shared; and the extent to which it is useful for improvement. Schools also need to determine when information can be made available, as continuous formative information can ensure that educators can improve their practice, tailor learning for individual students and address gaps in student skills knowledge in real time.

SEAs can ensure that school and district understanding of success in each of these areas is based on a rich store of local data—the kind that does not show up on test scores—by ensuring that schools and districts have simple tools, surveys, observation protocols, and information gathering systems to measure school health in these categories.

Consider, for example, the way in which a school or district must support the development of its students in ways not identified by test scores, but that directly impact student learning and development. Several districts have identified the vital role that local school or district bus drivers play in the success of children facing the challenges of poverty. If the bus drivers are not showing up for work on time or have absences that cause the buses to be delayed, students may not arrive in time to get their school-provided breakfast. The lack of proper nutrition has been shown to materially impact student academic performance.

Similarly, schools may think that teachers are improving in engaging students in classroom debate or dialogue thanks to a new approach to reading instruction being used across the curriculum. But observations might reveal that students rarely are encouraged to write reports based on topics they choose or have little opportunity to show personal efficacy in taking responsibility for directing their own learning. These observations would allow the school to adapt its approach rather than wait for the data to be collected, reviewed, and disseminated after testing.

IDENTIFYING APPROPRIATE MEASURES

To address the broader terms of ESSA, SEAs must choose the types of additional measures it will use. These indicators should include the right metrics to measure what matters most in improving performance. In considering school quality factors, the so-called “non-academic” factors materially impact academic success, and we should be looking at how well educational institutions identify and address those factors. These non-academic factors include such areas as culture, effectiveness of teaching and learning, quality of leadership, student engagement, and resource allocation. These pieces are just as important as proficiency on tests and graduation rates.

VARIATIONS OF EXTERNAL REVIEW

Several states have gone beyond this level of information gathering and planning to help schools better understand their situations and make more informed decisions about improvement. While accreditation in the United States and

inspectorate models in other nations have been criticized for focusing too much on compliance, external review builds on the best of these approaches. As Marc Tucker describes it:

The state would take responsibility for using the data generated by this system to identify schools whose students appeared to be in danger of falling significantly behind the expected progressions through the state curriculum and schools in which vulnerable groups of children were falling significantly behind. Schools thus identified would be scheduled by teams of experts trained and assembled for this purpose by the state. The expert teams would be charged with identifying the problems in the school and with producing recommendations for improving school performance through actions carried out by school faculty, the school district, the community, and state assistance teams.⁹

Most states do not currently have the capacity to implement this type of system with any fidelity, but we have seen modified versions work well in a number of states. For example, Kentucky voluntarily underwent an external diagnostic review of its lowest-performing schools. The review process takes into consideration all aspects of school performance—from instructional quality to curriculum design, leadership capacity, teacher morale, student advising and community engagement—that influence learning.

Kentucky’s approach to accountability is not to render a single verdict on the school’s performance overall but to provide information about its strengths and weaknesses, so that teachers and administrators can identify priorities for improvement. Kentucky’s diagnostic reviews account for 20 percent of a school’s score in the state’s rating system. Every low-performing school undergoes external evaluation with teams of experts who visit the school and monitor performance and develop improvement plans based on actual needs identified in the evaluation. The approach has provided comprehensive and reliable data to meet federal and state requirements, make informed decisions, and guide and validate its ongoing work in achieving college and career readiness, according to state officials.

Michigan introduced a more streamlined approach to continuous improvement and the monitoring of progress as part of its accountability system. Its approach requires schools to undergo school-based audits that diagnose and identify schools' greatest challenges with a degree of specificity that allows for planning and implementation of targeted strategies for improvement alongside a comprehensive web-based monitoring system.

These types of approaches have the potential to be scaled up in many other states, with outside support from educational improvement organizations and institutions that have the capacity and analytical tools that most states lack.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS

As part of the improvement process, SEAs might deploy specialized turnaround intervention teams to support low-performing schools and their students. Arizona, for example, uses such teams as part of a structured, comprehensive support system for low-performing schools in the state. The teams—overseen by regional directors—provide technical assistance, professional development, progress monitoring, and compliance monitoring.¹⁰

IMPORTANCE OF FORMATIVE REVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

SEAs also should include formative assessments in their plans to allow for corrective student and school-level actions over time. It's not helpful to have a single test score on a single day that in May results in a pass or fail for a student, teacher, or institution, because the results may not be an accurate reflection of performance and will come too late to drive meaningful changes over the course of a year. SEAs should look at testing not as a one-time event, but as a means to look at student achievement over a multi-year period. Under a CI framework, interim assessments offer real-time data that can drive supports and ultimately impact results and growth.

“Under a Continuous Improvement framework, interim assessments offer real-time data that can drive supports and ultimately impact results and growth.”

California's Accountability System Shows the Way

California's CI accountability system brings many of these approaches together. It combines multiple measures of performance and a comprehensive framework for technical assistance/intervention with a broad use of data to identify the success of its demographic subgroups.

Not long ago, California used test scores as a single measure to identify progress, but policymakers sought to eliminate the state's Academic Performance Index (API) system. When lawmakers adopted a new funding system, the state contracted with a research organization to develop new measures and rubrics. These are scheduled to be unveiled this year, though California leaders are still not clear what growth measures ought to look like, and will make the new measures advisory to districts.

The system is embedded in part in California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that allocates all funds based on pupil needs. Weightings are based on a measure of poverty, language status, and foster care status. The state requires districts to provide, develop, and adopt—with parent and community involvement—an accountability plan that identifies goals and measures of progress across indicators of both opportunities and outcomes. Local districts can add their own indicators to those that are state required. Indicators must include:

- Student achievement: State tests and other assessments (e.g., AP or IB tests, English proficiency)
- Student persistence and graduation
- Student inclusion (suspension and expulsion rates)
- College and career-readiness indicators (access to and completion of curriculum pathways)
- The availability of qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and necessary materials
- Student access to a broad curriculum, including the core subjects (including science and technology), the arts, and physical education
- Evidence of parent participation and opportunities for input.¹¹

In addition, ten school districts in the state have used NCLB waivers to establish their own CI accountability system. The districts—known as CORE districts—including many of the state’s largest, are educating more than one million students, or one-fifth of California’s entire student population. The districts have added additional measures of social and emotional learning and school climate that include chronic absenteeism, disproportionate special education identification, and student climate surveys.

The districts—which include the Clovis, Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Sanger, and Santa Ana school districts—partnered with Stanford University’s John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, the state school administrators organization, EdTrust West, WestEd, and other groups, to develop indicators of performance that have met key criteria and have been deemed reliable, valuable, and reasonably stable. In fact, a study released in March 2016 by Martin R. West of the Brookings Institution, examined the suitability of the Core Districts’ measures of four social-emotional skills. The study was based on the 2014-15 field test involving more than 450,000 students in grades 3-12. Starting this year, information from these measures will be publicly reported and is expected to be a small part (eight percent) of performance rating scores. The results are promising:

“Analysis of data from the CORE field test indicates that the scales used to measure student skills demonstrate strong reliability and are positively correlated with key indicators of academic performance and behavior, both across and within schools. These findings provide a broadly encouraging view of the potential for self-reports of social-emotional skills as an input into its system for evaluating school performance. However, they do not address how self-report measures of social-emotional skills would perform in a high-stakes setting – or even with the modest weight that will be attached to them within CORE. The data currently being gathered by CORE provide a unique opportunity for researchers to study this question and others related to the role of schools in developing student skills and the design of educational accountability systems.”¹²

Changing the Role of the School Education Agency (SEA)

Continuous improvement provides the carrot of better decision-making and removes the stick of school ratings based only on a single factor. The approach recognizes that changes need to be developed within the system that seeks to improve itself by using evidence to pinpoint what must happen in the areas of need identified through the continuous improvement process.

America must be courageous and create a system of accountability that is not punitive but instead is learner centric and focused on continuous improvement. In this system, failure is an opportunity for learning and collaboration. Outside forces do not dictate action. Local improvement measures (about school culture, talent, execution, and knowledge) suggest what needs to be done. Implementation of improvements leads to further knowledge, increases capacity building and peer learning, and improves the capability of the school to execute its plans.

Encouraging and supporting districts and schools to own the evidence for their success creates an opportunity for states to create a self-innovating system that helps schools become what we aspire for them to be—dynamic learning centers that help all talent rise regardless of where learners start. These schools, in the words of former Scarsdale, New York, superintendent Michael McGill, a professor at Bank Street College, become places where everyone in the community is part of what he calls a “collective commitment to quality.”

According to McGill, “Community, parents, motivated students, and professionals have a common sense of purpose and a belief in the value of the schools. Each is an essential part of a self-perpetuating cycle of achievement. The culture is what leads a Scarsdale freshman to say, ‘It’s cool to be smart here.’ ”

The self-perpetuating cycle is possible, McGill notes, because leaders do the right thing for students and “high expectations [are] grounded in teachers’ own scholarship, the demands of a rich curriculum, assessments that get at ‘un-measurables’ like critical thinking, and a high international standard of performance.”¹³

For the American education system and its schools to ensure that continual improvement can flourish, the role of the SEA must change. As the SEA builds out an informative feedback system that helps educators and local leaders act on what they learn to

improve their schools, the SEA's role in working with districts will no longer be to serve as good or bad cop (and parole officer), but to become true agents for improvement, providing needed technical assistance, coaching, and monitoring.

Just as parents must give more autonomy to children as they mature, SEAs can loosen the reins on schools. The SEA's most important role is to empower local systems to make improvements. Thus, the accountability framework must be shaped in partnership with local educators and communities who are empowered to address their unique challenges.

While ESSA now gives greater authority to states, it will only lead to improvement if states yield some of their power to districts and schools to make needed changes in their buildings. The change begins with loosening the grip that single measures have on our education systems. Just as we encourage students to provide multiple points of evidence to back up their conclusions, we need to ensure that schools have access to multiple sources of relevant data needed to make and sustain progress. States can help by providing a consistent way of measuring success that provides the ability to cross-reference and cross-validate evidence to draw a realistic picture—a 360 degree view or CAT scan to operate on the system. With that information it becomes clear what needs to happen to obtain goals.

With this approach, qualitative information can be as useful as quantitative data. We have learned that quantitative measures alone can be easily manipulated. It is too easy for states to change their targets after a few years. At times, an excess focus on quantitative measures also has encouraged cheating and gaming the system. Raw test scores may be intuitive to economists, but educators need additional qualitative information to understand how well they are doing and where they need to go. If SEAs set up the system correctly, alignment between qualitative and quantitative data will provide the true picture of what is happening—including shining a light into areas where no one is currently looking and where nobody has truly wanted to look.

The potential for cost savings is significant. If states increase school performance across the board, they will no longer have to pay millions of dollars to hire takeover specialists or search for the rare principal who can perform miracles with the lowest-performing schools.

Partner organizations and experts can help. School improvement and research organizations are devising new performance indicators for states and are helping implement comprehensive approaches to track school performance. Scholars are studying what constitutes effective systems for equity and improvement. There is a growing knowledge and technical assistance base that makes the transition to a new type of accountability less a risk and more of a reward.

We return to a point made at the beginning of the report: If we are serious about achieving success for every child, we must create systems that are responsive to the personal journey every child endures to achieve such success.

For more than 15 years, America has tried rigid systems of high-stakes testing to encourage and demand improvements in school quality, teacher effectiveness and student learning. Such systems have fallen woefully short of achieving desired improvements in these areas. If we are committed to every child's success, we must create accountability systems that guide, support and ensure continuous improvement. The learning process for every school, like every child, is a personalized journey of continuous improvement.

A Call to Action

The groundswell of support for change that empowers local educators and communities is real. SEAs and state leaders can tap into that current by working closely with national experts and education leaders, as well as educators across the state, parents, and community leaders, to discuss and plan for a system that tilts the focus of accountability in this new direction.

SEAs should begin the conversation about what the new approach to accountability should entail. By framing CI accountability as a desired long-term strategy that can be built together over time, SEAs can use the ESSA as a framework to inject new ideas, encourage collaboration, and jointly develop new measures and indicators with the input from key stakeholders throughout the state.

The suggestions on the following page provide ideas about how key audiences can be engaged in this effort.

What Key Leaders and Stakeholders Can Do

STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES AND LEGISLATORS

- **Avoid settling** for what didn't work in the past. Rather than tweak the old system, view ESSA as an opportunity to develop a modern system of accountability that drives continuous improvement.
- **Seek help** from expert advisors and organizations to think through your strategy and plan and develop new ways of working collaboratively with local districts, schools and stakeholders.
- **Get the feedback** of school leaders across the state about their interest in moving toward this type of system, and, if they are willing to work at it, give them room to innovate, experiment, and put the system to the test.
- **Study** states such as California and its CORE districts, Kentucky and Michigan that have made changes to introduce CI accountability using NCLB waivers. Talk to state leaders who are doing this, ask why and what results they have had so far.
- **Take time to think** through key elements of the CI approach that might work given your state's unique context.
- **Learn more** about CI accountability implementation, including its benefits and costs. You will find that, if done properly, new measures to track needed information about performance will make a big difference in outcomes and can be implemented for a limited cost statewide, saving the state millions of dollars over a relatively short period of time.

EDUCATORS

- **Learn more** about ESSA requirements and encourage your state not to repeat the mistakes of the past.
- **Advocate** for an accountability system that encompasses all aspects of the learning environment, respects the professional judgment of educators, and seeks broad measures (and broad input) beyond standardized test scores for understanding quality.
- **Speak out** so school leaders and your professional associations/unions know that you and your colleagues will commit to making a continuous improvement system work. Volunteer to study how such a system might work and how the measures and processes would affect your school or district.

STUDENTS

- **Encourage your school, school district and parents to** advocate for tests that have meaning to you, that help you learn better rather than serve as a tool to rate your school and tell the government what you do not know.
- **Stand with educators** who speak out for more sensible solutions that place high stakes on learning about your needs and helping you grow, rather than on tests designed only to determine whether your school or teacher needs to be punished for failure.
- **Be part of your school's improvement effort.** Through surveys, conversations, or other methods of feedback, your teachers and principal can understand more about the quality of instruction and the learning environment and ensure that teachers are teaching you not only "what" to learn but "how" to learn, so that you can spend the rest of your life learning on your own.

COMMUNITY LEADERS AND PARENTS

- **Share concerns** about excessive test-taking by stressing the limited and often punitive impact their use has had on your students, your school, and your community.
- **Emphasize the non-academic factors** that you value in your community's schools, and work collaboratively with local educators to identify ways to better measure them.
- **Stand with educators, lawmakers, and state policymakers** who are working toward more sensible solutions.
- **Inform** state lawmakers that you will not stand for more of the same.

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Dr. Mark A. Elgart serves as the founding President and Chief Executive Officer for AdvancED, the parent organization for the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). Under his leadership, AdvancED is recognized as a leader in achieving educational quality. AdvancED drives education improvement through accreditation, research and innovation, policy and advocacy, and technology serving over 34,000 institutions and 20 million students worldwide. Elgart's leadership has positioned AdvancED as a leader in revolutionizing and modernizing education worldwide while working to establish a learner-centric education system with the goal of preparing every student for college, career and citizenship. Elgart serves on the Board of Directors of the Knowledge Alliance and Measured Progress and is a National Advisor for Learning Forward. Elgart also represents AdvancED as a lead business partner with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).



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