

Bridging Divides: Colorado's School Accountability Task Force

In an era when contention and division seem the norm, Colorado education leaders from across the state- and representing a wide range of viewpoints- have come together to agree on recommendations to improve how the state holds districts and schools accountable for serving all students. Education First had the privilege to facilitate this unique and powerful group: a task force appointed by elected Democrats and Republicans, each bringing their perspectives and passions to the table.

In the early days of this task force, at least one observer criticized the Task Force as a “behemoth” and said the process “has been unable to overcome gaping philosophical differences.”¹ Yet it turns out that because of these different viewpoints--and not despite them--the task force has achieved something remarkable—a unanimous final report with 30 actionable recommendations submitted to the Education Committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Governor, the State Board, the Commissioner of Education, and the Department of Education.

A Task Force with a Mission

The Colorado General Assembly created the Accountability, Accreditation, Student Performance and Resource Inequity Task Force through H.B. 23-1241 “to study academic opportunities, inequities, promising practices in schools, and improvements to the accountability and accreditation system.”²

To address the issue's complexities, 26 task force members were appointed, including educators, policymakers, community leaders, charter advocates, public school superintendents, parent representatives, teachers and education advocates. Representatives from both large and small systems proved to be critical. The group's representation was intentional, reflecting the vast array of voices affected by the accountability system.

This Task Force engaged in 16 full-day meetings and 27 additional small group meetings to study elements of the accountability system and conducted stakeholder engagements. It completed its work between August 2023 and November 2024.

¹ Chu, Dale. Thomas B. Fordham Institute: “[Colorado’s Accountability Fiasco](#).” February 2024.

² [Colorado General Assembly](#) (2023).

The Task Force began their work by focusing on the current opportunities and inequities they have seen or experienced in the schools and districts. A strong belief emerged through this process: the accountability system alone cannot advance academic opportunities or prevent academic inequities. The goal for this task force, however, was to strengthen a system that could allow schools and districts that are navigating systemic challenges and resource inequities to earn a rating that reflects the outcomes they are producing that are independent of the demographics of students they serve.

The recommendations are guided by research and the rich expertise of this Task Force. While some recommendations may require a nuanced understanding of the state's accountability system, the major takeaways should be:

- Colorado's accountability system, at both the district and school level, must account equitably for all students;
- Accountability must be administered with consistency, fidelity, and reliable comparability;
- Disaggregated student-level data is essential to identify and address opportunity gaps;
- The accountability system should be a roadmap for improvements across all schools, but particularly in service of our most historically underserved students;
- The accountability system must be transparent when reporting to all stakeholders and
- Growth is crucial to how schools and districts meet individual student needs.

The task force had a clear mission: to review and make recommendations to enhance Colorado's education accountability system, building on opportunities and working to eliminate inequities. The role and effectiveness of states' accountability systems have long been debated. While some states focus on exploring new measures in their accountability system, Colorado is also working to ensure that the components and measures included in its legacy accountability system are working as intended.

From the outset, the Education First facilitators assumed that achieving consensus among 26 people coming together to tackle a complex problem would be challenging. Task force members shared their beliefs that others on the task force had agendas with which they strongly disagreed. We heard concerns that some people might push to eliminate all testing. We heard fears that people would want to scrap the entire accountability system and start over. We heard concerns that the Task Force might get so mired in ideological differences in accountability systems that no real progress would be made.

As time passed, we realized these fears and assumptions were largely unfounded. Traditional debates often lead to entrenched positions, but Education First approached the facilitation of this task force differently. Instead of framing discussions as a choice between opposing viewpoints, we fostered an environment where iterative feedback was not only encouraged but essential. This approach allowed Task Force members to revisit and refine proposals in real-time, creating a living document that evolved with the input of every member and the stakeholders they represented.

Building Consensus

Coloradans want a transparent, trustworthy and fair system, especially when decisions about resources and supports are involved. Education First kept the group focused on the students of Colorado, encouraging members to share concrete information and stories about what was happening in schools and districts due to the state's accountability system—along with concrete solutions for how to improve it. The process was one of continuous dialogue. Each task force member was invited to share insights, concerns, and suggestions. Instead of dismissing ideas that didn't align with their views, participants agreed to listen to one another. They worked to adjust language, find places to compromise, and ultimately modify their proposals to gain consensus. Education First created structures that allowed the Task Force to work in small groups, where everyone was informed and invited to give feedback to each group multiple times throughout the process. The iterative nature of our discussions meant that there were limited opportunities for anyone to take a firm stance in favor of or against any particular idea raised. Instead, we focused on finding common ground. This was not about compromising to the lowest common denominator; instead, the group agreed to build a system that would work for everyone. By continually revising the recommendations based on the feedback received, the Task Force continued to improve their work. Because the end goal was consensus, everyone worked hard to listen carefully to concerns and revise their ideas to satisfy everyone.

The process also involved meaningful stakeholder feedback about some of the unintentional consequences of the current system design. Task Force members created multiple spaces for feedback during and outside of Task Force meetings through stakeholder focus groups, stakeholder interviews and a statewide survey. Hearing directly from the people most affected by the accountability system brought real-life experiences into the room. For example, a superintendent from a district that is rated highly on the accountability system shared with the Task Force that the current system, as it is designed, allows their district to receive awards and accolades when they do not meet the needs of groups of students such as students of color, English learners or students with disabilities. Because those student numbers are small, their scores get swallowed up by the majority. This did not align with this Task Force's beliefs about equity.

Another superintendent pointed out that because Colorado allows families to opt their children out of taking the federally required assessments, state results are based upon only those students who took the test, giving misleading information about how a school or district is performing.

What has emerged from this consultative process is a set of recommendations that genuinely reflect the group's collective wisdom. Each recommendation was carefully crafted to balance what each stakeholder sees as the needs and priorities to improve teaching and learning, ensuring that the final report was something that everyone could stand behind.

Real Solutions to Real Problems

The task force's final report is a testament to what can be achieved when people with different perspectives come together with a shared goal. It outlines solutions for Colorado's accountability system that would make it more fair, transparent, and effective—one that holds schools accountable while also providing them with the support they need to succeed.

The final report recommends 30 concrete actions for the legislature to consider and suggestions for multiple areas for further study. The recommendations and further study categories include framework changes, state summative assessment, public reporting and engagement, continuous improvement processes, and accreditation.

This group presents these recommendations with pride and optimism. The process we undertook was not easy, but it was necessary. By prioritizing collaboration over confrontation, we produced a report that has the potential to drive meaningful improvement in Colorado's education system.

Moving Forward

Education First is committed to supporting Colorado as it implements these recommendations. The collaborative approach we facilitated serves as a model for other states facing similar challenges. Prioritizing dialogue and iterative feedback dissolves division and leads to solutions that work for everyone.

Ultimately, this task force demonstrated that even when we seem polarized, we can reach a consensus on complex topics. The journey was as important as the destination, and the relationships built during this process will serve as the foundation for continued collaboration in the future, leading to the implementation of these recommendations.