



Education First's

Elements of Effective Accountability Systems

January 2025

TRANSPARENT

Accountability systems establish, measure and report a common set of expectations for student, school, school district and state education system performance. Accountability systems are used by students, parents, teachers, system leaders, policymakers and the public to understand how students and systems are performing, and to plan next steps to support continuous improvement. What these expectations are, why they matter and how they are being measured must be clear to all actors so that they can take the right next steps. For example, most accountability systems include multiple indicators of performance, such as academic proficiency, academic growth, graduation rates and chronic absenteeism. School and district ratings that are created as a result of such multiple indicators should be understandable, clear and concise, providing clarity on how the data roll up into a single summative rating. Accountability systems also should prioritize clear communication through powerful data visualizations, easy navigation and clear language. Importantly, accountability systems should call attention to how schools are serving Black, Brown and indigenous students, as well as students experiencing poverty, multilingual learners and students with disabilities. This requires disaggregating not only data related to outcomes and performance, but also data related to school and district learning conditions.

ROBUST

Experience from over 20 years of local and state accountability system design and implementation has shown us that what is measured and valued in accountability systems is what matters most. We should not be surprised that schools focus too much on test preparation when the accountability system emphasizes test scores. Reading, writing, and arithmetic still matter most. But most families do not choose their child's school based solely on test scores. How well schools are serving students—and what is needed to help them improve—depends on a wide range of conditions and outcomes. Accountability systems should collect and make visible academic achievement data (including proficiency, growth and completion), as well as evidence-based indicators that paint a robust picture of the given school's or district's strengths and opportunities for improvement. These indicators of "school conditions" complement academic achievement data and provide insight into what schools need to do to improve student learning and achievement. For example, we recommend including school conditions indicators that research shows are essential to improving learning, such as the retention of skilled teachers who have support to use high-quality instructional materials. Robust systems can value all indicators (achievement and school conditions) while still weighting achievement measures more heavily.

Robust accountability systems may include:

- Multiple and diverse measures of academic achievement, especially those that are correlated with improved life outcomes, including proficiency and growth in core subject areas, enrollment in advanced coursetaking, course and credential completion, high school graduation, credential and degree enrollment and attainment
- Information about a range of school and district conditions that are correlated with student success, such as student engagement and attendance, discipline and suspension rates, school and local climate, teacher qualifications and retention, adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials, access to a well-rounded course of study and parent and family engagement

INCLUSIVE

Schools are ultimately accountable to the students, families and communities they serve. Youth, parents, families and community members are experts in their own experiences and what they need education systems to accomplish for them. Accountability systems are most powerful when communities can use the system to build meaningful learning experiences and improve outcomes for all young people. Positioning communities as partners in learning requires that the people who the system is meant to support are at the table alongside teachers, policy experts, professionals who work with specific populations and education advocates when deciding what is important to capture, how progress should be monitored and how outcomes should be shared. States should create opportunities for many stakeholders from within education and from the community to come together—with structured support, time for learning and process facilitation—to learn about the current

system, engage in respectful dialogue, identify gaps that diminish credibility and offer recommendations and solutions to improve the system. Such an inclusive approach enables more agency and ownership for young people and their families and provides more opportunities for educators in schools and districts to provide true input and feedback in the design and continuous improvement of the state accountability systems. Inclusion should result in a better-designed and more-credible accountability system that has greater support from the people it is intended to help the most.

ACTIONABLE

The theory of action for transparent and robust accountability systems is that stakeholders who are armed with credible data are empowered and enabled to take action to improve student experiences, learning and achievement. This theory of action is often true in schools with good leadership and targeted problems to address. But most chronically low-performing schools that receive little outside help are unlikely to improve. Accountability systems that stop at publishing data and school ratings are information systems, rather than true accountability systems. Accountability systems must directly lead to school improvement processes that balance supports and interventions.

Accountability systems can focus on the highest-priority students who need the most help and on those conditions and experiences that are most likely to improve student outcomes. Under current federal policy, states must identify the lowest-performing schools and they must undertake needs assessments and produce school improvement plans with their district. The themes across the diagnostics are usually consistent—school safety, climate and sense of belonging are often in poor shape for both students and educators; students are several grade levels behind; educators may lack skill, support or will to help students come up to grade level; principals may be ill-equipped to lead instructional improvement; basic needs are unmet; and neighborhood and community assets aren't aligned in support of the school.

Addressing these challenges through supports and interventions is a matter of both money and will. Too few districts and states are directly intervening to address the root causes. States and districts need the authority and will to move principals and teachers out of the building, hire different or additional staff and provide extra outside help to the educators and families in the building. They also need to allocate sufficient federal funding as well as their own state and local funds to meet basic needs, deliver evidence-based interventions for struggling students, purchase high-quality instructional materials and fund job-embedded professional learning for educators.

CREDIBLE

Trust is a fundamental but often undervalued element of effective accountability systems. Many of the stakeholders that accountability systems need to speak to are not deeply entrenched in education. Though state summative assessments typically are the most valid and reliable sources of learning data, their credibility is undermined by how and when the data are shared. If the systems are intended to spur families and educators to act, then test results need to be returned much sooner, in much more useful formats. Public sharing of school, district and state performance also must happen much faster. Despite the quality of state assessments, it's little wonder that families place less value than ever before on state test scores when the score reports are slow to arrive, confusing and lacking insights on what to do next. Systems that include additional school conditions also are more credible to families and the public who don't believe a single test score is the only measure that matters.