Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm

By Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, and Linda Pittenger

Why Rethink Accountability?

As states across the country are enacting new college- and career-ready standards, many are seeking to create more aligned systems of assessment and accountability that can assure every child access to the opportunities for deeper learning anticipated by these new standards, so they can meet the challenges of a world in which both knowledge and tools for learning are changing rapidly.

While the evolution of federal policy has contributed to advances over the last two decades — in particular, the focus on learning standards begun in the Clinton administration and the expectation that "every child counts" under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) — it is clear that these prior efforts are inadequate to the current challenges.

Although gains have been registered on the state tests that have been the focus of accountability under NCLB, U.S. performance declined between 2000 and 2012 on all subjects in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) — a more open-ended set of assessments evaluating how students can apply their knowledge and solve problems. On all of these measures, large and persistent achievement gaps remain among U.S. students by income, language background, and racial and ethnic group. The United States also exhibits one of the highest rates of childhood poverty in the developed world while distributing far fewer of its educational resources to meet the needs of disadvantaged students.

If we want to ensure that all students are indeed prepared for college and career readiness in these needs, several major changes are required. Among them are:

- *More sophisticated curriculum and assessments* "of, for, and, as learning" that foster and evaluate deep understanding of content, critical and creative thinking, problem solving, multiple modes of communication, and uses of new technologies to find, synthesize, evaluate, and use information to answer questions and create new solutions.

- *More equitable and adequate resources* which ensure that all students have access to the quality of teaching, materials, and technology they need to engage the new standards productively, and which address the additional needs of students who live in poverty, are new English learners, or who have other special educational needs.

- *Greater capacity among schools and educators* to teach this more challenging content to an increasingly diverse group of students. This will mean developing pedagogies for deeper learning focused on 21st century com-

petencies, personalizing instruction, and creating school designs that allow students to learn and apply their knowledge in ways that take advantage of new technologies and link to the world beyond traditional school walls.

- *A more effective model for change and improvement* that can foster the collaborative changes needed to transform schools from the industrial model of the past to innovative learning systems for the future. Rather than placing schools in a straitjacket reflecting the demands of tests pointed toward the past, accountability will need to enable thoughtful risk-taking informed by continuous evaluation using multiple measures to inform improvement.

## What Should a New Approach to Accountability Entail?

Since 2002, federally-enforced educational accountability has been defined primarily as the application of specific consequences to schools that do not meet annual targets for growth on yearly state tests. More is needed to meet current demands, however. 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 invest-

ments and change strategies that make it possible to achieve these expectations. This should include well-articulated expectations for what states and districts should do to provide the resources or conditions for learning, along with well-developed systems for improving professional skills, and research-based processes for guiding change and improvement.

A good starting point is to consider what parents and the public need an education system to be held accountable for: that children be taught relevant and meaningful skills that will prepare them for the world they are entering and that they be taught by competent professionals in adequately resourced schools responsive to their needs. From this perspective, a new paradigm for accountability should rest on three pillars: a focus on *meaningful learning,* enabled by *professionally accountable educators,* supported by *adequate resources* that are well-used. It should be animated by processes for *continuous evaluation and improvement* that lead to problem solving and corrective action at the local level. In such a system, accountability should be:

Reciprocal: Each level of the system — from federal and state governments to districts and schools — should be accountable for the contributions it must make to produce high-quality learning opportunities for each and every child. States and districts must be

Key Elements of an Accountability System

Meaningful Learning

Continuous Improvement

Resource Accountability

Professional Accountability
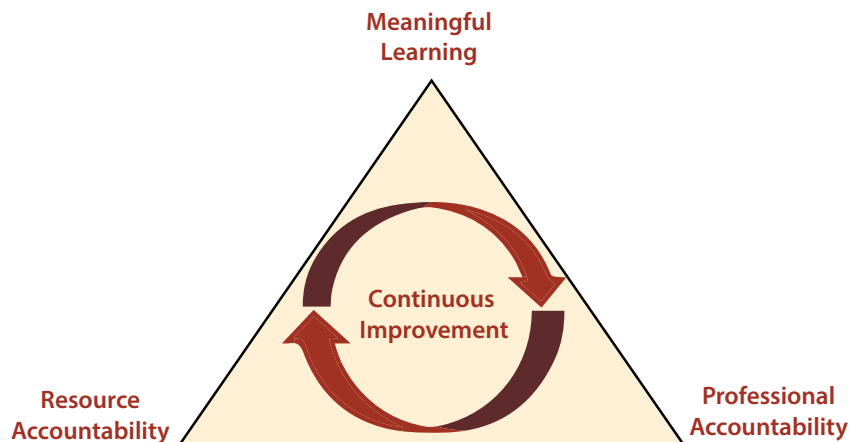
accountable for providing the resources, supports, and incentives that result in well-staffed, effective schools. Schools must be accountable for using these resources wisely and enabling strong teaching. Educators must be accountable for teaching the standards in ways that respond to their students' needs. Everyone must be accountable for continuous learning.

Focused on capacity-building: An accountable system acts on what is known about best practices: It builds capacity by making knowledge about what works widely available and provides learning opportunities for practitioners and policymakers, so that this knowledge is well-used.

Committed to problem-solving and improvement: An accountable system creates and shares transparent data and information, along with strategic evaluation processes, like school quality reviews, that can identify problems and guide diagnosis and corrective action.

Accountability Should Focus on Meaningful Learning

If meaningful learning for all students is the focus of an accountability system, then curriculum, assessment, and instruction must support the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students will need to succeed in 21st century college, careers, and citizenship — including the abilities to solve problems and apply knowledge, inquire and learn independently,
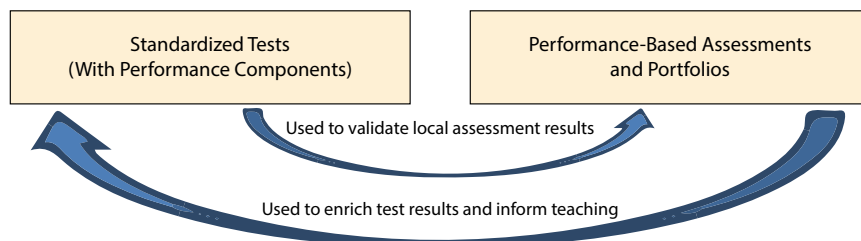
build relationships, use feedback, and persevere in the face of obstacles.

Capturing and supporting meaningful learning will require *richer assessments* that more authentically evaluate 21st century skills. These should be used to inform teaching and to expand, rather than limit, educational opportunities for students.

A System of Higher Quality Assessments: Assessments, both state- and locally-administered, should include more open-ended items, along with classroom-embedded performance tasks — research inquiries, scientific investigations, literary analyses, mathematical models, written and oral presentations, technology products — that develop and assess higher order skills. Robust performance assessments can also support and evaluate harder-to-measure abilities that matter greatly to success: the abilities to collaborate; to plan and organize time, materials, and people; to overcome obstacles; to persevere; to use feedback productively; and to learn independently.

New York State, for example, has authorized schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium to use a portfolio of performance assessments with common rubrics and scoring, in lieu of the Regents tests in most subject areas. Envision Schools and many Linked Learning schools in California use a similar approach. Research has shown that graduates from these networks of schools have higher college-going and col-

A New Competency-Based System of Assessment

Standardized Tests (With Performance Components)	Performance-Based Assessments and Portfolios

Used to validate local assessment results

Used to enrich test results and inform teaching

lege success rates than other students in their states[1].

New Hampshire is currently implementing a plan for a new competency-based system relying on a combination of state and local performance assessments to supplement the Smarter Balanced Consortium tests based on this design. The state will use a smaller number of higher-quality state tests to validate local judgments based on evidence from more in-depth tests and tasks, which offer more detailed information about how students think and perform, and can guide more effective teaching. This new system of assessment will move from an overemphasis on external summative tests to a greater emphasis on performance assessments that can inform and improve learning.

Accountability Should Ensure Adequate Resources, Wisely Used

In a country where school funding inequities are severe, inadequate resources deny genuine accountability to many families. If we really expect all children to achieve college and career-readiness, governments at all levels must be accountable for fairly allocating and wisely using resources — dollars, curriculum and learning tools, well-qualified educators, time, and safe, healthy environments for learning — to accomplish these goals. Measures of resource adequacy must become part of the accountability system, along with indicators of system performance that allow the public to understand what is being invested and with what results.

Resource Standards: Allocating adequate resources in relation to students' learning needs should include ensuring equitable access to high-quality curriculum and instructional materials that support students in learning the standards; providing well prepared educators and other professional staff to all students in settings that allow them to attend effectively to student needs; and ensuring additional

supports for students with particular needs associated with poverty or educational requirements.

Transparency: Information should be readily available to the public on how funds are spent and what outcomes result. This is a key aspect of the accountability strategy to support analysis of resource use.

Multiple Measures: To evaluate whether resources are adequate and appropriately used, multiple measures of access and performance for students, educators, and schools are needed to inform decision making at each level. These should capture the many aspects of education valued by parents, the profession and community. Like the dashboard on a car, which provides indicators of speed, distance traveled, fuel, fluids, tire pressure, and more, the combination of measures signals where to look further to figure out how things are working.

California's recently adopted Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is an example of an approach that addresses all of these elements. The LCFF allocates all funds based on pupil needs (weightings are based on poverty, English learner status, and foster care status). The accompanying Local Control Accountability Plan requires districts to 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. Data are *disaggregated* by student race and ethnicity, poverty, language status, and disability status. 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

Districts can add to the state measures, as the set of seven CORE districts (Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Santa Ana, and Sanger) did in their federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility waiver, when they added evidence of social-emotional learning and school climate, for example. Surveys of teachers, parents, and students are part of the data that help schools become more aware and responsive. The CORE accountability structure is shown below.

Problem-Solving and Corrective Action:
These data should be evaluated through well-designed systems of review, judgment, and intervention, rather than being used mechanically to mete out sanctions.
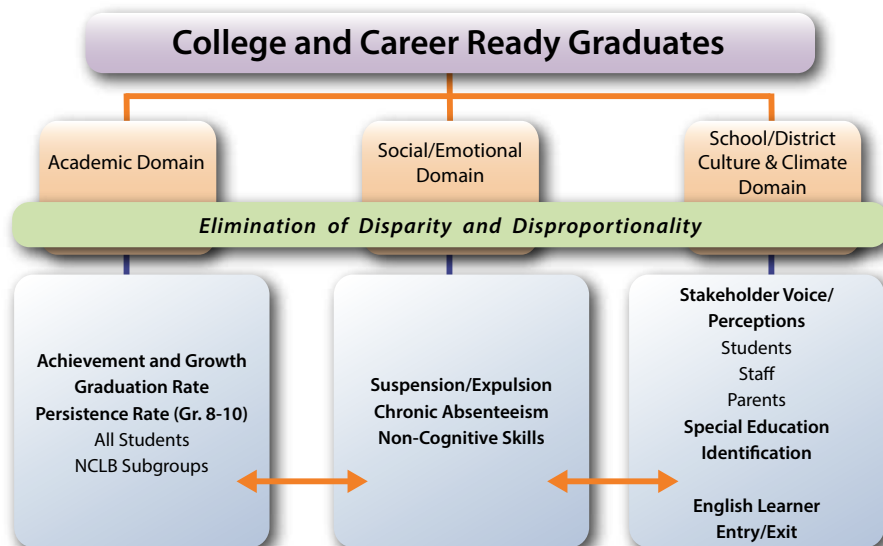
Such systems — whether evaluating student learning, educator performance, or school performance — should involve experts in interpreting information to guide consequences or corrective action based on a deep understanding of what is happening and what is needed. The goal should be to make strategic changes that protect students' rights and promote system improvement.

Accountability Should Support Professional Capacity and Ensure Competence

Unless students experience good teaching, accountability is meaningless. Accountability for implementing professional practice rests both with individual educators and with the schools, districts, and state agencies that recruit, train, hire, assign, support, and evaluate staff and organize education. Collectively, they are responsible for ensuring that the best available knowledge about curriculum, teaching, assessment, and student support will be acquired and used by individual educators and by the system as a whole.

The heart of a professional accountability system is a set of elements that ensures that educators are carefully selected, receive high-qual-

CORE Accountability Structure

College and Career Ready Graduates

Academic Domain — Social/Emotional Domain — School/District Culture & Climate Domain

Elimination of Disparity and Disproportionality

Achievement and Growth
Graduation Rate
Persistence Rate (Gr. 8-10)
All Students
NCLB Subgroups

Suspension/Expulsion
Chronic Absenteeism
Non-Cognitive Skills

Stakeholder Voice/
Perceptions
Students
Staff
Parents
Special Education
Identification

English Learner
Entry/Exit

ity preparation that enables them to acquire essential knowledge and skills, are licensed based on useful evidence of effectiveness, supported through high-quality induction and professional learning opportunities, and make sound personnel decisions — including opportunities for advancement that support further sharing of expertise — through thoughtful evaluation, supervision, and career ladders. Professionally accountable systems also ensure that well-qualified educators are readily available to all students across the state, which requires attention to recruitment incentives such as service scholarships, adequate and equitable salaries, and working conditions that provide motivation to stay.

Professional standards of practice should guide how educators are prepared and how they teach, lead, organize schools, and support students. States should adopt and use professional standards aligned to student learning standards to guide preparation, accreditation, licensure, and practice and to build capacity at all levels of the system, including:

- *Educator capacity* that enables teachers to teach for deeper learning and administrators to understand and support this work at the school and district level. This requires:

  ° High-quality *preparation, induction, and professional development*
  ° *Accreditation and licensing* based on evidence of teacher and administrator performance in supporting diverse learners to meet challenging standards
  ° *Evaluation* based on multiple indicators of practice, contributions to student learning, and contributions to colleagues in support of schoolwide improvement.

- *School capacity* to meet student needs, based on school, district, and state actions that ensure the availability of well-qualified staff who are properly assigned and ade-

quately supported with professional development, and who are engaged in well-designed curricula and educational programs that are consistent with research

- *System capacity* for professional practice and improvement, supported by awareness of research, as well as school quality review processes, that evaluate policies, programs, practices, and outcomes, diagnose areas for improvement, and guide appropriate interventions.

A School Quality Review system should help schools assess their practices and work on areas for improvement, supporting well-guided *intervention and corrective action* in schools where the evidence suggests that achievement is not adequate and students' needs are not being met.

An effective School Quality Review process should bring together several elements that have not been joined before in most education policy systems: *robust data, educational expertise,* and *peer review.* Like the inspectorate model used in many countries, it should be guided by experts who are deeply knowledgeable about practice and well-trained in how to conduct a diagnostic inquiry into school practices and their relationship to the nature and quality of student learning. Like U.S. accreditation systems, the engagement of peer reviewers from other schools in the state can

Elements of a School Quality Review
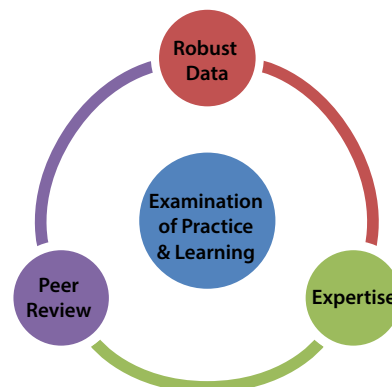
enlist multiple perspectives while stimulating a learning process that expands the knowledge and sharpens the analytical skills of participants. Like many research endeavors, the skillful use of robust quantitative data, much of which is comparable across schools, with qualitative insights developed from looking purposefully at teaching and student work and talking to stakeholders, can allow reviewers to get a better understanding of how the school is working and what may help it improve. By combining these things, such a process is more powerful and purposeful than accreditation approaches have been in the past.

School quality review approaches like this have been used successfully at various times in Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. Teams of distinguished educators may be called in to support the hands-on work of school improvement based on the deep analysis that has been provided. In some cases, these efforts have been focused on struggling schools. They are able to reveal what it will take to improve a school; whether changes are needed in curriculum, leadership, staffing, or other aspects of the organization; and even whether students would be better served by closing and redesigning a school entirely. While struggling schools or districts may engage more intensively in such efforts, a School Quality Review process should ideally be used to support system-wide learning and improvement.

Similarly, Peer Assistance and Review programs have been used successfully in teacher evaluation to bring the expertise of mentors and the judgments of a panel of teachers and administrators to bear for helping teachers to improve, and for making decisions about removal where improvement does not follow intensive assistance. In both cases, adding expertise, peer evaluation, and carefully collected data to a process of review and assistance around standards of professional practice produces better-grounded analyses and more effective decisions.

Engaging teachers in jointly scoring student work and consulting about how to improve curriculum and teaching to produce greater success for learners also helps build professional norms and knowledge. Indeed, engaging students in reviewing their own and their peers' work to guide revisions in light of standards leverages powerful learning.

Professional capacity and accountability are reinforced by systems of professional judgment for evaluating the work of students, teachers, and schools. Not only does expert professional judgment — used to make sense of qualitative and quantitative information — support more defensible decision, it can also help professionalize education by supporting educators' learning and sense of responsibility as they work with students and families to engage in accountability themselves.

Conclusion

We believe that a new conception of accountability can help the nation meet its aspirations for preparing college- and career-ready students by:

- addressing the opportunity gap that has allowed inequalities in resources to deprive many students of necessary opportunities to learn;
- developing curriculum and assessments that are focused on 21st century learning skills and used in ways that support improvement in teaching and learning;
- creating a dashboard of multiple measures to evaluate schools and sophisticated strategies, including school quality reviews, for helping them improve;
- developing professional capacity, through high-quality preparation, professional development, evaluation, and career advancement for individuals, plus sharing of expertise within and across schools.

One account of what this new accountability model would look like in a state that de-

veloped an integrated system can be seen at https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1257.

The gauge of a new system should be the outcomes it enables. True accountability should allow schools to be both responsible for high-quality professional practice and responsive to students' needs within the context of their families and communities. An effective accountability system should give students, par-ents, and governments confidence that schools are focused on what matters most and capable of helping each child connect to a productive future.

1. *Educating for the 21st century: Data report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium.* http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf; Friedlaender, D., Burns, D., Lewis-Charp, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Zheng, X., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Student-centered schools: Closing the opportunity gap.* Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Acknowledgments

This brief summarizes a more detailed report. To see the full report and to join our mailing list, please visit: edpolicy.stanford.edu.

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