

Education Week's blogs > Politics K-12

How Would Some Experts Design K-12 Accountability From Scratch?

By [Alyson Klein](#) on October 16, 2014 6:06 AM

There's been a lot of [attention lately on tests](#). State and district leaders say they want to cut out the ones that are [redundant and unhelpful](#). And former President Bill Clinton (and both teachers unions) had [advocated for testing only in certain grade spans, not every year](#).

Now Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford professor often identified with the progressive wing of the Democratic party, and others, including Gene Wilhoit, the former executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, have come out with a [proposal](#) that envisions a new approach to accountability and testing. Less frequent state summative assessments are only one part of the picture.

The [policy brief](#), released Thursday, is co-authored by Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Linda Pittenger, the chief operating officer for the Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky. The proposal is informed by a [journal article](#), also written by the trio, that came out in August, and considers what a new accountability system might look like in a hypothetical "51st state."

Here are some key features of their proposal:

- **State summative assessments wouldn't have to be annual.** Instead, tests could be given in certain grades. That's an idea that's been embraced by both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, as well as former President Bill Clinton and a smattering of lawmakers on Capitol Hill.
- **Assessments should move beyond the fill-in-the-bubble, criterion-referenced tests** to include more open-ended items and performance tasks, such as research inquiries, scientific investigation, and literary analyses. That's something New Hampshire is doing through its [competency-based system](#), which envisions local tests as a supplement to the Smarter Balanced consortium's assessments. The Granite state is in talks with the U.S. Department of Education about revising its waiver from the No Child Left Behind Act to accommodate a pilot program in which a handful of districts would take summative state assessments only in certain grade-spans, and would use local tests in other years.
- **States and districts should consider factors other than just test scores in their accountability systems.** That's something that the [seven CORE districts in California, which have received the only district-level NCLB waiver, are trying out](#). Their system considers factors like social and emotional learning and school climate.
- **School improvement efforts should consider something along the lines of an approach sometimes used in England, in which a group of seasoned, proven educators essentially do a deep diagnosis of a school and its root issues.** Several states are already experimenting with something like this, including New York, Rhode Island, and Kentucky. (I wrote about the Bluegrass state's use of veteran educators in turning around low-performing schools [here](#).)

Anne Hyslop, a senior policy analyst at Bellwether Education Partners, noted that there are a few things missing from this framework. First off, it seems there's no clear role for the feds in this mythical 51st state.

And second, some of the models the report embraces haven't worked so well on the ground, particularly California's CORE waiver, which is currently on [high-risk status with the Education Department](#).

"The California district waiver is held up as a model accountability system for the future—without any recognition of the numerous delays, implementation and capacity challenges, and lack of data on the effectiveness of their approach," Hyslop wrote in an email. "In reality, most of what the CORE districts proposed to do hasn't happened. Their accountability system to date has functioned much like NCLB. And worse, the CORE districts' are at-risk of losing their waiver! Yet this isn't even acknowledged."

Some background on the reports' authors: Darling-Hammond served as an education advisor to President Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, but [left before the administration's education agenda really got off the ground](#). And Wilhoit was the executive director of the CCSSO when the common-core standards initiative was just getting started. He had previously been the education commissioner in Kentucky.

Categories: [Waivers](#)

Tags: [no child left behind](#) [testing](#) [waivers](#)