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Fixing schools' broken accountability system

By Brent McKim

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Kentucky's education accountability system is broken and must be fixed. When the Kentucky Education Reform Act created our ground-breaking accountability system, the concept was simple: Identify clearly what schools are to teach and hold them accountable for doing so through a high-stakes statewide assessment. Although many of the highest performing countries in the world, such as Finland and Singapore, do not use accountability as the basis for school improvement, the KERA model is certainly a workable one. However, there are some critical assumptions that must be met if the system is to promote good teaching and learning, which should be the ultimate goal:

The expectations for what is to be learned each year must be clearly identified for educators, students and parents.

The amount to be learned in a given year must be reasonable and teachable.

The student test must be designed so that it promotes good teaching and learning.

The state assessment must test what students are expected to learn and the skills and capacities we want them to acquire.

Performance on the state assessment should be significantly affected, and ideally only affected, by the quality of teaching and learning occurring at any given school.

Kentucky has done an excellent job of meeting the first assumption. Although tremendously broad, our Core Content for Assessment is clear and easy to understand.

Unfortunately, we fall far short on the second assumption. The process for defining what we want students to know and be able to do was essentially to bring in groups of teachers, provide them technical assistance, and ask them, "What should we teach in your grade level or course?" Put a dozen teachers in a room, each with their own favorite topics, and the answer comes back "Everything!" every time. No one began by listing all the topics and asking the teachers, "How long would it take to teach each topic to a typical class of learners?" No one then said, "OK, now we are going to determine our content standards, but the rule is, we can't pick more standards than there is time to teach them."

Because little or no thought was given to whether there was enough time in a school year to teach all the standards, we now find ourselves failing the third assumption. Because educators are expected to teach a "mile-wide" set of standards, we find ourselves jettisoning our best teaching methods in an attempt to blaze through all the content for the given year in hopes that enough will "stick" to allow our students to do well on the state assessment. It's all about covering topics, not about teaching to mastery for all students. We simply don't have time for that.

Currently, our state CATS assessment does a pretty good job of meeting the fourth assumption (test is aligned with standards) and the fifth assumption (test scores are related to student learning). It is worth noting that moving from CATS, which is designed to test our state standards, to an off-the-shelf norm-referenced test like the ACT, as some have suggested, would cause us to completely fail both the fourth and fifth assumptions. A recent study by a respected educational authority found only about a 25 percent match between what is assessed on the ACT tests and what our schools are expected to teach. Clearly, such a move to the ACT would violate the fourth assumption (alignment with standards). Following from that, there would be no way for the ACT test to succeed on the fifth assumption either (instructional sensitivity). How could we make any judgment about whether schools are doing what they are supposed to if three-fourths of the state test doesn't even match what schools were asked to accomplish?

Since some of the critical assumptions underlying the current system simply are not accurate, it only makes sense that, after 18 years, we should pause and take an in-depth look at our school improvement public policy. Much has been learned since 1990 that can help us redesign a better system. As we move into the 21st Century, where an overwhelming amount of information (and misinformation) is just a "Google" away, we need a system that focuses less on what facts students know and more on what ability they have to acquire and make judgments about information. This focus on student capacities should guide us as we redesign our school improvement system.

It is time for policy-makers to join with education stakeholders as we engage in this challenging work. Kentucky has made tremendous progress since 1990. Now it's time to build on this success as we design a system that will propel us forward and provide Kentucky's learners with the 21st Century knowledge, skills and capacities to succeed in our democratic society and diverse, changing world.

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