

Summary and Excerpts from Accountability and the Federal Role: A Third Way on ESEA

Background

Recently, a group of diverse scholars and policy experts with differing views about the federal role in education policy generated a set of recommendations to inform Congressional deliberations about the reauthorization of ESEA.¹ The deliberations resulted in a position paper from which the following excerpts have been selected.²

General Agreements

At the outset the group agreed with the following points:

- ▶ Parents need information at each juncture of their child's education.
- ▶ Students' scores are valuable, but should be used with other evidence of effectiveness and progress.
- ▶ Assessment of schools should focus on meaningful learning and should be aligned to college and career readiness.
- ▶ Consequences should be attached to schools, rather than individual educators.
- ▶ The purpose of an accountability system should be to incentivize team improvement action.
- ▶ School leaders need sufficient flexibility, authority, and resources to foster school wide accountability aimed at continuous improvement.
- ▶ States and districts must have options (and the authority to exercise them) when children's opportunities are threatened as a result of not meeting performance expectations.

Goals of Accountability

Accountability is important because it is the means by which policymakers meet their responsibility to ensure that all children learn and become self-supporting citizens who contribute to the democracy. This means that public officials need to know how well students are doing and what is being done to educate all children. To that end, an accountability system should include:

- measures of results;
- means for making judgments about performance; and
- means of affecting change when children are not learning.

Differentiated Accountability³

Each level of the educational system has a different role and responsibility, and higher levels of government should not "jump over" lower ones. Different roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- ▶ *Schools*: Educate students; manage spending and hiring; make instructional decisions; and marshal the resources and educators to improve instruction and student outcomes.
- ▶ *Districts*: Hold schools accountable for performance; help schools find the resources and support they need in order to improve; and decide whether to sustain, assist, redesign, or replace a school that is not meeting expectations.
- ▶ *States*: Hold districts accountable for improving the overall performance of local schools; create more effective options for students at risk; invest in professional capacity building; and help districts find the resources schools need in order to improve.

- ▶ *The federal government*: Protect civil rights; ensure transparency of results across states, districts and schools; support investment in high-quality state longitudinal data systems; and use leverage (i.e., funding) to press states to hold districts accountable and to foster innovation.
- ▶ *Families*, too, have a role: Participate in decisions about their own children and school policies; and exercise public school choice to select schools that are best suited for their children.

Darling-Hammond and Hill Outline the Following Implications for Reauthorization of ESEA:

1. Congress should continue to expect states to make annual determinations of student learning and growth based on valid and reliable measures and to report assessment data by student groups. Congress should support reasonable experimentation with new approaches to measuring student learning and progress, evaluating schools, and remedying low performance. Furthermore, Congress should allow the Secretary of Education to approve statewide accountability systems based on systems of assessments that (a) combine general and deeper measures of learning to assess a wider range of content and skills, and (b) provide more detailed diagnostic information about individual children's learning. The Secretary should have the authority to revoke agreements that do not lead to effective action on behalf of children at risk.
2. ESEA should encourage state use of multiple measures dashboards that look at a number of indicators of student and school progress, yet still require states and localities to take effective action on behalf of children who are not learning as a condition of receiving federal funds.
3. ESEA should not prescribe local practices with respect to educator evaluation or school improvement, nor require mechanical use of test scores to drive consequences for schools. Instead, ESEA should require states to establish systems for reviewing district and school progress and determining when effective interventions are needed.
4. ESEA should transform the role of the federal government in accountability. The federal government should make annual performance agreements with individual states. These agreements should create strong incentives for states to improve district and school performance, raise graduation rates, and assure college and career readiness for disadvantaged children. They should also specify consequences for failing to do so.
5. Finally, ESEA should create incentives for states to recognize and remedy systematic differences in the financial and human resources available for the education of similar students, and for districts to remove internal barriers to funding equity and transparency.

¹ Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Hill, Paul T. (2015, March). *Accountability and the Federal Role: A Third Way on ESEA*. Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), University of Washington Bothell, and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE), Stanford University. https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/accountability-and-federal-role-third-way-esea_0.pdf

² This summary is a close adaptation of the report by Darling-Hammond and Hill, and is intended to highlight the most salient points of their work. In most instances, this document paraphrases the original text. However, in some cases direct language from the original is also included and is indicated by quotation marks.

³ These are not all of the roles assigned to each level of government that are listed in the original document.