Next Generation Accountability Systems for Student Success

How can we rethink next generation accountability to modernize schools and our education system to meet students' needs?

The time is overdue to rethink K-12 education policy around accountability in the United States. After twenty plus years of top-down state and federal accountability systems, there's growing recognition the current frames aren't working to ensure quality and equity. We must reimagine accountability to better prepare students, families, communities, and schools with timely and relevant information to improve teaching and learning.

Federal and state policy should provide flexibility to create pilots for next generation accountability. This would provide space for schools to begin innovating beyond what is currently done—in partnership with communities. Creating room in policy to enable accountability pilot programs in states, districts, and schools with a research and development agenda for innovation is the first step to build next generation accountability based on global best practices.

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The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) studies the top performing education systems around the globe. OECD has published a comprehensive international review of policies and best practices which lead to education improvement. As more countries embark on ambitious work in creating a world class education system, they are equity seeking.

To summarize global best practices, we recommend that policy should:

1. **Encourage accountability systems examining a broader range of outcomes, student experiences, culture, and community engagement as they set priorities and create performance frameworks. An example is Alberta, Canada with what is called the Assurance Framework.**

2. **Develop high-quality data systems to measure and report performance metrics, including student engagement, learning experiences, and attainment, and promote approaches aligned with student-centered learning and continuous improvement.**

3. **Prioritize quality of teaching, assessment, and learning in both formal and informal (work-based, community-based, digital) learning environments.**

4. **Foster partnerships between communities, parents, providers, institutions, and education systems in order to create high-performing schools.**

5. **Promote equity and inclusion by addressing inequity in school funding and resources, in addition to biases in assessment, and evaluate teaching and learning practices.**

6. **Promote equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities across schools, especially for students farthest from opportunity.**

7. **Ensure student assessment is used effectively to monitor and improve learning transparently, rather than solely to rank or compare schools.**

8. **Support teachers to use evidence-based practices, build assessment literacy, and become reflective practitioners based on the research on how students learn best.**

9. **Dedicate resources and strategies to increase student engagement and graduation, for example, increasing graduation rates through multiple pathways and extended learning opportunities.**

10. **Develop a culture of continuous improvement in schools, with communities, parents, students, educators, and leaders taking ownership of school outcomes through reciprocity.**

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According to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

"In the past, education was about teaching people something. Now, it is about making sure that individuals develop a reliable compass and the navigation skills to find their own way through an increasingly uncertain, volatile and ambiguous world. It will often be the mistakes and failures, when properly understood, that create the context for learning and growth. Today, schools need to prepare students for more rapid economic and social change than ever before, for jobs that have not yet been created, to use technologies that have not yet been invented, and to solve social problems that we do not yet know will arise."

Historically, accountability systems have been designed to rank and sort students and schools–identifying the lowest performing schools in each state. These compliance-based accountability systems entail narrow, time-based metrics of student achievement–examining age-based cohorts of students within subgroups using delayed snapshot data, and a narrow, one-size-fits-all approach. Our current accountability paradigm does not reflect community needs and priorities.

Ultimately, next generation accountability systems must emphasize reciprocal accountability–the practice of mutual responsibility within a system. The goal is to create an environment with transparent information where communities, parents, and stakeholders locally are empowered to identify the values, goals, and performance indicators for success. Reciprocal accountability systems shift power to families and communities, who should have a key role in rethinking benchmarks and goals that are in the best interest of students, and, in turn play a key role in determining what an excellent and equitable school system should look like. Accountability should be a shared responsibility, allowing for results-based outcomes with transparent reporting and responsiveness to student needs.

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Policy must move toward creating a new paradigm: one that is centered on reciprocity and in turn more adequately sets students, educators, families, and communities up for success. There must be a major shift in accountability systems in the United States to empower students and families and drive continuous improvement on the most important outcomes. Assessments should be meaningful for students, appropriate, and reliable. Accountability models should align to research on best practices,

build capacity for meaningful, authentic learning, and include performance assessments for building knowledge and skills with a focus on cumulative validity.

The good news is that there is evidence and examples we can pull from–both here in the United States and internationally–of more effective accountability systems that drive continuous improvement to better prepare students for success. We cannot continue to tweak the current top-down accountability model with more metrics that are comparable to the old system's metrics. We must envision a new system entirely. Benchmarking to the past will continue to hold the current problems and conditions in place.

Key Components of Building Next Generation Accountability

States and localities that want to build next generation accountability systems can start by examining the purpose of education, and redefining student success through frameworks like a "Profile of a Graduate." Designing a Portrait of a Graduate can facilitate the transition from traditional requirements of graduate success (based on traditional transcripts and seat time)–to more future-focused profiles of success based on demonstrated mastery of core academic knowledge, as well as skills we know employers value. Such profiles of the knowledge and skills students need can inform more effective performance frameworks and indicators.

Policymakers should engage students, families, community members, and employers in the co-design of new performance metrics. Ultimately, we need to shift the role of accountability to be a shared responsibility as bottom-up, rather than solely top-down from the federal government. States and localities can enable new accountability models with reciprocal accountability inclusive of performance frameworks, results-based outcomes for transparent reporting and responsiveness to student needs.

> *We have the tools we need to build more innovative, next generation, reciprocal accountability systems that provide real-time information*

Proof Points and Best Practices Around Next Generation Accountability

State and federal policymakers can explore global best practices around next generation accountability systems to modernize education here in the United States (as outlined above). Several states are already employing some of these approaches.

In Vermont, a performance measurement framework with multiple measures creates a comprehensive picture of education performance and encourages a system of continuous improvement. The state's school rating system uses performance frameworks to offer an easy-to-understand, more nuanced picture of quality.

In California's CORE Districts, there is a balance of state and local roles in monitoring school performance measures through the use of a School Dashboard. Districts monitor indicators that are gathered into a local dashboard, allowing district leaders to focus their efforts on evaluating and building school-level performance and capacity.

Colorado has created enabling legislation for local accountability pilots with investments to support districts in rethinking accountability. The state requires local accountability key indicators. The local entity identifies, develops, and analyzes high-quality, relevant measures and reporting. It builds capacity to improve use of high-quality data and continuous improvement practices. It also aims to strengthen local and regional partnerships, build capacity through professional development and community learning.

Across the globe, New Zealand's focused approach to education systems transformation and accountability offers a global best practice to study, by sharing responsibility and engaging in reciprocity with communities. Schools use a results-based outcomes framework, setting metrics with communities, families, students, and stakeholders through local boards. In evaluating school quality, there is a balanced score card of performance metrics through outcomes-based models. The accountability and measurement quality are enforced by a different government entity, the Education Review Office, with an accreditation process like a charter authorizer, rather than by a national testing program. National curriculum frameworks and the learning goals, as requirements, are set at the National Ministry of Education. There is currently little use of large-scale, high-stakes summative testing, except in the final three years of secondary school. The implementation of accountability, however, is ultimately local control. At the local level, there is locally-driven reciprocal accountability between each school, their educators, leaders, members of the community, families, and students.

A Better Path Forward for Human Flourishing

 Measurable, meaningful results-based outcomes can drive all aspects of school performance and continuous improvement. We have the tools we need to build more innovative, next generation, reciprocal accountability systems that provide real-time information to families, in turn better supporting student success and human flourishing. Global education expert JoAnn McEachin recently said, "Don't get good at a bad game. You have to change the game." We have to stop tweaking the status quo and transform education.

Related Resources:

Next Generation Accountability: Creating Performance Frameworks for Student Success