How to fix the damage done to schools by federal school reform laws

Perspective by Valerie Strauss
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More than 20 years ago, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into federal law, ushering in a new period of school reform that was centered on accountability based on high-stakes testing. It failed to produce the improvements promised by its supporters, as its critics at the time warned. NCLB's successor law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015, made some important changes but did not fix the problem of high-stakes testing.

A new report (see in full below) explains the flawed theory of change that was embedded in those school accountability efforts as well as other problems with the federal approach to accountability — and it offers recommendations to look anew at how to improve schools and close opportunity gaps that harm students from marginalized communities.

The report is the work of two dozen education experts who investigated the reform landscape and agreed upon six principles that federal authorities should prioritize. This post — written by Ashley Carey, Rachel S. White, Derek Gottlieb and Andy Saultz — explains the report's findings and recommendations. Carey is a doctoral candidate at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell; White is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Tennessee; Gottlieb is an associate professor at the University of Northern Colorado's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences; and Saultz is interim dean of the College of Education at Pacific University.

By Ashley Carey, Rachel S. White, Derek Gottlieb and Andy Saultz

For more than 20 years, our nation's public schools have operated under a system of high-stakes accountability ushered in by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Framed as an effort to strengthen schools and close opportunity gaps, the legacies of NCLB and ESSA tell a different story.

NCLB and ESSA have constrained states and communities, overemphasized standardized testing, and produced a slew of unintended consequences, particularly for schools and districts with large populations of students of color, low-income students and English learners. Though it is easy to point out the flaws of the existing system, we also have an opportunity to learn from our history and imagine a more effective and equitable accountability system.

We set out to do just that in our recent report — a multiyear effort involving two dozen leading scholars of education. We hope that policymakers will heed these lessons when they decide to take up a long-overdue reauthorization of federal education law. Here we describe six lessons learned from NCLB and ESSA and six aligned recommendations for the future of K-12 public school accountability.

First, accountability systems should reflect what Americans want schools to do. The dominant approach to educational accountability over the past two decades has centered on standardized test scores, which has resulted in a range of negative consequences including narrowing the curriculum to devote more time to tested subjects, teaching to the test and spending valuable time on test-taking. We can better track the multifaceted and diverse goals that local, state and federal stakeholders have for America's public schools by incorporating a comprehensive array of indicators, which measure the diverse goals community members have for their schools — from positive school culture to diverse course offerings that include arts and foreign languages.

Second, and relatedly, we have learned over the past two decades that unintended and harmful consequences proliferate when policy encourages practitioners to align teaching practices in the classroom with state assessments. The order of operations should be flipped: goals for high-quality curriculums and instruction should drive state assessment policies.

Third, resources and capacity building are vital. While the current system holds schools accountable for the academic outcomes of students, a reformed accountability system should correspondingly hold elected officials and other leaders accountable for providing schools with the financial resources, human resources and other supports needed for success. By engaging in reciprocal accountability, we can prioritize the importance of schools having the capacity they need to enact meaningful improvement.

Fourth, accountability systems must be respectful of the experiences and expertise of those that school systems serve. Diverse voices in local communities should be active participants in the development of goals for the local public schools. While ESSA requires that states include stakeholder groups in the development of school accountability systems, this requirement falls short of allowing communities to shape and make decisions. Historically marginalized communities have borne the brunt of harmful accountability consequences. We must allow communities — particularly those that have been intentionally underserved and disenfranchised — to contribute to decisions about whom local school systems are to be held accountable to and what school systems are to be held accountable for.

Fifth, we have learned that reducing accountability to a single rating or letter grade fails to provide useful information to the public or policymakers. Simplified rankings propagate the idea that schools are "good" or "bad" based on rudimentary measures of student achievement on state standardized tests. These narrow conceptions of school quality tend to disproportionately label schools serving larger proportions of economically disadvantaged students and students of color as "bad." Students at these schools are most likely to take state standardized tests on empty stomachs and are often attempting to learn academic concepts and standards in curriculums that do not include them or their culture. These measures also give undue credit to schools serving larger proportions of well-off students, misattributing any effects of their greater access to out-of-school opportunities to the schools themselves. If we are to foster school improvement and communicate school performance to the public, we should move away from systems that rate and rank schools based on a single measure, and instead ensure accountability systems provide actionable and interpretable results.

A sixth and final lesson learned from two decades of NCLB and ESSA is that accountability requires continuous evaluation and improvement, beyond the irregular and opaque process of reauthorizing federal legislation. We should design an accountability system that includes regular, built-in mechanisms to evaluate and adjust the system itself. For each major part of an accountability system, we should incorporate evaluative feedback loops to ensure they are working as intended and to adjust them when they are not.

We have learned a lot over the last 20 years of test-based accountability and can do better for the students in our nation. While a reauthorization of federal education law is overdue — part of the very problem we aspire to solve — we hope these lessons and recommendations will guide policymakers as they grapple with the perennial issue of how to help our nation's schools work for everyone.

Accountability policy that aligns with curricular aims, reflects public goals for education, and yields information that is both actionable and interpretable is possible. We can accomplish these goals by creating space for diverse voices, including those most harmed by existing policy, by engaging in reciprocal accountability to ensure schools have the capacity for success, and by embedding an evaluative feedback process into the design of an accountability system.