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ABSTRACT

An understanding of state accountability systems is critical in the discussion of educational reform. Clear and complete definitions of expectations for learners are needed before conducting educational assessments. This document describes findings of a study that examined six state accountability systems, with a focus on how they impacted low-performing school districts. The results of case studies of two low-performing school systems, one in South Carolina and one in North Carolina, are presented. The case studies examined how the state accountability systems related to: (1) the culture of poverty and politics of race; (2) the role of state agencies in supporting reform; and (3) the limitations of current state accountability systems. It is concluded that hasty implementation of accountability systems is a major impediment to educational reform. Rather than taking over continually low-performing districts, the state agencies need to implement midcourse corrections to help schools succeed. Examples of supportive state-agency practices in South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida are briefly described. A policy framework that supports all schools' ability to meet standards is outlined, with eight recommendations. (LMI)

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A New Framework for State Accountability Systems

Revised
September 8, 1994

Special Report of
The SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education

ERIC

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Introduction: Making Accountability Systems Work

In 1991, when SERVE began to investigate the barriers to school reform in the Southeast, the study unexpectedly lead to exploring state accountability systems. An understanding and examination of state accountability systems, defined here as state-level processes intended to inform the public about the performance of learners being served by state educational systems, is critical in the discussion of educational reform. All of the data collection, interviews, and focus group discussions around barriers seemed to end at the same troubling conclusion: Information generated by state accountability systems are driving the need for educational reform, but accountability systems have been set in place without clear and complete definitions of what is expected of learners. We need to know what should be measured prior to starting the measuring processes, unfortunately, this does not appear always to be true.

SERVE, the federally-funded education laboratory for Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina considered this issue to be so important that a study of state accountability systems was commissioned in the six member states. This study particularly focused on traditionally "low-performing" school districts. The results of the project are outlined in this report, which complements SERVE's companion document, *Overcoming Barriers to School Reform in the Southeast.*

The premise of *A New Framework for State Accountability Systems* is simple. While the concept of accountability is ultimately at the heart of school reform, the hasty implementation of state accountability systems stands as one of the chief impediments to real reform. Today's state-mandated accountability systems, particularly the "high stakes" systems that threaten serious consequences such as state takeover of low-performing schools, grossly overestimate the educational community's readiness to move to a new and accountable system.

In fact, the accountability "cart" has been far ahead of the goals, standards, and assessment "horses" needed to drive it. Specifically:

1. Most states throughout the SERVE region and the nation continue to struggle with the question: What do we want learners to know and be able to do on graduation from school? Southeastern states are progressing in answering this question, but they have not completed the process.
2. Because of the demand to move forward, instead of waiting for the development and implementation of state accountability systems based on what we want learners to know and be able to do, we continue to use tests that probably are not measuring some things that we should measure and are measuring other things that we do not need to measure. Schools continue to be held accountable for student performance based on these inappropriate measures.

3. While progress has been made in many states in the area of alternative assessment, many teachers continue to teach to traditional tests that do not measure standards associated with global competitiveness.
4. Early legislative initiatives related to state accountability systems ignored a basic reality: Those schools that had failed to meet older, less rigorous standards were no more able to meet higher standards when the accountability bar was raised. As a result, state after state is confronted with previously failing schools failing the new systems.
5. The profile of a typically low-performing school in the Southeast is remarkably predictable. It is likely to be rural, geographically isolated and impoverished; have a high rate of teenage pregnancy; have a disproportionate percentage of at-risk young people; and have been abandoned by the middle class and by white parents. These conditions call for intervention and support strategies that go beyond school walls and into the increasingly dysfunctional communities that surround them. Policy leaders need to be reminded that there are ways to overcome the predictable consequences of demographics.

State educational agencies, especially those in states with school takeover legislation on the books, face the very real prospect of having to do what no one has done before: Successfully take over continually low-performing school districts. While state agencies are undergoing dramatic overhauls to move from regulatory to supportive roles, they may not yet be prepared to provide the support and leadership necessary to reverse patterns of failure within these school systems.

An unintended consequence of school accountability is to further stigmatize areas which are already losing the economic competitiveness race and which face the greatest challenge in keeping or attracting jobs. The burden of being labeled "impaired," "at-risk," or "low performing" adds another barrier for those attempting to inject economic hope in areas where hope is at a premium.

Though school failure is largely a matter of demographic predictability, the typical state accountability plan does not include a component geared to helping schools likely to fail. In fact, several state plans provide assistance only after failure has been documented for a period of years. That assistance is removed if the school system's student performance shows improvement.

It has become increasingly clear that mid-course corrections to state accountability systems are required to help schools succeed. In particular, states that have established "high stakes" accountability systems need to rethink and redirect implementation to meet their intended goals. Otherwise, the weight of contradictory and confusing goals, the transition to new roles for state agencies, and the racial and economic consequences of educational failure could derail even the best-intentioned programs and lead schools back to "business as usual."

Policymakers who previously had the courage to establish accountability systems are being called upon to again take the lead and make the necessary corrections to ensure that these accountability efforts are supportive of all schools. For states now moving toward new systems of accountability there are many lessons to be learned from the experience of those who have pioneered the movement.

All of the southeastern states are currently in a transition period as some move from old to new curriculum frameworks and assessment processes and many are networking with low-performing schools. South Carolina, in this process, is one state that has been able to make mid-course correc-

tions and achieve positive results. The state once focused on taking schools over after they failed. Now, it's policy is to help schools succeed. For instance, rather than labeling schools as "impaired," they are now designated as "high priority." South Carolina was the first to study its rules and regulations and eliminate those that didn't fit into new strategies for success and has involved thousands of teachers in the process of changing the state's curricula. Other states are also on their way to making midcourse corrections. Examples include:

- North Carolina has established a Standards and Accountability Commission independent of, but working in collaboration with, the State Department of Public Instruction to answer the basic question: What do we want students to know and to be able to do?
- Georgia has undergone extensive and sometimes painful reorganizations to reorient regional staffs to work in partnership with low-performing schools, introducing strategies that go beyond traditional intervention.
- The goal of the Mississippi Assessment System is to provide accountability for students, schools, districts and the State of Mississippi. The system is designed to ensure that instruction focuses on complex thinking, effective communication, responsible citizenship, and lifelong learning. Schools surpassing standards, as measured by norm-referenced assessment, standardized performance-based assessment, and performance-based classroom assessment, will receive special recognition from the state. Those schools not obtaining the standards will be provided opportunities for special technical assistance.
- Alabama is in the enviable position of debating its high stakes accountability plan and is in position to take advantage of the lessons learned by those who plunged in early.
- Florida recently enacted a comprehensive revision of, and plan for, school improvement and educational accountability entitled Blueprint 2000. This includes the establishment of the Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability which has held numerous public hearings throughout the state to systematically involve educators, parents, students, advocacy groups, and other interested persons in the development of the plan.

While progress is being made, all of the six SERVE member states can do even better. Our "New Framework for State Accountability Systems" is predicated on the belief that if states ask schools to educate all children, then the states should assume responsibility for ensuring that all school systems succeed, rather than punishing them for failure.

Case Studies: Spotlight on Accountability and Low-Performing Schools

State accountability systems that included high stakes components; limited time and funding allocated for implementation; negative consequences for historically low-performing schools, and reliance on standardized testing as measures of success, emerged as major obstacles to reform. But are the schools failing the new accountability systems or are the systems failing the schools?

To define concretely what barriers to reform exist in the Southeast, in-depth case studies were conducted in two low- performing school systems, one in North Carolina and one in South Carolina. These studies were then validated by focus groups in Mississippi and Georgia. These four states were selected on the basis of similarity of state accountability programs, relatively long histories of involvement in the accountability and reform movement, and progress made by state education agencies in learning how to intervene and provide assistance.

Historically, educational decision makers have treated all school systems the same and have designed accountability systems at the state level that reflect this belief. The case studies show how change in different school districts can be affected by political, economic and cultural contexts. They suggest a need for beginning a new generation of policymaking that considers those differences and plans accountability systems accordingly.

This section briefly profiles the case studies, defines fundamental reform concerns, and examines how state accountability systems relate to these:

- The culture of poverty and the politics of race;
- The role of state agencies in supporting reform; and,
- The limitations of current accountability systems.

School Districts At Risk: The Cases of Sylvan One and Enduro

Both Sylvan School District One in South Carolina and Enduro School District in North Carolina (fictitious names used to assure confidentiality) are "at risk" school systems in their state's new high stakes accountability plans. They are poor, rural districts which share a history of below average performance on traditional measures of student achievement, an ongoing shortage of local resources, and a well-documented need for outside assistance.

Sylvan One School District. Sylvan One is a small, poor district. Of its 1,300 students, 98 percent are African American, 96 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 20 percent are classified as challenged. The district operates on an annual budget of approximately $5 million, with an average expenditure of $4,100 per pupil, slightly below the state's average and 79 percent of the national average.

Like many other multi-district counties, the county governing body tends to let the individual districts "rock along," evaluating only how well a district manages its budget, not how it performs on measures of student achievement. Yet, in terms of performance, Sylvan One has a long history of documented inadequacies. In the early 1980s the district ranked at or near the bottom on statewide tests of basic skills. Several years later the district was classified "impaired" by the state department of education. A state curriculum evaluation team identified numerous problems: unclear responsibility for curriculum design and delivery; inadequate curriculum guidelines; lack of feedback on instructional plans; and wasted instructional time due to student behavior problems and poor classroom management.

Since that time, as teachers and administrators are quick to point out, test scores have improved somewhat, the dropout rate has decreased, and the district has begun to pursue new efforts involving more ambitious outcomes for students. Nevertheless, in 1992, over 80 percent of the district's fourth graders scored below average (the 50th percentile) on a nationally-normed standardized test and only 46 percent passed the state's tenth grade exit examination. In 1992, Sylvan One failed to meet 10 of the state's 33 basic skills achievement standards, qualifying it for the state's "highest priority" technical assistance.

Enduro School District. Enduro, on the other hand, is a relatively large school district, located in one of North Carolina's largest counties and serving one of the largest student populations. In 1992-93, student enrollment was approximately 23,000, two thirds were minority students. The district's annual budget totaled nearly $100 million.

Although Enduro has one of the state's highest tax rates for supporting local government, it ranks near the bottom in yield; that is, the county has a high tax rate and a poor tax base. Therefore, even though citizens willingly tax themselves, the average income is so low that Enduro ranks next to the last in the state in the number of property value dollars spent per pupil, approximately one-tenth of the same value as the state's highest ranking district.

Performance measures started out well below the state norms in Enduro and have remained there. In 1991 the district was able to meet only 39 percent of the performance standards established by the state. In 1992 it met less than half of the state's accreditation standards. A comprehensive review of the district by the state department of education found that, despite a committed group of teachers and administrators and some pockets of excellence, the district suffered from fragmented reforms, inadequate or nonexistent planning, a preoccupation with politics, low expectations and a general lack of internal consistency and organizational consensus. There are some plans that focus on improving the quality of curriculum and others that address basic problems, but these are significant exceptions in an environment that seems to seek the path of greatest comfort.

The Culture of Poverty and the Politics of Race

It is impossible to describe barriers to change and academic improvement in rural, at-risk school districts without examining two interrelated factors: the culture of poverty and the politics of race. The power and prevalence of these conditions cannot be underestimated and must be confronted by policymakers, practitioners, and the public if school reform is to succeed in the districts that need it most.

The culture of poverty. Devastating teenage pregnancy and infant mortality rates; high numbers of students from single parent families (78 percent in one district); and virtually all students (97-100

percent) receiving free or reduced lunches are the conditions that exist in the classrooms in poor districts and are challenges teachers and administrators face in trying to serve their students. Teachers spoke passionately about their students' disadvantages: "They come from homes with no books and no cars, the majority from single parent homes, with no one who can help with even the simplest homework."

The poverty of these areas involves more than a significant lack of financial resources. As one Chamber of Commerce member asserted, "Our poverty is the base of most of our problems and it isn't just the dollars. It is the attitude of defeat that poverty brings. We are our own worst enemy." In another community, a leader explained that the culture of poverty is all about a belief system that has at its core, "I ain't got much, so what I got I am going to keep."

This cultural norm discourages risk-taking and vision-building on the part of education stake holders, from school board members to teachers and teaching assistants. It serves as a ceiling that frames low expectations for student achievement:

- When Enduro was challenged to reduce its drop-out rate and thus change its status from "at risk" to "warning," an administrative decision was made to temporarily lower the passing grade from 70 to 60.
- The best and brightest students in Enduro and Sylvan One see no reason to reinvest themselves in a low-performing school system and look for a one-way ticket out, creating a serious "brain drain." Even more disturbing, this trend is accepted with a fatalistic attitude and no expectation of change.
- The response to state accountability systems appears to be an attempt to avoid failure rather than to seek success. The pervasive fear of being labeled is exemplified in this statement by a principal whose school had been identified as low performing: "It was the most humiliating year of my life."

Low expectations and unwillingness to take risks are serious barriers to today's school reforms which call for a more rigorous curriculum with higher standards and more complex assessments. These change efforts demand that educators change the way they govern, select and use textbooks, administer and report on test results, and recruit and reward teachers and administrators. They require educators to question and challenge their own practices, often in very public ways.

Given past failures, currently "impaired" or "probationary" status, and a history of not questioning, it is difficult for at-risk schools to make this leap. As an educational consultant familiar with one such district commented, "There is a lot of good will and teachers want to do what it is best for the kids, but it is difficult for them to imagine what it would be like to re-educate those students. They cannot have high expectations for students when they do not have high expectations for themselves." Indeed, the culture of poverty cultivates low esteem not only among individuals, but the school organization in general.

The politics of race. Tightly coupled with the culture of poverty is the politics of race so prevalent in these communities. Local leaders in Sylvan One are frank about the problem. One claimed the system to be congested with racial discord that feeds on itself; another called the district's inadequate resources and poor student performance "a direct result of racism."

The findings indicate that racism is linked with elements of classicism or separatism as well. A South Carolinian familiar with Sylvan County claimed, "The community is starkly split along racial and socio-economic lines with the white power structure being reticent about providing quality education to black children." Unfortunately, local interviews confirm this conclusion.

The forces toward maintaining the status quo are strong. On the one hand, white business leaders said they "could not afford to lead" efforts to break down de facto dual school systems in their communities. On the other, black leaders in several of the districts did not question the dual school systems. Instead, they appeared to embrace the modicum amount of authority they had recently acquired. They also reject the prospect of help from those whose children are in private academies. As one retired black educator said, "If their hearts aren't with us, we don't want their help."

The politics of race, when negative, can breed fragmentation among local decision makers who must implement policy, and can stymie educational leaders trying to build consensus for change. Results were seen in a number of districts:

- A new superintendent with a successful track record in ameliorating racial problems in the 1960s and 70s has difficulty gaining the trust of his constituencies, both black and white;
- Out of fear for "the powers that be," teachers are unwilling to talk about the role of business, county council, or school board in supporting their efforts to change practice; and,
- Students, aware of their segregated roles in the community, are distrustful of adults, ill-prepared, and afraid to enter an integrated world.

In these instances, the politics of race has become a preoccupation for power and control that further harms children already at risk for school failures.

Supporting Reform and the Role of External Agencies

Educators in these at-risk districts need help and they know it. While the reforms of the last decade have brought more staff development to assist them, and there have been some performance improvements, much of the support for school reform in these districts falls short of the mark. The three main causes for this gap were:

1. *The professional development offered for teachers and administrators is inconsistent with the kind of school reforms needed in these districts.* The professional development that educators now receive involves skills-based and individually-geared workshops that are adequate for introducing new information, but they are generally inadequate for dealing with the complex social and academic problems educators collectively face.

   Districts need to be funded adequately enough in order to pursue comprehensive staff development related to governance, curriculum, integrated human services, and assessment. These are not easily taught in one-shot workshops; rather, such fundamental reforms require that local educators work together over time to consider new theories, ideas, and materials. They must have access to a wide variety of professional development networks and experts. No longer can states' and districts' teacher evaluation systems explicitly discourage risk-taking and collaborative problem solving; nor can they be disconnected from the larger professional development needs of local educators.

Currently, much of the curricular reform underway (e.g., whole language instruction, working with manipulatives, and cooperative learning) is inconsistent with the professional development offered. For example, new reforms ask teachers to teach in different ways (i.e., as facilitators of cooperative student work groups) but the type and quality of the in-service offered often continues to reinforce traditional and less effective methods of teaching.

2. *Although state departments of education are moving from a regulatory to supportive position for at-risk districts, they still have a long way to go.* In fact, in several of the states studied, the departments were in the midst of restructuring while they were supposed to be helping at-risk districts with their restructuring efforts. For these state agencies there are new programs to learn, new roles to fit into, and even new communication behaviors to employ. Providing effective technical assistance to at-risk districts is an enormous strain on their capacities.

   The majority of district educators interviewed did not view state department officials as effective change agents for them. One teacher summed it up by comparing the state-local relationship to England and its colonies: "They are over there and we are over here, and they do not care and don't know very much." Another claimed that departmental officials still arrive with the attitude, "I know what you need but this is what we are offering." These comments are hardly surprising given the widespread perception among local practitioners interviewed in four states that, "Ninety percent of the state department staff has not been in a school in years."

3. *The role of higher education in assisting these at-risk districts is blatantly absent.* For the most part, educators in these districts "have to seek help from the University." In very few instances was there evidence that a university took a proactive stance toward their problems. Where there was positive involvement by higher education, such as in the Mississippi Delta, that assistance was typically being provided through grants and "soft" money or being conducted by outside organizations and foundations. There is not a systemic effort to connect the resources of higher education to the problems of local school communities.

   Because of their location, educators in most of these districts did not have easy access to colleges and universities. In South Carolina teachers lamented that they "never see a professor," while district administrators could not name the deans of schools of education. At the same time, interviews with university administrators and professors revealed their institutions' benign neglect of local school districts. In North Carolina an official of a regional university near an at-risk district commented, "Our sense of separateness is pervasive."

   With few exceptions, state universities and colleges that could facilitate changes have not made a commitment to supporting these isolated, rural school districts. This neglect has played out in several ways. Most prominently, local educators have not been able to develop teachers' capacity through the use of student teachers and interns, a strategy employed quite effectively in professional development schools. One teacher reported sadly, "We have not had a student teacher in a real long time; however, we almost did last year. One of our graduates wanted to return to do her student teaching in the district but her college would not let her. They would not send a supervisor here. I think the commute was too long."

The Limitations of Current Accountability Systems

The public policy answer to creating better schools in the Southeast, as in much of the rest of the nation, has been to mandate and regulate performance. In the first wave of school reform, the typical legislative response was to pass a series of statewide policy standards, such as more stringent graduation requirements. In the second wave, new standards that included the use of criterion-referenced tests were implemented. These standards were generally determined by state initiative, passed by legislatures or state boards of education, and mandated to local school districts.

Little concern was raised about this top-down approach in the Southeast because state standards carried few meaningful consequences. Policymakers, recognizing the problem, responded predictably: by adding state sanctions for failure to meet state mandated accountability standards. Four of the six SERVE states have adopted so-called "high stakes" accountability systems, providing for direct state intervention or takeover of districts that continually fail to meet accountability standards. A fifth state is seriously considering this approach.

Instead of clarifying state performance expectations, as policymakers hoped, accountability systems have created more confusion. Local school districts are unclear about state expectations. This confusion is because some states in the Southeast have put high stakes accountability procedures in place before defining curriculum standards or the appropriate assessments for measuring these standards. Their confusion is manifested in the following ways:

- Districts, particularly low-performing districts, are not sure what curricula their schools are accountable for, what measures will most appropriately determine student learning, and what assistance is available to help them meet these new standards.
- Teacher evaluation systems are inconsistent with emerging educational developments which emphasize broader curriculum frameworks, higher order thinking, more authentic assessments, and teacher professionalism.
- Staff development practices still reflect past practices which has led to a fragmented approach to preparing a professional work force for school reform.

Interviews revealed a large gap in perceptions and a high degree of administration at the local level. In general, superintendents' thinking is different than the rest of their employees. They have come to accept the notion of accountability and are speaking the language of reform. As a Georgia superintendent said, "I think changing their image to a support team rather than a watchdog is something they (state departments of education) need to do, but they need to be aware it will take a while for the state's teachers and administrators to develop the kind of trust needed for reform to succeed."

Indeed, at the principals' level, there is evidence of real anger and frustration. As those most responsible for implementing shifts in policy, principals are caught in the middle. According to one principal, "We tend not to do what we know how to do." Site-based leadership is difficult when principals spend all their energy dealing with day-to-day issues. Behavior is motivated by trying to keep a job in the same school. Teachers, who have seen reforms come and go, are cynical. As one teacher exclaimed, "If the state has an answer for us, tell us! Show us! Don't just put on a show."

Part of the problem is that policymakers have not anticipated that their desires for better schools exceeded the capacity of some districts to overcome long histories of inadequate performance. In other words, there has been a gap between state expectations and local capacity or commitment.

For example:

- There is little local sense of commitment or ownership in the state's goals and standards which were largely determined externally. Local districts comply with the accountability procedures because they have no other choice.
- The accountability systems send mixed messages to local districts. First, schools have to be in deep trouble in order to get help. Then, when a low-performing district does improve, it loses its eligibility for resources to sustain the improvements.
- In districts where low performance in schools has become the norm, a general acceptance of such a condition pervades the thinking in the district. When these districts are threatened with state sanctions, the consequences are seen as inconsequential.

In short, there are limits to the effectiveness of centralized regulation and mandates. Those limits include the recognition that public policymakers must sometimes trust the practitioners, realizing that they want to make their schools better. They must understand the overwhelming odds that historically low-performing districts confront.

Policy Concept: A New Framework for Accountability

It is time for policymakers to examine best practices in accountability and identify what a good accountability system would look like. Recent information indicates that an effective state accountability system:

- Increases the possibility of best practices occurring;
- Decreases the possibility of harmful practices occurring; and,
- Promotes self-assessment designed to identify and alter policies and practices that are damaging or ineffective.

However, the data collected for this report reveals that traditionally low-performing school districts have a difficult time meeting these criteria, both in developing local accountability systems and in fitting into state accountability systems.

If the Southeast is going to develop world-class schools and prepare all young people for the demands of the future, states must hold themselves to a standard of accountability that reflects this goal. They must also provide a framework that supports all schools being able to meet this standard. The following recommendations suggest ways to begin the process.

Recommendation 1: Moratorium

It may not be too extreme to suggest that some states call an outright moratorium or hiatus on statewide accountability systems to provide an opportunity to bring the various elements of accountability into alignment. Less extreme, but no less important, is the concept of making mid-course corrections to achieve such an alignment.

Ideally, a well-conceived framework for accountability would begin with consensus around goals, standards, and assessment. It would provide the time and funds needed for training, staff development, and local planning. And it would focus from the start on schools likely to fail under more demanding accountability standards, a focus that would result in the state marshalling its resources in an attempt to make all schools successful schools. In short, a new accountability framework would be based on a goal of being true partners in accountability, with the state anticipating the nods of local school systems and working with schools to frame new standards and assessment practices.

Recommendation 2: Inclusion

To succeed, new standards and assessment practices need to win the support of practitioners who will implement them. Practitioners are the ones who will be asked to make the changes needed to meet the new standards. Accountable states would work to win the support of practitioners by involving them throughout the process of establishing new standards and assessment models. States such as South Carolina and Florida, which have implemented curriculum development initiatives that were inclusive and that resulted in building consensus, could serve as models for such efforts.

Recommendation 3: Needs Assessment

Before marshalling resources, fully accountable states would perform needs assessments to determine what types of resources are necessary for at-risk school systems. Based on these needs assess-

ments, states should then make available traditional and non-traditional responses which could range from funding for extended instructional or contractual school years to early education opportunities; from quality staff development support to on site facilitation in planning and curriculum revision; and from assistance in building local school and business partnerships to providing family intervention specialists.

Recommendation 4: Community Partnerships

The goal of truly accountable states would be to help develop high capacity communities that support high capacity school systems. This would mean enlarging the boundaries of traditional educational thinking to build partnerships with business leaders, economic development efforts, social service providers, and other community organizations.

Recommendation 5: Resources

A state working within a new framework for accountability would earmark additional resources for systems that are not likely to succeed in a new era of accountability. At the same time, the state would call on local school systems to design staff development plans that are in alignment with the demands of new accountability standards, adhere to the best thinking and practices of staff development, and are themselves accountable. In providing additional resources, accountable states would also address the issue of educators' time: time for training, time for planning, time for inquiry, and time for reflection.

Recommendation 6: Support Organizations

All six states in the region need to examine regional center models, such as the Delta Consortium in Mississippi, the regional school service centers in Georgia, or the newly developed math and science hubs in South Carolina. These examples are characterized by accessibility, responsiveness, and tangible services - traits that would be the key to the success of any regional support organizations.

Recommendation 7: Site-based Accountability Systems

If the goal of states is to help develop high capacity school systems, part of that capacity building in many states includes supporting structures and resources for school/community teams to evaluate the school's effectiveness. Some schools in the Southeast have moved from reviewing effectiveness based on singular emphasis on small changes in test scores to a more comprehensive assessment (e.g., based on student portfolios or other samples of student work, focus groups with parents and students, and action research). These efforts are more time-consuming than reviewing increases/decreases in test scores but worth the effort in keeping accountability tied to learning.

Recommendation 8: Higher Education Partnerships

In addition, accountable states should broaden their expectations of higher education. The problems confronted by states seeking to create high capacity schools go beyond the parameters of schools of education, extending into the arenas of schools of social work, criminal justice, and specific disciplines such as mathematics and science. The challenge for fully accountable decision makers is to frame policies which convey to publicly-funded institutions of higher education both an obligation and an incentive to contribute to the public good by working to ensure that all school systems become high capacity systems.

A decade after this wave of school reform began, we are now ready to get it right. Policymakers, educators, and community leaders must not abandon the progress that has been made; rather, they must use the experience of six southeastern states to make the necessary corrections for the future. A new framework for state accountability systems must be built in order to move states toward a truly accountable system, one in which all school districts and all school children are given an equal opportunity to succeed.

The Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) is the federally funded education laboratory serving Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Governed by a coalition of business leaders, policymakers, and educators, SERVE works with states, districts and schools to improve educational outcomes, especially for at-risk and rural students. SERVE's mission is to promote and support the continuous improvement of educational opportunities for all learners in the southeast.