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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides questions and answers that point to the increasing interest that states have in developing, shaping, and evaluating the success of schools. The booklet highlights the analysis and recommendations of representatives of 10 states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, and South Carolina) who were assembled by the United States Department of Education to study recent changes in accountability policies. Recommendations include: (1) make the purpose of the system clear to schools and to the public; (2) coordinate state and local data systems to ensure collecting data of maximum usefulness to both; (3) establish a blue-ribbon, independent body to oversee the system and recommend adjustments; (4) use multiple indicators of performance, not just test scores, to provide a fair and integrated picture of schooling; (5) consider a broad range of help to encourage both absolute high performance and comparative high performance; (6) when states intervene in cases of poor school performance, they should proceed in fair and well-defined stages; and (7) make school and district performance data public. The booklet also contains data collected by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in the fall of 1987, including a summary of the key dimensions of the 50 states' performance-accountability systems. Every state must answer the following six questions when designing an accountability system: Who designs the system? What data will the state or district collect? At what levels should data be collected and used? To whom should the data be reported and in what form? Should schools be compared and, if so, in what ways? and Should consequences be linked to the findings of accountability reports, and, if so, which ones? (LMI)

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Measuring Up

Questions and Answers About State Roles in Educational Accountability

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More and more citizens want to know in concrete terms what they are receiving for their hard-earned tax dollar investments in education. Governors, legislators, State leaders, and blue-ribbon committees are being called upon to provide more financial support for public schools. They naturally want to know whether this support yields a return. They, therefore, need better information about student performance and school outcomes to hold schools accountable for results and improvement.

Terry Peterson, Study Group Chair

All of the facts in this booklet point to the increasing interest States have in developing, shaping, and evaluating ways of measuring the success of schools. This policy brief highlights the analysis and recommendations of representatives of 10 States who were assembled by the U.S. Department of Education to study recent changes in accountability policies. In addition, this booklet contains data collected by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in the fall of 1987.

MEASURING UP:

Questions and Answers About State Roles in Educational Accountability

How well are schools doing? And how do we know?

States try to measure school performance and report to the public.

Since 1981, States have increased their aid to local school districts dramatically—by a national average of 21 percent. States want to know the results of their spending in keeping with a general trend to collect and report performance data on public services. The comparative economic well-being of the State and Nation depends on increased levels of skills and literacy in the work force. States need to know if today's students are going to measure up. They need information to improve education effectively.

With performance data in hand, States are better able to design policies that do improve local schools. Performance data can identify which schools need help, suggest what kind they need, and determine when they need it. They can provide information upon which to waive regulations, reward excellence, or increase technical assistance or funding. These data have proved to be powerful policy tools that significantly influence what schools plan and teach.

Why do we need to know?

To hold schools accountable and help improve their performance.

Reliable information is the key to better performance in education as it is in business and government. In the past, most people judged their schools on the basis of personal knowledge. First-hand experience, community satisfaction, and a responsive principal were enough to convince most people that their schools were doing fine.

Today, States are developing, or requiring local districts to design, systems for collecting, reporting, and using objective data on student and school performance. The issue is "hot" because being held accountable to taxpayers, training the future work force, and improving the caliber of schools are important political issues.

State systems are in flux; 30 of the 50 States report that they are considering changes. Commonly, these "systems" evolve in incremental changes over time. New reports may be issued, and consequences may be linked to data the State has collected for years. Once established, these systems provide continuing information and therefore influence how future school success will be judged.

What would educators gain from an accountability system?

Better information with which to plan and operate.

Information about the results of schooling can help both policymakers and educators judge the overall merit of schools. When information is detailed enough to identify strengths and weaknesses within a school, it can be used by local educators to demonstrate the merits and plan the improvement of local education programs. Data enable teachers and principals to adjust curricula, instruction, and teaching materials and to monitor success at meeting goals. In addition, States can offer additional policy rewards and incentives for performance.

Then why do these systems involve political tensions?

They affect *who* will be held accountable to *whom* for *what*.

They may become lightning rods for tension between State and local officials. Local districts fear losing control to the State; educators fear being judged unfairly; and everyone fears improper emphasis upon what is easily measured at the expense of what is most important. When high stakes consequences, such as large cash awards or district consolidations, are linked to performance, incentives exist for deception or manipulation of data in order for a school to look good.

The resolution of these tensions lies in finding a politically acceptable agreement between the public and educators about the purpose of the system and the fairness of its operation. While policymakers and the public need an honest accounting, professional educators need assurance that their work will be judged fairly. The Study Group recommends creation of a blue-ribbon, independent body to oversee the adjustment and improvement of this process.

What are the toughest choices?

Decisions that involve complex trade-offs.

Creating an accountability system requires tough choices on issues involving complex trade-offs. Many important dimensions of school performance cannot be easily measured. Nonetheless, policymakers seek clarity of purpose, mutuality of understanding, and fairness of operation to prevent subversion of a system that local officials might consider unfair. A sound educational accountability system, therefore, must consider both:

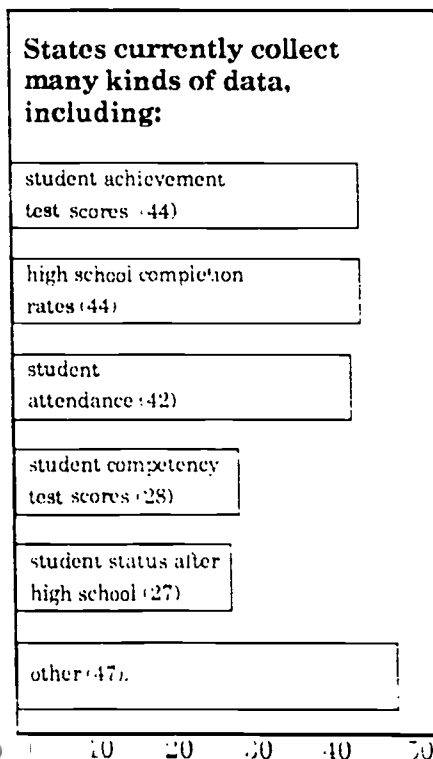
- State accountability *and* local autonomy.
- The need to know how well schools are doing in overall performance (excellent, mediocre, or poor) *and* the need to know other information about specific areas (such as writing skills, knowledge of foreign languages, minority success, or teacher quality) to improve diagnoses and plan improvement.
- The need for Statewide comparability *and* the need for local ownership.
- The usefulness, thoroughness, and fairness of collecting and analyzing new data *and* the the burden of paperwork, time, and effort it takes to do so.
- The economy of easy assessment methods, such as nationally normed standardized tests of basic skills *and* the importance of other measures of school performance, such as assessments of problem-solving skills or participation in the arts.
- A State's desire to assess local schools and help them improve *and* consideration of the State budget, staff expertise, political climate, and technology available to do so.

What does the State have to do?

Answer six key questions.

Public disclosure of performance data is likely to help improve schools when data are consistent with State and local goals, results are reported to schools and the public in a useful and timely way, and local districts have the resources and ability to act upon what they learn.

An accountability system can backfire if test scores are all that count or if school comparisons are unfair. Although no two States have devised identical systems, every State must answer these six key questions when designing a system:



Who designs the system?

Most States report that they retain primary responsibility for the design, implementation, and use of their accountability reporting systems themselves (see table, page 6). Two States, Minnesota and Vermont, require local districts to do so, and nine report that they share the responsibility with local districts. It is generally agreed that State systems must be coordinated with district and school accountability systems.

What data will the State or district collect?

Ideally, data should:

- measure the central and most important features of schooling;
- measure what is taught or considered important;
- provide information that can be acted upon;
- focus on school-level information (not just State averages);
- allow for fair comparisons; and
- maximize the usefulness and minimize the burden of collecting data.

These data can be presented as:

- National, State, district, and school-building averages;

Data of school performance may include:

Indicators of Results

- Graduation, dropout rates;
- Teacher, student attendance;
- Student writing samples;
- Achievement and competency test scores;
- Students' problem-solving skills;
- Participation in arts and extracurricular activities;
- SAT/ACT scores;
- National Assessment of Educational Progress scores;
- Student status after high school;
- Employer satisfaction;
- Progress toward State Board goals;
- Course enrollments (in advanced placement, foreign languages, sciences, arts);
- Percent of students meeting State university entrance requirements;

Indicators about Policy

- Amount and value of homework;
- Class size;
- Placement in academic tracks;
- Average teacher salary;
- Teacher qualifications;
- Per pupil spending;
- Implementation of State reforms;

Indicators about Context

- Community support and wealth;
- Student characteristics of race, wealth, language, parents' education.

- Changes over time: since last year; since 5 years ago; since major legislation or appropriations; or
- Distribution of achievement over subgroups: racial/ethnic groups; vocational education or college-bound students; groups with limited English proficiency; males and females.

Despite the widespread collection of varied data, only 24 States say they collect and use data based on an integrated set of indicators.

At what levels—school, district, State, or individual student—should data be collected and used?

The Study Group recommends publicly reporting performance data at the school-building level, as well as at the district and State levels. To do so, some tests, like promotion or high school graduation exams, must be taken by every student, whereas others can be given to a sample of students. State and local collection of data should be coordinated.

To whom should the data be reported, and in what form?

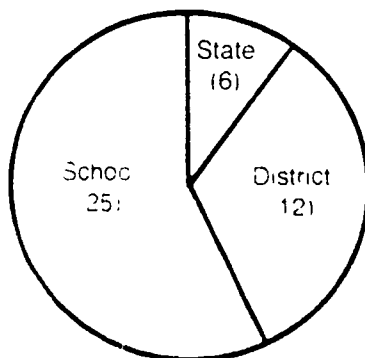
Some States create comprehensive "report cards" on every school and release them directly to the public, press, and schools; others report raw data to districts, who themselves report it to the schools and the public. Still other States only make performance data available to the public on request.

A number of States offer workshops to help schools and the press understand the format and interpret the findings of State reports. The Study Group recommends making special efforts to report and interpret data clearly, in forms that are intellectually honest and understandable to parents, teachers, and the public. The decisions a State makes about who is going to get information, in what form, and with what provision for interpretation are related to one another and to the purpose and effectiveness of the system.

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), States now vary in reporting data. Twenty-four States do not report school-level achievement test data to the media, parents, or the public. On the other hand, 38 States report these data to principals, 36 to districts, 19 to teachers, 18 to the media, 17 to parents, and 17 to the public.

Forty-three States make performance data public.

Segments show the smallest unit assessed and the number of States reporting data about that unit to the public.



Should schools be compared? And, if so, in what ways?

A controversial and important decision each State makes is whether to compare the performance of schools, and if so, upon what dimensions.

Should schools be compared:

- With local or State-specified goals?
- With past performance (demonstrating improvement)?
- With test norms?
- With all other schools (as rankings)?
- With similar schools?

If the latter, what are the important aspects of similarity: free lunch enrollment, racial/ethnic composition, per pupil spending, or parents' education?

Currently, according to CCSSO, 22 States report comparisons of schools' test results. Comparing schools on other dimensions of performance and against multiple indicators is more complex. Although 45 States collect contextual/demographic information, only 23 use this data to interpret student achievement or performance on other indicators.

California and South Carolina have pioneered the creation of "comparison bands" in which the performance of individual schools is shown in relation to that of similar schools. California reports each school's performance with relation to a "floating band" of the 160 schools across the State nearest it in demographic characteristics. South Carolina compares each school's performance to that of others with similar student bodies and calculates each school's expected scores on the basis of previous test results. When such bands are not used, it is difficult to distinguish the results of good schooling from those of social privilege. On the other hand, when they are used, there is the possibility that they can institutionalize lower expectations for disadvantaged students. The goal is a system that recognizes social context but holds high expectations for all students.

Should consequences (such as rewards or sanctions) be linked to the findings of accountability reports? And, if so, which ones?

Public disclosure of performance data has in itself powerful consequences for education. Some States feel the intrinsic value of improved education requires little or no additional policy incentives. Others hope effective accountability systems will enhance local autonomy by relieving successful schools of some State regulation. Most States also use collected data to provide rewards and sanctions as policy incentives for improvement.

States that formally recognize outstanding school performance need to communicate their selection criteria clearly. Some States recognize schools for both absolute high performance (ranking near the top of all schools in the State) and comparative high performance (ranking near the top of schools with similar student bodies or improving significantly over past performance). Only one-third of the States that recognize outstanding schools report that doing so is automatically triggered by high school assessment results, without an additional nomination or application process.

As a last resort, six States may intervene in local district management in response to low school performance. This may mean designating "bankruptcy" or "impairment" and ultimately either replacing the local superintendent and board or requiring consolidation with a nearby school district.

What States are doing with performance data

According to a study by CCSSO, States

Recognize one of the following	46
Teachers	46
Students	36
Schools	33
Districts	14
Require local improvement planning	14
Allocate funds for remedial programs	9
Intervene in local management	6
Provide financial incentives	5
Withhold funds	5
Waive regulations	2

KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE 50-STATE PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

State	Level	Indicator System	Test Type	Public Report			Compare Context	Policy Links	
				School	District	State			
Alabama	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Alaska	None	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arizona	State	No	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Arkansas	State	No	Both	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
California	Mixed	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Colorado	Mixed	Yes	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Connecticut	State	Yes	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Delaware	State	No	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
DC	State ¹	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes ¹	Yes	No	Yes
Florida	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Georgia	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hawaii	State ¹	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes ¹	Yes	Yes	Yes
Idaho	State	No	Achievement	No	No	No	No	No	No
Illinois	Mixed	Yes	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Indiana	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Iowa	None	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kansas	State	Yes	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Kentucky	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Louisiana	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maine	State	No	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Maryland	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Massachusetts	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Michigan	State	No	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Minnesota	Local	No	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Mississippi	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Missouri	State	No	Both	No ²	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Montana	None	No	Achievement ³	No	No	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nebraska	None	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nevada	State	Yes	Both	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
New Hampshire	State	No	Achievement	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

State	Level	Indicator System	Test Type	Public Report			Compare Context	Policy Links	
				School	District	State			
New Jersey	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Mexico	Mixed	Yes	Both	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New York	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
North Carolina	State	No	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
North Dakota	None	No	Achievement ³	No ²	No ²	Yes	Yes	No	No
Ohio	Mixed	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Oklahoma	State	No	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Oregon	Mixed	Yes	Both	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Pennsylvania	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rhode Island	State	Yes	Achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
South Carolina	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
South Dakota	State	No	Achievement	No	No	No	No	No	No
Tennessee	State	No	Both	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Texas	State	Yes	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Utah	Mixed	Yes	Both	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Vermont	Local	Yes	Competency	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	No
Virginia	State	No	Both	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Washington	State	Yes	Achievement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
West Virginia	Mixed	Yes	Both	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Wisconsin	Mixed	No	Both	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Wyoming	State	No	Achievement	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Totals	S=35 L=2 M=9 N=5	Yes=23 No=25 N/A=3	A=18 C=1 Both=29 N/A=3	Yes=25 No=23 N/A=3	Yes=37 No=11 N/A=3	Yes=43 No=4 N/A=4	Yes=38 No=8 N/A=5	Yes=21 No=26 N/A=4	Yes=25 No=22 N/A=4

SOURCE: Council of Chief State School Officers 1987 Survey and related State documents.

- 1 The District of Columbia and Hawaii each operate a single system in which the State and the district are the same.
- 2 Missouri and North Dakota send school—(plus North Dakota district)—level data to parents but not to the press.
- 3 Montana and North Dakota offer local districts the option of using a State achievement test.

Recommendations

Be Clear **Be Fair** **Be Open**

On the basis of their experience, Study Group members recommend:

1. Make the purpose of the system clear to schools and to the public.
2. Coordinate State and local data systems to ensure collecting data of maximum usefulness to both.
3. Establish a blue-ribbon, independent body to oversee the system and recommend adjustments.
4. Use multiple indicators of performance (not just test scores) to give a fair and integrated picture of schooling.
5. Consider a broad range of help—incentives, rewards, and relief from regulation—to encourage both absolute high performance (ranking near the top of all schools in the State) and comparative high performance (schools making significant improvement or ranking near the top of schools with similar student bodies).
6. If State intervention is considered appropriate in cases of poor school performance, proceed in fair and well-defined stages. Give local districts ample support and opportunity to improve on their own before the State intervenes.
7. Make school and district performance data public.

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The complete report of the OERI Study Group is available for \$4.00 each from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402 (request stock number 065-000-00352-0). Send check or money order payable to "Superintendent of Documents."



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