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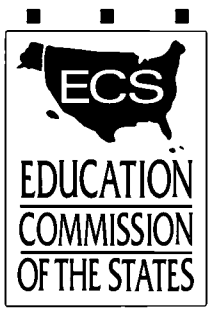
ABSTRACT

Ways in which state governments can effectively deal with seriously underachieving schools are presented in this report. Governors and other state leaders are beginning to understand how important it is for students to be better prepared and that, as policymakers, they are obligated to demand accountability from students, from schools, and from districts. However, accountability for learning is difficult to implement; a good state accountability system,contains the following eight components: (1) uphold uniform state standards; (2) create consequential roles for school districts; (3) consider different schools' needs and capabilities; (4) give schools the freedom and resources they need to improve; (5) provide real assistance to low-performing schools; (6) act promptly to salvage children's opportunities; (7) provide good information to parents and citizens; and (8) do not tolerate nonperformance at the school, district, or state level. Examples of what states have done and what lessons have been learned are provided. (RJM)

Accountability — State and Community Responsibility



Accountability — State and Community Responsibility

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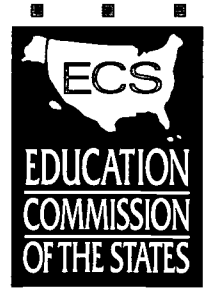

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The "Accountability for Learning: What Does it Take?" meeting was sponsored by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and hosted by the Ohio ECS commissioners in order to share lessons across states about what interventions work to improve student achievement and how states balance local control with public accountability.

ECS gratefully acknowledges the contributions from the following people:

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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the idea that states could, or would, step in and intervene in local school districts because students were not achieving enough was almost unthinkable. Now, however, state intervention not only is acceptable among a majority of the states, but is becoming a major policy tool to deal with seriously underachieving schools or districts. But it's a tough assignment.

School districts, for the most part, are doing as well as they have in the past, in the opinion of Governor George Voinovich of Ohio, but that is not enough. In some ways, he told a recent conference on state accountability for learning, "we are more at risk than we were in 1983," the year a national commission shocked the country with its warning about the eroding quality of the American public school system. Schools, even the best of them, are not responding adequately to the changing demographics of the student population, nor are they doing enough to retain students until graduation, Voinovich said.

Governors and other state leaders are beginning to understand how important it is for students to be better prepared and that, as policymakers, they are obligated to demand accountability of students and from schools and districts. The Ohio legislature, for example, wrestled with this problem in 1997, finally passing an accountability measure that calls for community reckoning of local school efforts and results.

Ohio's Education Commission of the States' (ECS) commissioners co-hosted a one-day conference (*Accountability for Learning: What Does It Take?*) with ECS on October 30-31, 1997, in Columbus to discuss issues around the state role in accountability. Representatives from nine other states with accountability laws were invited to share their "lessons learned." The discussions made it evident that state accountability policies are evolving quickly, but also, as Voinovich pointed out, that "accountability for learning sounds easy but is very difficult to implement."

Governors and other state leaders are beginning to understand how important it is for students to be better prepared and that, as policymakers, they are obligated to demand accountability of students and from schools and districts.

The Framework for State Accountability Policies

The Columbus meeting contrasted sharply with a Baltimore conference earlier in the year, also held to discuss state accountability policies. The Baltimore meeting exposed the frustration of policymakers with school/district takeovers or threats of them for academic bankruptcy reasons. States are not good substitutes for local leadership and commitment to change, participants agreed, but they also acknowledged that few options other than strong interventions are available to them.

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Experts who addressed the Columbus meeting, however, provided more specific information about education accountability policies. An accountability system "doesn't stop until every child is in a good school," Paul Hill of the University of Washington emphasized to participants. He drew upon research to outline the "do's and don'ts" of a state accountability system. Such a system, he said should include the following:

- Struggling schools should not be labeled without a review of their circumstances and capacities. This means that student performance needs to be the only tool for identifying low-performing schools, but those below a threshold may be in one of several categories — capable of improvement with help, unlikely to improve without dramatic action, or failed and in need of reconstitution. Although social and demographic factors can be considered, no school should be exempt from the need to improve.

- Information about schools must be simple and easy to understand. School profiles should include student proficiency in reading, math and other subjects, as well as comparison with average scores of similar schools. Absolute score levels, however, should not be obscured by complex weighting schemes.

- States must have the capacity to provide real help to struggling schools. State policies and actions must differentiate the kinds of help schools need, consider the help to be temporary, strengthen the school staff even if that means changing it, and replace schools that cannot improve.

- Forms of assistance need to be diverse and from many sources. Hill's checklist of who should be involved and how shows that colleges and universities, voluntary school networks, and nonprofit or for-profit providers are much more likely sources of comprehensive assistance than are state education departments, educational service districts or local school districts. Failing schools need help with everything from new curricula to inservice teacher training, whole-school improvement models, principal retraining and replacement, and parent outreach.

- Local school boards should make initial judgments about low-performing schools. Local boards need to distinguish those schools that are improving from those needing action, allocate resources to the neediest schools, certify plans and set expected improvement levels, and identify schools not improving as expected. States still need to hold local boards accountable, rewarding them for their accountability and success at turning schools around or imposing sanctions for failure to act or to equalize school funding.

Ultimately, according to Hill, an accountability system has four elements. These include:

1. *Measurement* — of student success at state standards

2. *Reporting* — to inform districts, schools, parents and neighborhoods

3. *Labeling* — to designate schools for rewards, assistance or dramatic remedial action

4. *Remedies* — to help children in low-performing schools by supporting teachers and principals who know how to improve, providing guidance and help when schools flounder and replacing schools that cannot improve. It also includes review of assistance measures to be sure they are working.

CRITERIA FOR A GOOD STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

- *Upholds uniform state standards*
- *Creates consequential roles for school districts*
- *Considers different schools' needs and capabilities*
- *Gives schools the freedom and resources they need to improve*
- *Provides real assistance to low-performing schools*
- *Acts promptly to salvage children's opportunities*
- *Provides good information to parents and citizens*
- *Does not tolerate nonperformance at school, district or state level.*

Source: Paul Hill

Hill acknowledged that schools cannot be accountable for students who are not there or who misbehave, "but the worst thing schools can do is assume students won't respond to reasonable demands." One also cannot assume how teachers' unions will react to accountability policies, although Hill believes job guarantees and school seniority provisions in contracts "are totally incompatible with accountability systems."

From the Trenches

Among Hill's components of state accountability action, the one that has most concerned Ohio is the need to keep decisions and leadership local as much as possible. Both Voinovich and State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Goff, drawing from takeover experiences in Cleveland and Youngstown, called for empowering local communities as a major strategy to improve schools.

"If everyone in a community knows what is going on, the pressure will be on to improve schools."

"If everyone in a community knows what is going on, the pressure will be on to improve schools," the governor said. He supported the recent transfer of responsibility for the Cleveland schools to the mayor's office because the schools now are in the hands "of people who can get the job done." Voinovich also sought — and won — governance changes at the state level. The state board of education is now a hybrid of both elected and appointed members, making it more accountable to the governor.

Goff, who likened the takeover situations to a Vietnam syndrome — can't win and can't get out — said Ohio's move toward stronger accountability policies began when the state board realized its evaluation process of local districts "never asked whether students were learning."

Using assessment data, the state identified 48 "nonperforming" districts. From the two that it finally assumed control of, "we learned we could clean up the administrative and fiscal issues, but we didn't know how to get things back on track so we could assure academic achievement," said Goff.

Ohio's new accountability legislation will collect data on how well school districts perform in five subject areas, as well as attendance and graduation rates. School districts will be rated, and the information will be reported to parents. The state essentially is saying, according to Goff, "Here is where you are, get your community involved and let's see what progress you can make. If you don't show progress, we are interested in knowing what you can do about it."

Another Type of Data Collection for Accountability

For several years, agricultural statistician William Sanders labored almost anonymously in perhaps the largest longitudinal data collection on students ever. He directs the Value-Added Research and Assessment Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, which annually analyzes assessment results from students in grades 2-8. The legislature began the testing program in 1991, and Sanders began collecting data in 1992. This value-added analysis has convinced him that the classroom, rather than the school, is "the real functional unit" for accountability purposes. The cumulative effects of teachers on student academic achievement is what policymakers need to look at, he told the Columbus conference.

The cumulative effects of teachers on student academic achievement is what policymakers need to look at.

Data from the Tennessee system show the following:

- The single largest factor affecting academic growth of student populations is differences in effectiveness of individual classroom teachers. Class size or prior achievement patterns pale in comparison to the effects of teacher quality.

- Teacher effects are cumulative and additive with little evidence that students can compensate later for a poor teaching experience. For example, he said, "a student with three poor teachers in a row will be 52 percentile points below a student with three good teachers in a row." These effects last at least four years beyond a positive or negative teaching experience.

- Students who have been low achievers are the first to benefit as teacher effectiveness improves. In fact, it is only when lower-achieving students get top teachers that "you see a year's worth of growth in their academic achievement," Sanders said.

- Overall, school principals are exerting little effective leadership on the academic growth of their school population. Teacher effectiveness appears to happen independent of principal leadership. Sanders found the differences in effectiveness among teachers in the same school to be very significant.

He pointed out that the effects of good teachers do not seem to spread and that policies should support the identification of outstanding teachers. Good teachers, he said, are unlikely to come to the forefront naturally "because it is an unwritten rule in schools that you don't want to put yourself up."

Teacher effectiveness appears to happen independent of principal leadership.

Policies and research that focus on "the culture of the school" are misguided, according to Sanders' research. "Our evidence is counter to the idea that it is the culture of a school that makes a difference. If a good teacher moves someplace else, he or she will do just as well," he said.

This type of data has great diagnostic value, Sanders said. Local districts receive the data; it is up to them to decide if principals and individual teachers see the data. The value-added system requires testing every student in every grade, in every subject, every year. Sampling would make the data collection more cost effective, he noted.

Alternative Modes of Accountability

Most accountability systems are of the "BOS type" — Bureaucratic Operating Systems — in the opinion of policy analyst Chester Finn of the Hudson Institute. These systems are based on the belief that the only way to construct accountability is from the top down, a failing strategy, he says.

Finn's alternative is charter schools that cater to the needs of their "clients" and, thus, are accountable to them as well as meeting other kinds of public account-

ability. Finn's ideal accountability system would consist of: standards, information feedback that tells if the standards are being reached, and evidence that the school is making a difference or else is subject to consequences.

The difficult part of any accountability system is the last element — consequences. In the marketplace, as through a charter school system, consequences "are easy to imagine on the negative side, slightly harder to realize on the plus side," but waiting lists for some charter schools are one indicator, Finn said. He considers reconstitution another form of top-down accountability. Instead of limiting change to current structures, "we need to open windows and allow other, fresh ideas to come into education."

Finn admitted that "mistakes have been made" that allowed some "charlatans" to get into the charter school movement, but accountability of charter schools gets complicated if authorities want to regulate credentials and curriculum.

The difficult part of any accountability system is the last element — consequences.

Hill's recommendation for an alternative system stays within the structure of public education but provides a radical way to organize accountability. He described a plan being prepared for Washington's governor that would establish an independent state accountability commission. The sytem would invest in an array of private and public school assistance providers, oversee the relationships of districts with schools considered to need intervention, and order reconstitution or chartering of schools that do not improve.

A major benefit of this idea, Hill said, would be to take intervention strategies out of the political arena and provide consistent policy and standards even though political leadership might change. Such a commission, he explained, "would represent parents and neighborhoods, label schools without a conflict of interest in doing so, and be able to create new school options when district remedies fail."

What States Have Done

"The accountability circle is complete . . . when teachers, students, building and district leaders have clear instructional goals (standards), when states and local districts have developed sound assessment techniques and quality indicators, and when visible consequences for all involved parties have been put into practice (rewards and sanctions)."

An ECS report on education accountability systems among the states (*Education Accountability Systems in the 50 States*) shows that a majority of states have instituted several elements of a full accountability system.

"The accountability circle is complete," it says, "when teachers, students, building and district leaders have clear instructional goals (standards), when states and local districts have developed sound assessment techniques and quality indicators, and when visible consequences for all involved parties have been put into practice (rewards and sanctions)."

Most states now have standards and assessments and use multiple indicators for accountability. Just over one-fourth offer rewards; 31 impose sanctions either in statutes or regulations.

Beyond the statistics are stories of negotiations, compromises, creative technical assistance, and the building of relationships between state and local leadership. In fact, said Voinovich, "what you can't do through legislation, you can do through interpersonal skills. If the issue is accountability, then you have to talk to one another."

New York's accountability plan offers a plethora of technical assistance from the state, delivered personally to failing schools. In New York City, a regional office works directly with schools on the state's watch list through a "tough love" attitude. Once a school is on the list, it has only three years to prove it can make progress on student achievement, instead of the 10 years, often extended, allowed under previous accountability policies. Even if a school makes enough progress to get off the list, it receives some funding and remains on program-quality review for five years, unless the school reaches 90% compliance. "We don't want [the schools] to come back," said Shelia Evans-Tranumn, associate state commissioner of education.

Schools are moving off the watch list; in late 1997, the state announced that 15 of 92 New York City schools had been taken off the watch list. Some schools met the goals because of the money that was pumped into them, she said. The state has requested $100 million to finance the technical assistance, $10 million of which would be used for curriculum-based parent training.

Another area of interest is teacher quality. New York's school report cards included information on teacher preparation and certification, and the results have led to further policy discussions on teacher quality. "We are talking about decertifying teacher preparation programs that are not doing their job," said Evans-Tranumn.

The state accountability approach, she explained, holds local school boards directly accountable for school improvement, but the state contracts with universities for services, works with unions to provide teacher centers in buildings, and makes sure all federal and state funding are targeted at improving student achievement. "We play a brokering role," she said.

California, which approved an assessment plan last fall (but has yet to approve academic standards), "went through a lot of partisan bickering over different issues" that diverted it from considering a full accountability plan, said Kerry Mazzoni, chair of the Assembly Education Committee. The state has experience in takeovers, however, usually done for fiscal reasons. The state assumed control of the Compton district five years ago for financial reasons, but its presence has not led to greater student achievement.

Maryland averted state reconstitution of an alarming number of Baltimore City Schools, or even takeover of the city system itself, through a compromise that gave greater control over the Baltimore schools to the state in exchange for additional state funding. Negotiations over the new governance plan, admitted Pat Morris of the Baltimore City Schools, confronted a lot of challenges from the teachers' union.

Although **Missouri**'s accountability plan does not include takeovers, it does include an abrupt finality to school failure. The state will not get involved in takeovers because a district that is evaluated as "lapsing" two evaluations in a row ceases to exist, said Marilou Joyner, assistant commissioner of education. Even though the state prefers to see its role as a technical assistant, the accountability legislation gives it a "hammer" that districts are trying hard to avoid.

In **Kentucky**, the state's massive reform plan with specific rewards and sanctions has survived three changes of administration and significant changes in the legislature, but "key legislative leaders have been willing to take the heat," said Jim Jackson, division director of the Kentucky Department of Education. The state has intervened in smaller districts and is moving to do so in a larger one, but needs advice on how to get a community together behind school reform, he said. A colleague, Penny Sanders, now a partner in a private consulting firm, noted that Kentucky's reforms have been centered in the political process. "We need to shield the accountability process from political vagaries, but not politics," she said. "Public support of reform tends to cluster around seminal events so its involvement must be ongoing." Any accountability system, she also advised, must be totally defensible "or it will be challenged through the legal system."

What Are the Lessons Learned?

The growing interest in strong accountability systems among the states derives from a new phase in policy-making. "This is the first time in our nation's history when we are putting student learning ahead of people's welfare," said ECS President Frank Newman. As a new trend, accountability still relies on early lessons to build better systems. Some consensus is emerging from those lessons, however, including the following:

- State policies must support local decisionmaking to the fullest extent possible, including support for community mobilization for turning schools and/or districts around.
- Improving student achievement is the bottom line at all times and should drive collection and use of data, indicators of success and the extent of intervention actions.
- States cannot allow continued failure of any school/district, but they must institute stages of intervention that allow local districts and communities to build their capacity for improvement.
- States must maintain a balance between creative technical assistance and rigorous monitoring of schools and districts where intervention is necessary.
- Additional funding often may be necessary to obtain resources and support that schools and districts need to build their capacity for change.
- Interventions must last long enough to assure fundamental changes have been institutionalized.
- State policies must protect accountability measures, particularly those that involve strict sanctions, from political changes that could undermine efforts.
- State policies should encourage creative changes in governance, relationships with higher education institutions or other innovative strategies, perhaps embedding this idea in a reward system.

Voinovich, stressing the importance of involving as many people as possible in local accountability efforts, including the business community, gave conference participants some frank advice. "If you make the decision to take over schools or districts, do it right," he said, "but my advice is: don't do it."

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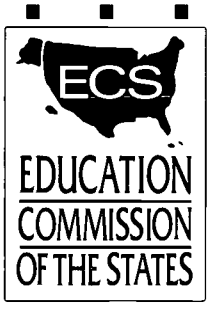

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