



Illustration by James Yang

# Locally Tailored Accountability

BUILDING ON YOUR STATE SYSTEM IN THE ERA OF **NCLB**

*Under No Child Left Behind, adhering to the state's accountability system is obligatory for any school district using federal funding. But what if a community finds that the state's approach does not fully address its own education concerns and values? While districts cannot eschew the state requirements, they can use the state system as a foundation on which to build a local accountability system tailored to their own vision of the education they want for their children.*

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This *Knowledge Brief* argues for the value of creating a district accountability system that complements the state's federally prescribed effort. It also identifies essential decisions that must be made in developing a local system and includes or points to resources that can help inform and guide the process.

*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) requires all states to develop an accountability system that includes statewide academic standards, state assessments aligned to the standards, and student performance levels established, minimally, at basic, proficient, and advanced — all with the ambitious goal of ensuring that, by school year 2013–14, every student in each state will perform at least at a proficient level.

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To reinforce this goal, interim targets, called *annual measurable objectives*, provide yearly checkpoints along the road from a state's baseline performance in 2001-2002 to full proficiency 12 years later. The consequences of repeatedly failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) are serious. Districts with schools in need of improvement must carry out a series of escalating interventions. In the earliest years, such districts must dedicate a percentage of school funding dollars to school choice and supplemental services. In later years, plans to fundamentally restructure the school must be developed and carried out.

As states push to meet tight timelines for implementing NCLB-compliant accountability systems, districts and their schools face their own challenges: In the short run, they need to ensure that their overall instructional program is aligned to the new state tests and to communicate what the new state assessment-and-accountability system will mean for their school community, from administrators and teachers to students and parents. Low-performing schools and their districts face the added worries about what happens if their improvement is not adequate under the new system.

## The Case for Local Accountability

At the local level, the effort of ramping up to meet new top-down accountability demands can seem overwhelming — sometimes eclipsing any thought of trying to do more than just comply. The idea of adding local accountability requirements to those of the state may not even cross the minds of local administrators and policymakers. Some education stakeholders may also be turned off by the concept of accountability in general, writing it off as simply disciplinary rather than helpful. Jamentz (2001) notes that when accountability

policies are externally imposed, set unattainable goals, fail to support school reform, and reward a view of success not shared across stakeholders, they are often perceived as punitive — rightly or wrongly.

But when accountability policies grow out of local needs, establish reachable goals, inform school reform, and reward outcomes that are prized locally, accountability policies can serve as a foundation for school improvement. Through thoughtful application of incentives and interventions, accountability systems

have the capacity to reward, inspire, and foster meaningful conversation about student and school performance. While a state system may offer compelling reasons to initiate school reform, a well-designed local accountability system has the potential to help guide that reform. Particularly for low-performing schools, local accountability plans can supplement state plans that

may not acknowledge or reward incremental growth or improvement in areas important to the local community.

Because the point is to have a system that addresses local needs, local systems will naturally differ from one another. These differences may involve either additional indicators or different uses of the same data sources. In one community, the system may focus on looking at existing results in alternate ways, perhaps including new indicators but requiring no new data collection apart from what is in the state system. For example, per NCLB's mandate, all state systems report growth in student test performance from below-proficient to proficient. A local system might opt to rely only on the state assessment but choose to also report growth from the below-basic to basic categories, even though federal law does not require or provide rewards based on such an indicator. Another system might employ



formulas that distill state and local assessment data and other data. At least one school district has chosen yet a different variation, classifying schools based both on whether the state system has identified a school for improvement *and* on local assessment performance. But regardless of its form, a local system designed to address community concerns and values can be invaluable for several reasons.

**Used with the state system, a local system can yield a more complete and nuanced picture of schools than the state system alone.**

As important as a state's accountability system is, when a district defines the status of its schools strictly by measures in that system (e.g., the percentage of students scoring proficient on standards-aligned statewide exams in reading and mathematics), it risks compromising — or, worse, ignoring entirely — some important additional education outcomes. Three kinds of examples illustrate this danger: Because the state system provides an incentive to maximize the percentage of proficient students, when a district has scarce resources, as many do, there is considerable pressure to focus most closely on students performing near the cut point that separates basic and proficient. The effort to maintain those who are already proficient and to move more above that cut point can short-change students who are performing at either the lowest or highest levels. In similar fashion, too much focus on the academic domains that are part of the federal AYP determination (reading, mathematics and, beginning in 2007–08, science) risks narrowing the curriculum. Finally, there is concern that when districts commit too much attention and support to areas included in the state system, little is left for programs, competitions, and initiatives that are

valued and would otherwise be supported, such as district science fairs, foreign language competitions, music and arts programs, Junior Achievement, life skills development, and programs that support student health and well-being.<sup>1</sup>

An improperly directed school improvement effort is another potential pitfall of omitting local accountability. When the local view of what constitutes a successful school is not fully represented in the federal view, districts may find themselves required

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to intervene in schools that are well regarded locally. This may cause a credibility problem for both the district and the state accountability systems. More importantly, interventions that are at odds with local perceptions of a school may be so demoralizing or confusing as to undercut continued progress.

Within any accountability system purporting to hold all schools to the same high standards, fairness

dictates that schools be judged by the same measures, which naturally limits the measurement options for a statewide system. If state accountability is the only game in town, a district will, by default, pay greatest attention to those broad, universal measures for which it will be held accountable. While these measures can provide an important view of school performance, the view is necessarily limited. For example, if only a handful of communities value and

<sup>1</sup> When schools cut back on physical and health education and other ancillary programs and courses that address students' comprehensive health needs in order to concentrate more resources on instruction and test-taking skills, these changes are likely to be short-sighted and counterproductive. See Hanson, T. L., Austin, G., and Lee-Bayha, J. (2004). *How are student health risks and resilience related to the academic progress of schools: Ensuring that no child is left behind*. San Francisco: WestEd.

collect indicators about civic education, that domain cannot be represented in the state accountability system. Instead, it should be represented in the local accountability systems of these communities.

**A local system can provide information detailed enough to guide district management decisions.**

When state assessment results are reported, they do not come with a list of reasons why performance is not higher. But when administrators can see assessment data next to other information about the district, linkages and courses of action may suggest themselves. For example, a district that tracks parent participation or engagement may see that higher or lower levels of participation relate to test performance. Administrators may then call for efforts to increase parent involvement, targeted at the neediest sites.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS  
WILL NEED TO IDENTIFY  
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**A local system can inform decisions about curriculum and instruction.**

Knowing how to improve students' performance on standards-based measures requires not just an understanding of what students need to know or be able to do to meet a particular standard or set of standards, but also an understanding of what individual students already know or can do in relation to that standard. While a statewide test may generally categorize students by broad performance levels, this kind of test cannot yield precise information about what students need in order to improve. Detailed diagnostic information is more likely available from local tests and other kinds of assessments, which can be included in a local accountability system. For example, as part of an overall score in mathematics, statewide tests may report sub-scores for strands such as *number and operations*. The local system can give more detailed information about such a strand, thereby guiding decisions about curriculum and instruction. A school

or district that identifies a weakness in a specific area can target curriculum and instruction to improve performance in that area.

**One Special Circumstance:  
The Case *Against* a Local System**

Is a local system always advisable? In schools and districts that face demands on their time, energy, and fiscal resources, a local accountability system may seem more of a luxury than a necessity. School and district administrators may also feel that they lack the professional staff and organizational capacity to build a system, or that parents and other stakeholders will not understand a local system. But anecdotal evidence suggests that districts that

feel they lack the capacity but push forward anyway will be pleased with the results (Jamentz, 2001). Likewise, when a system is thoughtfully designed and clearly explained, stakeholders' capacity to understand is considerable. So, despite these and other concerns, only one, seemingly rare set of circumstances seems to justify a decision not to pursue a local accountability system. It is when there is strong consensus within the community that existing measures reported as part of a larger state system provide all the information of importance to the community.

**Building an Effective System**

At its core, an accountability system is intended to help stakeholders understand how their schools are performing, identify areas in need of improvement and the changes necessary to achieve improvement, and establish consequences (e.g., rewards and sanctions)

that motivate and support improvement efforts. The balance of this brief describes a process for building an effective local accountability system. That process starts with broad conversations about the community's values, overall goals for its education institutions, and its intent in having a local accountability system that augments the state system. The process continues with discussions becoming progressively more specific as decision-makers identify the mechanisms by which the accountability system will influence practice and improve student outcomes, decide what information is required for various purposes and what indicators will yield that information, and address the technical issues related to collecting and reporting accountability information.

**Ensure representative participation.** The first and perhaps most important step in building a local accountability system is generating a shared understanding of its purpose and the values it should

represent, that is, people's expectations for their schools. Since different stakeholders will undoubtedly represent a range of viewpoints — which can be both a strength and a challenge — engaging stakeholder representatives in a local-accountability policy committee can be a good starting point. Typically, whoever is spearheading the drive to establish the local system — the local school board, the district superintendent, or both acting jointly — would manage the development process, including establishing the committee. In a medium-sized school district, this type of development committee should minimally include representation for students, parents, teachers, non-teaching school staff, administrators, policymakers, and area business leaders. In contrast, a one-school district might opt for a committee of only a few members because a large committee

would be impractical. Whatever its size, this type of committee must make sure it successfully solicits and considers the values of all stakeholders. Depending on the complexity of the district, the relevant issues, and local education politics, a community may opt for larger or smaller committees, or for a structure of committees and sub-committees. For purposes of discussion, this brief assumes that one committee will be carrying out most of the development work for the local accountability system.



**Decide on goals and identify local values.** Having clear, specific goals for the accountability system is a must. Ananda and Rabinowitz (2001) note that a common mistake is to weigh down an accountability system with too many goals. The resulting dilution of focus may hamper progress. Working toward a small number of clearly articulated goals is a course for success in accountability work.

Whether implicit or explicit, values shape all accountability efforts. When a community's values are made explicit, the local accountability system can be designed to reflect and support them. The following questions might be used to guide early committee discussions:

- » What education outcomes do we value?
- » For students, what do we mean by success?  
What does a successful student look like?
- » For schools, what do we mean by success?  
What does a successful school look like?

Once values have been defined, other important questions follow: Does our state accountability system fully reflect these values? If not, what aspects does it

cover and what aspects should be addressed, instead, by a local system?

As is evident in these last questions, those building a local system must have a thorough understanding of the state’s accountability system to know where and how it reflects local values. Because it is highly unlikely that any community would reject the overall goal of NCLB — that all students should be able to perform proficiently on a state assessment aligned with rigorous learning standards — a local system should not be expected to replace the NCLB-driven state system, but to augment it so as to yield a richer understanding of local education.

**Choose a reporting method.** There are two general approaches to communicating about school performance. One approach combines indicators into an overall rating or score. To use this approach requires agreement about the relative importance of different indicators, since each must be weighted in order to contribute to an overall score. This method lends itself more easily to making school-to-school comparisons on an entire set of information. Such comparisons can be valuable in several ways. They inform parent choice, which is desirable in any case and especially under the choice provisions of NCLB. Also, such comparisons foster conversations about the overall quality of the schools. At a minimum, school-to-school comparisons point out where one school is not performing as well as another, so these comparisons can highlight areas of relative strength and weakness across schools.

The other approach to performance reporting is more descriptive, presenting the various pieces of information about a school without attempting to combine them into a general rating. This style of

reporting allows stakeholders to draw their own conclusions based on their own judgment about the relative importance of different information.

If a committee wants the system to be able to make school-to-school comparisons based on all of the available data, it should employ a method that yields the overall rating; otherwise, to present the data without any inherent weighting of information, the committee should adopt a descriptive approach.

A LOCAL SYSTEM CAN REPORT AREAS THAT ARE IMPORTANT PARTS OF THE CURRICULUM BUT ARE NOT CAPTURED ON STATEWIDE TESTS.

**Connect information to improvement.** Obtaining a richer picture of how your schools are working — or not — is interesting and, in and of itself, can help parents make important decisions, regarding school choice, for example. But rich information becomes most useful when it drives

or supports improvement. To this end, committee members will need to identify specific mechanisms for transforming information into action, for motivating and supporting increasingly higher levels of student and school performance. The underlying question is this: Against the backdrop of the state system, how does our local system reward high performance and address low performance? Here, too, it is necessary to first understand the kinds of consequences required in an NCLB-driven state system (e.g., parental choice, provision of supplemental educational services, implementation of a new curriculum, replacement of school staff, or other “corrective action”).

One strategy is to have the local system focus on rewards, leaving to the state system interventions or sanctions, such as restructuring when a poor-performing school fails to make progress over a given period. Alternatively, the local system could explore interventions that may be related to academic success, from reconsidering the student promotion policy to

examining changes in how teachers are evaluated and rewarded. Another strategy is to supplement state interventions with local action that may be viewed as less punitive, such as requiring forums or performance summits at schools identified by the local system as needing improvement (Jamenz, 2001). One intention of such meetings might be to agree upon targeted areas for improvement and then recruit volunteers to give more one-on-one time to students performing below a basic level. Similarly, a district might decide after release of new data that it should sponsor districtwide grade-level or course-alike staff meetings to examine what can be learned from the data about curriculum and practice. For example, lower-than-expected results from a districtwide reading assessment might suggest the need for greater emphasis on a particular part of the reading curriculum or for additional professional development. For good news, the committee might decide to institute something more celebratory, such as awarding plaques at a schoolwide party.

In any case, setting forth the mechanism of how accountability results will be used for school improvement is an essential step in building a system (Carr & Artman, 2001; Gong, 2002; Marion & Gong, 2003).

**Identify desired information.** Once the committee has clarified the values it wants represented in the system and has decided how accountability reporting will be used to effect school improvement, the challenge is to identify the information it wants to include in the local system. In doing so, the committee should ask several questions:

- » What information would complement state accountability data and help us communicate a fuller story about how our schools are performing relative to what we value?
- » What additional information do we need in order to better manage the school or district so as to improve student performance?

- » What additional information do our teachers need in order to improve curriculum and instruction?

*Information for communications.* Without their own additional measures, communities have to rely on statewide test scores to evaluate their schools. But because a state system can address only those things common to all its schools, it yields only a partial picture of local education. Local systems can fill out the picture by focusing on specifics of local importance. For example, a school community that has identified service learning as an important feature of its curriculum might decide to collect and report information about the degree to which students are involved in service learning.

In addition to providing a broader picture of school performance, a local system might be designed to yield a more detailed picture, which can be especially important for parents and guardians who, under NCLB, have unprecedented opportunities for school choice. Accountability reporting should be designed to inform those choices. So, for example, while the state accountability system may indicate that a school has not achieved adequate yearly progress as defined by NCLB and the state, the local system may report that the school's performance has improved in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies, and that the number of students earning distinction in a state arts program has doubled.

No matter what information is initially included in a local accountability system for purposes of informing parents, attentive educators will want to continue to identify parents' informational needs during both formal and informal interactions, taking every opportunity to ask, "What would you like to know about our school or district that is not reported currently?" Sometimes the information parents want is already reported but has little meaning for them. For example, although the state system reports the number of students who are proficient in a given

area, parents may not understand what *proficient* means in terms of what children can actually do. They may need a number of concrete examples. Often, however, publishers of state tests allow only a few test items, if any, to be made public. On the other hand, administrators of a local assessment system might choose to release relatively more items so parents and community members are well informed about what students know and can do. Making it easier for parents and others to interpret what state tests report is a valuable role for a local system.

*Information for district management.* In addition to parent-related communications goals, principals and district administrators have management goals that can be served by a local accountability system. These educators have multiple responsibilities in the life of a school. In

addition to managing resources, they play a significant role in shaping a schoolwide and districtwide vision. One responsibility is to promote a sense of shared purpose across the organization. They often also have the responsibility to comment on performance to the broader public, at meetings or in the media, for example. Their data needs will reflect these different roles. Results that are ready-made to inspire the organization or communicate a simple message to a wide audience will have greatest salience to them. For example, while an eight-point gain on an index may be important information to some stakeholders, a district leader may want to present a more concrete finding, such as the fact that 20 percent more fifth graders are correctly identifying their town on a state map.

From the state system, district administrators will have information about student performance relative

to state standards. This information provides an important look at the overall health of the district. On the other hand, there are many other administrative functions for which other data are needed, and a local system can provide or highlight those data. For example, a system might be designed to provide information about classroom-level average change to inform teacher assignment; about sub-par performance to help administrators identify and initiate important programs; about short-term changes in performance from

smaller, periodic assessments to help in the evaluation of those programs; and about vivid examples of progress to highlight in district publications.

*Information to inform curriculum and instruction.*

Because state accountability systems are set up to provide feedback just once a year, a local education community may want its local system, minimally, to provide more frequent feedback.

One strategy is for districts to use shorter, more frequent assessments to inform curriculum and instruction with current, dynamic information. Teachers conduct informal and formal assessments of student performance all the time. These assessments support teachers in their teaching role, providing information that helps them to plan, focus, or modify instruction to help students learn and be able to demonstrate what they know. When small, frequent assessments are consistent across a district, the results are more responsive teacher practice as well as timely highlighting of areas where wider intervention may be helpful.

Local accountability systems can also provide more complete reporting of performance on state standards. Education policymakers and committees





in some states identify standards for assessment at the state level, the local level, or both. In these cases, the expectation is that the statewide assessments will sample from the full set of standards, with student performance on the remaining standards captured locally. By assessing and reporting on state standards not covered in the statewide test, a local accountability system ensures that these standards and the values they represent receive appropriate emphasis in the local curriculum.

Yet another way to use a local system to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction involves reporting no new data, but, instead, reporting existing data in a different fashion. For example, while a state system focuses on ensuring that students become proficient, as required by NCLB, a community may be more immediately interested in moving students from a below-basic to basic category on the statewide tests. The local system can capture progress toward that goal whereas the larger system does not. In both cases, reporting such information lets local educators know whether their efforts with lower-performing students are successful and should be continued or whether they should be revisited. Finally, a local system can report areas that are important parts of the curriculum but are not captured on statewide tests. To return to the service-learning example, for a school or district in which service learning is an integral part of the curriculum, the system could report the number of hours of service its students performed in the community during the current school year. Parents and the broader community could see the level of service, both in the aggregate and per pupil, and how these indicators have changed over time. When service learning, civic education, or any other enterprise is valued locally as part of the curriculum, the local accountability system can be designed to capture and report that important information.

**Address technical considerations.** If the information in an accountability system is to be helpful, system developers must ensure that the indicators used are

objective and universal, that they are collected at the most useful levels, and that there is a thoughtful system for summarizing the indicators so they can be used to inform district or school decisions.

**Important indicator properties.** Any accountability system must use objective and universal indicators. An *objective* indicator is one so clearly defined that it will lead different individuals to collect and report the same data. Examples include standardized test scores, the number of students promoted to the next grade, and the number of community meetings focused on school performance during a given period. Personal judgment is not required in collecting objective information. This contrasts with *subjective* indicators, of which ratings or appraisals are the most common examples. While subjective indicators can also be used for accountability purposes, they are most useful when supported by documentation, such as rubrics or raters' guides, that ensures common expectations and a standard for performance.

A *universal* indicator is one that exists for all units that are to be compared, in this case, for all schools. An accountability system that groups elementary, middle, and high schools separately could have universal indicators within each school type, even if no indicators are common across types. (Note that the universality requirement applies only when schools are going to be compared against one another; if schools are only going to be compared against themselves, over time, indicators may be school-specific.<sup>2</sup>)

**Level of detail.** In collecting data, a basic principle of alignment applies: the level at which information is to be collected should match or be more fine-grained than the level at which it is to be reviewed and reported. Simply put, data cannot reveal more detail than was

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<sup>2</sup> In our experience, circumstances when schools are not compared against each other are rare. Many accountability systems even explicitly cite comparing schools as a goal of their systems.

originally collected. So in planning data collection, it is important to anticipate how you intend to use it. For example, a district wanting to know where to target its parent involvement efforts might want to find out whether there is a correlation between parent involvement at each grade level and the quality of student performance at each grade level. To that end, its schools would need to collect participation indicators by grade level rather than schoolwide.

**Combining indicators.** As mentioned before, many accountability systems feature a summary rating of schools. In designing a system that uses a summary rating distilling multiple indicators, planners will need to choose an approach for combining them. *Index systems* combine multiple indicators to yield a numerical score. *Categorical systems* produce a categorical summary rating, with labels such as *exemplary*, *sufficient*, or *needs improvement*. Since a numerical index

will accommodate many more possible scores than a set of categories, index systems allow for a more fine-grained summary of school performance. Several states, including California, Kentucky, and Ohio, use a numerical index as part of their school accountability efforts. It is worth noting that because the rules defining performance categories can be based on index scores, index systems and categorical systems are compatible.

**Decide report format and other issues.** At this stage, the committee has addressed nearly all of the critical issues in the design and building of the local accountability system. The issues that remain concern production and dissemination of the accountability report itself.

**Report formatting.** In choosing the report format, it is appropriate for the committee to consult with people skilled in making assessment and other information easy to understand and to employ review procedures, including focus groups. The first step is to produce sample report designs for review and comment by parents and other end users. Key information should be clear and easy to find. Use larger size and special formatting for the most critical information. Parents or community members with experience in graphic design can be especially valuable assets.

THE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE NCLB ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL ARE NEITHER INHERENTLY RIGHT NOR WRONG — THEY SIMPLY REFLECT ONE WAY OF DEFINING SUCCESS.

Some information lends itself to charts and graphs. Decide early on if you will be using these tools, since developing them often requires a fair amount of lead time. In addition, use of color in the report can help to highlight information for the reader. The downside of using color is its cost. Also, individuals who receive a photocopy following the original print run are likely to get a black and white copy, so

all information must be easily readable even when copied from the original to black and white.

**Timing of the report and frequency of release.** The committee will also need to decide on the timing and frequency of reporting accountability information. If possible, it is advisable to coordinate community forums about education and education data with release of accountability reports.

**Dissemination of the reports.** Consider how you will disseminate the report. Will it be available only as a paper copy, on the Internet, or both? If there are associated materials, such as a press release and information guide, these must be ready when the reports are released.

*Translation.* To ensure that no group of parents or community members is left out of the report dissemination, the report must be available in all major languages spoken in the community. Many school districts have a regular translator that they use for the documents that have to go home to parents. If yours does not, it makes sense to find a good one and negotiate a volume discount in anticipation of ongoing accountability reporting.



The assumptions underlying the NCLB accountability model are neither inherently right nor wrong — they simply reflect one way of defining success. Other defensible and equally valuable accountability systems have been developed over the past decade

based on different models of success or on additional sets of indicators. As the number of schools and districts identified as being in need of improvement increases over time, based on the narrow NCLB definition of success, policymakers may well seek supplemental school classification systems to broaden perspectives about what defines an effective school. But the goal of a local accountability system is *not* to overrule or undermine the state's accountability decisions; rather, it is to provide additional data to help the public understand its public schools, to guide district administrators in management decisions, and to inform curriculum and instruction.

For more information, including resources for local accountability, visit <http://www.wested.org/accountabilityresources>.

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