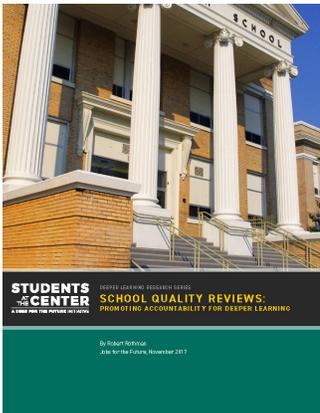


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SCHOOL QUALITY REVIEWS: PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DEEPER LEARNING

By Robert Rothman



Spurred by The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the requirement of developing plans for complying with ESSA for approval by the U.S. Department of Education, many states are considering innovative ways of measuring student and school performance. In short, ESSA, a reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed into law in December 2015, has given momentum to accountability reform.

One method under consideration in a growing number of states is the use of school quality reviews. These school quality reviews base an assessment of school performance on a broader set of measures than student test scores on standardized assessments, and provide information that could be useful in improving teaching and learning.

This executive summary highlights research findings regarding the potential for school quality reviews to assess and promote a broader set of outcomes than are currently being measured in most districts and states. These outcomes include a deep understanding of content as well as the ability to use that knowledge to think critically to solve complex problems, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, and learn how to learn. Collectively, these competencies are known as “deeper learning,” and have gained currency in recent years among educators, business leaders, and others.

Promising Features

- 1. School quality reviews take an expansive look at instruction and learning, including the opportunities for deeper learning.** School quality reviews provide opportunities for accountability systems to measure schools' progress in developing a broader set of competencies. These systems can gauge whether schools are engaging in the kinds of instructional practices that lead to deeper learning by examining student work, classroom instruction, as well as the perceptions of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents.
- 2. School quality reviews are designed to foster school improvement, not simply identify low-performing schools.** School quality reviews might not necessarily provide the resources for the remedy, but they do tend to be more transparent and understandable than previous accountability systems.

- 3. School quality reviews engage educators in understanding what good instruction and learning looks like.** School quality reviews are based on the idea that examining instructional practice is the only way to determine the quality of teaching and learning in a school, and that by setting standards for instructional practice, the system can establish aspirational guidelines for schools

Challenges for Implementation

- 1. The cost of school quality reviews.** Just as student performance assessments are considerably more expensive than multiple-choice tests because they rely on human scorers rather than computers, school quality reviews are more costly than accountability systems based solely on test scores or other quantitative metrics.
- 2. Challenges of reliability.** As systems that rely on human judgment, quality reviews must be conducted carefully to ensure that the judgments about each school are made in a comparable fashion.
- 3. The burden on schools.** One of the main advantages of a school quality review is that it relies on a broad array of data to produce judgments about the quality of a school. The downside of that feature is that producing such evidence can be burdensome for schools.

Recommendations

States now have a new opportunity, through ESSA, to rethink how they determine school quality and promote school improvement. States and districts might want to consider the following suggestions when establishing a school quality review system:

USE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL QUALITY REVIEWS.

Because of the involvement of teachers in conducting reviews and evaluating school practices, school quality reviews are more expensive than NCLB-type accountability systems. At the same time, the reviews can act as effective professional learning opportunities for teachers. To offset the cost, districts and states could consider using professional development funds.

MAKE DEEPER LEARNING OUTCOMES CLEAR IN RUBRICS.

If the goal is to foster deeper learning outcomes, then the rubrics used to gauge school quality need to be clear about those outcomes and the classroom practices that elicit them. Educators need to have an understanding of what student work that exhibits deeper learning looks like, and what curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices can produce those outcomes. The rubrics for New York City and Cleveland show concrete examples of what observers should expect to find in classrooms that foster deeper learning.

PILOT THE SYSTEMS, AND EVALUATE THE PILOTS.

School quality review systems are complex, and districts and states need to be sure that they produce the outcomes they want. Pilot programs enable schools to determine if they produce valid and reliable judgments about school quality, whether the training of raters is adequate, and whether the burden on schools is excessive, among other things. An independent evaluation of a pilot will help states and districts understand what worked well and what needs to change before the program is launched at scale.

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