The Historical Roots and Theory of Change of Modern School Accountability

Introduction

Public schools are expected to enable students from all backgrounds to achieve clearly defined academic standards. Over the past few decades, states have used a variety of formal and informal incentives to ensure fairness and high achievement for all but schools often fell short of this goal, with the gravest consequences of this failure borne by the most vulnerable students.

The logic behind school accountability policies is straightforward: States set learning standards, assess how well students in each school performed on those standards, then use a system of incentives and consequences linked to that performance to change how schools serve students. Ultimately, the goal of what is now called "standards-based accountability" was to drive higher and more equitable achievement for students — an idea widely accepted now, but once considered radical.

This brief is part of a four-part series examining the past, present, and future of modern school accountability systems. With the dual forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national call to action on racial inequity, the question of how we should measure and hold schools accountable for the impact they have on students is more urgent than ever. Please visit the Bellwether website by clicking here for more details and links to the other briefs in this series.

Standards-based school accountability policy in the United States is not a modern phenomenon, nor is it accidental. It is the result of a consistent effort to articulate the foundational skills and knowledge that students need to learn and be able to do at each grade level, and then hold schools accountable for helping students achieve those benchmarks. Historically the standards-based reform movement attracted support from a broad and bipartisan political coalition that included equity-minded liberals and efficiency-focused conservatives, but current political support for this idea is not as strong as it once was, despite evidence that these policies can lead to significant gains in student learning.[1]

This brief examines how today's school accountability policies are supposed to work and how they've evolved over the course of several decades. We also argue that the core objective of accountability — higher and more equitable outcomes for students — must remain at the center of policymakers' decisions, particularly as they navigate the uncertain landscape of schooling during a global pandemic.

Understanding the School Accountability Theory of Change

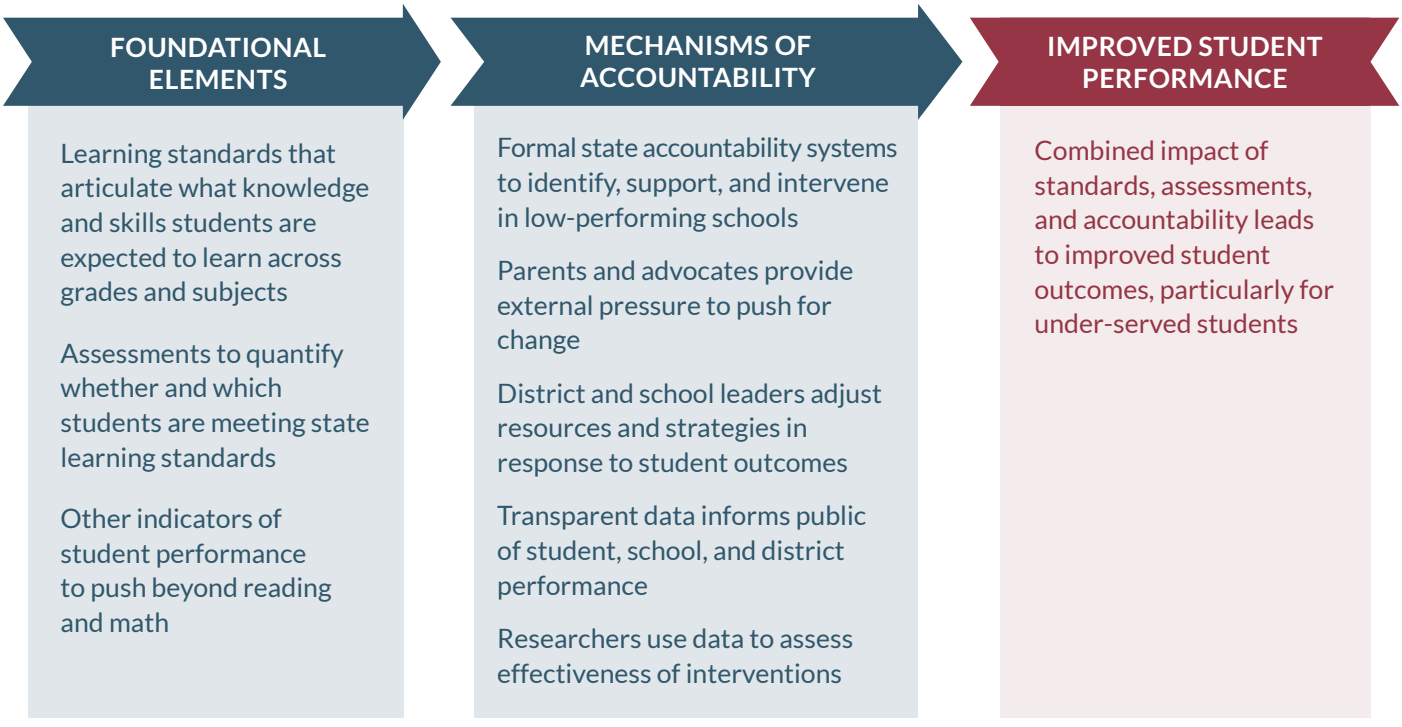
For decades, federal, state, and local policymakers have turned to standards-based accountability systems as a way to improve student outcomes and increase equity within the public schools. Under current federal law, each state accepting federal support for education is required to establish its own school accountability system, with distinct ingredients but following the same basic recipe. Each system starts with a pair of foundational elements:

- a clearly articulated system of learning standards for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level
- a system of annual assessments aligned to those standards to measure whether students are meeting them

Those two elements in turn enable several mechanisms of accountability, ranging from transparency through publicly accessible data on school performance, to regulatory response, through state- or district-led interventions in struggling schools. The theory of action behind standards-based accountability rests on these mechanisms of accountability changing schools' behavior in ways that lead to:

- Higher levels of student achievement overall
- More equitable achievement between students of different races, family income, English learner status, and special education status

School Accountability Theory of Change



School accountability systems have a clear purpose to their design: to drive systemic and equitable improvements in student achievement. More specifically, these systems are designed to focus the attention and efforts of educators and policymakers on schools that are not producing a high level of academic success for every student.

By focusing on lower-performing schools, accountability systems can be a powerful lever for exposing and addressing inequities throughout our public school system. They can place various forms of incentives and pressure on educators and policymakers to improve the quality of education for student groups that have been traditionally underserved by public schools. Without this explicit focus on traditionally underserved students, a school could be considered a "good" school overall even if its Black, Hispanic, or low-income students were not receiving the same education as their white, wealthier peers.

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Accountability systems are an attempt to make this vision a priority for all stakeholders in the public school system. To do so, the systems are intended to drive behavioral changes ranging from teachers being responsible for delivering grade-level content to all of their students, administrators assigning the best teachers to students who need them the most, and district and state officials allocating revenue and making programming decisions to support all children. Since parents entrust their children to public schools, and citizens pay taxes to support those schools, schools are held accountable for ensuring that all children — regardless of their background or identity — receive a quality education.

The inputs and processes used in today's standards-based accountability systems are not ends in and of themselves — they are intended to shift how schools serve students effectively and equitably. However, these systems and their component levers have also delivered a range of unintended consequences. In response to testing systems, some schools and teachers over-emphasized low-level test-taking skills as opposed to delivering rigorous academic content. The emphasis on grade-level proficiency created an incentive to focus on students right around the proficiency level while ignoring students who were well above or below that mark. And in response to formulaic rules on which schools must be identified for support, policymakers had an incentive to set low passing standards. We discuss the evidence for standards-based reform efforts further in "The Impact of Standards-Based Accountability."

The establishment of accountability systems that emphasize achievement, equity, and transparency did not happen overnight, nor did this begin in 2002 with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. It developed iteratively over the course of several decades and is the result of generations of policymakers' and reformers' efforts to improve our understanding and enhance the quality of and equity within our public school system.

Evolution of Modern School Accountability

During the early 20th century, K-12 education was primarily the domain of state and local governments, but that all changed following the enactment of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," ESEA provided states and school districts with federal funding to support the education of disadvantaged students.[2] State officials had considerable leeway to spend ESEA funding. One of the co-authors of the original ESEA, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, expressed a desire for some form of accountability to ensure that the new spending produced better outcomes for kids.[3]

> *"We really ought to have some evaluation in there, and some measurement as to whether any good is happening."*
>
> *Sen. Robert F. Kennedy*

The federal government's new focus on student outcomes led some states to develop school accountability programs that centered on the generation of student outcome data — efforts that were often funded through federal dollars. However, these systems only provided information on where schools fell short, and there were no meaningful avenues of accountability for improving student outcomes.[4]

Even as these nascent state systems failed to exert meaningful accountability on public schools, these efforts did lay the groundwork for a political coalition to support more accountability in education policy. Liberals wanted to find ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of increased federal investment in social programs like education, while conservatives sought to ensure that taxpayer dollars were being spent well.

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While the notion of education accountability appealed to some on the left and right, the release of the "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983 helped to galvanize business leaders and state officials. The report, which famously decried the "rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's education system, also articulated the importance of a strong public school system for the country's economic interests.[5]

Governors responded to this call by convening task forces within their states to study education policy. Through the National Governors Association (NGA), they published "A Time for Results," which proposed granting schools more flexibility to operate in exchange for more accountability for student outcomes. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush convened the nation's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia, to formally articulate a set of national education goals (known as America 2000) that included recommendations for voluntary national standards and testing.[6]

While the America 2000 proposal was never implemented by Congress, some states began to take the lead on standards-based reform, beginning with the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990.[7] These efforts were further accelerated with the passage of Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 under President Bill Clinton. IASA represented the latest reauthorization of the original ESEA, and it took a major step forward by requiring states to develop their own systems of standards and assessments,[8] including the first federal requirements to test students in reading and math once per grade span (grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12).[9] These provisions were opposed by conservative Republicans, but a coalition of activists from the business and civil rights communities helped to build enough bipartisan support to keep these essential elements in the final version of IASA. [10]

Yet implementation of IASA varied significantly by state — only 11 states fully complied with the law as of the 2000-01 school year.[11] Other states made incremental progress in developing accountability systems: 29 states held schools accountable for student outcomes with some form of consequences. But at the same time, 14 states relied on transparency alone, and seven did nothing at all.[12]

The standards-based reform movement received another major push forward when Congress next reauthorized ESEA under President George W. Bush. Known as NCLB, the law was supported by the same business/civil rights coalition behind IASA and required every state to formalize academic content standards in reading and math and assess all students based on those standards.[13] NCLB strengthened key aspects of IASA by requiring reading and math testing annually in grades 3-8 and once in high school, and including specific accountability targets for low-income, special education, and English learner students.[14]

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Testing students annually based on common, rigorous standards and holding schools accountable for the achievement of all students — including English learners and students with disabilities — was considered radical at the time, but was a critical step forward for equity. Not only that, but NCLB also required states to hold schools and districts accountable for meeting annual goals in academic gains (academic yearly progress, or AYP) overall and for each disaggregated group of students defined by race/ethnicity, income, disability, and status as an English learner ("student subgroups"), and prescribed interventions for schools that failed to meet AYP targets.[15]

For the first time in our nation's history, the long-developing political coalition in support of greater accountability for schools — which included liberals, conservatives, the business community, and governors — was able to establish the core model of modern school accountability in all 50 states through federal action.[16] However, not every state implemented these policies with the same level of rigor. On one hand, every state produced publicly available, comparable data on school performance for every school and student group for the first time. But the rigor of state learning standards varied significantly across states,[17] and schools and districts typically chose the weakest possible interventions.[18] Further, as the policies matured, the number of schools and districts failing to meet their AYP goals each year became more unwieldy and unrealistic for states to manage well.[19]

As President Bush pressed for reauthorization of NCLB in 2007, there was a near-universal agreement that the law needed to be amended, but congressional intransigence left the law's flaws untouched.[20] With Congress still failing to reauthorize NCLB after his inauguration in 2009, President Barack Obama sought to address some of its challenges through grants and administrative actions. The Race to the Top program, which provided competitive funding to states based on promises to adopt certain education policies, provided bonus points for states to adopt more rigorous learning standards such as the Common Core,[21] implement teacher evaluation systems, and adopt more aggressive interventions for consistently low-performing schools.[22]

These policies became key parts of the Obama administration's NCLB waiver initiative, which was driven by political pressure to provide states relief from the law's goal of 100 percent student proficiency by 2014. In exchange for this regulatory relief, states had to develop plans to raise standards, focus interventions on the lowest-performing schools, and include student performance as a factor in teacher evaluations.[23] Those policies effectively ended NCLB's mandate to hold all schools accountable for all students, and instead asked states to focus on a more limited group of the worst-performing schools (just the bottom 5 percent of schools overall) and those with the largest achievement gaps (another 10 percent of schools). In exchange for being able to focus state accountability systems on a smaller list of schools, the waivers required states to adopt teacher evaluation systems that held teachers accountable, at least in part, for how much their students learned over the course of a year, as measured by test scores. The waivers ultimately provided some flexibility for states, but they weakened a key tenet of NCLB: that every school could be held accountable if they failed to meet preset performance targets.

The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), embedded many of the waiver systems' weaker school accountability principles into law, but left off the teacher evaluation component.[24] Facing pressure from conservatives (who opposed federal pressure on states to adopt the Common Core) and liberals (who sided with teachers' unions against the imposition of teacher evaluation systems including test scores) to change the federal approach to school accountability, ESSA gave states much more leeway to create their own approaches to school accountability.[25]

After decades of federal expansion in K-12 education policy, ESSA signaled the first meaningful contraction of federal influence. This relaxed federal role created an opportunity for states to innovate and strengthen their accountability systems, though most states' new ESSA plans were widely criticized as uncreative and weak.[26]

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Finding a Way Forward for Accountability

The past century of school accountability policy efforts operated like a ratchet — each incremental move enhanced the power of local, state, and federal officials to establish standards, assessments, and mechanisms of accountability, all in the hopes of driving equitable improvements in student outcomes. It also led to a pull of power away from districts and a push of requirements from the federal government, both of which landed with states that were not always in a great position to serve those roles well.

Accountability policies were once supported by a broad coalition of equity-focused liberals, efficiency-focused conservatives, business leaders concerned with developing a strong workforce, and governors interested in combating the "rising tide of mediocrity" as articulated by the Nation at Risk report.

But by the end of the Obama administration, school accountability policies were loosening, not tightening. Instead, the passage of ESSA represented a release valve for some of the pressures placed on educators and policymakers. Even though federal policy still required school accountability, it became clear that simply mandating these systems in states would not be enough to fully realize the ultimate goal: improved and more equitable student performance.

Nevertheless, states entered the first years of implementing their new accountability systems under ESSA, only to have the COVID-19 pandemic lead to a "pause" on testing and accountability and exacerbation of educational inequities. This is a critical moment for states and schools to clarify what it means to drive higher and more equitable student performance and how accountability systems can adapt to meet the challenges of the uncertain landscape we face.

As policymakers consider how to adapt accountability systems to ensure all students' learning is still a central focus for educators, they ought to draw on the lessons of what has worked in accountability policy. While our current school accountability policies are the result of decades of evolution and they are far from perfect, to abandon the foundational elements of standards, assessments, and the mechanisms of accountability they support would be to abandon the effort to drive systematic improvements in student learning. As we look to the future of school accountability, policymakers ought to continue the evolution of accountability policies. Policy leaders should recommit to the goal of safeguarding equity, solidify foundational structures that promote equity and high achievement, identify weaknesses and limitations that challenge those goals, and improve the mechanisms of accountability that can continue to drive improvements in school and student performance, especially in an era of uncertainty and increased inequity.

Policy leaders should recommit to the goal of safeguarding equity and continue to drive improvements in school and student performance.

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Any errors in fact or analysis are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.