



## Multiple Measures Accountability Systems: A Perspective from Vermont

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This article is an advance publication for the *Redesigning Assessment and Accountability* special issue, guest-edited by Soung Bae, Jon Snyder, and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich.

**Abstract:** In response to Bae's (2018) *Redesigning systems of school accountability: A multiple measures approach to accountability and support*, this commentary expands on some key considerations for states and school districts as they seek different ways to support school improvement while also addressing the competing demands of educators, policymakers, and the public. Using examples from Vermont, the author highlights the need for: (1) states and districts to make accountability part of their core statement of values, with a focus on *why* certain measures are selected, not *what* measures are selected; and (2) reciprocal accountability through better collaborations between federal, state and local actors to identify and fund the best investments for education.

**Keywords:** education policy; accountability; Vermont

### Sistemas de responsabilidad multi-perspectiva: Una perspectiva de Vermont

**Resumen:** En respuesta a Bae's (2018) "Rediseñando los Sistemas de Responsabilidad Escolar," este comentario amplía algunas consideraciones clave para los estados y distritos escolares que buscan diferentes formas de apoyar la mejora escolar mientras que también abordan la competencia

las demandas de los educadores, los políticos y el público. Usando ejemplos de Vermont, el autor destaca la necesidad de: (1) que los estados y distritos hagan que la rendición de cuentas sea parte de su declaración de valores central, con un enfoque en por qué se seleccionan ciertas medidas, no qué medidas se seleccionan; y (2) responsabilidad recíproca a través de mejores colaboraciones entre los actores federales, estatales y locales para identificar y financiar las mejores inversiones para la educación.

**Palabras clave:** política educativa; responsabilidad; Vermont

### **Sistemas de responsabilidade multi-perspectiva: Uma perspectiva de Vermont**

**Resumo:** Em resposta aos “Redesenhando Sistemas de Responsabilidade Escolar” de Bae (2018), este comentário amplia algumas considerações importantes para estados e distritos escolares que procuram diferentes maneiras de apoiar a melhoria escolar, ao mesmo tempo em que abordam as demandas dos educadores, políticos e público. Usando exemplos de Vermont, o autor destaca a necessidade de: (1) que os estados e os distritos tornem a responsabilidade parte da sua declaração básica de valores, com foco em por que certas medidas são selecionadas, e não o que medidas seleccione; e (2) responsabilidade recíproca através de melhores colaborações entre atores federais, estaduais e locais para identificar e financiar os melhores investimentos para a educação.

**Palavras-chave:** política educacional; responsabilidade; Vermont

## **Multiple Measures Accountability Systems: A Perspective from Vermont**

Accountability. I'm not sure there is a word in education more rife with multiple meanings and problematic understanding. The public seeks measures of accountability to understand how well education tax dollars are being spent—most expect schools to prepare our youth for active participation in civic and economic life, but few agree on how to get there. Educators want systems of accountability that accurately depict the complexity of their work and don't hold them responsible for factors beyond their control. Those seeking equity worry that efforts to minimize external factors will result in perpetuating inequities and lower expectations for some. And through it all is the misplaced notion that our public education sector simply needs the right combination of carrots and sticks in order to improve educational outcomes for students.

As Bae describes in *Redesigning systems of school accountability: A multiple measures approach to accountability and support* (2018), many states, districts and nations are striving to find different ways to address the competing demands of these varied audiences.

### **Accountability as a Statement of Values**

A key component of Bae's work (2018) is the degree to which the accountability system reflects the core values and goals of the entity engaged in the work. Ultimately, this is the struggle in choosing priorities—too many measures and the public and schools cannot focus, but in the culling to critical areas, other important aspects of schools are set aside. For example, in Vermont we have eight critical content areas but only the funding to cover assessments in 3, possibly 4. Absent federal guidelines, we still would have chosen a literacy and math assessment—these are critical for students accessing a successful future. We selected science as a third because it is required by ESSA and physical fitness because we are concerned that the emphasis on academic preparation has reduced time spent at play, in recess and in physical education and health. But we also highly value arts, social science, and world languages, technology, and the transferable skills and we can't afford to assess those areas with current resources and we worry this will lead to an inadvertent distortion of instruction.

This article helps readers to see that strong accountability systems bring forward some, but not all, measures that describe high quality outcomes for students. At one point, I believed we could identify the “right” measures—that there would be agreement across the sector for what we should measure. Now, I see that it is far more important to help everyone understand *why* measures are selected, what they do and don’t tell us about school quality and the reasons why these measures are good proxies for all of the other school factors that are more challenging to quantify.

### **Reciprocal Accountability**

Without a doubt, we all hope that resources allow for reciprocity between federal, state and local actors in supporting school improvement. However, this should not be interpreted as a blank check for improvement—public funds to support education are not unlimited. As Bae (2018) points out—more money isn’t always the answer; it is putting that money to good use in proven ways that leads to better outcomes.

Continuing the long tradition of ESEA, ESSA pushing the greatest amount of federal dollars to the local school level—this makes a lot of sense, we want the funds to be affecting the students in schools. However, this also means that school systems have the greatest discretion over how they spend their resources and they are often constrained by local obligations. For example, one school system may be excelling in reading/language arts and quite poorly in mathematics. The school attributes the reading success to an intensive part-time reading specialist and is reluctant to divert resources to provide math support out of fear the reading would suffer if less support was available. Whether or not this is the best course of action to take is debatable, but absence an increase in funding it is a decision the local level must make. State agencies can support school systems in making better investments by looking carefully at needs assessments and linking federal spending to those needs; we need to help them think carefully about the value of each dollar.

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