



Colorado's Network for Local Accountability

In Colorado, a grassroots accountability and continuous improvement network is uniting far-flung rural school districts—with members as many as 400 miles apart—in a collaborative effort to address the unique needs of Colorado's rural students.

As in other states, Colorado rural districts must deal with funding disparities, isolation, education policies driven by urban voices, and small enrollments, which, when coupled with lower per-pupil revenues, result in tight district budgets and make it hard to offer equitable opportunity for all students. For example, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and special education services are most often shared across multiple rural school districts through a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). In one Colorado BOCES, staff are shared across 10,000 square miles and 13 districts. It is also challenging for districts to offer a wide range of advanced courses, electives, and work-based learning opportunities to rural students.

When it comes to accountability, small rural school districts face issues related to small sample size, or n-size, where each individual student's score gets significantly more weight due to a lower overall number of test takers when compared with large school districts. In numerous categories, small districts and schools receive an effective "no score" due to an n-size of less than 16. Over time, this n-size problem has resulted in rural districts with similar scores receiving different ratings for reasons difficult to uncover.

Another issue for rural Colorado schools—and one that can serve as an early warning system for larger districts—is difficulty in hiring teachers, which is exacerbated by state teacher preparation programs currently graduating half the needed supply each year.¹ The situation in rural Colorado is particularly acute (see also article, page 29). And if that were not enough, funding for education in Colorado is among the worst in the nation, behind Mississippi, Louisiana, and New Mexico, which post the nation's highest poverty rates.² Colorado schools

A network of rural peers help districts design meaningful, timely, community-connected accountability.

Kirk Banghart

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currently have over \$14 billion in infrastructure needs. And in response to budget reductions and to attract and retain teachers, more than 100 districts across the state, predominantly rural ones, had already moved to a four-day school week before the pandemic began.³

Consequently, rural students are not receiving sufficient support, including in their social and emotional learning, which has been shown to boost academic scores and high school graduation rates.⁴ Colorado has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the country, and it is the leading cause of death in the 10- to 24-year old age group.⁵ Yet the current state accountability system, as in most other states, does not encompass the need for monitoring and reporting on the needs of the whole child.

Collaborative Problem Solving

Spurred by their desire to make state accountability more relevant to local stakeholders and actionable for them as district leaders, a group of rural superintendents came together in 2015 to create a peer-driven accountability system. “To collect and communicate this comprehensive look at students, we needed to look at the district system overall, through a variety of tools, by being onsite, and then supporting the district to adjust priorities to continually improve,” said Lisa Yates, superintendent in the Buena Vista School District.

What started with a commitment by 15 rural superintendents and advocacy organizations at an annual gathering of school executives developed into a robust network improvement community called S-CAP. It is supported by a research-practice partnership that includes a national nonprofit, Battelle for Kids; a state organization, Colorado Rural Education Collaborative supported by Generation Schools Network; and the University of Colorado’s Center for Practice Engaged Education Research, along with technology partners and local, state, and national funders.

The S-CAP partners coalesced around a shared commitment to expand the state accountability system to reflect multiple measures in evaluating student learning. S-CAP districts and partners work together to measure, reflect on, and communicate growth of the whole child in a meaningful, localized way. The program has three main components:

- evidence-based accountability and improvement rubrics and tools centered on the mastery of rigorous academic content as well as deeper learning dispositions that consider the whole child;
- a peer-based annual Systems Support Review (SSR) process guided by survey and academic data and rubrics to assess quality indicators in learning climate, curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and leadership and vision; and
- a superintendent-led networked improvement community to use SSR findings for continuous improvement.

Four values drive the work: 1) emphasize every student and the whole student, 2) accountability means continuous improvement, 3) what gets measured and reported gets done, and 4) accountability impact increases with local stakeholder investment.

Rural Districts and Their Relationship to Accountability

Over the past two decades, state and federal governments have moved toward tighter district and school accountability for student outcomes. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state boards of education, along with state education agencies, shoulder much of the weight for successful implementation. Yet in Colorado, some educators—particularly rural ones—have found that the statewide system does not always address the local context well.

In Colorado, 17 out of 20 school districts are classified as rural, 70 percent of which are classified as small rural (with district enrollments of less than 1,000 students).⁶ Yet they serve only 15 percent of Colorado’s preK-12 population. These districts, as well as the state’s charters and alternative schools, have struggled to leverage the state accountability system as designed to guide their efforts to continuously improve. The state’s summative assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success, largely determines state K-12 accountability ratings.

The state legislature passed a bill to create Local Accountability System Grants in 2019, and the Colorado State Board of Education awarded \$450,000 in grants in spring 2020. Grantees applied to support innovative efforts that do

not subvert the state's ESSA plan but rather add meaning for the local school context. The applicants could select from among three options for improving accountability: 1) using multiple measures to evaluate student success, including nonacademic measures, 2) assessing a school system's ability to support student success, and 3) applying measures of student success to continuous improvement efforts.

The Student-Centered Accountability Program (S-CAP), a grassroots accountability and continuous improvement network driven by a geographically diverse group of rural district leaders, received one of the grants. Created in 2015, S-CAP was also a source of inspiration for the legislation that created the grant program. Its lessons learned may also help state boards nationwide as they grapple with how to make accountability relevant amidst COVID realities and how to better serve small, remote districts and school settings that serve nontraditional student populations with small n-sizes.

System Support Reviews

Staff and administrators from participating districts meet to conduct the onsite reviews in each district. Participants use data collection tools developed by S-CAP partners and member districts to collect data, then work together at the end of the SSR to develop a "summary of findings" that the host district can use to inform their improvement planning, professional development, and stakeholder communication. Data sources for the review include classroom observations, staff and student focus groups, online staff and student surveys, and data and document review. S-CAP peer reviewers use these multiple measures of student success to structure their feedback and explore results beyond a single state test score, including additional academic measures and learning disposition measures.

Not only do the results of the SSR provide the host district with actionable feedback, but the SSR process benefits participating reviewers, who are able to network and form relationships with educators from other rural districts and bring back successful strategies identified through observation and analysis to their own districts. SSRs uncover system weaknesses and highlight strengths to provide district leaders the information they need to build strategic plans for

continuous improvement. With both comprehensive student success data and feedback from on-site reviews, district leadership, local school boards, and stakeholders are better equipped to support local efforts and invest in student success.

"This is the most impactful work I have done in all of my years in education," said Rob Sanders, superintendent of the Buffalo-Merino School District.

Opening your district and schools to visits from other districts can be intimidating. Yet a strong sense of trust has been built among the superintendents and staff to the point that they now welcome the SSRs and the opportunity to learn from one another throughout the year in ways that go well beyond their review. Participating superintendents have said that the changes they have made in response to SSRs would not have surfaced as priorities with the statewide School and District Performance Frameworks alone.

A Colorado Education Initiative review of the program suggests that the SSR process offers a viable supplement to state accountability. Participating district staff largely embrace participating in SSRs and are not afraid of what the process will reveal. District leaders look forward to hosting SSRs and consider the review process a valuable professional development experience for staff. The program review revealed other benefits as well:

- Superintendents said SSRs help them better understand the root causes of their challenges, develop strategies to address them, and align resources.
- Superintendents and staff said peer feedback often validates their own assessments of strengths and challenges, pushes their thinking, and elevates issues sooner than they might have been without the reviews.
- Peer reviewers report they gain instructional ideas, particularly around deeper learning, from observing and talking with other educators on their review teams.
- SSR findings help board members, parents, and community members engage in the accountability process in authentic, meaningful, and positive ways.⁷

"Our district had been complacent at 'pretty good' for many years," said Darcy Garretson, superintendent of the Haxton School District.

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“I wanted to help parents see what we do, why, and get their feedback.”

COVID-19 Response

When schools across the nation abruptly closed to in-person learning in an attempt to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus in spring 2020, educators responded in unprecedented ways. Not only were they challenged to provide alternative instruction, they were also asked to help ensure food security and internet access for their students and to train staff to deliver instruction remotely. Among the many repercussions of this crisis, traditional accountability systems were suspended. Because student learning dramatically shifted and testing accuracy could not be ensured, most states elected to forgo the state testing that feeds their accountability systems. In Colorado, this meant no CMAS testing in 2020, causing a delay in school and district ratings.⁸

For S-CAP member districts, the crisis also provided an opportunity to put their accountability system to the test. Through the S-CAP network improvement community, leaders were able to swiftly reallocate funds earmarked for transportation to provide wireless hotspots for families and transition commencement ceremonies to socially distant formats. Rather than problem solving alone, they did so together in a divide and conquer fashion. Through their SSRs and S-CAP reporting websites, they were able to pivot, holding onto their improvement priorities and supporting staff in staying the course, even in an online environment.

At a time when traditional accountability systems have ground to a halt, S-CAP is providing communication to stakeholders, a network for leaders, and—most important—high-quality support for students. Using supplemental information provided by SSRs (which can be conducted virtually), it continues to provide authentic accountability to local stakeholders.

A Viable Means to Augment Statewide Accountability?

For state board members nationwide, the work of S-CAP can inform and benefit your state accountability systems in these ways:

1) modeling how peer review provides an efficient, effective supplement to accountability

and continuous improvement; 2) identifying additional accountability performance reporting measures that inform small districts and their community stakeholders despite a small n-size; and 3) demonstrating strategies for increasing local stakeholder investment in school accountability.

A superintendent in a S-CAP district summed up the benefits. “The process of the System Support Review at Kit Carson is making the big picture clearer to me and my team,” said Superintendent Robert Framel of Kit Carson School District. “The SSR has made my life a lot more focused. From the review, the Board of Education and I have been able to focus and realign our district priorities.... This process does involve hard work, but everything we have learned is guiding our next steps. It is making our steps more natural and less fragmented. And it is making some of my responsibilities as a leader much easier and definitely more efficient. This has allowed the teachers and staff to provide critical input and self-reflection. I encourage everyone to take a serious look at S-CAP and the value that it has.” ■

¹Cynthia Cole, “Teacher Shortages across the Nation and Colorado: Similar Issues, Varying Magnitudes” (Denver: Colorado Department of Higher Education, December 2017).

²“Education Spending Per Student Per State,” *Governing*, <https://www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/state-education-spending-per-pupil-data.html>.

³Jennifer Oldham, “In a Booming State, Public Schools Grapple with Asbestos, Leaks, and Four-Day Weeks,” *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2019.

⁴John Payton et al., “The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students: Findings from Three Scientific Reviews” (Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2008).

⁵Colorado State Office of Suicide Prevention, Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, “Office of Suicide Prevention Annual Report 2016–2017,” 2017. In June 2015, the Colorado State Board of Education unanimously endorsed the work of the S-CAP districts. In spring 2019, legislation was passed (SB 19-204) that created the Public School Local Accountability Systems Grant, influenced by the work of S-CAP districts. Additionally, elements of the S-CAP model are being considered as a way to fulfill a provision of ESSA funding that requires struggling schools to visit high-performing schools.

⁶Colorado Department of Education, “Colorado Education Facts and Figures,” web page 2020, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/coeducationfactsandfigures>.

⁷Elliott Asp and Rebecca Holmes, “A Grass Roots Approach to Rethinking Accountability” (Colorado Education Initiative, February 28, 2018).

⁸Adjustments are being made to ensure that S-CAP can continue to function as an accountability system during COVID and without the state test by using local formative and summative assessments.

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