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What Could School Accountability Look Like in a Post-COVID World?

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the spread of the novel coronavirus, soon to be known as COVID-19, to be a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). What followed resulted in the deaths of more than one million Americans (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2024) and severely disrupted daily life around the world. Stay-at-home orders ground the economy to a virtual standstill and precipitated the closing of schools across the United States. Students, educators, and families had to quickly pivot to remote learning, all while dealing with anxiety provoked by the pandemic's impacts on health, well-being, and economic uncertainty.

As we emerge from what is likely the worst of the pandemic, many seek a return to normalcy. This normalcy in the context of education policy involves resuming pre-COVID school accountability policies. Many accountability structures center standardized test results as the primary, sometimes the sole, determinant of school and district quality. These rigid accountability structures represent coercive policies that exert top-down pressure from state or federal policymakers and have had little positive impact on improving student achievement or positive educational reforms (Leader & Pazey, 2023).

When the Texas Education Agency (TEA) canceled the administration of the state's annual standardized tests in March of 2020 (TEA, 2020), formal school accountability in Texas was also canceled. The TEA uses the results of these tests to assign a letter grade to each campus and district in the state, which is intended to be a recognizable indicator of school quality. However, in the absence of such data, no letter grades could be assigned. This study describes how educational leaders in three Texas school districts responded to pandemic-related needs in their communities and how they are forging ahead with an alternative accountability system that continued to operate in the face of unforeseen challenges.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to better understand how school district leaders leveraged their pre-pandemic locally-developed alternative accountability systems to report school and student achievement to their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study investigated how leaders in three Texas school districts assessed their stakeholders' needs and adapted their Community-Based Accountability Systems (CBAS) to account for those needs.

The two research questions that guided this study were as follows:
1. What needs emerged among students and in the community due to pandemic-related disruptions, and how did educational leaders work to meet them?
2. To what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures impact the district's alternative accountability system?

Review of Relevant Literature

Schools have long been critiqued for their reliance on a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogy, instruction, and assessment. Scholars argue that learning is inherently an individualized process, and efforts to impose uniformity risk undermining the core mission of education (Petrilli, 2020; Sellars & Imig, 2020). In the aftermath of an unprecedented global health crisis that has disrupted conventional views on instructional, assessment, and accountability practices and policies, there is a growing awareness of the need to reconceptualize

school accountability frameworks. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of established definitions of both institutional and student success.

Limitations of Test-Based Accountability Systems

For decades, the American education system has relied heavily on standardized tests as the primary means of assessing school and student performance. Test-based accountability systems, shaped by federal policies like the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have been criticized for their one-size-fits-all approach to measuring academic success. For instance, the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests form the basis for determining public school ratings in Texas, with letter grades assigned to districts and individual schools based on student performance. However, research has shown that this approach has disproportionately affected historically disadvantaged students and failed to account for the broader goals of education, such as preparing students with the necessary non-academic skills they will need to succeed in society (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Moss, 2022; Zhao, 2020).

Zhao (2020) critiques the standardized testing regime, arguing that it does not adapt well to unanticipated disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Standardized testing is inherently rigid, favoring normative standards while often overlooking the local context of schools and the diverse needs of students. When the pandemic forced widespread school closures in the spring of 2020, the limitations of test-based accountability were laid bare as states like Texas could no longer rely on the results of standardized tests to evaluate school performance and assign year-end school letter grades. This failure highlighted the need for an adaptable accountability system that could continue functioning even when traditional metrics like testtest scores were unavailable.

Sellars and Imig (2023) similarly contend that the pandemic exposed long-standing flaws in test-based accountability systems. They argue that such systems are inequitable and ill-suited to support long-term educational improvement. Instead of promoting student engagement or addressing their holistic needs, test-based systems often exacerbate existing inequities. Test-based accountability systems work on the presumption that all children develop homogeneously and that a student's background, experiences, and diversity do not affect educational opportunities, both positively and negatively. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a generational opportunity to rethink accountability and transition to a more inclusive system responsive to the evolving needs of schools and communities.

Calls for Community-Based Accountability Systems (CBAS)

In response to these documented limitations of test-based accountability, some school districts began adopting Community-Based Accountability Systems (CBAS) even before the pandemic. Unlike top-down accountability frameworks, CBAS allow for greater local control, empowering school leaders and their communities to set locally-developed educational goals, determine needs and priorities, and create meaningful measures of accountability that align with their values (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Tanner, 2021). These systems are particularly valuable in communities where standardized test scores may not fully capture student success or school quality.

Most CBAS are constructed around a set of pillars, ranging from academic achievement (usually measured by test results and other quantitative data) to engaged and well-rounded students, typically measured by participation in non-academic pursuits (e.g., fine arts, athletics,

and clubs). Other common pillars include safety and security, resource and fiscal management, and highly effective faculty and staff. Each pillar represents one function the school and community agree is essential to promoting the overall mission and purpose of the school system. Ongoing collaboration helps to continuously define the goals, priorities, and needs under each pillar and how schools can assess and publicly report their progress toward meeting them (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Tanner, 2021).

Districts utilizing CBAS recognize that an annual state-issued letter grade does not fully capture the breadth and depth of student achievement, and the test on which those grades are determined inadequately reflects how schools prepare students for their futures on a daily basis. This belief is not to say that tests do not matter. The data gleaned from standardized test results are an important diagnostic tool to identify student and school achievement patterns (or lack thereof) and replicate or disrupt them (Bennett, 2022; Finn, 2022). However, an effective reimagined accountability system will place at least equal value on non-testable aspects of learning, such as excellence in the arts, civics, and athletics, good citizenship and character, feelings of safety and belonging, and characteristics like perseverance, effective communication, and creativity (Clark, 2014).

Vasquez Heilig (2015) emphasizes that a CBAS provides an opportunity for districts to collaborate with local stakeholders, such as parents and community stakeholders, to craft an accountability system that goes beyond test scores. By focusing on a broader set of indicators, including student well-being, engagement, and community partnership, a CBAS promotes a more comprehensive understanding of school success. Furthermore, because these systems are locally developed, they are more adaptable and responsive to community needs, allowing schools to continue operating effectively despite disruptions in standardized testing like the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures.

Tanner (2021) argues that a CBAS shifts the focus of accountability from compliance with state or federal mandates to a system of shared responsibility between schools and their communities. This localized approach to accountability aligns with the diverse needs and goals of different communities, ensuring schools are held accountable for a broader set of outcomes—including academic achievement, social-emotional learning, student engagement, and resource management. These outcomes are more meaningful to local communities because stakeholders have agency in determining what the district should be accountable for and how accountability should be measured and reported.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Accountability Practices

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant disruption to traditional accountability systems, particularly those reliant on standardized testing. As schools across the country shifted to remote learning and state-mandated tests were canceled, the foundation of test-based accountability crumbled. Without test results, schools struggled to report student progress or meet state-imposed accountability requirements (TEA, 2020). This disruption underscored the fragility of test-based accountability and prompted educational leaders to consider alternative approaches.

In districts where CBAS was already in place, however, schools were able to adapt more quickly. These districts continued to hold themselves accountable through a broader range of metrics, including student engagement, well-being, and local community needs (Petrilli, 2020; Mann et al., 2020). Petrilli (2020) argues that the pandemic created an opportunity for educational leaders to redefine accountability, focusing less on test scores and more on the

holistic needs of students. This shift allowed schools to maintain accountability even when traditional testing mechanisms were unavailable.

Mann et al. (2020) highlight how the pandemic brought attention to the essential functions schools serve beyond academic instruction, such as providing meals, healthcare, and mental health support, all of which were exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic and subsequent social and economic disruptions. Districts that utilized CBAS were better positioned to address these needs, as their accountability systems were already designed to prioritize student well-being and community engagement (Leader & Pazey, 2023). As such, schools were able to report their efforts to support students and families during the pandemic, demonstrating that accountability extends beyond test performance.

The Future of School Accountability in a Post-COVID World

As schools continue to navigate the challenges of a post-COVID world, there is a growing consensus among educational leaders and researchers that accountability systems must evolve. Lake & Worthen (2021) propose a balanced approach to accountability that combines both formative assessments and traditional testing to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of student progress and school performance. This approach recognizes the value of standardized tests as a diagnostic tool while also emphasizing the importance of continuous, formative assessments that track student growth over time. The formative assessment data that are produced will better inform teachers and parents of a student's individual strengths and areas for improvement, facilitate a partnership between teachers and parents, and allow teachers to use their professional training and judgment to make informed decisions that meet the specific needs of each student.

Petrilli (2020) similarly advocates for a more comprehensive accountability framework that includes metrics related to student engagement, mental health, and social-emotional development. He argues that schools should be held accountable not only for academic outcomes but also for their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students and communities. Bennett (2022) asserts that schools must foster environments where students feel safe, engaged, and supported while also developing life skills that go beyond academic achievement. Schools must be accountable for creating these learning environments to help students succeed in facets of life and society that a standardized test cannot measure.

As the education system, like many other aspects of daily life, continues to recover from the disruptions caused by COVID-19, there is an opportunity to build a more equitable and adaptable accountability system that better serves all students. CBAS offers a model for achieving this by focusing on a broader range of outcomes and allowing schools to continue operating effectively, even in the face of future disruptions.

Methods

The study drew upon seven semi-structured individual interviews with educational leaders from three Texas school districts to better understand their lived experiences and decision-making related to pandemic-related needs in their communities and the implications of those needs on their CBAS. The districts were selected based on their membership in the Texas Public Accountability Consortium (TPAC), a statewide group of school districts developing and implementing a CBAS to meet their local communities' needs, priorities, and goals. A diverse sample of districts was chosen from among the thirty-four TPAC members for their enrollment, geographic location in the state, and relative socioeconomic status. Table 1 displays the relevant

characteristics of each independent school district (ISD), as reflected in the 2021-2022 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR). Pseudonyms were assigned for each ISD.

Table 1

Relevant District Characteristics

District	Geographic Setting	Enrollment	Economically Disadvantaged %	TEA District Performance Rating
Central ISD	Rural	1,740	74.0%	B
North ISD	Suburban	13,107	8.9%	A
Southeast ISD	Suburban	40,235	35.6%	B

Individual participants from each district were selected based on their professional roles in school accountability, teaching and learning supervision, and policy implementation. Potential participants were contacted via email to solicit their collaboration and to request that they share the researcher's contact information with district colleagues whose professional roles aligned with the purpose of the study. Table 2 provides additional details regarding each of the participants.

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participant #	District	Position	Years in Position
1	Central	Superintendent	22
2	Central	Deputy Superintendent	3
3	Central	Director of Strategic Initiatives	6
4	Central	Director of Curriculum & Instruction	3
5	North	Superintendent	7
6	Southeast	Executive Director of Assessment & Accountability	3
7	Southeast	Assistant Superintendent of Teaching & Learning	8

Data collection was conducted in the fall of 2023 using an interview protocol developed in alignment with the research questions and relevant literature. Each interview was conducted virtually, lasting approximately one hour, and was audio-recorded for transcription via an online service. Participants were invited to review their respective transcripts to verify the accuracy of their responses.

An in vivo coding procedure, as outlined by Saldaña (2016), was applied, followed by multiple rounds of coding for each transcript. In the initial round of coding, codes were identified to address the first research question, facilitating an understanding of how participants perceived their roles in responding to the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic and school closures.

Subsequent coding focused on identifying codes related to shifting definitions of accountability, the evolving measures of the non-academic missions of schools, and the extent to which these new understandings impacted the districts' CBAS.

Table 3 provides a sample of the in vivo codes and their connection to the emergent themes, which are elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

Table 3
Sample In Vivo Codes and Emergent Themes

Sample In Vivo Codes	Emergent Themes
"never a culture of chasing STAAR scores," "holding ourselves accountable," well-roundedness, "to whom and for what," "[A-F grade] wasn't a priority"	Redefining Accountability
"physical and emotional safety of students," formative assessment, real time data, "sense of connectedness," "so much more than what's tested," "this work was already underway [pre-pandemic]"	Adapting CBAS to Address Emerging Needs
isolation, nutritional needs, infrastructure, "mental health crisis," apathy, inequity, "community resource," technology social-emotional safety, culture of care, anxiety	Schools' Non-Academic Roles

Note. Codes without quotation marks represent a broad theme expressed by multiple participants. In contrast, exact words or phrases from a participant are marked with quotation marks. A combination of each type of code has been included to allow the participants' actual words to be expressed in the findings.

Findings

Each participant in this study represented a school district actively engaged in CBAS development and implementation before the pandemic. The spread of the COVID-19 virus caused the cancellation of the spring 2020 administration of the STAAR tests for millions of Texas students. Because the TEA relies heavily on the results of these tests to determine school and district accountability, assigning A through F letter grades for the 2019-2020 school year was also halted. This experience laid bare the fundamental flaws of a test-based accountability system. Without a test, there can be no test-based accountability. However, this notion was not true in districts that were using an alternative means of reporting accountability to their communities.

Redefining Accountability

With the cancellation of the STAAR tests in 2020, Texas districts relying on these standardized assessments faced significant challenges in reporting student progress and determining school quality, highlighting a fundamental flaw in a test-based accountability system: its inability to adapt rapidly to unexpected circumstances. Participant reflections highlighted the struggles districts faced when the primary mechanism for accountability was removed. As Participant #3 noted:

> Without STAAR, there was no foundation for accountability, which left us struggling with how to communicate progress to our community...[the pandemic] forced us to speed up what we've been trying to do for so long, which was moving away from talking about

the tests when discussing accountability and moving toward talking about other
measures, which is our CBAS.

This shift allowed district leaders to engage in deeper conversations with their stakeholders about their goals, priorities, and values pertaining to their schools, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive measures of student success beyond standardized test scores.

The absence of standardized testing during the pandemic allowed districts to redefine the meaning and purpose of accountability. Instead of focusing solely on academic outcomes measured by STAAR, districts reported progress using alternative metrics, such as student work samples, teacher-developed assessments, and engagement data. As Participant #5 observed, parents no longer had STAAR results, but they saw firsthand their child's work, struggles, and successes, stating parents had "a clearer picture of their [child's] progress than any test ever could give because they saw assessments with actual value. This lets parents know how their student what progressing. They could see it happening in real-time."

The shift away from test scores as the primary accountability measure enables district leaders to engage in meaningful discussions with their communities about the hopes and goals of their local schools. This shift also helps leaders enhance their comprehensive accountability frameworks by incorporating social-emotional and developmental outcomes while still maintaining a focus on academic achievement.

Adapting CBAS to Meet Emerging Needs

In contrast to the test-based system's collapse, districts with an existing CBAS were able to pivot and maintain accountability in the absence of STAAR results. These districts leveraged their locally developed systems, focusing on broader metrics beyond test scores, such as student engagement, well-being, and needs within the broader community. Participant #4 explained, "CBAS was already embedded in the district, even before COVID. It allowed us to continue assessing students' progress and addressing their needs, despite the absence of STAAR results." Through CBAS, districts demonstrated their accountability to local communities by focusing on comprehensive formative assessments and reporting progress in real time, thus providing the flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

The Role of Schools Beyond Academics

The pandemic reinforced the notion that schools play a much broader role in their communities beyond simply delivering academic content. Districts with CBAS highlighted this role by focusing on student and family well-being as a core accountability measure. Participant #6 shared how their district shifted to ensuring connectedness and support when students felt increasingly isolated from their peers, stating that the district leadership team did not focus heavily on academic measures during the initial school closures. Instead, the participant noted, "We talked about our COVID response, how we were going to keep kids safe, how we were going to keep them engaged, and what measures we were putting in place for their emotional well-being." This district leaders expressed that much of the team's planning centered on addressing students' physical, nutritional, and psychological needs. CBAS allowed these districts to communicate this broader role effectively, demonstrating that accountability goes beyond just what can be tested and encompasses the full scope of what schools provide to their students and communities.

One of the most significant challenges districts faced during the pandemic was addressing the emergent needs of students and families, particularly related to technology access, mental health, and equity. Each district acted swiftly to ensure students had the devices and connectivity

necessary to participate in remote learning. For example, Participant #2 described how their district deployed buses equipped with Wi-Fi to community hubs, ensuring students could stay academically and socially connected. Mental health also emerged as a critical concern, with districts seeing heightened anxiety and depression among students. Pre-COVID CBAS pillars related to health and well-being enabled districts to respond effectively, as illustrated by Central ISD's decision to open a district-run mental health center to support students, staff, and community members. These efforts further illustrate the role CBAS play in measuring and reporting accountability above and beyond mere test scores.

The Future of School Accountability: Lessons from the Pandemic
As district leaders reflect on the challenges and successes of navigating accountability during the pandemic, there is consensus that school accountability must evolve. The flexibility and adaptability of CBAS allowed districts to continue functioning and meeting their communities' needs, even in the absence of traditional testing. Participant #5 remarked:

> [CBAS] is a learning tool, a measurement of student growth. It's not designed to get away from something, and sometimes people think that we are trying to run away from state accountability, but we're not. We want to be accountable. In fact, I think a CBAS makes you even *more* [emphasis added] accountable to your community in more areas. The pandemic forced us to rethink accountability, and we realized that CBAS was the path forward.

> The future of school accountability, as envisioned by these district leaders, involves a balanced approach that values both academic and non-academic outcomes. This approach ensures that schools are accountable not just for test scores but also for fostering environments where students feel safe, supported, and able to thrive. This vision reflects a more equitable and comprehensive approach to what schools should be accountable for and is better suited to meet the diverse needs of students and communities.

Discussion

This study sought to answer two research questions: (1) What needs emerged among students and in the community due to pandemic-related disruptions, and how did educational leaders work to meet them? and (2) To what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures impact the district's alternative accountability system? The findings provide valuable insights into how districts with Community-Based Accountability Systems (CBAS) were able to navigate the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, redefining their approach to accountability while addressing the multifaceted needs of their communities. The following section connects the study's findings to the relevant research literature and these research questions.

Emergent Needs in the Community
The findings of this study align with existing research emphasizing the essential role that schools play in addressing the comprehensive needs of their students, including social-emotional, nutritional, physical, and mental health needs (Clark, 2014; Leader & Pazey, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these roles, with schools stepping in to support their communities in ways that went far beyond academic instruction. The first research question explored the emergent needs of students and how educational leaders worked to meet them during the pandemic. School closures introduced new challenges in areas such as technology

access, mental health and well-being, and equity. Educational leaders responded by leveraging their CBAS to ensure students had access to the necessary tools for learning while also developing new strategies to address their social-emotional, physical, nutritional, and other non-academic needs.

CBAS provided a critical framework for schools to remain accountable to their stakeholders, even during a crisis. The district leaders who participated in this study used these systems to report not only academic outcomes but also how they were meeting the broader developmental needs of students. As noted in the literature, test-based accountability systems often fail to account for these non-testable needs (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Moss, 2022). By contrast, CBAS enabled districts to prioritize student well-being, engagement, and social-emotional support, areas that standardized testing traditionally overlooks (Tanner, 2021). These findings highlight the flexibility of CBAS in allowing schools to address the multifaceted challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Participant #6 illustrated this shift by describing how the district responded to growing concerns about student isolation and mental health. The district's existing CBAS allowed leaders to focus on ensuring students felt supported and connected to their school communities, even while learning remotely, reflecting broader calls in the literature for accountability systems that measure success not just through academic performance but also through students' social and emotional growth (Mann et al., 2020).

Impact of the Pandemic on Alternative Accountability Systems

The second research question examined the extent to which the pandemic impacted districts' pre-existing alternative accountability systems. The findings suggest that while test-based accountability systems collapsed when standardized testing was canceled, districts with a CBAS could maintain their accountability frameworks. The pandemic revealed the fragility of test-based systems, which depend almost exclusively on standardized assessments like STAAR to measure school performance. The cancellation of these tests in 2020 left many districts without the primary tool used to report accountability to their communities. As Participant #3 observed, "Without CBAS and without STAAR, there is no accountability, which would leave us with no way to communicate progress to our communities." This mirrors critiques in the literature that argue that test-based systems are overly rigid and ill-suited to adapt to unanticipated disruptions (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Moss, 2022; Tanner, 2021; Zhao, 2020).

However, districts that had implemented CBAS before the school closures could continue operating and communicating progress through alternative metrics, such as student engagement, well-being, and teacher-developed assessments. Participant #4 described how CBAS enabled their district to continue tracking and reporting student progress in real time, even without STAAR scores. This adaptability aligns with the literature's emphasis on the need for more flexible accountability systems that can better reflect the complexities of educational environments, especially during times of crisis (Petrilli, 2020; Tanner, 2021).

The pandemic also prompted districts to engage their communities in discussions about the future of accountability. One of the more engaging features of CBAS is that it facilitates an ongoing dialogue between the district and the community about what should be measured and how. With STAAR data unavailable, these CBAS districts shifted the focus to other indicators of student success, such as the quality of student work and social-emotional development. This shift away from a narrow focus on test scores and toward a broader understanding of student progress and achievement is consistent with calls in the literature for more comprehensive, locally

developed accountability frameworks (Petrilli, 2020; Sellars & Imig, 2020; Tanner, 2021; Vasquez Heilig, 2015). As the worst of the pandemic's impacts recede, these districts will likely continue collaborating with their communities to determine how best to proceed with a CBAS that prioritizes local educational goals and needs.

Pressing Forward: The Future of Accountability

The findings of this study suggest that the future of school accountability must move beyond the limitations of standardized testing. The pandemic demonstrated that schools are responsible for far more than academic instruction, and accountability systems must evolve to reflect the full scope of what schools provide to their students and communities. The participants in this study used their CBAS to address the immediate needs of their students and communities during the pandemic, from ensuring access to technology for remote learning to supporting mental health. These actions underscore the importance of maintaining a flexible and comprehensive accountability system that can respond to both academic and non-academic challenges.

The literature suggests that accountability systems should focus not only on test scores but also on a range of outcomes, including student engagement, mental health, and community involvement (Bennett, 2022; Lake & Worthen, 2021). The adaptability of CBAS, as described by Participant #7, allowed districts to rethink their accountability systems in a way that values the holistic development of students. As educational leaders continue to reflect on the lessons learned from the pandemic, there is a clear opportunity to advocate for accountability systems that prioritize student well-being and community support alongside academic achievement. The findings of this study reinforce the argument that schools should not be judged solely by a letter grade or test scores alone. Instead, accountability systems must capture the full range of services schools provide to their students and broader communities. Moving forward, school accountability systems should be designed to value both academic results and the social-emotional and developmental support that schools offer. This approach aligns with a vision for a more equitable and comprehensive model of accountability that better meets the needs of students and communities (Clark, 2014; Leader & Pazey, 2023; Tanner, 2021; Vasquez Heilig, 2015).

Implications and Conclusions

The implications of this study on accountability-related policy and leadership practice are significant. The fragility of test-based accountability was on full display during and shortly after the onset of the pandemic and subsequent school closure. As the worst of the COVID-19 impacts begin to wane, another disruption will inevitably occur. In its current state, test-based accountability appears to be poised to fail again in the face of the next global pandemic, widespread natural disaster, or other calamity that will make administrating the test impossible. Therein lies the danger of using just one data point to determine success.

On the other hand, this study shows that a CBAS that utilizes multiple measures can continue to function and adapt in the face of challenges. Despite having no STAAR data, these participant districts could still publish reports that reflected the gains students and schools made during the 2019-2020 school year. These included measures of student engagement through project- and problem-based learning, social-emotional health as reflected in virtual appointments with counseling staff, teacher professional learning for online instruction, and addressing issues of resource equity and access by providing all students with technology and connectivity. When operating at full capacity, CBAS is a comprehensive accountability system that utilizes both

quantitative and qualitative measures like those discussed here to create a meaningful and valuable picture of student and school achievement. The success of CBAS during the pandemic suggests that policymakers should reconsider the overreliance on standardized testing as the sole measure of school and student performance.

For educational leaders, the study's findings reinforce the importance of engaging with local communities to develop accountability systems that reflect their unique goals and needs. Districts that had already established CBAS were better equipped to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic, as these systems prioritized collaboration with stakeholders and allowed for more responsive, adaptive decision-making. As schools recover from the pandemic's impacts, there is an opportunity to build on these successes by advocating for accountability systems that empower local communities to play a central role in defining what constitutes student and school success.

The work, however, must continue even as the tendency grows to return to pre-pandemic accountability thinking. Advocacy from state groups such as the TPAC, smaller regional consortia, and even individual school districts will be crucial if educational leaders are to be successful in using the inequities and failures of the current test-based regime to highlight the need for a reimagined accountability system. Returning to a system that overvalues one test on one day rather than a comprehensive portrait of what a student knows and can do devalues the diverse ways schools serve their communities. Districts like those highlighted in this study will continue to lead the way as we envision school accountability in a post-COVID world.

Areas for Future Research

While this study contributes to the understanding of how CBAS functioned during the pandemic, several areas warrant further exploration. First, future research should examine the long-term impacts of CBAS on student outcomes, particularly in comparison to districts that rely solely on test-based accountability systems. This could provide valuable insights into whether the more flexible and comprehensive approach of CBAS leads to sustained improvements in academic achievement, student and community engagement, and overall school performance.

Further, additional research is needed to explore how CBAS can be scaled and implemented in a broader range of contexts, particularly in urban districts and those with limited resources. Understanding the conditions under which CBAS can be most effective and the implementation challenges will be critical in determining whether this model can serve as a viable alternative to traditional accountability systems on a larger scale.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility and limitations of school accountability systems reliant on standardized testing. However, the districts that had adopted Community-Based Accountability Systems (CBAS) demonstrated resilience and adaptability, continuing to measure and report progress through a broader array of metrics, including student engagement, well-being, and community needs. This study underscores the importance of reimagining school accountability in a post-COVID world, moving away from an overreliance of testing as the sole measure of accountability and embracing more flexible, locally-driven systems like CBAS. These findings suggest that schools must be held accountable not just for academic outcomes but for their capacity to meet the holistic needs of students and communities. As schools and policymakers look toward the future, the lessons learned during the pandemic

present an opportunity to reshape accountability in more equitable, comprehensive, and better aligned with the diverse needs of students and communities.

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