Refocusing the Priorities of Accountability

Introduction

This is a critical moment for standards-based accountability policy. State summative testing and accountability systems were suspended for the 2019-20 school year and some states are indicating they'd like to continue that moratorium through the 2020-21 school year. After releasing three briefs looking at the past and present of state accountability systems, this brief asks the question: What should accountability for student learning look like next year and in the years to come?

The stakes are incredibly high for students. Estimates of learning loss due to the pandemic paint a frightening picture for all but the most advantaged students. Those in the highest socioeconomic quintile seemed to have adapted fairly well to distance learning, but students with average or low socioeconomic status are likely to sustain major learning losses.[1]

The 2020-21 school year promises to be another abnormal year. School system leaders, principals, and teachers are working to develop new plans for distance learning and hybrid schooling options to teach students while also prioritizing public health. But none of these approaches has been tested at this scale in our school system, and the impact these changes will have on students in the long run remains uncertain.

Using the operational uncertainty of the next year as an excuse to suspend assessment and accountability would cripple our ability to understand the impact of COVID-19 on student learning and imply that schools should not be held responsible for the work they do this year in mitigating and overcoming that impact. We find that to be an unacceptable proposition. At the same time, while we believe that accountability can and should play an important role in focusing stakeholders and resources on the important goals of higher and more equitable student achievement, we recognize that just as schooling has been forced to adapt to new challenges, so must accountability policies.

This brief is part four 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, links to the other briefs in this series, and related resources.

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This is not only a moment for considering how accountability policy can adapt in response to the pandemic — it's an opportunity to refocus and refine the priorities of accountability systems for the long term. These systems demonstrated an ability to drive higher and more equitable student outcomes, but those improvements weren't dramatic enough to fully close learning gaps and they came with distinct trade-offs.[2] Additionally, the previously strong bipartisan coalition that originally supported standards-based accountability has diminished over time, fracturing partly in response to legitimate issues with accountability structures and implementation and partly due to increasingly polarized politics.

There are fair cases to be made for well-intentioned critiques of accountability systems, and policymakers ought to grapple with them seriously. But before policymakers undertake efforts to redefine how accountability works, it's vital that such deliberations begin with consensus on why accountability is essential: It places stronger and more equitable student outcomes at the core of how we determine the successes and failures of our school system and the policies that support it. If policymakers are able to recommit themselves to that goal, productive debate over how accountability works can follow — even in the face of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

Clarifying the Priorities of Accountability Policy

Over time, policymakers have asked accountability systems to perform many functions: labeling school performance, intervening in low-performing schools, informing instructional decisions at the school level, and providing transparency to parents and the public about school performance.[3] But as these policies are on pause due to COVID-19 and school closures, policymakers should ask: Can accountability systems serve all of these purposes equally well, or should they focus on a particular priority?

With COVID-19 amplifying equity gaps and assessment and accountability systems paused, now is a prudent time to consider how to drive more equitable student achievement over the short-, medium-, and long-term. Policymakers should begin with questions of focus: What goals should be prioritized in the next generation of accountability systems? Which people are the systems primarily designed to serve, and what should accountability systems enable or require those people to do?

This brief builds on the lessons learned from the past 20 years of school accountability[4] and examines what it would look like for a state to prioritize three different purposes that accountability systems have been asked to serve historically:

- As a means for policymakers to intervene in schools
- As a tool for schools to improve instruction
- As a platform to inform parents as they engage with their school communities and/or make school choice decisions

We present three scenarios focusing on each of these priorities in isolation, in order to explore how a policy optimized for that priority could be structured — with a particular focus on changes in policy or practice that could address common critiques of current systems, what a system designed specifically to serve that priority might mean for equity, and what downsides or trade-offs could emerge.

Some of the elements within each of these three scenarios could be compatible with each other, enabling a well-designed system to address more than one purpose. But it would be extremely difficult for all three to work equally well together, particularly if policymakers seek to address some of the pain points that have emerged for various stakeholders under current systems. On the other hand, sharpening the focus of future policy on one or two priorities could address some of the challenges and critiques of current structures, albeit with some trade-offs. The political and practical constraints of addressing each of these three priorities highlights the central argument of this brief: If policymakers want accountability systems to truly have an impact on improving student outcomes, they should tailor their actions to focus on a more constrained set of priorities.

SCENARIO 1

Prioritizing Accountability as a Means for Policymakers to Improve Low-Performing Schools

Priorities and Goals

The most visible and controversial feature of standards-based accountability systems are the policies that identify and intervene in schools with low overall performance or substantial gaps between student subgroups. It is also one of the aspects of accountability that has seen the most change in the past decade. From NCLB to Obama-era waivers to ESSA, the process by which states identify and intervene in schools evolved from a rigid structure dictated by the federal government to one that permits much more flexibility at the state level. At the same time, where federal law once asked states to hold all schools and districts accountable for student outcomes, it now requires states to focus interventions on only the very lowest-performing schools and ignores districts altogether.

These policy evolutions were a reflection of two realities. First, states did not have the fiscal, political, or human capital to intervene in more than a small subset of schools and districts. Second, previous attempts at school improvement and turnaround efforts have a limited track record of demonstrated success. Policymakers can accept those limitations and still view school identification and intervention as the most critical component of accountability.

A new set of policies that embraces a focused but enhanced role for states to identify and intervene in low-performing schools and districts might help deliver more sustainable student gains in the future. States with this priority would essentially set the goal of their accountability system to ensure a baseline of quality — a "floor" of performance below which they would not allow schools to fall.

How It Could Work

The first task for a state focused on interventions in the lowest-performing schools and districts would be to clearly define two processes. First, the state would need to set clear performance standards and measure student progress against those targets to drive decisions about which schools and districts are in need of interventions. Second, states would need to set clear consequences for schools and districts that failed to meet those standards after a reasonable amount of time.

States already have the building blocks for such a system: Every state has defined academic standards and adopted an assessment regime to test for performance against those standards.

Standards-aligned assessments would continue to play a key role in informing state and district leaders on the progress of students by school and subgroup, but this could look different in a system that focuses on school- or district-level identification.

For example, states could employ sampling methods that test a representative portion of students instead of testing all students. There are trade-offs to this approach — which we discuss in the next section — but a sampling approach would allow a state to reduce its testing burden while still gathering enough information to identify the lowest-performing schools and districts. It could also relieve some of the political pushback against accountability systems that has been driven by perceptions of excessive testing.[5]

Moreover, test data need not be the sole determinant of accountability decisions. Just as is reflected in some current structures, states could include other metrics that reflect how well schools are serving students, such as student attendance (or engagement in hybrid or distance learning), equity of access to rigorous coursework, postsecondary readiness, or student and parent surveys assessing school culture.

Once new approaches to school identification have been adopted, states would also need to develop effective interventions and consequences for underperforming schools. Policymakers have struggled to find a consistent and effective playbook for school turnarounds, but there is a strong base of evidence to suggest that one-off or ad-hoc interventions don't have much of a long-term impact on schools or students. Instead, interventions should take a more comprehensive approach to school or district intervention.

The efforts to turn around schools in Lawrence, Massachusetts[6] and in Tennessee's iZone[7] offer one blueprint for states to consider as they evolve their approach to intervention. In both cases, state efforts focused on supporting or developing district and school capacity in curriculum, instruction, staffing, and logistics. The capacity-building efforts were also paired with governance reforms to increase school-level autonomy. Taken together, the result is a state-supported but locally led approach to school and district turnaround.

Refocusing accountability efforts on identification and state-supported, but locally designed intervention in underperforming schools and districts is attractive in many ways. It capitalizes on states' strengths in past accountability efforts — establishing rigorous standards and aligned assessment programs. And it aligns the scale of an accountability system's ambitions with the limited capacity of state departments of education to effectively intervene in schools and districts. With a more focused effort on identification and intervention, states could also reduce their testing burdens as they focus on developing effective interventions and capacity-building efforts with local districts and schools.

Potential Trade-Offs

The drawbacks to this approach are both clear and concerning. First, a more focused effort on identifying and turning around the lowest-performing schools could reduce the incentives for all other schools to improve.

Second, while sampling approaches to testing may be able to generate sufficient data for policy decisions, the loss of data on each individual student would fail to provide parents with information on their own child's performance. Since only a fraction of students would be tested each year, a sampling approach would also hamper research and analysis efforts that depend on fine-grained, student-level data.

A sampling approach also works much better for district-level accountability than it would for school-level evaluations. That's because schools are smaller than districts and thus have smaller sample sizes. Worse, the smaller sample sizes under a sampling approach would make it especially hard to hold schools accountable for the performance of individual subgroups of students.

Third, there is no guarantee that this strategy, or other strategies, will lead to a high degree of success in improving a state's lowest-performing schools. While stronger implementation efforts may yield better outcomes, states would be wise to plan for what happens if their strategies for improvement don't pan out. What timeline should a strategy be given to work? What recourse will students and families have if turnaround efforts are unsuccessful?

There are a suite of consequences that policymakers have already adopted, including closing or restarting schools. But the most drastic interventions, closures and restarts, have not always been enforced, either in a timely manner or at all, and have mixed results and impacts on communities.[8] In addition to establishing clarity around and consistent application of consequences, there is also room

for innovation on this front. States could develop policies and incentives for high-performing schools to expand the number of students served, either through physical expansion or potentially through virtual options. Recognizing that virtual schooling has a bumpy track record historically and particularly during the COVID-19 school closures, we recognize that schools and educators are learning a tremendous amount about delivering instruction in new ways at scale. There may be lessons to harness from that experience that could allow more students to access higher-quality options, either on a physical campus or virtually.

In other words, this scenario depends on political leaders to actually follow through with high-stakes consequences that would follow failed intervention efforts. Clear policies, defined and transparent decision-making processes grounded in objective data, and strong communication and engagement processes can mitigate the fallout of actions like school closures, but the decision to close a school will always be challenging and politically fraught. But if policymakers are willing to invest in developing strong mechanisms to protect against ineffective turnaround efforts that allow poor performance to persist indefinitely, a focus on better identification and intervention could help improve the outcomes of states' highest-need students.

SCENARIO 2

Prioritizing Accountability as a Vehicle for Schools to Improve Instruction

Priorities and Goals

In theory, assessment data from accountability systems can provide information to inform future instructional efforts. However, the data produced by current state summative assessments are often not useful to parents or teachers and delivered too late to inform specific or timely changes for the next school year. Refocusing accountability systems to have a more significant and successful impact on instruction could help address those shortcomings, but it would also lead to a larger role for state political leaders to more directly influence instruction.

The primary goal of this approach would be for the state to take a stronger role in defining quality instruction and building systems to support instructional improvement. This kind of system would require developing more actionable data on student performance that would in turn lead to changes in instruction that would ultimately produce better student outcomes.

How It Could Work

The first challenge in a shift to a more instruction-focused accountability system — reducing the time it takes to get from assessment administration to delivering useful data to educators — is a solvable problem. Higher-quality summative assessments that provide more instructionally relevant feedback to teachers and administrators at a faster pace can be done, but would likely require trade-offs in terms of instructional constraints or cost.[9] Alternatively, states could adopt an assessment system that relied on interim or "through-course" assessments that could be rolled up into a summative indicator of student learning, an approach states are already allowed to pursue under ESSA.[10]

What features should policymakers seek, other than faster turnaround time? First, updated assessment systems will likely need to address a wider range of student learning at each grade level. Most current state summative assessments focus on a relatively narrow set of grade-level standards, which hampers the ability of these assessments to pinpoint learning achievements or gaps students may demonstrate either above or below grade level, nuance required to truly inform student-level instructional decisions. This challenge will likely be even more acute following COVID-19, as the effect of the pandemic on students' learning is likely to produce even wider ranges of performance within grade-level cohorts.[11]

Computer-adaptive assessments — which self-calibrate question difficulty based on students' responses mid-test — may help address this challenge, but a competency-based system of assessment may be even better-suited to an era where students' age may be less correlated with their academic achievement. Under a competency-based approach, students could take assessments when they are prepared to demonstrate mastery over a certain span of content and standards. Once students demonstrate mastery of content or skills, they could move on to more advanced topics. If they don't, teachers would know they needed to target instruction to facilitate content mastery.

Policymakers would also want to find ways to make the results of assessments more actionable for educators and parents. At a minimum, all students would need to be tested at least annually, and ideally more frequently, with their results shared quickly with parents and educators. Enhancing those connections would likely mean developing even stronger links between curricular content and assessment results. While this approach would limit the autonomy of educators to design and implement curricula of varying rigor and quality, it could help ensure more consistent and equitable access to quality content, as well as clarifying for parents and educators the solutions to address students' weaknesses.

Establishing deeper relationships between curriculum, instruction, and assessments could bring a higher degree of clarity and coherence to instructional improvement efforts. States could follow Louisiana's approach and provide incentives for schools to adopt higher-quality curricula.[12] Research has shown that high-quality curriculum and instructional materials can have large, positive effects on student learning.[13] Furthermore, when teacher professional development (PD) is tied to the curriculum and sustained over the course of a school year, it can lead to better student outcomes.[14] If more instructionally relevant assessment data led to PD that was targeted to specific weak points in schools' curricula or to better target remediation for specific students, it could lead to real gains in student outcomes.

Overall, shifting accountability policy to prioritize instructional improvement has some clear strengths. It would tighten the link between standards, assessments, curriculum, and instruction, which could help produce more equitable student outcomes. A more instructionally focused approach to accountability would also elevate the focus on and effort to improve and maintain high-quality instruction for all students.

Potential Trade-Offs

What happens once educators have better and more actionable student performance data? Can we be confident that instructional improvement will follow organically? Unfortunately, there's no evidence that would happen on its own. Teachers already analyze their own data, identify where they might need to shift their approach, and then implement those changes — an approach often referred to as "data-driven instruction." But when teachers have been asked to study student test score data and adapt their instruction accordingly, the research has not found it leads to improved student outcomes.[15] Data from more instructionally relevant state assessments may lead to some improvements on this front, but that would not be a guarantee of improved student progress.

For state leaders, an instruction-focused approach would also need specific protections for equity concerns. This would include some form of public reporting of the outcomes, at the school level and for specific student subgroups. If states adopt a more competency-based approach to assessment, there would also need to be clear expectations for how much time students should be allowed to master specific content and standards. This could come in the form of specifying a minimum level of achievement per academic year or a certain amount of academic growth over a period of time.

This scenario also lacks any required actions if students fail to make sufficient progress over time. It's possible that principals would be empowered with more actionable and more frequent data and could hold teachers accountable. Or state leaders could act on the data in similar ways as envisioned under the first scenario, but that would complicate a system intended to get teacher buy-in.

Unlike efforts to identify and intervene in low-performing schools, this instruction-focused version of accountability has never been tested at scale in the United States. It would require a massive investment in overhauling assessment, curricula, professional development, and student supports, and the construction of a system to increase the alignment of these systems. These measures would also require state leaders to have more involvement in the scope, sequencing, and pacing of curriculum. Some educators might appreciate such an influx of support for instruction, but others might balk at a higher level of codification and policy intervention in the instructional process.

Ultimately, the greatest risk in this scenario is that it could lead to changes in instructional practices that never produce comparable gains in student outcomes. Improving instruction is a necessary condition for improved student outcomes, but states would need to make sure that focusing on improving the process of instruction does not allow for poor student performance to persist, especially for the most vulnerable students.

If policymakers are willing to commit the necessary resources and build reliable equity safeguards into an instruction-focused approach to accountability, it could have a positive impact on the core of students' classroom experience and lead to improved outcomes. But the untested nature of this approach, the homogenizing effect it would have on teacher development, and the unclear mechanisms of accountability should give leaders pause. Such a system could work, but it would require a great deal of commitment, systems-building, and buy-in from stakeholders into a completely new approach to accountability.

Prioritizing Accountability as an Informational Tool to Support Parent Choice

Priorities and Goals

Under the third scenario, accountability systems could focus primarily on becoming informational tools. As such, they would help bring much-needed clarity over student outcomes to stakeholders, but absent other features borrowed from scenarios 1 or 2, they would need to be paired with family empowerment mechanisms as the primary mechanism of accountability.

The goal of prioritizing information to support parents' school choice would represent a significant scaling back of states' efforts to directly change how schools operate. Instead, this approach would focus on informing and empowering parents to define school quality on their own terms and make school enrollment choices accordingly.

How It Could Work

The first priority of an information-first approach to accountability would be a focus on developing and publishing information on the aspects of schools that families value the most. This would include measures of academic performance and student engagement (such as attendance or survey data) differentiated by significant student subgroups, but it would also include broader information on the schooling experience. That could mean information on the particular curricular or instructional approach of a school, operational details such as transportation options or safety and security, extracurricular offerings, or family supports such as after-school care.

Some of this information could be collected with a combination of existing and new data sources. Assessments could provide data on academic achievement and growth, data that could potentially be generated through sampling techniques instead of testing every student, similar to scenario 1. If states did adopt a sampling approach, parents who wanted specific data on their child's progress could have the option to "opt in" to a state's assessment system. While this could create complications from a data quality perspective, states could find ways to offer more information to the parents who ask for it.

Other indicators of school offerings, such as the curricula they use or the extracurriculars they offer, could be reported through standard templates created by state departments of education with the input of parents and school leaders. Since much of this data would be self-reported by schools, states should also consider creating anonymous hotlines for parents to flag information that is misreported by schools. These data points would also be challenging to define — how can the uniqueness of each school be captured in a few standardized fields? States would need to work with parents to establish minimum reporting requirements for schools that balance comparability across schools with capturing the nuance of each school's offerings. States could then collect and report that information for each school through multiple modalities that are broadly accessible to lay audiences.

In this scenario, the simple act of providing transparency to parents has some value, but the real power of accountability comes when stakeholders can act on that data. Parents may use that data to advocate for their child's specific needs. But in an information-focused accountability system, the strongest form of accountability is when parents have the ability and power to choose among a range of school options.

There is some evidence that providing choice options can help improve student outcomes. Taken as a whole, charter schools tend to perform about the same as traditional public schools, but urban charters tend to produce better academic outcomes for low-income and nonwhite students.[16] Additionally, urban areas with higher charter school market share are associated with better test scores for Black and Latino students.[17] Studies of private school choice programs demonstrate weaker or negative evidence of improvement for students on test scores, but participation in these programs

can lead to positive long-term outcomes for students, including higher rates of college enrollment and persistence.[18] There is also some evidence to suggest that private choice programs can have positive effects on the students who remain in traditional public schools.[19]

The extension of school options to families in this system would not only rely on mechanisms like growing the charter school sector or offering private school tax credits, but it also includes ensuring robust access to traditional public schools through open enrollment programs. While 47 states have some form of open enrollment policy,[20] relaxing restrictions on interdistrict enrollment could improve the number of options available to families, which could increase their power to exercise accountability. But these measures would need to be paired with efforts to address informational and operational barriers for families and the often legitimate capacity constraints that limit access to high-demand schools, such as building size or access to the highest-performing teachers.

Potential Trade-Offs

High-density areas of the country often have robust forms of school choice, including charter schools, magnet schools, and private school choice programs. But many families live in areas where there are few or no alternatives to their neighborhood school. What would an information-first form of accountability do for families in states without charter schools or those who live in sparsely populated areas?

Technology may be one answer to this challenge. If more schools develop better-quality distance education options in response to the global pandemic, this could provide avenues for students to access schools that are outside of their ZIP code. But many of these efforts are still nascent, their quality is unknown, and technological barriers such as broadband access remain significant issues in many parts of the country.[21]

There are also serious equity concerns with an accountability system that relies on parent choice. Would this approach lead to the exacerbation of existing inequities by giving privileged families greater structural advantages in school selection? What protections would be needed to ensure that students with special needs or families with language barriers had equitable access to educational opportunities in a choice-heavy system?

An information-first approach to accountability may seem relatively easy for states to adopt. It would change their role from an intervention-focused one to an information-generating and choice-supporting one. But the real weakness of this approach is its assumption that every family can access alternative schooling options if their child isn't being served well by their current school. In many parts of the country, there are very real barriers to exercising school choice, from lack of options in rural areas to transportation issues in more urbanized areas.[22]

If policymakers adopt this approach but fail to cultivate robust options for all students or include protections for students with special learning needs, there is a high risk of this approach subverting the equitable ambitions that undergird any accountability effort. The information on schools generated by this approach, while useful to parents, would not be well suited to support any of the school or instructional improvement efforts outlined in scenarios 1 or 2, which would leave no backstop of support for students if choice failed to deliver for them.

Choosing Priorities with Achievement and Equity at the Core

Policymakers will have to make their own high-stakes decision in the very near future: What will they do about their state's school accountability system? Even as schools face the difficult challenge of navigating through a pandemic, we believe that allowing another year to pass without any transparency or accountability for student outcomes would only serve to compound the negative effects of this difficult moment. Instead of pressing "pause" for another year, policymakers should recommit to the goal of driving higher and more equitable student outcomes.

While we attempted to present the scenarios above as neutrally as possible, we have the most faith in scenario 1 given its strong focus on protections for historically underserved students. We're biased toward action, and scenario 1 is the only option of the three where something has to happen in low-performing schools. While scenarios 2 and 3 each have their merits, they both lack safeguards to ensure that students don't fall through the cracks. States could adopt sampling measures if they wanted to relieve some of the testing burdens, or they could restrict the number of schools and districts in which they intervene if they wanted to target interventions more narrowly, but we do not think school and district leaders should be entirely free of responsibility for student learning outcomes.

We also believe that states are better equipped to effectively administer scenario 1 than they are the other two. States already have academic content standards and assessments. They have been identifying and intervening in low-performing schools for the better part of two decades now, albeit with varying success. In contrast, state leaders have been reluctant to wade into classroom-level curriculum decisions, as scenario 2 would require. And while states have adopted some school choice programs, they have not been willing to intervene as far into local control as scenario 3 envisions. Further, an approach to accountability that relies solely on family choice requires significant investment to ensure equity — including sufficient and widely accessible information for families, transparent processes, and support infrastructure like transportation. While aspects of scenarios 2 and 3 could be incorporated into their systems, state leaders should not pretend that their accountability systems can be all things to all audiences.

As policymakers consider how to adapt accountability systems to meet their goals during COVID-19, we believe that their efforts will be strengthened if they clearly articulate what functions they want to prioritize in a next-generation system of accountability. This brief has illustrated what it would look like for states to set three very different priorities for their accountability systems. Each approach has distinct strengths and weaknesses, but whatever path policymakers pursue, they should be:

- Clear about the primary purpose of their accountability system

- Honest about the costs and trade-offs associated with that approach

- Uncompromising in their approach to meeting the needs of historically disadvantaged student groups

Policymakers must also recognize that an improved accountability system is only one part of what should be a comprehensive effort to improve outcomes for students. In addition to improving and focusing accountability systems, leaders will need to address a plethora of other policy challenges to improve student success, including increasing the equity of state and district funding formulae, developing a more diverse educator workforce, and addressing the social-emotional needs of children.

The choices facing education policymakers are daunting. But adapting accountability systems to meet those challenges is not only feasible, it can also provide much-needed clarity for leaders and educators working on the ground. Most important, recommitting to the goal of higher and more equitable student achievement is the right thing to do at a moment when so many students are facing so many obstacles. Children deserve policymakers who put student outcomes at the top of their priorities — something that the next generation of accountability policy can help them accomplish.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

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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.