Takeaways for State Policymakers and Advocates

As schools enter Fall 2020, education leaders face two major challenges: creating a healthy and safe environment for students and staff, and addressing the inequitable effects of school closures and months of distance learning. The effects of the pandemic would be bad enough if they affected all students equally. Instead, historically underserved students are more likely to suffer from educational, health, and economic impacts, especially Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students.

In the face of these crises, standards, assessments, and accountability systems are more important than ever. The core objective of accountability — higher and more equitable outcomes for students — must remain at the center of state policymakers' decisions and advocates' agendas. State leaders must not let this crisis dismantle systems designed to shine a light on the lowest performing students and schools, and compel action. Another year of missing data, lost opportunities, or an indefinite pause on accountability systems would be a disaster for our youngest, most vulnerable children.

> This resource is part of a 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 bit.ly/MakingNextYearCount for more on this series.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the weaknesses of existing accountability systems, and now might be an opportune time for improvements. **Here are some of the most important considerations for state education policymakers and advocates for educational equity:**
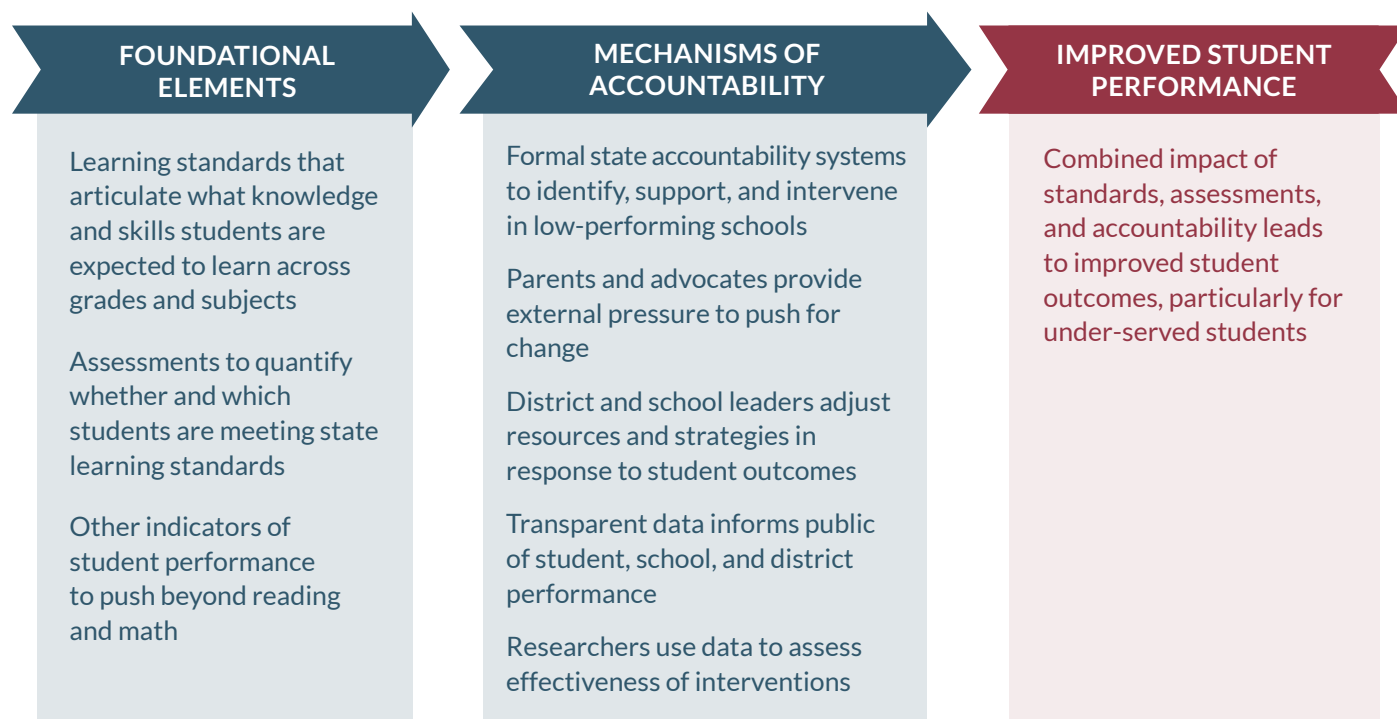
Understand the Why and How of Accountability Systems

If state leaders and advocates understand these fundamental "why" and "how" features of accountability systems, they will be better positioned to cut through political rhetoric and improve their accountability systems in ways that support students and make sense for the short- and long-term.

Accountability systems aim to improve educational achievement for students overall, and ensure that factors such as race, family income, English learner or disability status do not determine educational outcomes. Based on a variety of student performance metrics, states use a combination of transparency, public pressures, school interventions, and resource allocation to reshape student outcomes.

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Standards-based accountability systems have changed a lot in the past 30 or so years, and every state's system works differently under current law, but all accountability systems follow the same basic recipe, explained in this graphic:

School Accountability Theory of Change

FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS	MECHANISMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY	IMPROVED STUDENT PERFORMANCE
Learning standards that articulate what knowledge and skills students are expected to learn across grades and subjects	Formal state accountability systems to identify, support, and intervene in low-performing schools	Combined impact of standards, assessments, and accountability leads to improved student outcomes, particularly for under-served students
Assessments to quantify whether and which students are meeting state learning standards	Parents and advocates provide external pressure to push for change	
Other indicators of student performance to push beyond reading and math	District and school leaders adjust resources and strategies in response to student outcomes	
	Transparent data informs public of student, school, and district performance	
	Researchers use data to assess effectiveness of interventions	

Preserve What Works Best in Current Accountability Systems

In the midst of great uncertainty and change, state leaders and educational equity advocates should remember and preserve what has worked best in accountability systems:

High standards and reliable measures of achievement

States have adopted better standards aimed at preparing students for college and careers,[1] and successfully administer rigorous annual tests aligned to those standards.[2] Although there is room for improvement, without any tests, states, districts, schools, and the public would have no reliable, comparable indicators of student achievement and progress in critical domains of learning.

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1   Solomon Friedberg et al., "The State of State Standards Post-Common Core," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 2018, https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/0822-state-state-standards-post-common-core.pdf.

2   Alex Spurrier, Chad Aldeman, Jennifer O'Neal Schiess, and Andrew J. Rotherham, "The Impact of Standards Based Accountability," Bellwether Education Partners, 2020, https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether_Accountability-Impact_Final.pdf.

Disaggregated data to measure and monitor gaps

Transparent, comparable student performance data disaggregated by subgroups, including by race, income, disability status, and language learner status, is an essential mechanism of accountability and equity. This data is a powerful tool for parents and advocates, and an indispensable equity check for state and school leaders.

Prioritizing growth

Most states prioritize academic growth in their accountability systems, rewarding schools that advance their students the most, even if they started off behind. Growth measures are also less likely to correlate with factors such as race and income. Student growth information will be critical to understand the impact of school closures.

As state policymakers embark on the next stage of accountability, they must carefully consider tradeoffs and competing incentives. Accountability systems have been used to serve several potential purposes, including identifying and intervening in low performing schools, informing and improving instruction, and communicating school performance to parents and the public. It is almost impossible for an accountability system alone to do all three of these things well at once, and any big design changes should keep equity at the center. To delve more deeply into these priorities and tradeoffs, read *Refocusing the Priorities of Accountability*.

Take Action Now

Decisions state leaders make today will shape students' educational recovery from the pandemic, and could build more durable, effective accountability systems in the future. Here are some top priorities for the near term:

Identify data substitutions to guide immediate decisions	Without typically available information like attendance and test scores, state leaders should support districts and schools to substitute relevant and available data in the short term. These data should be flexible and relevant whether students are back in classrooms, learning from home, or both. See this resource for more.
Target student support and reconsider any consequences	The most critical use for student performance, progress, and engagement data right now is to diagnose gaps in engagement, instruction, and learning, and close those gaps quickly with targeted resources and supports. States with policies tied to accountability data that might distract from that priority in the short term, such as third grade reading retention laws, or test-based high school graduation requirements, should consider waivers or "hold harmless" pauses on any student consequences.