



New Hampshire's Accountability 3.0

*Accountability must be a reciprocal process. For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance.*¹

—Richard Elmore

Education policymakers over the past few decades have made two critical decisions that I believe have had deep, deleterious effects on the overall public education system. First, by demanding that each school be evaluated based on a single externally determined assessment or set of measures, we branded public educators and schools as mediocre at best and failures in the eyes of many in their communities. Second, we took responsibility, if not accountability, out of the hands of local school boards, educators, parents, and students.

The result is a one size fits all system, where instead there should be vibrant schools in which educators develop their own mission statements, theories of action for teaching and learning, robust courses of study, assessments based on their own learning paradigm, and accountability based on research-based indicators of excellence and success. It is no wonder so many have been so taken by charter schools, where responsibility has been largely given over to charter boards. Yet overall outcomes for charters have been surprisingly similar to those of public schools.

At the same time, a return to local educator responsibility would not relieve the state education agency and the state board of education of their responsibility for accountability, transparency, and equity. They still must ensure that students graduate high school knowing how to read, write, and calculate. They need these basic skills not just to succeed in college but also in careers. Additionally, students need the agility to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Developing this adaptability requires a retooling of the system.

How is this circle to be squared? I believe New Hampshire has found a third and better

way—one that deprives neither local educators and communities of their ability to drive learning in their schools nor states of their need to ensure that public education is working for all students. Rather, it focuses on model competencies jointly developed by local districts and the department, intensive professional development around performance tasks, and a coherent system of assessments, also developed with a joint local and state imprint.

In 2011, the New Hampshire State Board of Education adopted this vision for the state's public schools:

To harness community resources and technology to provide a world class, personalized, student-centered education in a flexible, innovative learning environment that promotes active engagement to maximize the potential in every individual.

Adoption of this vision spurred the state education agency and school districts to direct schools toward competency-focused education, blended learning, and student-centered practices. The board did not adopt this vision out of the blue: It is consistent with board statements and leadership as far back as 2005, when it adopted rules eliminating the Carnegie unit and requiring that students master competencies in order to earn credit toward high school graduation.

At the beginning of her tenure, Commissioner Virginia Barry launched a collaborative dialogue with state board members, community leaders, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and students, and faculty of institutes of higher learning. She asked them to make a plan for the next several years. As a result, the New Hampshire Department of Education adopted this theory of action:

If we expect that all students will be college and/or career ready by the time they graduate from high school, then we see the need for a system of personalized learning that has clear and high expectations, delivered through a rigorous competency-based course of study

One of the architects of New Hampshire's overhaul of its school accountability system explains what drove the change and how the state is doing it.

by Paul Leather

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and built around customized pathways designed to adapt to a student's learning plan. This system will have comprehensive systems for supporting students as they engage their learning. It will provide all students with opportunities for anytime, anywhere learning. An unrelenting focus on student agency will define the learning process. The whole system will be aimed at college and career success upon graduation.

This level of expectation requires that the state support local school boards and educational leaders as they build their capacity for teaching and learning, build their assessment systems, and show us how they will hold themselves accountable.

The commissioner and I began the process by bringing New Hampshire educators together to develop model graduation competencies in core content areas. Educators across the state vetted these model competencies in English language arts, mathematics, science, arts, and work study practices, and the state board adopted them over the last two years.

Simultaneously, New Hampshire invested in intensive professional development for its educators, with a particular emphasis on professional learning to develop rich performance tasks to support student work. Previous training had focused on deficit areas of knowledge and skills identified through large-scale assessments. In contrast, New Hampshire educators were now being instructed in how to construct and score complex performance tasks, such as science experiments and other real-world problems in mathematics and English language arts.

Beyond NCLB

As part of this effort, the department also created a coherent system of assessments, where less is more. New Hampshire educators and education policymakers believed they needed to move beyond the structures created by No Child Left Behind and the subsequent round of waivers and renewals that came in its wake. I call New Hampshire's model Accountability 3.0. This approach encompasses a much wider array of measures to help the state's education community gain a deeper understanding of whether their students are poised for college and

career success. With Accountability 3.0, teaching and learning is becoming more personalized and more competency and project based, and the system more directly balances formative and summative assessments around a student-centered approach.

New Hampshire's new model, Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE), dovetails with the work of Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, and Linda Pittenger.² In their 2014 paper, they describe a continuous improvement and innovation model that focuses on richer, deeper learning that requires the development of the professional capacity and resources needed to support this learning at every level.

PACE balances state standardized assessments with locally developed performance-based assessments and portfolios. The standardized assessments are used to validate local assessment results; the performance-based assessments are used to garner more robust test results and inform teaching and learning. New Hampshire now administers state assessments once in each grade span. With local educators leading the way, the SEA has created complex, curriculum-embedded performance assessments in the intervening grades. These assessments were designed to support a system in which students are engaged in increasingly complex tasks based on state and national standards.

New Hampshire began using PACE in a few pilot districts—first in four and in eight this year. In order to join the pilot, districts had to demonstrate they had put several “guardrails” in place:

- adoption of state-model competencies aligned with college and career outcomes as the main learning targets;
- an instructional system to support student learning of competencies, including strategies to personalize learning;
- an assessment system to measure student achievement and growth related to the competencies;
- use of vetted performance assessments in the local assessment system; and
- administration of the Smarter Balanced assessment at least once each in elementary, middle, and high school.

Once these communities demonstrate readiness to join the pilot, their district leaders joined the SEA in constructing the overall system of assessments. Currently at the table are lead educators from eight districts and schools, lead staff from the department, and New Hampshire's core technical partner, the Center for Assessment, which is based in Dover, NH. Together, we developed key design principles, which include the following:

- a focus on college and career outcomes and promotion of deeper learning for all students;
- a clear commitment to the achievement of educationally disadvantaged students;
- a clearly described internal accountability process supported by the local board of education;
- commitment of resources necessary to ensure the plan's success by both the state and local districts; and
- development of leadership and educator capacity to design, implement, support, and sustain the system.

District and state staff also worked together, with technical advice from the Center for Assessment, on actual construction of common performance assessments. The operative maxim of the state's support of district work is "trust but verify." State support includes these elements:

- assistance in preparing an application to the department for inclusion in the pilot;
- help in conceptualizing local assessment system design;
- design and selection of assessments and other local measures;
- data analysis of student results;
- review and implementation, including calibration of student results on performance assessments; and
- reports on progress and adjustments to the system based on monitoring of student outcomes.

As part of these supports, the Center for Assessment is developing comparability studies that will weigh the results of the grade-span state assessments against local competency determinations, with common performance tasks as checks in the process. In this way,

the department can "validate" the use of rich, curriculum-embedded tasks in its annual accountability determinations over time.

While those checks are crucial to the ultimate success or failure of the PACE pilot, in the interim, department staff are encouraged by the stories they have heard along the way. Teachers in one district declared, "This is incredibly hard work, but it's the right work to support our students' learning."

PACE's pilot phase ends with this school year. The department projects that full implementation throughout the state will take five to ten years.

State boards of education everywhere are entering a new day in terms of assessments and accountability. Key principles can guide their initiatives:

- Decisions about assessments and even accountability measures should be done in partnership with local educators and communities, with the state providing technical support.
- Readiness to partner matters, and state education policymakers should assess and support the state agency and local agencies' readiness to engage.
- One size does not fit all.

These principles are driving New Hampshire's efforts. As New Hampshire puts education back into the hands of educators, with checks along the way, I believe our state will see richer student work, higher student performance, and a new era for learning. ■

¹R. F. Elmore, *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004).

²L. Darling-Hammond, G. Wilhoit, and L. Pittenger, *Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2014).

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