

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Accountability in a Standards-Based Learning System

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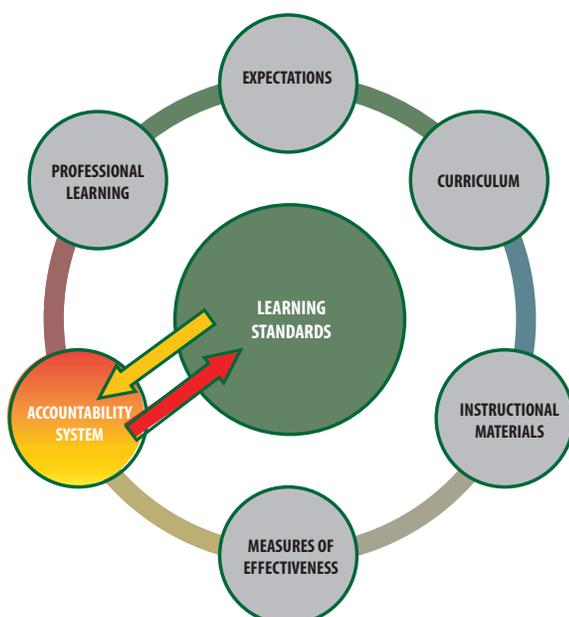
In a standards-based leadership system, accountability cannot be reduced to a box-checking exercise, void of connection to the higher levels of learning students need to succeed in college, careers, and civic life. For too many, No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) came to represent exactly that. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives responsibility and flexibility back to the states to make accountability a means for ensuring students' zip codes, income, race, and background do not determine their futures.

An effective accountability system is essential to the success of a standards-based learning system. An accountability system establishes the learning goals and benchmarks to ensure that students are mastering standards and being prepared for college, careers, and civic life at each stage of their education. More important than benchmarking, accountability assigns everyone—from the teacher in the classroom to the policy-maker in the board room—with responsibilities for the education system's success, as measured by its ability to ensure students get equitable educational experiences regardless of income, race, and other factors. Lastly, an effective accountability system helps direct resources, supports, and recognition to help all schools improve—those that struggle, those that excel, and those in between.

dispositions embedded in state standards (see figure).

- **multiple measures.** The state should evaluate success through a coherent, multiple-measure accountability system that incorporates statewide summative assessments, formative assessments, and other measures that reflect the mutually reinforcing inputs, outcomes, and processes.
- **status and growth.** System outcomes should credit students, educators, and schools for both status and growth.
- **informed continuous learning and improvement.** Data in the system should be transparent and actionable for students, educators, parents, and community members regardless of whether a school is low performing, high performing, or somewhere in between.
- **reciprocal responsibility.** The system should ensure not only that schools and educators are held accountable to the state but that the state is accountable to schools for providing the necessary resources and technical assistance—through means such as equitable funding formulas and school quality reviews—that help drive the system toward excellence and continuous improvement.

### Accountability Systems Must Align with Standards for Learning



Achieving these objectives requires attention to key principles that reflect the goals of the learning standards and build stakeholders' capacity. Key principles for a state's accountability system include the following:

- **commitment to equity.** Through the appropriate disaggregation of outcomes, the system must set an expectation for the same level of excellence for all students regardless of race, income, language ability, disability, and other characteristics.
- **alignment to standards.** The system must be aligned to and account for the full range of knowledge, skills, and

There is nothing new about these principles. In 1998, three years before the passage of No Child Left Behind, NASBE's state delegates voted many of these principles into the association's official Public Education Positions: basing the system on multiple measures of success, including information to inform a full range of interventions, and declaring that schools be held accountable for all students' performance. A number of states had established systems exhibiting these principles before NCLB. The passage

## KEY ESSA ACCOUNTABILITY PROVISIONS

ESSA empowers states with these new responsibilities:

- to replace “adequate yearly progress” with more holistic accountability systems that account for both traditional measures of success such as test scores and graduation rates and other measures of success that states choose;
- to identify the lowest performing schools in the state for comprehensive, evidence-based interventions that states choose;
- to identify schools with low-performing subgroups for targeted, evidence-based interventions that states choose.

of the Every Student Succeeds Act provides new incentives and opportunities for more states to do likewise (see box).

## STATE LEADERS IN ACCOUNTABILITY

Several state actions give cause for optimism about what states can accomplish. For example, **Kentucky** has been a national leader in this regard, advancing an accountability system that embodies many of the principles highlighted here. Kentucky presents its citizens with a holistic picture of educational success through a rich set of indicators that focus on learner and subgroup achievement; access to quality learning opportunities in arts and humanities, career studies, and other disciplines; and professional effectiveness as measured by the percent of teachers and principals rated highly on the state evaluation system.

Kentucky also has both a system of robust diagnostic reviews of programs and schools—providing support when necessary—as well as a process for recognizing and providing opportunities for their high-flying schools so that accountability

is not seen as just a punitive stick.

**Massachusetts** has also been a national leader in developing systems of support and recognition for all schools in its system. The state helps low-performing schools develop individualized plans to improve based on areas of need and focused on practices that had produced rapid, significant performance gains in similarly struggling schools. Additionally, the state has aligned school accountability goals with education preparation, licensure, and evaluation standards so that there is greater coherence across the system.

**California** has established a comprehensive accountability system that is also reciprocal in nature. Through state board and legislative actions, the state has paired a system of accountability through Local Control Accountability Plans with a Local Control Funding Formula that provides schools and districts serving higher concentrations of students who are low-income, English language learners, or in the foster care system with more resources.

Like Kentucky and Massachusetts, California has created a mechanism—the Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)—to support its schools’ continuous learning and growth. The CCEE mobilizes expertise across the state to help districts meet the needs of special populations such as special education students and English language learners and supports improvements in the quality of teaching and school leadership at struggling schools.

## CONCLUSION

Accountability needn’t be a four-letter word for educators or policymakers. Nearly every profession has some means to hold itself accountable and improve. With the new flexibility provided under ESSA, states can move beyond compliance and create an accountability system that meets the aspirations embedded in their higher standards. With new flexibility comes new responsibility. State boards of education can and will rise to this challenge.

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## RESOURCES

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## NOTES

1. Actual inclusion on this last indicator in accountability has been delayed.