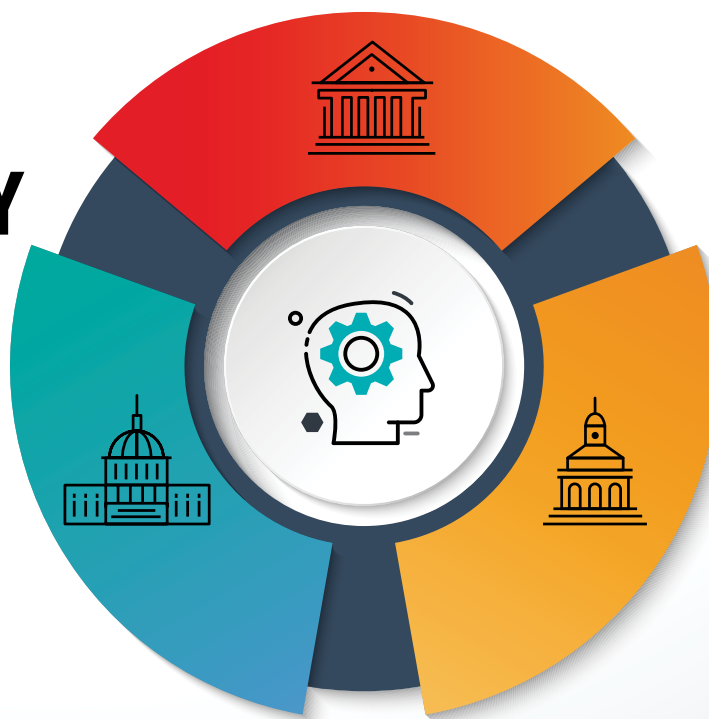


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# ACCOUNTABILITY FOR LEARNING

by Christopher H. Tienken  
 Academic Editor



## Abstract

*The author advocates revamping the current accountability structure into a three-layer system in which district, state, and national participants work together to inform and improve the quality of student learning.*

**Key words:** *accountability, public schools*



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**T**he current environment for accountability in public school education is dominated by policies and structures focused on student achievement on standardized tests and, to a lesser degree, on student course-taking patterns such as the percentage of students who take advanced-level courses in high school. The reliance on standardized test results as the dominant indicator of student achievement is problematic for several well-publicized, evidence-based reasons. Not the least of which is the fact that they can be predicted with a high level of accuracy by out-of-school demographic factors. This commentary presents an argument for a multi-indicator system of education accountability that combines local indicators, state-mandated variables, and a capstone process of evaluation by a recognized school

accreditation organization such as the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

## Accountability Landscape

Test-score-driven education accountability policies have been in use nationwide since the 2003–2004 school year as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2003). But federal calls for test-score accountability came long before NCLB. The blueprint for NCLB was written in 1978 with the release of the report *Improving Educational Achievement* (National Academy of Education, 1978). That report seemed to be the foundation for the NCLB Act.

The authors of the 1978 report called for a return to “basic skills,” increased achievement-test scores, greater teacher quality, and test-score-driven accountability of teachers and administrators as ways to *improve* education. Several statements seem

prophetic now. “American education should be paying much more attention to doing a thorough job in the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic” (p. iii). The authors went on to state, “Tests can play several different roles. One is as a means of public accountability” (p. 7).

### Education Accountability 2.0: ESSA

One stated purpose of education accountability is to inform the public about the efficacy of the publically funded system of schools. As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), each state must implement a school accountability system to identify the lowest-performing schools as in need of comprehensive support or targeted assistance. The ESSA accountability mandate also requires a mandatory public “report card” in which schools within the state are graded, ranked, or labeled in some way. Most states have opted to grade schools in one of three similar ways: (a) A–F scale, (b) points scale, (c) stars scale. Most states use standardized test results as the deciding factor for school ratings.

### Problems With Test-Based Accountability

Standardized test results do not capture accurately what or how well students learn, especially when students are subjected to large doses of test preparation. Test preparation is a form of gaming the system, and it invalidates the results as indicators of learning (Koretz, 2008). Standardized test results do not explain how well teachers teach or how well principals lead. In short, results from standardized tests are poor measures of academic achievement. Standardized test results can be predicted with a good deal of accuracy based on demographic factors found in the U.S. Census data, including the results on the SAT and ACT tests that can be predicted by family income levels (Tienken, 2010; Tienken et al., 2017). Also, none of the state-mandated standardized test results have been validated as accurate measures of quality teaching, leadership, or overall school quality.

Perhaps the most insidious issue with using standardized test results as education accountability

criteria is that the act of testing itself does nothing to improve learning or teaching. The United States has been using standardized testing as the yardstick for quality since the 2003–2004 school year, and the same schools have continued to score low. The tests used for accountability purposes are summative instruments to surveil teachers and students, and to pressure them into teaching and learning in standardized ways rather than using formative assessments to inform teaching and learning.

### Accountability 3.0: Assessment to Inform Learning

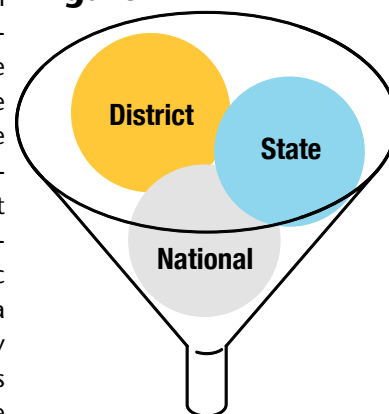
In its most basic sense, education accountability at the state level is about answering the question, *How is the school doing?* To fully answer that question about school quality, a comprehensive accountability program should address the three historic purposes of public schools: (a) prepare students for a vocation or career; (b) prepare students for socio-civic life; and (c) give students opportunities to pursue avocational hobbies or interests (Dewey, 1916).

One way to move away from the current system of false accountability and toward comprehensive education accountability is to create a layered system that addresses the question of quality through multiple measures within the context of the historic purposes of education (see Figure 1). The historic purposes of education require a layered system of accountability because the purposes themselves are multidimensional and must be accomplished in various ways.

#### The District Layer

The first layer of the comprehensive accountability system resides at the school district level. School districts should be accountable for assembling a portfolio of district-wide indicators that provide information on how well students are developing academically, socio-civically, and avo-

**Figure 1**



**Accountability for Learning**

cationally. The district level is ideal for providing in-depth information about those three purposes because districts can draw upon the many types of teacher-made assessments to help paint a picture of student development. District personnel identify threshold skills and create a portfolio of standardized instruments, including projects, for teachers to measure quantitative and qualitative achievement. Results are reported to the public and state education agency.

Districts can use high-quality, teacher-designed, criterion-referenced assessments that foster effective teaching methods. Examples include assessing reading levels through running records and readers' workshop formats, writing prompts, literary analyses, and problem-based assessments that include socio-civic concepts and use of mathematics. Schools also can be judged on the types of avocational opportunities (clubs, hobbies, and organizations) they offer and how many students take advantage of those pursuits or have an avocational support outside of school.

Quality models and assessments already exist, which district personnel can call upon for support as they transition to this type of multidimensional accountability. The New York Performance Standards Consortium is a group of 38 public, non-charter schools that has developed authentic and problem-based assessments in areas such as higher-order thinking, writing, mathematical problem-solving, technology use, science research, appreciation and performance in the arts, service learning, and career skills. The schools use outside experts from universities and the community, along with the teachers, to review student work and provide real-world feedback to students.

The Mission Skills Assessment (MSA) is one assessment districts can use as a way to gain information about socio-civic skills and unstandardized skills such as creativity, resilience, and teamwork. The assessment is formative in nature and seeks to provide ongoing feedback to school personnel and students about the development

and use of important skills. The College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA+) is a standardized problem-based assessment that provides feedback on complex thinking skills such as written communication, critique, mathematical reasoning, and evaluation of information. Questions are designed around problem-based activities and reading passages. The MSA and CWRA+ are just two examples of assessments that are formative in nature and meant to inform instruction and learning on a wide range of unstandardized skills.

A clear framework for the district layer of accountability structure already exists. The program known as the Nebraska School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) was first implemented in Nebraska during the 2000–2001 school year under former Nebraska Commissioner of Education Doug Christensen (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2005) called it the “nation’s most innovative assessment system” (p. 13). The program operated successfully until the 2009 school year when the political winds changed and an NCLB-friendly state legislature changed to an all commercial, standardized, test-based system. But the framework, including state policy documents, assessments, and protocols still exists; and state education leaders could easily reinvigorate the system without having to reinvent the accountability wheel.

### *The State Layer*

The second layer involves the state department of education, in which state personnel serve a three-part role organized under an Office of Accountability and Development: (a) assessor, (b) auditor, and (c) professional developer. In the role of assessor, the state administers low-stakes, non-intrusive, off-the-shelf standardized assessments of basic skills such as arithmetic and reading comprehension. Such tests can be administered in 30 or 45 minutes, and are inexpensive to administer and score. The results would carry little weight in the overall accountability system because of the known issues that invalidate standardized

test results as high-stakes decision-making tools, but they would satisfy the federal ESSA testing requirement for compliance purposes.

The more important roles for state education personnel are those of auditor and professional developer. State personnel provide or arrange for job-embedded professional development for teachers on quality assessment design, problem-based activity development, and scoring protocols and processes. State personnel also provide an auditing system in which they audit a percentage of district-level accountability assessments to maintain quality control of the scoring processes, and also identify professional development needs to help inform and enhance classroom instruction and assessment processes.

### National Accreditation Layer

The final layer is the capstone of the multi-dimensional accountability system: accreditation from third-party regional accreditation organizations. There exist at least six national accreditation agencies that provide accreditation assessment processes to public schools. The processes include a broad set of criteria that require districts to demonstrate quality practices and procedures that relate directly and indirectly to the historic functions of education. For instance, the process used by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (2014) includes 12 components that cover all aspects of public schooling at the school level: school mission, governance and leadership, school improvement planning, finances, facilities, system organization and staff, health and safety, information resources, educational program, assessment and evidence of student learning, student services, and student life and student activities.

National accreditation involves a comprehensive, multi-year process of intensive self-study by the school and district, a rigorous external review capped by a multi-day visitation by an independent team of accreditation auditors, and a detailed visitation report written by the team. In addition, the process includes yearly updates

prepared by the school district and sent to the accreditation agency that explain how the district is following through on its accreditation plan, as well as a midterm reporting process after 3 years that includes a follow-up team visit for any district's or school's first time being accredited.

National accreditation is an important capstone because it is not part of the state or district political environment and, as such, the accreditation agencies are less apt to have political pressure contaminate their findings. This process goes beyond the typical state education monitoring process that focuses mostly on standardized test results. Accreditation looks at how schools are functioning on a broad range of components that affect all areas of schooling.

### Closing Argument

A three-layered approach to accountability provides triangulated data points from which to inform all areas of the education process. The layered approach brings a sense of balance in which one indicator cannot make or break the rating of a school district. The entire structure acts to provide feedback about school quality to the public and provides actionable formative data that school personnel can use for more evidence-informed school enhancement efforts. ■

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