

Next Generation Accountability

*How district leadership
can best respond to
the Every Student
Succeeds Act to establish
meaningful evaluation*

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In the most encouraging sign in educational policy since the turn of the 21st century, a bipartisan majority in Congress has repudiated micromanagement of educational accountability by the federal government. Instead, the Every Student Succeeds Act provides school districts and state education leaders with an unprecedented opportunity to create a constructive version of educational accountability systems.

Unfortunately, some of the current state plans submitted under ESSA come up short. One superintendent we interviewed recently in our research described these as “NCLB 2.0.” The nation can do better than repeating the failed policies of test-based accountability and federal micromanagement.

We believe three essential questions should guide us:

- ▶ How can districts and states move their accountability systems from effects (test scores) to causes (leadership and teaching)?
- ▶ How can districts and states move from meaningless to meaningful teacher and leadership evaluations?
- ▶ How can accountability systems move from mandates to menus, considering the unique needs of rural, urban and suburban districts?

Overlooked Excellence

Some great performances by hard-working schools are being lost in the haze of today’s accountability systems.

Mountain House High School in Lammersville, Calif., reduced its failure rate by more than 60 percent from 2016 to 2017. The East Hartford, Conn., schools reduced their chronic absentee rate by 65 percent from 2015 to 2016. Greenfield, Wis., reduced its schools’ suspension rates by more than 60 percent between 2004 and 2017.

These are not trivial accomplishments, yet you would rarely find them in state accountability records. That is because traditional accountability measures focus on effects — student test scores — not on the causes, which we see as the heroic work of teachers, principals and central-office administrators leading to these marked improvements.

Effective use of ESSA will recognize not just scores but the cause variables — the teaching and leadership of these and countless other great districts and schools — that are associated with great gains in student performance.

Effects to Causes

Child obesity is an epidemic across the United States. Schools understandably want to help children lead long and healthy lives and reduce the incidence of obesity. To address this, school leaders have two choices. One option is to focus on student weight and body mass indices — the “scores” that reflect a measurement of student health. That might provide a partial understanding of results and lead to a celebration of the obese student who loses weight.

But there’s an alternative focus. Wouldn’t parents want to know if the weight loss was caused by diet and exercise or by eating disorders and drug abuse? These factors also could lead to weight loss, but no one would say these alternative causes are of equal value. So it is with test scores.

It’s possible that reading scores could increase with a thoughtful multidisciplinary approach to student literacy that enriches the lives of students and leads to an eternal love of learning. It’s also possible that reading scores could increase with a desperate strategy of cheating and test preparation. Education leaders ought to know the difference between effects — test-based accountability — and causes. This can happen through thoughtful examination of objectively measurable teaching and leadership strategies.

With research involving hundreds of schools and more than a million students, we have demonstrated conclusively that in rural, suburban and urban communities, the Professional Learning Communities At Work model contributes to gains in student learning.

Douglas Reeves believes new federal legislation gives educators a better chance to measure student performance effectively and fairly.

Meaningful Evaluation

Effective accountability in education takes time. Educators face many challenges, not the least of which are the ubiquitous and unproductive meetings, maybe best represented by the coffee mug that says “Another meeting that could have been an e-mail.”

Nevertheless, the biggest diversion of time for school leaders from the meaningful to meaningless is the widespread use of toxic, time-consuming and counterproductive teacher and leadership evaluation systems. Many evaluation systems rest upon the theory of the perfect teacher, or perhaps better referenced as the adequate teacher. Unless they are truly awful, teachers perform somewhere along the scale of satisfactory, proficient, excellent or extraordinary. The time to assess them — through pre-observation conferences, full-period observations, performance write-ups and post-observation conferences — consumes substantial time.

For administrators, this ultimately leads to two phenomena. First, the final month of the school year is full of document drills — catching up with evaluation documents before the year is over. Second, the system yields little or no feedback on how teachers need to improve. When everyone in the school district is good or great, teachers and administrators do not need to improve their practices.

This dreary picture is no better for K-12 education leaders, from superintendents to principals. In our 36-state study of leadership evaluation, a key finding was that the higher the rank, the more ambiguous and less constructive the evaluation. Newly minted administrative interns receive



feedback that is consistent, constructive and related to improved performance. But for veteran principals, central-office leaders and superintendents, the picture is remarkably different. Feedback ranged from nonexistent to delinquent, and rarely related to student results or the leadership actions necessary to improve performance.

Constructive alternatives are available that cost less and produce more results. (See resources box below.)

What all of the recommended instruments have in common is that they provide guideposts for development, not merely terminal assessments of teachers and leaders. Moreover, these rubrics distinguish clearly between several levels of teacher and leadership performance, providing clear guidelines for how to get to the next level in performance. That means teacher and leadership assessment can be constructive rather than contentious.

Mandates to Menus

One of the significant accomplishments of ESSA is an explicit rejection of the one-size-fits-all model of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Every state has school systems with dramatically different needs.

In Alaska, conditions range widely from the urban environment of Anchorage to the isolated, rural frontier of Kotzebue. In Arkansas, there's 25,700-student Little Rock at one extreme and Arkadelphia, with 1,800 students, in the southcentral part of the state. The state-based accountability measures imposed since 2001 were administered through state education agencies, rather than local school districts, as the engines of innovation.

The antidote to this illusion is what we call "menus, not mandates." In small, rural systems, teachers may work in isolation, where a single math teacher serves all students in the middle and high school grades. They need to collaborate with peers across district, county and state lines. In urban schools, math teachers should collaborate with their subject-area colleagues down the hall.

The broad-based Professional Learning Com-



Educational consultant Rebecca DuFour sees opportunities to deliver better performance feedback to administrators at all levels.

munities At Work model serves alternative environments. While the common imperative is collaboration, each district and school should be free to engage in variations on this theme.

Ultimate Motivation

For too long, education leaders have been motivated by the question "What's next?" We think a better question is "What's right?" Suppose for a moment there are no federal mandates and no state requirements and the only requirement for education leaders is to address the question "What's the right thing to do right now?"

From what we know, K-12 education leaders would not respond by waiting for answers from Washington — or Topeka or Juneau or Montgomery — to tell them what to do. They would simply do the right thing. They would move from effects to causes. They would move from meaningless to meaningful evaluations. They would move from mandates to menus.

In the end, it is not the federal Every Student Succeeds Act or any other piece of legislation that motivates education leaders, but rather what they know in their gut to be true. The best interests of students outweigh every mandate, every federal and state requirement and every passing fad. ■

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Additional Resources

The authors suggest these tools, all available at no charge, for upgrading performance evaluations within school districts:

- ▶ "Mini-observation" rubrics available at MarshallMemo.com
- ▶ Professional Learning Community implementation rubrics available at www.AllThingsPLC.info.
- ▶ Leadership Performance Matrix Leadership accessible at www.CreativeLeadership.net.