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association of california
school administrators

PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

**Guiding Principles for a Comprehensive Accountability System
to Ensure that All Students Leave School Prepared for the Future**

Final Report and Recommendations of the Accountability and Assessment Task Force

February 2010

PURPOSE

Today's students live in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world-wide community. As our educational system is continually improved we must think globally about the knowledge and skills that will be required for all students, especially underachieving students, to thrive in this new era. These recommendations provide a framework for improving the way we evaluate student, school, and district success. Further, these recommendations ensure we meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of this new century.

The dawn of the twenty-first century heralded unprecedented accountability for student success. California's Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999 and the federal re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, (NCLB), set ambitious goals and rigorous accountability timelines for academic achievement among all students. These systems have served primarily an evaluative function to identify schools in need of improvement. However, the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) believes that the fundamental purpose of an accountability system must be to stimulate, support, and recognize high achievement and to close achievement gaps among all students and student groups (subgroups). A design that simply serves an evaluative function misses the moral obligation to use all available means, including an accountability system, to leverage higher achievement for all students.

BACKGROUND OF CURRENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Implementation of the current state and federal accountability systems created transparency in reporting student achievement outcomes for all students and specific subgroups, while simultaneously making visible both systemic accountability innovations and limitations. Based on rigorous standards, California's Academic Performance Index (API), the PSAA accountability metric, is designed to identify and reward attainment of high achievement as well as incremental growth in achievement. By combining both achievement and growth expectations, the API has promoted significant increases in school and district performance. At the same time, the API produced California's first statewide disaggregation of student performance among racial and ethnic student groups which highlighted significant achievement gaps.

The NCLB expectation for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) contains yearly targets for the percent of students meeting state-identified proficiency levels. It expanded the range of subgroup disaggregation to include English Learners, students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students. However, lack of comparability among states in their assessment measures, failure to acknowledge achievement gains at all performance levels, and statistically unattainable performance targets limit NCLB's utility as a reliable indicator of student achievement across the nation.

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Additionally, in California, progress on both the API and AYP metrics has been based on year-to-year grade level performance comparisons, not annual individual student achievement gains. The inability of the California Standards Tests and data analysis procedures to produce reliable and valid information about individual student growth precluded the acceptance of the state's API as an approved growth model by the United States Department of Education. As a consequence, California schools and districts are required to meet the sometimes conflicting accountability requirements of the dual accountability systems of the state and federal governments.

With these innovations and limitations in mind, ACSA convened the Accountability and Assessment Task Force to develop recommendations for a comprehensive and robust accountability system designed to achieve excellence and equity. The goal of the task force is to develop *Guiding Principles* for an accountability system that would ensure that all students, schools and districts benefit from an educational system built on rigorous standards, expectations for increasing student performance, and the ability to document growth in achievement.

Three essential components of an accountability system for excellence and equity are:

- Standards
- Performance Measures, and
- Incentives and interventions to support high student achievement and to close achievement gaps.

Guiding Principles for a comprehensive accountability system and its components are detailed below.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Accountability for Excellence and Equity

- The accountability system must be purposely designed to achieve the following dual purposes:
 1. stimulate, support, and recognize schools that demonstrate significant progress toward high achievement and closing achievement gaps among all students and student groups (subgroups), and
 2. identify schools and districts that have not demonstrated improvement in raising student achievement or closing achievement gaps in order to provide intensive support and intervention to meet continuous improvement expectations.
- Performance expectations within an accountability system must be benchmarked against requirements for post-secondary education, viable careers, and performance expectations of internationally competitive nations.
- The accountability system must recognize continuous growth in achievement at all performance levels and provide incentives and recognition for raising performance among students with the greatest achievement needs, thus closing achievement gaps. Similar schools that have attained high achievement and closed gaps should be identified in order for them to serve as models/exemplars for other schools.
- Accountability targets should be based on individual annual student gains in performance within the typical school structure of elementary, middle, and high school to both measure annual growth and set expectations for achievement by the end of selected grade spans.
- The accountability system should be multi-tiered growth model with achievement and accountability indicators at the student, school, district, and state levels designed to meet the information needs at each level to enhance individual student achievement progress and program planning and implementation.

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- The accountability system must be unbiased and fair to all student groups, including linguistically diverse students and students with disabilities.
 - Disaggregated subgroup indicators must give credit for the performance of all subgroup members, including those who have successfully attained proficiency targets.
 - Academic achievement expectations for English Learners should be contained within the general accountability system and not duplicated in Title III.
 - Subgroup accountability for English Learners should be disaggregated by years in program to account for exposure to English and increasing expectations and to preclude the inappropriate practice of accountability for performance on a test for which the student does not yet have sufficient English language proficiency or years of schooling
 - Individual Education Plan requirements for the use of accommodations and modifications in assessment must be implemented and the results credited within the accountability system.
- The accountability system must include multiple indicators of college and career readiness at the school, district, and state level, including completion of advanced coursework (courses required for college entrance, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate), career technical education course sequence completion and industry certification, and graduation and drop-out data disaggregated for each identified student group (subgroup).
- All schools and districts receiving state and federal funding must participate in the state and federal accountability systems and meet shared expectations for serving all students.
- It is the responsibility of the state and federal government to provide full funding for a comprehensive accountability system, including development and benchmarking of essential content and performance standards, development of appropriate performance measures, implementation and scoring of local, state, and federal assessments, professional development to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn the essential standards, and incentives and interventions to improve system-wide performance.

Standards

- The content and performance standards should include all subject areas, including the arts, English Language Proficiency standards, career technical education, and 21st century workplace skills.
- Essential content and performance standards must be identified and emphasized to ensure a focus on depth over breadth so that all students have the opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge at high levels for solving real-world problems and meeting rigorous, internationally benchmarked standards.
- The standards should be balanced between cognitive knowledge, problem solving, and application of academic skills similar in rigor to the to the highest performing nations.
- Content and performance standards should be benchmarked against exemplary national and international standards.
- English Language Proficiency standards should be integrated into all academic standards to support linguistically diverse students' need to master both linguistic and content standards.
- Content standards and career technical education standards should be cross-referenced to support real-world performance demonstrations.

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- Content and performance standards should be revised periodically in light of evidence of changing preparation needs to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Performance Measures

- Performance measures must be aligned to essential, rigorous, internationally-benchmarked content and performance standards that prepare students for post-secondary education and viable careers.
- Performance measures must meet the highest standards of educational measurement to ensure that they are valid and reliable measures of student achievement and be developed according to the principles of universal design.
- English Learners must be assessed in a manner that distinguishes content knowledge from linguistic proficiency in English and in accordance with the number of years of instruction in English. Assessments for students with disabilities must incorporate the Individual Educational Plan requirements for accommodations and modifications and other testing requirements. Assessments for linguistically diverse students must evaluate such students fairly and results should distinguish between content knowledge and linguistic proficiency.
- Performance measures must be balanced and require evidence of students' ability to reason, analyze and evaluate multiple sources of information, and solve challenging, real-world problems.
- Performance measures must focus in-depth on essential standards rather than attempting to survey all precursor skills. Expectations for mastery of foundational skills must be embedded in demonstrations of higher-order, essential standards required for exemplary achievement.
- Performance measures should include a variety of question types and must be appropriate for the construct being evaluated. They should align to high quality teaching and learning by emphasizing constructed response items that require students to demonstrate critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving for real-world scenarios.
- Performance measures should be designed to be meaningful, relevant, and motivating to students. At the secondary level, performance measures should be aligned and streamlined with college entrance and placement criteria and industry expectations to reduce redundancy and motivate students by demonstrating the critical link to post-secondary options.
- Assessment of career technical education standards should require embedded demonstrations of the application of academic standards for problem solving.
- The assessment system should vary by intended purpose with formative assessments for teachers and schools to provide current information and guidance for teaching and student learning and summative assessments, with randomized matrix sampling, to provide information about school, district and statewide performance.
- The design of performance measures should serve as a model for effective teaching and learning of essential standards, critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving.
- Formative assessments should be benchmarked against exemplary models to guide the development, administration, and use by teachers to enhance instructional planning and teaching of current students.
- Summative assessment results should provide sufficient information to guide determination of school, district, and state priorities to support full implementation of rigorous, world-class essential standards.

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- Development and implementation of a comprehensive system of performance measures should include substantial professional development for teachers and administrators to maximize their impact on student learning.

Incentives and Interventions

- The accountability system needs to be thoughtfully designed to distinguish between schools that demonstrate continuous progress at all achievement levels and deserve recognition for growth in student achievement and closing achievement gaps and schools that demonstrate a long-term pattern of failure to attain growth in student achievement or close achievement gaps.
- Incentives and intervention components within the accountability system must be solution-oriented, not punitive, providing positive support, including sufficient financial resources, multiple years of support, and professional development for improving teaching and learning to world-class standards for all students.
- States have the responsibility to hold districts accountable for improving school-wide performance. Determination of specific interventions needs to be made based on a comprehensive analysis of specific district and site strengths and needs. The district, site and external advisors should collaborate to analyze needs and plan interventions that target these identified needs. Flexibility regarding state Education Code requirements should be provided as needed based on identified needs of the district and school.
- The determination of a need for interventions should be based on multiple years of performance data indicating insufficient progress in raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps as well as analysis of local conditions and improvement strategies.
- Incentives and interventions must be evidence-based, sustained over multiple years, and free from political practices and priorities.

CONCLUSION

Linda Darling Hammond has pointed out that “assessment systems should support the learning of everyone in the system—from students and teachers to school organizations and state agencies.” ACSA believes that the guiding principles for standards, performance measures, and incentives and interventions in this report provide a model of system-wide strategies to ensure both excellence and equity for all students.

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GLOSSARY

Academic English—The variety of English used in schools, in textbooks, in many business and government transactions.

Academic Performance Index (API)—California’s API is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, that reflects a school’s, an LEA’s, or a subgroup’s performance level, based on the results of statewide testing. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools.

Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)—A representation of the annual academic performance targets in reading and math that the current Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as No Child Left Behind, requires the State, school districts, and schools to reach to be considered on track for 100% proficiency by school year 2013-14. AYP is written in percentages. An AYP of 65% would mean that 65% of students would be considered proficient in language arts or mathematics.

Benchmark—An actual measurement of group performance against an established standard at defined points along the path toward the standard. Subsequent measurements of group performance use the benchmarks to measure progress toward achievement.

Constructed Response Items—A student-created response to a test item, such as a short answer or an essay response.

Content Standards—Expectations about what the child should know and be able to do in different subjects and grade levels; defines expected student skills and knowledge and what schools should teach.

Essential Standards—1) Content standards that have been selected as especially important based on their fundamental nature in leading to understanding or because they are tested frequently. 2) In the context of this report Essential Standards are those that may cross content areas and are fundamental to developing student knowledge and skills of the most essential content standards.

Formative Assessments—The gathering of information about student learning during the progression of a lesson, course or program to improve the learning of those students.

Growth Model—A growth model tracks student performance from one time period to the next and describes, , the likelihood of students displaying various amounts of growth. Note that in order to close an achievement gap lower performing students would need to “grow” more than one year in a year’s time.

Internationally Benchmarked—A process for measuring state-level education performance globally by examining student achievement and attainment in an international context to ensure that students are receiving the education they need to compete in the 21st century economy.

Linguistically Diverse Students—There are a variety of types of linguistically diverse students. They include students who are learning English as a second language as well as students who speak a dialect of English at home that is different than standard English,

Matrix Sampling—A method of providing statistical information about a large group by dividing all test items among the group so that not every student is tested on every item. Matrix sampling is efficient and accurate when a large group is being studied (like a school or district) as opposed to a small group (like a classroom or individual).

Performance Measures—Performance measures relate to the variety of ways in which students can demonstrate what they know and are able to do. Performance measures may include multiple-choice test results as well as essays, portfolios, or demonstrations of what the student has learned.

Performance Standards—A performance standard is an expression of the performance threshold(s), requirement(s), or expectation(s) that must be met to be appraised at a particular level of performance.

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Summative Assessment—Summative assessment is the process of evaluating the learning of students at a point in time (e.g. end of course, specific time of year). The California Standards Test, given annually is an example of a summative assessment.

Title III—The section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that relates to language instruction for limited English proficient and immigrant students.

Universal Design Principles—Designing assessments so that they are flexible enough that they can be directly used (without requiring any assistive technologies or modifications) by people with the widest range of abilities and circumstances as is commercially practical given current materials, technologies, and knowledge. The Center for Universal Design has identified the following principles: 1) Equitable use, 2) Flexibility in use, 3) Simple and intuitive, 4) Perceptible information, 5) Tolerance for error, 6) Low physical effort, and 7) Size and space for approach and use.

World Class Standards—Academic standards which are comparable in rigor and expectations to the standards of the highest performing nations.