D I S P A T C H E S

from the
Next Generation
Accountability
Learning
Community for
Small-to-Midsize
Urban Districts

Establishing Principles for Accountability:
Perspectives from small-to-midsize urban districts and their allies

The Next Generation Accountability Learning Community (NGALC) is a group of roughly two dozen New England education leaders who have come together to look at the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) from the perspective of small-to-midsize urban districts. Members of the NGALC gathered twice this summer to hear from experts and exchange ideas on this question: *how do states and districts revise their accountability policies and practices in ways that will lead to improved student outcomes in these urban communities?*

This paper lays out three sets of ideas to support local and state leaders in their efforts to ensure the success of accountability work in small-to-midsize urban districts:

1. A set of core purpose principles to clarify what accountability systems should do, why they matter, and how to honor their critical roles.
2. A set of design principles for states as they take on the job of developing the new statewide accountability systems that ESSA mandates and that states and their stakeholders envision.
3. A set of design principles for local districts, outlining how local systems, with the right supports from states and other allies, can begin to exercise leadership in shaping and spearheading accountability systems and practices.

NGALC project staff have developed these principles by drawing on the diverse range of ideas generated during Learning Community conversations, and by studying

the research that the Learning Community has tapped over the past four months. Later in September, the group will gather to examine this conceptual framing for accountability redesign that can take advantage of the changes permitted by ESSA, while drawing on the lessons of NCLB. This effort remains very much a work in progress. NGALC project staff welcomes your feedback on this Dispatch and the principles it outlines. Comments can be sent to Ben Forman at BForman@MassINC.org.

I. Emerging "Purpose Principles" for Accountability

As described in NGALC Dispatch #1, state leaders, educators, parents, teachers, and students have a diversity of perspectives on the role of accountability. While the NGALC is still exploring this topic, and new views may still come to light, so far, five principles on the purposes of an accountability system have emerged. These apply to all school districts, but they are especially important to educators in small-to-midsize urban districts, and to those who support them, because of the ways they interact in these school systems and communities:

- **Promote equity.** Protect the right of every student to a quality educational experience and the opportunity to succeed.

- **Set high expectations.** Affirm clear, ambitious goals for academic achievement that will allow students to succeed in college, career, and civic life.

- **Document outcomes.** Generate widely understood and accepted evidence of student, school, district and state outcomes, whether reporting progress or underperformance.

- **Facilitate improvement.** Help educators, schools, and districts to understand outcomes data and to use it to improve their practice; help states and other stakeholders to effectively support these improvement efforts.

- **Ensure transparency.** Inform parents, key stakeholders, and the public, accurately balancing complexity with clarity.

These principles set a high standard. Equity means several things here: many in the Learning Community express the view that students have a right to access well-rounded learning opportunities and great teaching. However, while essential, this is not enough: schools must also give students every chance to actually experience success. High expectations is sometimes summarized as "All means all." Multiple Learning Community members have said something along the lines of, "I want for my students what I want for my own child." Documentation and transparency require that data be frequent, useful, reliable and clearly presented. It is essential that people experience the data and reporting of accountability systems, in the words of one Learning Community member, as "...trustworthy." Parents, educators and the public must understand what the data is, and have readily available opportunities to interpret its meaning. Given the large number of indicators and the complex data in play, all players in the accountability sys-

tem are under pressure to simplify without distortion, to make things plain without losing essentials.

After promoting equity, the most challenging of these principles is the imperative to "facilitate improvement." While the Learning Community members generally agree that NCLB was not successful in this key purpose, there are robust differences of opinion about which aspects of accountability are most likely to promote improvement: Measures of student achievement on standardized tests? The use of a letter grade or number to rank schools? Expansion of the number and nature of measures used to assess student success and school quality? Increased use of student growth scores? Outcomes disaggregated by student groups? Use of competency-based performance assessments? A re-orientation of accountability to emphasize deep student learning and teacher professional development?

One clear opportunity in the current period is for states and districts to do what they can to help educators and students, and schools and districts, to experience accountability systems and practices as practically and immediately useful in their daily and highest priority work. How can accountability systems genuinely help educators and students better understand and improve the efficacy of their work, and their results? This is a pathway to improvement worthy of more exploration.

Built into both ESSA and the emergent NGALC "purpose principles" is an expectation that states and local systems will make use of multiple measures to hold all parties accountable. While there is strong debate about the relative merits of standardized testing as the cornerstone of NCLB and as the central ongoing feature of ESSA, there is unanimity that the use of additional measures is critical for the success of accountability systems and the schools and districts they support. ESSA requires a core set of indicators, including a new one over which each state will have discretion. Learning Community members agree that accountability systems are very likely to have more impact helping educators and students when they include measures and indicators beyond those produced by standardized academic testing. Many Learning Community members see such additional measures as essential to the long-term success of accountability. Some even feel that until multiple new measures and indicators are in effect, it will be hard for schools and districts to benefit substantially from accountability systems. Others regard the core academic achievement measures of NCLB and ESSA as bedrock tools required for promotion of equity, illumination of the areas of greatest unmet need, and catalysts for future improvement efforts.

There is a long history of accountability systems being experienced by educators as designed by others, and serving the needs of others. ESSA's empowerment of states offers state education agencies the chance to change that, by assiduously engaging local educators and stakeholders in the design of future systems. Doing so would have the added benefit of addressing the current widespread skepticism and lack of trust that educator and community conversations about accountability often reveal. In the words of one Learning Community member, "What I wish is that we could start talking about shared responsibility rather than accountability. This has to be about what we do together, not what someone else expects of us." Another Learning Community member refers to *reciprocal accountability*: the idea, explored later in the Dispatch, that states and local districts can hold each other accountable.

II. Emerging "Design Principles" for State-Level Accountability

State departments of education are under pressure to move from NCLB-era accountability systems to more robust "next generation" frameworks, under a relatively rigid timeline that in its current form would require a new system by the fall of 2017. They are also being invited to adopt a wide array of proposed new features that have been thoughtfully put forward by researchers, educators, and other stakeholders.

In New England, and across the country, a diversity of approaches will be taken up, or carried on, by states adopting new accountability systems. However, even with that wide range of options, there exists a core set of design ideas, or principles, which every state can use. Redesigned state policies can reasonably incorporate, from the outset, these core design principles:

• States can distinguish between two critical areas of performance—student performance and school performance—and place equal emphasis on each.

• States can report measures of student participation in activities that are essential to a well-rounded education and highly correlated with student success.

• States can prioritize working with districts, offering resources and support to help them develop local accountability systems that foster collaboration, leverage resources, and encourage innovation.

• States can take a long, "learning" view on accountability design, seeking to improve the system over multiple years of implementation and adjustment

From the evidence and lessons the NGALC has been learning and examining, these principles are especially important for small-to-midsize urban districts. We examine each one in more detail, below.

1. States can distinguish between two critical areas of performance—student performance and school performance—and place equal emphasis on each.

Student performance measures pinpoint student achievement and allow all stakeholders to understand a student's progress toward meeting state standards. Student performance measures keep us honest as a society—they show how well disadvantaged students are faring and how much of a gap exists between their current performance and the commonly agreed-upon standard of proficiency. When disaggregated, these student data also reveal gaps among diverse populations of students.

Fair accountability systems are vital to ensure equity in education. Since low-income students typically have access to fewer family and community resources, student performance outcomes in high-poverty schools tend to reflect the socio-economic status of the student population. In fact, across the country, zip codes are alarmingly predictive of proficiency scores. In this way, student performance measures have the potential to promote and advance equity, by making plain any disparities in outcomes, and challenging us, as a society, community, and education system, to respond. Yet proficiency scores are far less accurate predictors of the quality or performance of a school, and this distinction matters a great deal

School performance measures can accurately tell us how schools stack up against other schools in advancing student performance. When school performance is measured through student growth—and done well—we can distill the contributions of educators and schools to an individual student's success. We can aggregate the information about individual student growth to see and compare patterns and trends across various populations and various schools. These growth measures, sometimes referred to as "value added" by a district or school, hold educators responsible, together, for how well they help a student advance, compared to the advances made by peer students. Such measures, highlighting the effects of a school and its programs on the learning of students, are inherently more accurate and fair measures of school performance than the raw proficiency scores of the very same students.

Every child deserves access to opportunities to learn and the experience of being held to high standards. And every school community—students, parents, and educators—deserves

to know how well or poorly it has performed its core task, which is to ensure that student learning and growth is substantial, and to help all students to succeed. There can be no tolerance for low expectations, but neither can there be a willingness to label as failing or deficient those schools that are significantly accelerating the learning of high needs students, even though some or many of those students are not yet proficient.

Small-to-midsize urban districts with larger populations of high-need students stand to benefit the most from the use of growth measures to document when a school is helping students achieve at a rate that exceeds those of other schools; this can encourage educators and students and improve a community's perceptions of its schools.[1] Research shows that a school's performance on standardized tests influences housing values in the surrounding community, especially when schools receive a "failing" label.[2] Harmful labels can also undermine the future success of a school; studies show that schools designated low-performing have great difficulty retaining teachers, particularly the highest-quality instructors.[3] Assigning labels to schools based on absolute student performance rather than incorporating measures of growth in student performance tells an incomplete and inaccurate story, and fails to meet any of the "purpose" principles laid out above. Of course, student growth is necessary, but not sufficient: as one Learning Community member put it: "...if students get growth but never attain final learning, we are left with inequity in our system."

Accurately differentiating between school performance and student outcomes/needs will give schools a better sense of where they stand, independent of demographics, likely increasing stakeholder buy-in and encouraging those who need to improve performance to take needed action.

2. States can report additional measures of student participation in activities that are essential to a well-rounded education and highly correlated with student success.

One of the rising efforts in accountability systems across the country is the push to document the degree to which students enjoy access to well-rounded learning opportunities. Beyond the measures incorporated in the formal accountability system, school report cards can offer the public new data on student participation in learning and enrichment experiences highly-correlated with student success—experiences

1   Rebecca Jacobsen and others. "Informing or Shaping Public Opinion? The Influence of School Accountability Data Format on Public Perceptions of School Quality." *American Journal of Education* 121.1 (2014).

2   Bogin, Alexander and Phuong Nguyen-Hoang. "Property Left Behind: An Unintended Consequence of a No Child Left Behind "Failing" School Designation." *Journal of Regional Science* 54.5 (2014): 788-805.

3   Feng Li and others. "School Accountability and Teacher Mobility." Working paper w16070. (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010).

like work-based learning, arts learning, advanced coursework, early college, and extracurricular activities.

Information regarding student exposure to and participation in such opportunities can:

• Draw attention to opportunity gaps in small-to-midsize cities;

• Highlight to students, families and educators that such programming is valued and regarded as educationally consequential;

• Create incentives for educators, schools and districts to seek tools and resources to increase access and participation over time; and

• Encourage state and local governments and private philanthropy to identify funding to close gaps.

Students in small-to-midsize urban districts live in disproportionately low- and moderate-income families and communities. Educators, parents and other stakeholders in these communities are well aware that access to experiential learning, development, and employment opportunities is a staple of student success. If done well, documentation of student access and participation rates, within schools and districts, in core learning, development, and career opportunities, has the potential to do what NCLB's rigorous academic achievement reporting undeniably did: make plain the disparity or comparability, in the experiences of students, between one school or system versus another.

3. States can prioritize working with districts, offering resources and support to help them develop local accountability systems that foster collaboration, leverage resources, and encourage innovation.

Since one of the critical but elusive purposes of accountability systems is to facilitate improvement of teaching and learning, it is logical to encourage states and districts to use the tools they are applying in many other large-scale improvement efforts—collaboration, shared resources, innovation—in their next generation accountability work. In their design of statewide approaches, states can create incentives for districts and schools to work together, to seek additional resources that can support accountability goals, and to spark new ideas and approaches.

States can and should lead this work in diverse ways. Using the state accountability formula to create an incentive is likely to be challenging, given ESSA regulations. An alternative might be to establish an incentive through state grant eligibility requirements. For example, states could prioritize early college and dual enrollment funding to districts that include post-secondary completion rates in their local accountability system. Similarly,

early learning grants could go to districts that make kindergarten readiness a local accountability measure.

Some of the goals we have for deploying data to improve instruction and student outcomes are best left to local accountability systems, especially in smaller, inclusive urban districts responding to a wider array of student needs. Unless these measures are anticipated and supported by the state accountability formula, district leaders will have difficulty devoting time and resources to them. State accountability policies can create incentives for districts to develop additional locally-determined measures and reward them for improving outcomes in these areas.

Local accountability systems also provide an important avenue for under-resourced districts, with limited capacity to purchase additional support, to form collaborative partnerships. Working with philanthropic partners and other institutions, states can develop incentives for multi-district partnerships to leverage resources, innovation, and the diffusion of learning across communities.

Small-to-midsize urban districts are eager to form such partnerships, which are sometimes referred to as ventures in "reciprocal accountability." In New Hampshire, the PACE districts (Performance Assessment of Competency Education) are part of a state education agency-initiated effort to create a new state assessment and accountability system with common and local performance assessments as the primary means to make determinations of student proficiency. A new group of Massachusetts school district teams, called the MA Consortium for Innovative Educational Assessment, is co-led by superintendents and union presidents from each district, who are focusing on creating alternatives to high stakes, single measure accountability practices; they seek to influence DESE's approach to its state assessment and accountability system.

As one Learning Community member observes: "A central theme of both initiatives is that of reciprocal accountability: the state and local districts are mutually responsible and accountable for working in partnership to create a fundamentally different type of accountability system that is embedded both in local district curriculum and in efforts to provide deep learning experiences to students." As these examples suggest, while the initiative for such accountability work can originate in a state agency or in a set of local communities, success will hinge on genuinely shared leadership and exchange, over time.

4. States can take a long, "learning" view on accountability design, seeking to improve the system over multiple years of implementation and adjustment

States are still adjusting to the very substantial increase in their autonomy from federal mandates, and they are under intense

short-term time pressures to comply with ESSA requirements. Over the long term, however, states have an opportunity to reflect on their practice, and to make use of their increased leeway to foster changes that could accelerate student learning and success.

One such adjustment might be to build in periodic sunset provisions into new or experimental elements of the state accountability system. Another idea could be the adoption of a deliberately experimental, or "improvement science," approach to one or more areas of accountability work, in ways that leverage ESSA's provision for alternative approaches, or that augment or supplant them. A third approach might be the use of partnerships with research or higher education institutions willing to enlarge the research capabilities of the state, or to focus on areas of particular difficulty, like the education of students in high need communities, or the development of district capacity in under-resourced systems and cities.

The point of this is to encourage states to frame the work of next generation accountability in truly generational terms, and to act on their newly conferred leadership responsibility. States and their communities need and want ambitious, far-sighted approaches to accountability that advance better outcomes for students and that strive for substantial improvements over current practice and outcomes. Taking a long view will help states to continually improve on their success in this core endeavor, by being consistently open to change and improvement, based on what they are learning from the system.

III. Emerging Design Principles for Local Accountability

All of the purposes for accountability laid out above—promoting equity, setting high expectations, documenting outcomes, ensuring transparency, and facilitating improvement—can be furthered by local accountability systems that are more robust and attuned to the specific needs and priorities of small-to-midsize urban districts. Here are four proposed "design" principles for local community accountability systems:

- Local accountability systems can establish shared responsibility across multiple levels of education systems.

- Local accountability systems can provide strong indicators of student, parent, community, and teacher engagement and inclusion.

- Local accountability systems can support innovation in assessment.

- Local accountability systems can take a long view on accountability by positioning educators to reshape it over time.

While the Learning Community has yet to devote sufficient discussion to local accountability, conversations thus far indicate several areas in which states could look to devolve responsibility to districts, especially as states and districts experiment with new areas of accountability that may figure more prominently in the future. At the same time, most of these ideas will rely on the readiness of states not only to encourage initiatives of this kind, but to play active, leadership roles in their framing, design, and sustained effort.

1. Local accountability policies can establish shared responsibility across multiple levels of education systems.

Achieving the ambitious goals we have for student outcomes requires linkages beyond K-12. The state accountability system's focus on year-to-year change creates a disincentive for districts to invest in efforts that bear fruit in the post-secondary system or first bloom in the early learning system. Small-to-midsize urban districts with limited resources must carefully consider how they accrue the benefits of every dollar spent, and often find themselves pressured to focus a disproportionate share of their resources on programs and services for students in "tested grades" or struggling to graduate.

Interventions like helping preschool-age children get off to a good start or investing in advising so that graduates are more likely to complete post-secondary programs and land on career pathways ultimately produce large benefits. Leaders in the community and region can collaborate with school districts who incorporate measures in their local accountability systems that will demonstrate the return on these investments over a longer time horizon.

2. Local accountability systems can provide strong indicators of student, parent, community, and teacher engagement and inclusion.

School climate matters to student success and this is information that parents care deeply about. While there are advantages for making school climate measures part of the state system in terms of transparency and economies of scale, very little is known about whether these measures will be reliable and how the sharing of these data would influence school improvement efforts. Piloting these measures in communities that are most eager to experiment with their use would provide valuable information before states move to universally adopt them.

3. Local accountability systems can support innovation in assessment.

Many districts can benefit from active support of innovations in assessment. To better serve students with a diverse range

of needs, many urban communities are working to deliver personalized instruction. To facilitate such student-centered learning, assessment must allow for competency-based progression, where students demonstrate mastery of a skill. Inclusive urban communities also stand to benefit from the development of new social-emotional skills assessments. These measures would allow districts to better understand how their curricula and programs lead to social-emotional growth and to more readily identify students for targeted intervention and support.

4. Local accountability systems can take a long view on accountability by positioning educators to reshape it over time.

Draft ESSA regulations, the potential influence of new Presidential leadership, and the pending spring 2017 deadline for state submissions to the US Department of Education are receiving much attention. While fall 2016 is clearly a critical moment, it is also important to frame the transition to next generation accountability as unfolding over an extended time frame.

Local educators may be feeling powerless right now, but over the long term, their actions, innovations, exchanges with one another, and feedback to state education officials and policy-makers can have a very large influence over accountability and its effects. By design, local accountability systems can position teams of leaders to play this very important role.

DISPATCHES

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