

Executive Summary

When President George W. Bush leaves office after the 2008 election, the future of his landmark and controversial domestic policy initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, will be in doubt. The drive to hold schools responsible for raising student achievement will not be.

Accountability is here to stay.

Over the past 20 years, state policy-makers and educators have moved toward a system of elevating all students to higher levels of learning. They set expectations for what students should know, canonized in academic content standards. Then they began measuring students' abilities to master those standards on assessment tests and formed systems to link those outcome measures to a series of interventions and rewards.

California policy-makers, however, left the job half completed. Without a real way to ensure actual improvement in student proficiency, today's accountability systems often amount to little more than a drill, with far more energy devoted to process than to outcomes.

According to the federal law, all students, regardless of their starting point, must reach proficiency in math and reading by 2014. It is understandably a daunting task. But given the state's present and future social and economic needs, the goal of getting California's 6 million students to read and perform math at grade level is worth embracing, not abandoning.

At 10,000 schools across California, the paradigm already has shifted, with teachers and administrators focusing on student outcomes. With annual test scores and separate state and federal proficiency yardsticks, they know how well they measure up and where they need to improve. But accountability systems based on yardsticks and sanctions so far have not succeeded in elevating proficiency across the state's classrooms.

At the state level, the responsibility for improving student learning is diffused. From an accountability perspective, a governance structure that splits education policy among a State Board of Education, a state

superintendent of public instruction, a Legislature and a Governor's Office has resulted in the following:

- The lack of a coordinated system of oversight and follow-up to ensure improvement plans are appropriate, in place and effective.
- The marginalization of the California Department of Education as a compliance agency, focused on the still-important job of ensuring that taxpayer dollars are spent according to statute and regulation, rather than on holding districts and schools accountable for, and helping to improve, student performance.
- The state's highly prescriptive school spending culture, emblemized by widespread use of separate pools of money for specific spending categories, that reduces flexibility at the local level and discourages innovation.

The governance structure is unlikely to change. But California's approach to accountability can, and to improve student proficiency, it must.

The federal accountability system is driven by an ever-increasing bar of excellence that leads to the 2014 deadline for all students to reach proficiency. Many policy-makers and educators have been distracted by the specter of federal sanctions as more California schools – now more than 2,200 – do not meet annual performance benchmarks and become enmeshed in the federally mandated Program Improvement process. The reality is that no schools are expected to meet the 2014 federal deadline. This requires the governor, the Legislature and other education policy-makers to adopt a new way of thinking.

California pioneered an educational accountability program, building a system that stresses the performance growth of an entire school. Its transition to the federal government's deadline-driven system that requires individual student success, as opposed to that of an entire school, has been difficult. Many would like to hold onto the state system. This tension has resulted in districts and schools feeling pulled in opposite directions by state and federal accountability systems that often are at odds.

With the 2014 deadline nearing, the transition is almost complete. Transformation is next; once all schools are labeled as "failing," the identification system becomes meaningless. This is an opportunity. The state must stop fighting the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) system and instead merge the two systems. Policy-makers, educators and parents must recast the accountability program as a system of continuous appraisal and improvement. Education leaders from the Capitol to the classroom must work together under a structure that links

interventions and rewards to outcomes. All schools, even the “good” ones that are bound to get caught in the NCLB net, should strive to better themselves constantly.

As a first step, the state must put teeth into accountability. Despite the fear of sanctions from No Child Left Behind, the reality is no schools in California are being shut down or taken over by the state for low performance. NCLB interventions are not necessarily onerous. The federal government provides considerable flexibility to states to implement the program, which has led California to delegate turnaround efforts to local districts without additional state oversight. Many of these schools do need a stronger hand from state or regional authorities than currently is provided to place them on a pathway to proficiency. Some chronically underperforming schools require even stronger interventions. A few probably deserve to be shut down.

In practice, the Program Improvement process forces most schools to revise instructional programs to engage students, analyze data to evaluate programmatic efforts and allow teachers to collaborate on lessons – hardly what most would see as punishment. On the continuum of interventions, replacing a principal or starting over as a charter school is not necessarily the first choice a district should or even has to make at a struggling school under NCLB.

The flexibility allowed by Program Improvement has allowed many schools and districts to take a path of least resistance. But the flexibility also is the program’s strength, a guiding principle that state policy-makers should preserve regardless of what happens to No Child Left Behind. What is clear is that the state cannot revert back to its Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 as a sole measure of accountability.

Accountability is not voluntary. Though it does not do so now, the system must include all students at all public schools.

A universal approach requires the governor, the Legislature and the state superintendent of public instruction to implement a coherent and comprehensive system that provides differentiated support for all of the state’s schools. Such a system must include the financial and regulatory freedom to empower local school boards, engage teachers and encourage schools to pursue their own turnaround plans while holding leaders responsible for the results.

This system must be guided by education leaders from the state to the local level. The Commission recognizes the challenges faced by the California Department of Education with intervening in every low-performing school district or school. But the issue of capacity cannot be

used as a crutch. The department must take ownership of student performance.

Many county offices of education already are taking the initiative to link state policies with on-the-ground implementation at local school sites. The Commission learned about successful collaborations at the county level that help schools embrace accountability as a means to raise achievement. These entities must have the formal support and authority from the state to oversee and monitor local schools for continuous improvement.

The Commission also found great merit in a model for swift academic intervention for chronically underperforming schools and districts based on the existing Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team approach, also run through the county-level network.

And all levels must continue to expand on infusing data-driven strategies into policy and classroom practices to reach the goal of improving student outcomes.

The state is not short of inspirational stories about low-income schools beating the odds, and the Commission heard from two Central Valley schools that unite parents, teachers and staff around an unwavering commitment to high expectations for students.

Their message is that accountability is more than test scores and punishing “bad” schools. It is bigger than the politics of the No Child Left Behind Act. The discussion of how to improve accountability must take place apart from the budget crisis that threatens school finances, but it must inform how those budget choices are made.

Accountability can be transformative. The transformation will require a series of linked steps with responsible officials playing distinct and interdependent roles. It begins by recognizing that students can do better, then making the commitment to take them there.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The state must establish a comprehensive accountability system that combines state and federal principles.

- ❑ ***Combine the state and federal accountability systems.*** The State Board of Education must align the metrics of the state and federal accountability systems to the highest common denominators, including proficiency goals, timelines, participation, subgroup expectations and exit criteria from interventions.
- ❑ ***Set clear goals for all students.*** The state must establish non-negotiable expectations with clarity and specificity of purpose that all students can reach a minimum of grade-level proficiency on California’s academic content standards.

Recommendation 2: The state must implement a new, transparent rating system for schools that aligns interventions and rewards.

- ❑ ***Leave the old intervention programs behind.*** The state must abandon the High Priority Schools Grant Program (HPSGP) and the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). The Legislature should direct the state auditor to investigate school-site expenditures from the HPSGP and the II/USP.
- ❑ ***Use simple language to communicate school status.*** To better communicate a school’s standing to educators and parents, the State Board of Education must adopt a simple overall rating for schools, such as “excellent,” “commendable,” “continuous improvement,” “academic watch” and “academic emergency.” The ratings must correspond to a new education index.
- ❑ ***Activate a new education index that links state and federal criteria.*** The State Board of Education must adopt a new “Right Track” index that incorporates both state and federal criteria – growth and performance. This index should include multiple metrics, such as improving proficiency levels for subgroups, improving graduation and attendance rates, increasing the number of Advanced Placement courses, raising redesignation rates for English learners, improving parent participation, placing more experienced teachers in hard-to-staff schools, reducing school suspensions and reducing teacher absenteeism.
- ❑ ***Institute a new intervention model.*** Using the “Right Track” index, the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education must triage schools and districts with appropriate and differentiated levels of interventions and rewards.

- ✓ Following the lead of Maryland and Michigan, the state must expand the five federal restructuring options into a menu of more specific strategies in order for schools and districts to select, with approval, the appropriate level and type of intervention to create their own turnaround strategy.
- ✓ Using the successful Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) model, the state must create the Academic Crisis Management and Assistance Team (ACMAT) – a quasi-independent agency, separate from the California Department of Education, that sends strike teams to the most chronically underperforming schools and districts that are unable or resistant to change after earlier intervention steps.
- ✓ For schools still unable to improve, the State Board needs to install a trustee who will utilize legal authority, such as “stay and rescind” power, to effect change.
- ✓ Ultimately, the State Board must close schools that fail to improve the academic performance of students over a reasonable time period and make provisions for the quality education of those students.

Recommendation 3: The state must give districts and schools flexibility to ensure deep implementation of standards and instructional improvement.

- ***Allow more financial flexibility.*** The Legislature must coordinate and combine state categorical programs that target factors affecting student achievement: academic preparation, language acquisition, parental involvement and school safety. The state should redistribute these funds in a block grant tied to high-needs student populations.
- ***Reward success.*** Districts must be rewarded with additional money from the pooled categorical funds in exchange for increasing their performance on the new “Right Track” index.

Recommendation 4: The state must formalize and enforce the chain of accountability.

- ***Take ownership of school outcomes.***
 - ✓ The governor must use his power to appoint members of the State Board of Education to focus that body as the policy lever and independent enforcer of the accountability system, serving as a true check on the California Department of Education.
 - ✓ The state superintendent of public instruction, as the leader of the California Department of Education and spokesperson for student achievement, must use the existing arsenal of

intervention tools and the power of the office to catalyze a dramatic turnaround for underperforming schools.

- ❑ **Keep the lines of authority clear.** In the name of efficiency and streamlined accountability, the state must not continue to expand the Secretary of Education's Office, which would increase redundancy and dilute lines of responsibility. The governor should maintain a cabinet-level education emissary and a residual education policy staff. The governor can continue to exert influence to shape and determine education policy through his State Board appointees as well as through the budget process. To further professionalize the State Board, the Legislature should expand the role of the board president into a full-time position.
- ❑ **Increase the authority of county offices of education.** The Legislature must expand the fiscal oversight role of county superintendents to include academic accountability.
 - ✓ As part of the existing budget-approval process, county offices of education must not endorse a district's budget until the local school board adopts a blueprint for districtwide improvement strategies that comply with federal NCLB guidelines.
 - ✓ The Legislature must authorize county offices of education to conduct evaluative, diagnostic inspections of chronically underperforming schools in their jurisdiction to ensure turnaround plans are being implemented. County office of education recommendations should be enforceable through state law or policy. The state needs to set uniform standards for this process.
- ❑ **Strengthen the Regional System of District and School Support.** The 11 regional centers carry the potential to coordinate and oversee statewide accountability programs more effectively. The state must delineate the roles and responsibilities of the regional centers to serve as official field offices of the California Department of Education.

Recommendation 5: The state must champion the use of data to drive instructional improvement and policy and financial decisions.

- ❑ **Support the build-out of data systems.** The Legislature needs to monitor closely the progress of CALPADS and CALTIDES and work with the administration to ensure the systems are being built as robustly and accessibly as envisioned – and needed.
- ❑ **Make data usable.**
 - ✓ The state must return fine-grained data to teachers, schools, districts and parents on timelines and in formats that support efforts to improve educational outcomes.

- ✓ The state must ensure that data about students and teachers can be linked to identify what instructional practices and strategies are working and to target support to students and teachers who need it.
- ✓ The state must support more training for districts and schools to compile data on the front end and translate and utilize it on the back end.
- ❑ ***Capitalize on periodic assessments.*** The state must ensure that districts develop benchmark assessment tools.
- ❑ ***Reach out to parents.*** The state must simplify School Accountability Report Cards (SARC) and improve Web-accessibility for parents to better understand progress at their children’s schools and districts.