

# Standards, Assessments and Accountability

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEFING SHEET

## Recovering the Promise of Standards-Based Education

Over the past 20 years, the U.S. has worked to establish as the foundation for public education two sets of standards: content standards that identify key ideas and skills to be learned, and performance standards that define adequate mastery of that content. Bolstered by good teaching and a rigorous curriculum, and with student achievement monitored by appropriate assessments, the standards were intended to serve as the common organizing principle for the schooling of all students, thereby increasing quality and equity. To ensure that would happen, schools and school districts were to be held accountable for their students' mastery of the standards.

That was the theory. Although educators, policymakers and researchers still talk about standards-based education and work to make it a reality, the accountability part of the theory has come to dominate reform efforts; assuring that students master a broader set of skills and important content has become secondary.

Observers raise three key concerns about current reform efforts. First is the concern that the content standards adopted by many states are too voluminous, superficial, and repetitive, and look more like laundry lists than clear progressions for learning and teaching. Consequently, the standards give little coherent direction to instructional efforts.

Second, there are concerns that accountability tests over-represent what is relatively easy to measure (such as basic skills) and under-represent highly valued reasoning skills such as problem solving. Because there are consequences for schools and school districts (and sometimes students and teachers) for how well students perform on the tests, the accountability system establishes strong incentives for schools to focus almost exclusively on what is tested. More than a

century of social and behavioral science research shows that incentives have powerful effects on the choices and actions of individuals and institutions; education is no exception. In addition, the results of most current tests provide little guidance for improvement efforts or changes in teaching.

A third area of concern is that the accountability systems created are flawed, and therefore misrepresent school performance. With student test performance and hitting adequate yearly progress targets as the only measures, nearly 30 percent of U.S. schools are judged to be failing and in need of intervention. School districts and states have nowhere near the capacity to deliver appropriate help to all of those schools.

Accountability systems have yet to bring about the hoped for improvements in learning. We urge state and federal leaders to fully review the status and effects of test-based accountability policies. The intention of these policies—to focus attention on student learning, make schools more responsible, and provide guidance for educational improvement—are in the best interest of the country. We know enough to create a new generation of policies that will sharpen the focus on the schools and students that are not yet performing well and to help them improve.

**Recommendation: The Federal government should encourage the redesign of content standards—and the curricula, professional development, and assessments that must go with them—to present clear progressions for teaching and learning; efforts to develop these instructional systems may involve partnerships among states, universities, groups of teachers, scholars, and the private sector.**



Standards should be focused and rigorous; also needed are curriculum frameworks that help teachers provide the instruction necessary for students to master those standards, and that involve smart uses of technology. Teachers should not have to grapple with poorly articulated standards, practice test-like items, or try to guess the content to be tested. Models for appropriate teacher education and professional development programs must be created. The standards, curricula, and assessments for secondary school subjects need special attention. Additionally, student assessments should focus on the most important elements of the standards and provide teachers with the feedback they need to improve their practices. Care should be taken that assessments measure and guide the learning that is intended.

One way to foster these redesign efforts that would recognize the traditional decentralization of public education in the U.S. would be for the federal government to contract with consortia of states, experts, public-private partnerships, or other entities to develop the instructional resources described above. The federal government should work with several of these partnerships to provide a variety of models of high standards and the instructional infrastructure that is needed to bolster them. States would have discretion as to whether to participate in these partnerships directly or use the resources that the partnerships produce.

**Recommendation: The federal government should support a program of research and development of the next generation of assessment tools and strategies for accountability systems.**

It is an axiom, one supported by research and experience, that what is tested is what is taught. Thus, good assessments are critical to a well-functioning accountability system that promotes and supports standards-based instruction. The consortia referred to above

would be expected to design assessments that provide a focus for high quality instruction, and that go beyond facts and routine procedures to assess critical thinking and the ability to come up with innovative solutions to problems. Such assessments should take advantage of emerging technologies to permit complex assessments to be developed, administered, and scored at lower cost.

More work needs to be done to make sure these new assessments also examine student understanding so that teachers get good guidance about how to build on and extend student thinking. In addition, the special challenges of testing English language learners and other special populations need focused attention.

In addition to testing, however, accountability systems need to be addressed. No test alone, no matter how technologically advanced and well-founded, can fully measure the performance of a school. This is one reason that some educators have pushed for the development of accountability systems that also take account of growth when judging a school's performance. We should consider methods for gathering new information and for weighing the evidence from different sources. Test-based accountability indices should trigger further investigation rather than portend immediate sanctions. There are models to draw upon in designing school review or inspection systems. Several countries—along with some states and large school districts in this country—use inspection teams to review school characteristics in order to determine how best to improve the performance of schools that appear to be in trouble.

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