

RECIPROCAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A Model for Reform

In the 1980's, the national standards-based reform movement grew out of business concerns that many American students were not being adequately prepared to compete in the emerging global marketplace. Although the movement has resulted in the adoption of higher academic standards in nearly every state, development of effective accountability mechanisms to ensure that adequate resources are in place and students meet these standards has remained largely elusive.

Many current state accountability systems are lop-sided in their focus: the emphasis on high-stakes student testing has overshadowed the need for more comprehensive accountability measures that hold all stakeholders responsible for increasing opportunity and student achievement. Today, as the federal No Child Left Behind law renews the call for broader student achievement in every state, ensuring the implementation of accountability systems that will hold all stakeholders responsible for real progress is of critical concern.

In this issue of *ACCESS Quarterly*, we briefly touch on the current accountability systems in place around the country and explore promising accountability models that would help fulfill the still-unrealized promise of the standards-based reform movement.

What passes for "accountability" in many states across the country places disproportionate responsibility on students, and not enough on the system that created and continues to reinforce educational inequities. Tragically, the great promise of the standards-based reform movement has yet to be fulfilled because most states' accountability systems merely assess student progress on selected subjects with standardized exams, but do not ensure that schools and students have the resources or environment for learning that they need to meet the standards. Only with a broader, more comprehensive vision of accountability that holds all stakeholders responsible will the promise of the standards-based reform movement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) be realized.

Current Climate for Reform

High-quality education remains a top concern for the American public. Even as the weak economy, terrorism, and tensions with Iraq dominate the news, polls consistently show that education reform remains one of Americans' top domestic policy priorities. In 2002, in fact, 31 governors specifically mentioned education standards and accountability in their state-of-the-state addresses, and in the November 2002 elections, voters in a number of states and localities passed pro-education funding measures and ballot initiatives.

Politicians may support accountability out of genuine belief in its efficacy, but it is likely that the current prominence of the accountability movement is due, at least in part, to growing political and fiscal pressures. Amidst tight budgetary constraints and revenue

shortfalls, a number of states have reduced public school spending. Given the relative budgetary ease of implementing tougher standards – especially compared to hiring and training more teachers, renovating crumbling school facilities, or buying new textbooks and computers – it appears that test-driven accountability systems are here to stay.

To date, standardized tests have been the linchpin of educational accountability for schools and students. More than half of the states hold schools accountable for test results either by rating schools' performance or by identifying low-performing or "failing" schools—which are the schools with the least resources and the highest concentration of "at-risk" students with the highest educational needs.

Individual children, not schools or policy makers, bear the greatest burden of current accountability systems. In the name of ending social promotion, some states have developed high-stakes tests at certain "gateway points." In North Carolina, for example, students must pass state tests in order to progress past the third, fifth and eighth grades, and are held back in those grades until they pass, if ever. States are also increasingly requiring students to pass exit exams in order to earn a high school diploma. According to the Education Commission of the States, as of October 2002, 27 states mandate exit exams as a graduation requirement. Critics contend that high-stakes testing unfairly punishes students for the failures of state funding systems. Testing advocates maintain, however, that assessments can be a uniform and objective

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way of measuring student achievement if they are high-quality assessments that are accurately aligned to states' standards, and that they can be a tool to increase student achievement if they are used diagnostically to shape teacher professional development and curriculum.

The challenge facing advocates and policy makers across the country is ensuring that assessments are meaningful and that results are used fairly, in the context of a much richer, effective system of accountability.

Reciprocal Accountability

A fair, comprehensive accountability system must deal squarely and candidly with the full range of factors that influence student learning—from resources to regulations to instructional practices. In such a system, all stakeholders in the public schools—parents, students, teachers, administrators, school board members, and local and state policy makers, along with community members and college teacher preparation programs—share the responsibility for reform and ongoing effectiveness.

In New York, after a trial court judge in *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State* ordered the State to overhaul its education finance system, including enacting comprehensive accountability measures, CFE led a statewide public engagement process to gain input on what such a system would look like. From these discussions, consensus emerged that New York's current accountability system holds too few of the responsible parties—school personnel, parents, school districts, and the state government—accountable for fulfilling their roles in improving educational opportunity and student learning. Norm Fruchter of NYU and Lynn Weikart of Baruch College have confirmed this, finding that school administrators and state and district leaders are rarely perceived as owing accountability to their students, teachers, and parents.

Fulfilling the promise of standards-based reform requires not only creating solid standards and holding students accountable for meeting them, but also creating strengthened accountability for providing students with the appropriate resources and environment for learning for meeting standards. The concept of “reciprocal accountability,” through which all education stakeholders hold each other accountable for a specified series of inputs, processes, and outcomes, should serve as a model for accountability reforms across the country. Columbia University professor Thomas Sobol likens an effective reciprocal accountability system to a web, with a child at its center, surrounded by all of the people with a role in that child's education. The threads of mutual accountability that run from one individual to another create this complex web of reciprocal accountability. A comprehensive standards-based accountability system should include these key components: high standards, adequate resources, capacity for teaching and learning, fair assessments with even-handed consequences, and strong reporting and long-term planning systems.

Ensuring Adequate Resources for High Standards

Without adequate resources to provide good teaching and learning conditions, it is ineffective and unfair to hold students and schools accountable for improving achievement. According to Fruchter and Weikart, “setting standards without...investing the necessary resources, does not help all children learn” and instead often condemns at-risk children to academic failure. The cornerstone of a comprehensive accountability system is a clearly defined process to ensure adequate resources to all schools. States bear the primary responsibility to provide these resources to ensure fair distribution of funding to every school. Funding should be appropriated and allocated based on school and student need, and statewide costing-out studies should be undertaken by all states to determine the actual costs of educating students and linking funding and resources to actual need. [For an update on costing-out, see *Policy/Research on page 5*].

Linking Resources to Results: Ensuring Capacity

Adequate resources are a prerequisite for student success, but effective use of resources is critical to ensure student learning. Recent research confirms that the way resources are used significantly influences student outcomes. A school's environment for learning (“capacity”) includes its instructional quality, administrative leadership, faculty collegiality, and parent involvement. Students in schools lacking adequate capacity have trouble meeting learning standards, and accountability systems that simply measure student learning through test scores is not sufficient to address this problem. As Harvard's Richard Elmore has written, “Giving test results to an incoherent, atomized, badly run school doesn't automatically make it a better school. The ability of a school to make improvements has to do with the beliefs, norms, expectations, and practices that people in the organization share, not with the kind of information they receive about their performance.” According to Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford and Carol Ascher of NYU, “assessments of what students are learning must be accompanied by assessments of what the school is doing.”

In a full accountability system, the learning climate in each school should be aligned with state and local standards, and should be capable of actually providing students specific instructional support geared to these standards. Successful implementation of standards-based reform requires the commitment of policy makers and school leaders to allocate adequate resources to effectively align standards with professional development, curriculum, instructional materials, assessment, and school facilities.

Fair Assessments, Fair Consequences

Standardized testing, the primary feature of most state and local accountability systems, has been the source of considerable controversy across the country. While test-

ing advocates point to research that has found standardized tests to be a uniform and objective way of measuring student achievement, other studies show that high-stakes testing narrows the curriculum, increases dropout rates, and does not provide an accurate picture of student achievement. Despite the intense debate, however, state policy makers overwhelmingly support standardized tests, and increased high-stakes testing is now the cornerstone of the new federal No Child Left Behind requirements.

Assessment experts caution that standardized testing must be used carefully and correctly. The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) has recommended that the use of standardized tests should emphasize school improvement over current performance, and should be just one piece of a full accountability system including standards, tests, alignment, professional development, rewards, sanctions, teacher quality, curriculum, and resources.

To prevent narrowing of schools' curricula to "teach to the test," states and school districts should also consider supplementing standardized tests with alternative measures like portfolios and performance-based assessments that can emphasize the full range of student skills and accomplishments. In portfolios, teachers analyze an organized collection of a student's work throughout a course or class year. In performance-based assessments, students perform hands-on tasks, such as conducting a science experiment or giving a presentation on a research topic. Although alternative assessments can effectively measure a student's capacity for important writing, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, they are also resource-intensive and pose considerable challenges to states in ensuring statewide objectivity in scoring. The State of Oregon, citing budget constraints, abandoned an ambitious plan to collect student work from all students in three grade levels to demonstrate their attainment of the state standards. Currently, only two states—Kentucky and Vermont—use portfolios to help measure student progress toward state standards.

In a fair accountability system, testing should be seen primarily as a helpful diagnostic tool, not as a source for retributive sanctions. All schools whose students exhibit low performance should receive technical assistance


from the district and or the state, including conducting an objective resource inventory and analysis of factors impeding the development of an environment for teaching and learning at the school. Corrective action should supply any resources and supports necessary to overcome resource deficiencies and other impediments, such as standards-based professional development and supports to strengthen schools' ability to hire highly qualified teachers. Penalties and sanctions should only be applied to schools that fail to improve after receiving such resources and support.

Informing the Public through Effective Reporting

Public reporting is the most basic school accountability tool, and all 50 states currently produce or require school districts to publish district or school "report cards." In many cases, however, these reports only contain assessment data, leaving out critical information on teacher quality, class sizes, per pupil expenditures, attendance and drop-out rates, school facility conditions, and disciplinary data.

Report cards should be a tool for holding state policy makers accountable for results. States, school districts, and schools must ensure transparency and public understanding of school data on resources, capacity, and student achievement through timely, clear, and easily understood reporting. To this end, report cards should include specific information detailing states' and districts' progress toward ensuring adequacy of resources, sustained and stable funding, and removal of regulatory impediments.

Long-Range Planning

Finally, the glue that binds the reciprocal accountability "web" is a "feedback loop" in which reported data on resources, capacity, and assessments is used to drive ongoing, long-term budgetary and educational program planning. A truly comprehensive, fair accountability system will require every level of school governance—from the school to the state—to develop multi-year plans based on specific goals linked to state standards. In the end, long-range planning is only as good as funding streams: the public should hold states and districts accountable for providing sustained and stable funding that will allow effective planning. 

No Child Left Behind and Accountability Reform

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has brought a high level of renewed attention to high standards and strong accountability. NCLB's focus on low-performing schools, and its underlying commitment to providing all children "highly qualified" teachers and the opportunity to meet high standards, can be a potent rallying cry to bolster local, state, and national reform efforts.

All 50 states will soon submit "accountability" plans to the U.S. Department of Education, as required by the NCLB. As states prepare these plans, many are confronting the challenge of adapting existing state education reform policies and goals with the new federal mandates.

To assist advocates and policy makers in addressing these challenges and in developing accountability systems that maintain high comprehensive standards and adequate resources, we have created a "No Child Left Behind" resource section on the ACCESS website, which includes a summary of the key provisions of NCLB and important advocacy perspectives for effective reform implementation.

Visit our "No Child Left Behind" resource section on www.schoolfunding.info/federal/nclb/nclb.htm

Arizona: State Ordered to Comply

In October 2002, a Superior Court judge in Arizona ruled that the legislature illegally used \$90 million earmarked for the state's Building Renewal Fund to help balance the state budget and ordered the legislature to return the money by June 30, 2003. The state, which continues to experience revenue shortfalls, has appealed. In 1998, in response to the Arizona Supreme Court's decisions in *Roosevelt Elementary School District v. Bishop*, the State moved responsibility for funding school construction and other capital items to the State and phased out the local property taxes used to support capital expenditures. The new law created the School Facilities Board, which administers the system consisting of three funds: New Schools, Building Renewal, and Deficiency Correction. If the facilities funding is not returned, the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest may ask the court to block distribution of state education aid.

Arkansas: Cost-Based Adequacy

In November 2002, in *Lake View School District v. Huckabee*, the Arkansas Supreme Court affirmed a lower court decision declaring the state education finance system unconstitutional and finding "extremely troublesome" the State's failure to prepare a study on the per-pupil cost of providing an adequate education. The "key" to a constitutional funding system, the court said, is to determine what comprises an adequate education, including adequate funding to provide it. The court stayed its order for little more than one year, until January 1, 2004, to allow the State "time to correct this constitutional [violation]...and chart a new course for public education in this state." [For an update on advocates' response to this ruling, see page 5.]

Idaho: Special Master

In November 2002, Judge Deborah Bail, appointed a school facilities architect as special master to conduct an assessment of all run-down school buildings in Idaho, with the idea of ordering repairs based on the report. The court, in Idaho's long-running school funding suit, *ISEEO v. State*, previously ruled the state's system of

funding school construction unconstitutional. Although the State claims that plaintiff districts have enough money to make necessary repairs, the need for repairs and renovations is not in dispute. The special master's study will be the first school facilities assessment in Idaho since 1993.

The appointment of the special master comes in the midst of hearings that the court is holding as its latest attempt to resolve the case. In these hearings, school districts have reported crumbling foundations, moldy floors, and broken fire alarms. The hearings will resume in January.

Massachusetts: High-Stakes Testing

In December 2002, U.S. District Court Judge Michael A. Ponsor declined to hear a lawsuit, *Student v. Driscoll*, alleging discrimination on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Eight students who failed the MCAS, which serves as the State's high-school graduation exam, filed a class-action suit in September against state education officials and the Holyoke School District alleging discrimination against minority, limited-English-proficient, vocational, and special education students. The court said that the issues of the case should be heard in state court, but Judge Ponsor expressed sympathy for the defendants and told them to return to him if they make no progress in state court.

Beginning with the class of 2003, Massachusetts students must pass the English Language Arts and Mathematics exams to obtain a diploma. Students have five chances to pass the two sections, but after three attempts, 50% of Latinos and 44% of African Americans have not passed—compared to an overall failure rate of 19%. Shortly before the court decision, the State authorized "certificates of attainment" in place of diplomas for students who fulfill all graduation requirements except passing MCAS.

Interestingly, business groups in Massachusetts filed papers with the court saying they disagree with the remedy plaintiffs seek. Instead of eliminating MCAS, they suggest paying for tutoring or a year of community college for students who have not passed, according to the *Boston Globe*.

Ohio: Court Ends DeRolph Suit

In December 2002, the Ohio Supreme Court ended the 11-year-old *DeRolph v. State* case by declaring the state education finance system unconstitutional. The court directed "the General Assembly to enact a school-funding scheme that is thorough and efficient, as explained in *DeRolph I* [and] *DeRolph II*." These earlier decisions had also declared the funding system unconstitutional and identified particular elements, such as the "over reliance on property taxes" and "forced borrowing," which the General Assembly needs to change in order to develop a system that meets the "thorough and efficient system of common schools" required by the Ohio Constitution.

After four earlier state Supreme Court decisions in *DeRolph*—three of which ruled the system unconstitutional and one that ordered mediation which ultimately failed—a heavily financed, contentious election in November 2002 changed the make-up of the court, effective in January 2003. Based on the candidates' stated positions, there was speculation that the new court might, for the first time, find in favor of the State in the case. However, the justices who formed the majority in *DeRolph I* and *II* regrouped and issued this concluding opinion, *DeRolph V*. The court did not retain jurisdiction.

Tennessee: Equal Opportunity

In October 2002, the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled in favor of plaintiffs for the third time in Tennessee *Small School Systems v. McWherter (Small School III)*. The court held that the Teachers' Salary Equity Plan adopted in 1995 violates the State's obligation to "maintain a system that affords a substantially equal education opportunity for all students" and found no rational basis for excluding the cost of providing teachers from the State's cost-based funding system. Plaintiffs are seeking substantial equalization of teacher salaries across the state.

For all 2002 school funding court decisions, visit:
www.schoolfunding.info/litigation/recentdecisions.htm

ADVOCACY

Alabama: Without Lawsuit, Advocates Move Forward

Despite the Alabama Supreme Court's May 2002 dismissal of *ACE v. Siegelman*, Alabama's long-standing education adequacy case, the state's education advocates launched two major reform initiatives since July 2002.

In the first, over 20 grassroots groups have joined together to support the state's \$1.6 billion "REACH Campaign," an education adequacy funding plan announced in July 2002. The strategic planning group formed by the state, which includes a number of advocacy groups, recently announced plans for ten collaborative initiatives, including a media campaign and a "get out the vote" effort beginning in 2003.

The second initiative, the Campaign for Alabama, was unveiled in November 2002 by members of the state's business community and aims to build support for practical reforms to Alabama's tax and education funding systems.

Arkansas: Legal Victory Boosts Funding Reform Efforts

Armed with the November 2002 Arkansas Supreme Court decision that held the state's education finance system unconstitutional and ordered the governor and legislature to devise a constitutional system within a year, the

state's advocacy groups are gearing up for the impending political battles. Advocates plan to focus on conducting public education and organizing on school funding, lobbying for higher teacher salaries and additional school resources, and strengthening programs in the 44% of the state's schools that are in poor, rural areas. Advocates are also pushing for increased funding for pre-Kindergarten programs, even though the Court did not mandate these programs.

PEN Conference: Civic Imperative of Standards-Based Reform

In November 2002, 280 advocates from around the country came together in the nation's capital at the annual 4-day conference of the Public Education Network, a national organization of 77 community-based Local Education Funds (LEFs) headquartered in Washington, D.C. At the conference, entitled "Standards-Based Reform: A Civic Imperative," participants discussed strategies to build public support for public education, link school reform to a sustained and effective democratic society, and foster community involvement in achieving standards-based reforms. LEFs promote parent and community involvement in schools, encourage districts to collect and use data to improve

student achievement, and raise millions of dollars each year for public schools.

States Consider Alternative School Funding Sources

Facing worsening revenue shortfalls, some states have begun to consider funding alternatives to head off severe education budget cuts.

In South Carolina, legislative leaders plan to introduce a bill in early 2003 that would use money from sales taxes to fund schools, which would result in up to \$1 billion in increased revenues. In Oklahoma, educators urged Gov. Frank Keating to call a special legislative session to address their ideas for school funding. In New Jersey, Gov. Jim McGreevey announced in November 2002 that he would freeze state aid in several areas to provide more money for schools. In California, unions, parents, and advocates are actively protesting potential multi-billion dollar education budget cuts.

Despite this tough economic climate, results from the recent 2002 elections indicate that Americans still support education funding measures. Among other successes, major statewide construction bonds were passed in Alaska and California, and Tennessee voters approved a lottery with proceeds earmarked for public education.

POLICY/RESEARCH

More States "Cost Out" Education
Joining over a dozen states in which "costing out" studies have been conducted to determine the actual costs of educating students, two major studies were recently completed in Nebraska, and two others were launched in California and New York this fall.

In Nebraska, a broad-based coalition of advocacy groups, school districts, and the state's teachers' and administrators' unions will, by January 2003, release the results of a study that costed out the provision of an adequate education. The study, conducted by nationally-known education finance experts, used the "professional judgment methodology."* The coalition will present the findings to the legislature, and will consider filing a school funding lawsuit if the legislature fails to

enact reforms. A second coalition of 63 rural districts, led by the Nebraska Coalition for Education Equity & Adequacy, commissioned a statewide equity study. Preliminary findings indicate that Nebraska's school funding system contains major inequities and causes gross disparities in resources between small and large districts.

In New York, 25 advocacy, business, and civic groups from across the state, led by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and the state school boards association, launched a major costing-out study in December 2002 to determine the actual costs of providing adequate educational opportunities in all 700 school districts in New York. The year-long study, the first of its kind in such a large, diverse state, will involve extensive public engagement and use both

the "professional judgment" and "successful schools" methodologies.* A final report is expected by early 2004.

In September 2002, the California legislature approved the creation of a 13-member commission to develop a Quality Education Model (QEM) for pre-K-12 education that will determine the resources necessary for "the vast majority of pupils" to meet state standards. The Commission will convene in July 2003 and issue a report 12 months later.

The trend toward cost-based funding systems continues to grow: additional states, including Arkansas, Connecticut, and Texas, are considering similar studies.

* Descriptions of the key costing-out methodologies are on the ACCESS website at: www.schoolfunding.info/resources/costing-out.htm

Share your stories! ACCESS Needs Your Help for Book on Education Adequacy

How can we assure adequate education for all children? In a forthcoming book, CFE/ACCESS Executive Director Michael A. Rebell and researcher Joseph Wardenski will detail the national movement to achieve equal educational opportunities through judicial action and public engagement. The book will call for a renewed emphasis on the critical democratic imperative for quality education for all students in state and national reform efforts.

We need your help! We are looking for contemporary, real-life stories of children who are being harmed by systemic inequities, children who have been helped by successful reform efforts, and promising programs and practices that demonstrate the link between strong advocacy and real reform.

To share your stories, whether through already-documented accounts or through a phone interview with an ACCESS staff member, please contact Joseph Wardenski at jwardenski@cfequity.org or (212) 867-8455.

ACCESS Quarterly
6 East 43rd Street, 19th floor
New York, NY 10017

ACCESS News

Senator Dodd to Deliver Keynote at ACCESS National Conference

ACCESS is pleased to announce that U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Connecticut), the chief Senate sponsor of the recently introduced Student Bill of Rights Act, will deliver the keynote address at our third annual national conference, "Education Adequacy: Strategies for Achieving Reform in Difficult Times," in Alexandria, Virginia in February 2003. Senator Dodd's proposed legislation would require states to provide essential educational resources in all public schools.

The conference, co-sponsored by the National School Boards Association, will bring together litigators, policy experts, and advocates from across the country to discuss strategies for fostering successful implementation of education and school funding reform.

The conference will also feature Lou Harris of the Harris Poll and Doug Gould, President of Douglas Gould & Co., who will offer insights on the use of polling, surveys, and media strategies to advance school funding reforms.

ACCESS
A Project of the Campaign
for Fiscal Equity, Inc.
6 East 43rd Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10017
Phone: (212) 867-8455
Fax: (212) 867-8460
E-mail: access@cfequity.org
Website: www.schoolfunding.info

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Michael A. Rebell, *Executive Director*
Molly A. Hunter, *Project Director*
Joseph Wardenski, *Editor*
Jessica Wolff & Tico Almeida, *Contributors*

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