



Change policy, cause a ripple effect.



A framework for  
**RETHINKING STATE EDUCATION  
ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT**  
from birth through high school

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In the last decade-plus, statewide accountability systems have emerged as a strategy for improving child outcomes, particularly for low-income and minority children. It is clear that state accountability systems have changed the behavior of schools. But to date, accountability efforts in both early learning and the K–12 public school system have not set the right goals for educators. Moreover, both early learning and K–12 have struggled to generate the capacity needed to improve education at scale, and the strategies currently being used for improvement have frequently not had the intended effect. For an accountability system to truly succeed, it must both set the right goals and provide the right supports for achieving those goals. States can build on the best ideas in both early childhood and K–12 accountability systems to create a single state education accountability system from birth through high school—one that sets the right goals and identifies the supports needed to help achieve them.

Stated broadly, the right goals for an accountability system are widely agreed upon: Accountability systems are supposed to measure the professional practice of schools, and then help schools improve their practices as a means of achieving better student outcomes. To date no consensus has emerged about how to measure practice, how to help schools improve, or what student outcomes should be measured. But while there is not yet clear national agreement on how accountability systems should work, existing efforts to improve accountability systems in early learning and K–12 are creating promising trends.



# POLICY CONVERSATIONS

What makes accountability systems promising is that we know they influence school behavior. Supporters and critics of *No Child Left Behind* (the federal accountability statute adopted in 2002) may not agree on whether NCLB has had a positive effect, but they agree that it has had a significant effect on local decision-making and practice. Similarly, early childhood accountability systems in Head Start, state prekindergarten, and child care have all influenced behavior, in many instances for the better. But there are ways in which current accountability systems have failed to drive the right behavior:

- In early childhood, accountability has historically focused on structural inputs related to program quality that are sometimes correlated with improved child outcomes, but not always. They have not historically had an intensive focus on professional practice or child outcomes. Arguably they have traditionally focused more on that which is easily measured than on that which is most directly linked to enhancing outcomes, and in many instances have included such long lists of criteria that the most important elements are not adequately prioritized.
- In K-12, schools are held accountable for how high their students' scores are on English language arts and math tests in grades 3-8 and high school. This approach may mean that schools are rewarded or punished (mostly the latter) regardless of how good their professional practice actually was. Moreover, this narrow band of child outcomes is simply not reflective of the more comprehensive outcomes an education system should produce.

These problems derive from having the wrong metrics in place. They are then compounded by support systems that place schools in broad categories based on their scores, and then apply a broad menu of interventions based on that placement. A better support system would identify the specific needs of schools and then mobilize the right resources to address those needs.

But already there is reason to be hopeful, thanks to current trends inspired or driven by recent federal activity:

- In early learning, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant has helped states develop new accountability systems that include more programs, a greater focus on educational practice, and more comprehensive supports.
- In K-12, *No Child Left Behind* waivers administered by the U.S. Department of Education have allowed states to broaden their accountability metrics somewhat, and to account for student growth rather than just proficiency (which may be a better measure of professional practice).

Despite these positive changes, much more is needed. A comprehensive accountability system that draws on the best components of existing early learning and K-12 systems would include the following elements for all publicly-funded education from birth through high school:

- **New Metrics:** A new set of metrics focused on both professional practice and child outcomes, with the balance between those categories potentially varying for children of different ages.

# POLICY CONVERSATIONS

- One critical lesson of early childhood that K–12 leaders are starting to appreciate is the idea that to improve professional practice, it has to be studied directly—because test scores are simply not an adequate proxy. An accountability system that identifies effective professional practices in successful schools—and then measures whether those behaviors actually occur—would be a significant improvement over today’s approach to accountability. Professional practice metrics should look at whether schools are implementing practices that are likely to lead to school success, such as the “Five Essentials for School Improvement” identified by the Chicago Consortium for School Research: (1) A coherent instructional guidance system; (2) Professional capacity; (3) Strong parent-community-school ties; (4) Student-centered learning climate; and (5) Leadership to drive change. These are not the only possible elements of professional practice metrics, but are a helpful starting point for metric development.
- Of course, the purpose of improving professional practice is to improve child outcomes, and those must be measured as well. These measurements must be developmentally appropriate, and should not be limited to high-stakes testing in a handful of grades and subjects. The outcomes parents, educators, and the public want for children are not limited to English language arts and math test scores—so our accountability systems should measure a broader spectrum of outcomes that matter. Importantly, leading researchers have found that high-stakes child assessment is inappropriate prior to third grade, so child outcome metrics for earlier years will need to focus on broader outcomes.
- **New Measurements:** These new metrics will require accountability systems to rely on a different set of measurement tools, including much greater reliance on observational measures. In early learning, observational measures are already an accepted norm. In K–12, some schools use accreditation processes for improvement, and other developed nations have successfully used “inspectorates” to measure school quality. The frequency of observations can be tied to school performance, with the lowest performing schools observed most often.
- **New Performance Tiers:** Existing accountability systems divide schools into performance tiers, and new metrics should help states make more effective use of tiering systems. In early learning, the tiers are often denoted by star levels (with systems ranging from one to four or five stars), and increasingly K–12 systems are based on A-F letter grade. However these systems are titled, they serve an important public information function, and help schools understand what is expected of them. Improved metrics can help solidify the top tier of a system as including schools that deliver outstanding education and produce great results (and the bottom tier as the reverse); creating meaningful distinctions in the middle tiers will undoubtedly take some time.
- **New Supports for Professional Practice:** Currently performance tiers are often used to determine consequences for schools, but that practice should be reduced by an accountability system that produces richer diagnostic information about schools. Instead of broad-brush supports based on wide performance tiers, support systems should be based on more precise supports reflective of a school’s specifically diagnosed need.



# POLICY CONVERSATIONS

Actually making a system like this work will take new kinds of resources and capacity that simply do not exist in most state systems today. This is particularly true in early learning, where many children do not even have access to early learning, many early learning programs are not designed or funded to focus on educational outcomes, and different early learning programs are subject to completely different kinds of accountability. In both early learning and K-12, however, a redesigned accountability system would do a better job of identifying for policymakers where educational needs exist, and could help focus resource use on addressing those needs effectively.

We know that high quality education makes a huge difference to children of all ages, particularly at-risk children—and a redesigned accountability system should help educators provide the education that children of all ages really need. There is widespread frustration with current systems and how they measure success, allocate resources, and provide support. Redesigned education accountability that combines the best of both the K-12 and early learning systems offers a promising approach to addressing those issues, and the framework proposed here is meant to help inspire new conversations about how best to use accountability systems to improve child outcomes in the years ahead.

## PROPOSED BIRTH TO HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

	<b>Ages 0-3</b>	<b>Ages 3-5</b>	<b>Grades K-2</b>	<b>Grades 3-8</b>	<b>High School</b>
<b>Metrics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mix of metrics balancing child outcomes with professional practice</li> <li>• Child outcomes will vary across age spans</li> <li>• Balance between child outcomes &amp; professional practice will vary across age spans</li> </ul>				
<b>Measurements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measurements of child outcomes that are research-based and age-appropriate</li> <li>• School observations used to measure professional practice</li> </ul>				
<b>Tiers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tiers that communicate to the public the quality of outcomes and practice at a school</li> <li>• The highest tier will be reserved for schools that score highly on both, and the lowest tier for schools that score poorly on both</li> <li>• Over time it will become possible to draw more meaningful distinctions in the middle tiers</li> </ul>				
<b>Supports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports to schools designed to address issues identified by the observation of professional practice</li> </ul>				