

Washington K–12 Accountability for Student Achievement in the Next Decade

A well-designed accountability model for a standards-based school system takes time to develop and is exactly what Washington needs to accompany the great work going on in our schools today. **The model must be complex enough to meet the needs of student, parent, school, district and state accountability**—all of which have different requirements. The system also must be simple or sufficiently focused for the entire educational community and public to have similar understanding of the model's components.

The current accountability system in Washington's K–12 schools is a combination of state accountability under HB 1209 and federal accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act. **The combination of state and federal accountability causes confusion among stakeholders and resentment among educators.** Under the state system, using WASL scores in grades four, seven and ten to measure nearly everything in our system is short-sighted, insufficient and unfair. For example, high schools with grades ten through twelve are evaluated based on an assessment given to students six months after enrolling in the school. The state system has no measures to evaluate the school's contribution to the students' growth during the next two years. Similarly, while WASL scores in grades four, seven and ten may be acceptable evidence that a district is doing a good job, they are inappropriate for junior high schools composed of grades eight and nine.

At the federal level, everything from system goals to the language of the Act itself creates an atmosphere of animosity and negativity in schools. For example, NCLB uses terms like "adequate yearly progress (AYP)," a label that some schools can fail to achieve even though significant gains were made or one that can be achieved without making progress at all. Schools and districts are expected to meet an arbitrary one-size-fits-all goal, which presents some schools and districts with an impossible situation and others with little or no challenge. The instruments used to measure AYP across the country vary in difficulty and skill measurement so that comparisons among states are often inappropriate and misleading. A new accountability model needs to be established that would set Washington apart from those states that are content to use No Child Left Behind requirements as their state accountability measure.

An effective, transparent accountability system requires several elements, including performance targets. An assessment system using the current Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and other appropriate instruments would measure the progress toward the targets. Growth by individual student, class, school and district must be components of the accountability system. The system needs to be incentive driven with appropriate answerability when schools and districts do not meet targeted expected growth.

In creating a new system of fair and reasonable accountability, we must ask several key questions at each level of the system. These include:

- What type of target goals should be established?
- What should the range of the target goals be (i.e., pre-kindergarten through college)?
- How many target goals? What is reasonable to manage and is fair and easily understood by all?
- What evidence will we accept that this student should graduate?
- What evidence will we accept that this teacher is doing a good job?
- What evidence will we accept that this school is doing a good job of educating students?"
- What incentives support and engage continuous improvement and striving for excellence?
- What actions should be taken if individuals, schools and districts do not meet the expected growth?
- How will the accountability system be monitored or evaluated?

A note of caution in establishing target goals—recognize that setting the goals is complex and could be compared to setting goals in the field of medicine. Medical professionals want to eliminate cancer, but to set that goal by a specific timeline without balancing it against resources and possible advances in medical technology is not reasonable. For education, we could set the goal for the graduation rates to move from 70 to 80 percent over a five-year period and then reset the goal in six years. **The target goals must be established based on the best research of teaching and learning, so the goals are realistic.**

An important aspect of accountability is the transparent reporting of progress toward the goals by school, district and the state. Annual reporting through the media and other sources has become common practice during the past decade. A report card on the progress of schools, districts and the state toward target goals will need to be refined and implemented. A second element of transparency may be to establish an expectation that each school will conduct an annual public meeting to review its report card and to share the plan of action for the subsequent year, perhaps as part of their annual I-728 public meeting process. Parents should receive annually an individual student progress report for each child based on the targeted goals. The report must be easy for parents to read and understand.

Another significant aspect of accountability is the concept of each school and district having specific value-added growth goals. Value-added growth goals should be based on the variables of each school and district. These variables have a direct effect on overall student academic performance. The system requires a statistical application that uses the variables to project average value-added growth in student achievement that is fair but, at the same time, challenging for each school and district in the state. Therefore, schools and districts should not be expected to meet an arbitrary one-size-fits-all goal as is now

the case under No Child Left Behind. A value-added system would be challenging and fair to all schools and districts. Can such a system be developed for the WASL? The answer is yes. The state of North Carolina has a similar system.

Incentives, assistance and answerability of schools and districts are essential aspects of providing significant additional resources to the K–12 system. Incentives should encourage teamwork and collaboration. The most successful schools and districts over the past decade have become powerful collaborative learning teams focused on effective learning and teaching strategies. North Carolina has developed a bonus-pay incentive for schools that meet their value-added goals. This encourages team work, because all members of the team get the bonus—principals, teachers and support staff. A few other states have allowed schools to receive additional discretionary money to use for various purposes by the school staff as an incentive award.

Providing appropriate assistance to schools that do not reach their individual value-added goals is essential to maintain a fair system. The first level of additional support must come from the district. In small districts, the Educational Service Districts (ESDs) can provide direct support to schools. Schools may need additional focused resources and direction to reach their goals. Such focus could include a district-support plan that provides a diagnostic and prescriptive report based on the school's data. The district and/or ESD will work with the school to implement the support plan. The district will have the option of bringing in direct assistance from the ESD and/or OSPI for additional support. If after three continuous years a school does not meet its value-added goals, the state—either through the ESD or OSPI—will appoint a team of professionals to conduct an evaluation of the school's lack of progress and require specific changes in curriculum, instructional priorities, resources and monitoring based on an analysis of the school's performance data and a full assessment of the school. The school will be reevaluated on a yearly basis until the goals are reached.

The initial group charged with creating an accountability model will need to explore the many facets of the system, which will make it effective. For example, how should credit be given for substantial growth? How might the model accommodate significant differences in student populations in schools? **How might this model uplift spirits and energize students and staff, rather than demoralize hard-working teachers and administrators?** How might we merge the state and federal systems to maintain compliance while simultaneously providing a fair assessment of learning at all levels? Finally, how might we do all of this while allowing accessibility to families, communities and the taxpayers who pay for our schools?

Whatever system the state decides to establish for incentives, assistance and answerability, it must be transparent, fair and challenging to each school and district. The Washington Association of School Administrators, the Association of Washington School Principals and the Washington State School Directors' Association are ready to assist in the development of the Washington accountability system for the next decade.