

Elements

ELEMENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Overview

A standards-based system of education aligns standards and research-based practices to major elements such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, leadership, and data-driven planning. Part of that system is a comprehensive accountability system that measures progress toward goals for each element in the system to publicly report results, acknowledge successes, and inform decisions about continually improving the system. In *Succeeding with Standards*, Judy Carr and Douglas Harris¹ state that a comprehensive local accountability system:

- provides quality control for technical and ethical issues;
- addresses policy, leadership, and professional development;
- links data about resources, programs and practices, and student results to action planning; and
- engages in ongoing evaluation of the accountability system itself and makes revisions to improve the education system.

Local school and district accountability is about taking responsibility for reporting results and using data as the basis for decisions about continually improving the system. Six elements define a comprehensive standards-based system of local accountability:

- **Standards:** District standards are aligned to state standards that specify both important concepts and skills all students should understand (content standards) and how well they are expected to perform (performance standards). The district evaluates the degree to which local standards are aligned to state standards. The schools and district evaluate the knowledge level of staff, students, parents/legal guardians, and the community about the standards.

- **Instruction:** Lessons target standards. Strategies are research-based. Core instructional strategies in all classrooms and intervention programs are connected and meet the diverse academic needs of students. The school and district evaluate whether there are core instructional strategies throughout the school or district that target grade-appropriate standards and address student needs.
- **Assessment:** A variety of measures provides accurate, useful, timely information to staff, students, and parents/guardians about students' progress toward attaining the standards, at least in language arts and mathematics. The school and district evaluate whether classroom, school, and district assessments are high quality and meet their intended purposes.
- **Leadership:** District and school administrators share leadership, responsibility, and decision-making with other stakeholders, especially teachers. Leadership creates goals and builds commitment to a common vision of excellence for all staff and students. Leaders engage all stakeholders in a system of accountability that exemplifies a results-driven learning organization — planning for continual improvement, ensuring equity, managing and monitoring progress, and sharing results and decisions. The school and district evaluate the effectiveness of leadership to set measurable goals and make meaningful progress toward them.
- **Professional Development:** A variety of opportunities engages staff in personal and team learning about research-based practices to continually improve student learning. Learning from results and team problem solving is part of the process. The school and district evaluate the effectiveness of adult learning strategies in terms of their impact on student learning.
- **Reporting and Using Results:** Results are reported to all stakeholders in a timely way. Data on school and district processes are linked to data on student achievement. Reports are user-friendly and administrators and faculty members interpret the results and make sound decisions at key points during the year about students and instructional programs. The school and district evaluate the effectiveness of data reports and processes to inform decisions about school and district program improvement.

Goals and Indicators

A comprehensive accountability system includes goals and accountability indicators for each major element of the system (described in detail below). The district usually sets goals. Specific progress goals may be set for each school. Individual schools may add school goals linked to a school improvement initiative. Goals have accountability indicators that define the type of data that

will allow the district and schools to decide whether goals were met or meaningful progress was made. Accountability indicators define measurable performance such as:

- increase in the percentage of teachers in a school who implement core instructional practices at a proficient level, measured by a self-assessment and the principal’s observation checklists; and
- increase in the percentage of students achieving at the proficient level on an assessment of reading comprehension.

Douglas Reeves, in *Accountability in Action*,² lists a variety of sample indicators appropriate to the district (“system-wide”) and school (“school-based”) levels. Accountability indicators state the type of data to be reported and may include the specific assessment instrument or process.

This concludes an overview of the elements of a comprehensive system of accountability. Next, each of the six elements is discussed in-depth in terms of its definition, purpose, required features, and sample accountability indicators.

Element 1: Standards

The first step in a local standards-based education system is establishing and implementing content standards aligned to state standards. Merely distributing a list of standards to teachers does not ensure understanding and commitment. Strong district and school leadership and ongoing professional development are needed for teachers to understand the standards, select a starting point, design standards-based lessons, and improve and expand over time.

The district sets measurable goals regarding implementing standards-based education and builds capacity and commitment to reach the goals. The district designs a strong accountability system that encourages implementation of actions to reach the goals. The degree to which standards are actually implemented in the school and district is publicly reported. Teams frequently analyze data about implementation and impact on student achievement to learn what was successful and what needs improvement.

Definition

Content standards specify the concepts and skills a student is expected to learn. California has developed content standards that reflect year-end expectations at grades K-8 and for courses in high school.

Performance levels identify and describe a range of achievement. The performance standard is the expected, rigorous performance level. In California's system, the Proficient level designates the standard. Some districts use the label, "Meets the Standard." Performance levels have labels, descriptors, and, where appropriate, exemplars of student work. Criteria specify in concrete terms what the performance levels are for each assessment. Score ranges such as percent correct for multi-item tests or scoring guides for performance tasks are common means of specifying performance levels for a particular assessment instrument.

Special Education: Should special education students be expected to master the same content standards as students in the regular program? All students are expected to be part of a standards-based accountability system with challenging expectations, but a very limited number of students may need to have differential standards.

For special education students with severe disabilities who are enrolled in a "life skills" program, appropriate content standards might be the objectives stated in each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

For special education students enrolled in academic courses, the content standards might be those appropriate for the grade level of instruction and stated in the IEP. For example, a sixth-grade special education student may be instructed and assessed on third-grade reading standards and fourth-grade mathematics standards. The student might be expected to reach proficiency as indicated by district assessments with appropriate accommodations for disabilities.

English Learner Students: California adopted the English Language Development Standards (ELD) for English learners. The ELD standards blend content standards and performance levels to build a progressive foundation of "content expectations" from Beginning to Advanced proficiency levels. ELD instruction is intended to build English learners' literacy and fluency skills so they can comprehend instruction on ELA standards as well as standards in other core subject areas.

The relationship between ELD and ELA standards is evident in *A Map for Teaching and Assessing California's English Language Development and English*

*Language Arts Standards for English Learners.*³ This map places clusters of related ELD and ELA standards side-by-side. In some instances, the Advanced ELD standard is exactly the same wording as an ELA standard.

It was mentioned above that the ELD standards are a blend of content and performance — what English learners should know and be able to do at each developmental level. Content is described at the Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced levels. The district accountability system monitors progress of English learners on ELD standards. Some districts expect English learners to progress one level for every year in the district (a five-year model for students entering the district at the Beginning level).

Purpose

Content standards delineate what all teachers are expected to teach all students. Content standards bring unity to a prior condition where teachers in different classrooms but at the same grade level addressed very different curricula.

Content standards can help classrooms, schools, and districts “raise the bar” where prior instruction targeted content below grade-level standards. Implementing rigorous state standards has led to a more demanding curriculum and higher expectations for all students. This improvement is the result of professional development. Accountability holds teachers responsible to implement what was learned in professional development sessions.

Quoting Hayes Mizell, “When teachers take action by using standards to focus on improving their performance and that of their students, they shift the focus of standards from testing to learning, from accountability to responsibility, and from obligation to opportunity.”⁴

Recent textbook adoptions in California organize content by grade-level standards. Without curriculum textbooks explicitly aligned to standards, a school or district must reorganize materials to reference the content standards. Ample opportunity to teach and learn the standards may mean pruning content and practices.

Performance levels can be used to:

- monitor student progress;
- assign students far below proficiency (at risk of retention) to interventions that have the potential to accelerate the student to the proficient level;

- compare students to performance standards rather than to each other or an abstract norm group, and establish a foundation to build consistency and accuracy across teachers in the district’s grading system; and
- analyze summary student achievement data for the school and district to evaluate program effectiveness.

Required Features

The state requires that local district content standards be aligned to state standards in breadth and rigor. Districts may adopt the state standards or develop their own, as long as adequate alignment is maintained.

California does not mandate that districts establish local performance standards. Federal Title I requires participating districts to establish at least three performance levels aligned with advanced, proficient, and below proficient achievement. California established the following performance levels: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Below Basic, and Far Below Basic. Ranges of percent correct score define performance levels on the California Standards Test (the augmented SAT-9). Performance levels were established and reported for language arts in 2001 and are planned for mathematics in 2002.

Accountability Indicators

It is not enough to just state that content standards and performance levels have been established. What evidence exists that all teachers are teaching the curriculum addressed by the standards? What evidence exists that local assessments are aligned to standards, and the district and its schools are basing student and program decisions on performance-level results?

The indicators in the accountability system allow a comparison of actual practice to goals — established standards or research-based practices. The district should have measurable indicators of implementation of content and performance standards to judge progress toward goals and to inform the direction for improvement. Surveys, interview protocols, and observation checklists⁵ are tools for gathering information about implementation.

Two indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure understanding of standards follow:

- the percentage of classrooms with key standards posted in student-friendly language, recorded during the principal’s “walk-throughs” on an observation checklist; and
- the percentage of a sample of students who adequately explain key standards and performance levels during the principal’s walk-throughs.

Element 2: Instruction

The core instructional program consists of common instructional strategies used regularly throughout a school, or at least appropriate grade spans in an elementary school or departments in a secondary school. A common set of core strategies encourages teachers to collaborate and gives students a seamless approach as they advance in grades. Core strategies across schools make education seamless for students who frequently move within a district.

Establishing core strategies does not mean teaching one way to all students all or most of the time. Instructional strategies should be research-based and meet the needs of diverse learners such as English learners and students with learning disabilities. Differentiated instruction offers a variety of ways to learn standards.

Intervention strategies for students who need extra support to reach proficiency are closely aligned with those used in the classrooms. This provides a seamless instructional program and encourages close communication between the regular classroom teacher and intervention teacher.

Districts provide schools with equitable resources and useful research information to support best practices and meet students’ needs. Schools determine the specific classroom core practices and school interventions that best fit local conditions and in which there is adequate unity within a district.

The accountability system includes goals or standards about research-based instructional strategies. The schools and district office each have roles in collecting and analyzing data about the connection between instructional practices in regular classrooms and intervention programs. Summary school and district data are used to improve school programs and district policies and services.

Definition

A school's instructional program can be thought of as an integrated set of strategies addressing three areas:

- **core instructional strategies** implemented in classrooms throughout a school or district, or at least at appropriate grade spans;
- **school intervention strategies** that supplement classroom instruction for students who need extra help to accelerate learning; and
- **home-school strategies** to engage parents/guardians and the community in partnership with the school.

Some students may only need moderate or “strategic” interventions such as small group tutoring a few days each week to reach proficiency. Other students may need intensive interventions such as one-to-one professional tutoring every day.

Schools and the district build strong home-school partnership strategies by respecting parents/guardians as partners and communicating information clearly, encouraging feedback and involvement, and providing parent education services. Research⁶ suggests certain practical actions that all parents/guardians can take to help their children be successful learners, regardless of the parents'/guardians' literacy skills.

Purpose

A school's instructional program can be quite complex in terms of all the curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and specially funded programs (e.g., special education, Title I, GATE). Categorizing the school's program into three major components (core strategies, interventions, parent/community partnerships) can make the accountability process feasible. Each component is assessed in terms of level of implementation. Data analysis starts with an evaluation of progress toward goals set for each component. Next, the components form a “working whole” so their combined impact on student results is evaluated.

The district and schools do not have data about student achievement and then make guesses about how well the program was implemented and what needs improvement. Results data are collected on these school processes and are directly connected to student achievement results to make data-supported decisions. Improving instruction to improve student achievement is the central focus of accountability, so quality of instruction should be assessed well.

Required Features

State or federal mandates do not specify particular practices that must be offered. There are general references in mandates and other documents to research-based practices and standards-based lessons. Certain state and federal programs require or encourage adoption of comprehensive school reform procedures and models.

Accountability Indicators

The accountability system provides tools and processes for schools and the district to measure actual program implementation. Self-assessment and observation checklists and scoring guides can be useful assessment tools when feedback informs decisions about what is working and what needs improvement. Cross-validation methods such as observations by persons external to the school can strengthen the credibility of staff self-ratings. Reporting results for accountability focuses on schoolwide or districtwide practices.

Four indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure implementation of the instructional program follow:

- positive ratings by school leadership teams that the district adequately provided guidance, professional development, and ample standards-based materials;
- increase in the percentage of teachers who implement core instructional practices at a proficient level, based on a teacher self-assessment checklist and corroborated by the principal's observations;
- positive ratings on a checklist by a district team that classrooms practices in a school are aligned with interventions; and
- positive ratings by school leadership teams and a sample of parents about district and school actions regarding partnerships.

Element 3: Assessments

The district accountability system contains a chart of assessment instruments measuring key standards, guidelines to accommodate instruments for students with special needs (e.g., special education, English learners), a schedule for assessing students just after lessons are completed, and a process for communicating and using results. The district instructs teachers how to analyze

data and use results to plan improvements. The district acknowledges and celebrates when schools meet their goals.

School-specific or teacher-specific assessments also might be included in a local accountability system. Some districts combine these measures with district and/or state results into an overall score. Other districts separate levels of assessment and may use the teacher or school assessments as informal feedback to students and practice for the year-end district and state assessments.

Definition

A standards-based assessment measures one or more content standards and yields a performance level. Performance-level scores compare a student to a standard that all students are expected to reach. This is in contrast to a norm-referenced test that compares a student to other students (a norm group or sample of students). A standards-based assessment can have a variety of formats (e.g., multiple-choice items, short constructed responses, complex performance tasks).

The term “performance assessment” is reserved for a test that has one or more complex tasks requiring students to construct responses, rather than select from response options. Performance assessments have scoring guides, also called rubrics. Scoring guides provide specific descriptors of what performance looks like at each achievement level on the assessment.⁷

Exemplars or models of student work at each performance level may accompany the scoring guide. Exemplars help teachers, students, and parents understand the performance level. Exemplars supplement scoring guides to strengthen scoring consistency among raters.

The discussion above is about summative assessments, measuring what students learned at the end of a unit of study or the year. California curriculum frameworks mention that assessment should occur before (entry level), during (formative), and after instruction (summative).

Testing students before instruction helps teachers determine what students already know and tailor lessons accordingly. Also, students who do not have crucial prerequisite concepts and skills may be offered intensive instruction so they will more likely succeed in learning. Bloom⁸ and Marzano et al.⁹ found entry-level assessment to be a very powerful tool.

Bloom also found that formative assessment, sometimes called “corrective feedback” or “checking for understanding,” was a highly effective teaching strategy

when teachers used the feedback to continually adjust their lessons. Proper use of formative assessments can be dramatic, with the average student outperforming 84% of students in classrooms that do not use formative assessments.

Purpose

The primary purpose of an assessment is to collect accurate information about student achievement. Students have diverse learning strengths and styles. Students also have diverse strengths and styles for showing what they have learned. All students are expected to achieve at high levels, but equitable access to learning and accurate assessment necessitate offering alternate pathways to fit diverse student needs.

Districts can provide a variety of ways and multiple opportunities for assessment that are beyond the state's capability. Tomlinson¹⁰ and Silver, Strong, & Perini¹¹ give concrete examples and advice about teaching and assessing students in a diverse classroom.

A local accountability system should not rely only on the state test to serve all local assessment purposes. The teacher, school, and district need assessments with a variety of formats, given frequently, with immediate feedback during the year while there is time to adjust instruction and inform students of their progress.

First, a local accountability system can concentrate on key content standards. Second, alternative types of assessment such as performance assessments can delve deeply into students' understanding and application of the standards. Performance assessments are perfect for standards that address complex and critical thinking and "real world" application (e.g., developing research reports from a variety of sources using multimedia or making insightful conclusions and inferences). Third, local assessments can be more flexible than state tests to accommodate diverse needs of students.

Districtwide assessments can be a valuable source of information about the impact of instructional programs and improvement trends during the year and over several years. They are closely aligned to the key standards, and method of instruction in the district may be able to detect impact of program changes when the state test does not. Some districts base instructional program decisions primarily on local data, and state data that are less diagnostic and reported at the end of the year are used as a complementary source.

Required Features

An assessment system must be technically sound, meeting the professional standards for testing. Technical features that are necessary for any effective and defensible assessment procedures include at least the following:

- **Validity:** the degree to which the test measures the target standards;
- **Reliability:** the error of measurement in terms of random fluctuation in a student's score; or consistency for one teacher across all students or over time on performance tasks, or across raters on a particular performance assessment;
- **Accuracy:** the bias of measurement in terms of a tendency to over- or under-represent a student's true achievement level; and
- **Meaningfulness:** the degree to which teachers and students perceive the test as important; teachers do their best to prepare students for the test and administer it, and students do their best to complete the test.

Accountability Indicators

In a local standards-based accountability system, the district examines the local assessments to ensure that they are high quality. Indicators of quality assessments can be adapted from criteria about validity, reliability (consistency), accuracy/equity, and meaningfulness contained in many resource books (Carr & Artman;¹² Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters;¹³ Stiggins¹⁴).

Two indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure quality of local assessments follow:

- ratings by a review panel on the alignment of district assessments to standards and instruction, accommodations and alternatives for equity, and the scoring process.
- feedback from surveys and interviews of teachers about the meaningfulness of assessments in terms of informing lesson planning or assigning grades.

Element 4: Leadership

A school district provides strong leadership to its member schools, guiding and supporting a school improvement process. The district establishes a management style and system that encourages shared leadership. District administrators share

leadership with schools; school principals share leadership with staff. Empowerment to make decisions is coupled with responsibility to continuously learn and improve. Leaders build a culture of a learning organization.

Culture is about attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are widespread in a community or organization and institutionalized through informal and formal structures and processes. The culture of a learning organization is the foundation of any improvement initiative. In schools and districts that exemplify a learning community, all stakeholders are passionate about learning from results and working as a team to help all students meet challenging standards.

Tools such as scoring guides (rubrics) or survey checklists can be used to assess the effectiveness of leaders to build and sustain a school and district culture for accountability and improvement (e.g., Bernhardt¹⁵; Carr & Artman¹⁶; Costa & Kallick¹⁷). Self-assessments might be used once a year to monitor progress toward a goal (e.g., from Partial to Proficient on a scoring guide) and plan improvements.

Definition

Leadership is about building a common vision that inspires people to excel, fostering a genuine feeling of responsibility for all students. Leaders empower all stakeholders to be responsible participants in the accountability system. They follow through by managing resource allocations, staff support services, program implementation, database updates and reports, and data-based decision-making. The focus here is on the role of the “accountability leader” in terms of:

- planning the time and structures for analyzing results;
- establishing systematic, frequent processes for using assessment results to evaluate progress toward goals;
- building staff capacity to implement accountability processes; and
- managing and refining implementation of the system.

Purpose

Decision-making in the local accountability system depends on the management style in the district and school. Leadership begins and sustains change. Accountability is about ownership of decisions and how they impact student results. Levels and areas of responsibility are defined in the district’s accountability system.

District and school leaders foster the culture of a learning organization where results, and decisions based on results, are a shared responsibility throughout the district. District and school leaders manage time to continually engage in accountability practices. Leaders use professional development for problem solving and team learning that address the challenges identified in the results. Leaders foster a culture and management structure for doing, reviewing, and revising — not just doing.

Required Features

State and federal mandates do not require particular forms of leadership. However, California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) lists sanctions that can be invoked when schools fail to meet API growth targets, including reassignment of certificated staff and principals. There are state standards (California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders) for education leaders, and some districts include accountability indicators in administrators' annual performance evaluations and periodic supervisory consultations.

Accountability Indicators

There is an explicit statement about the role, functions, and characteristics of a district and school leader in the accountability system. The accountability system links leadership to the five other elements in the system because the leaders have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, monitoring, and revising each element. The district accountability system also includes an examination of policies that support or hinder stability of leadership to sustain school improvement initiatives.

Three indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure leadership are adapted from different sources:

- the percentage of supervised staff giving satisfactory ratings to district/ school leaders in five areas derived from research,¹⁸ using a scoring guide or checklist:
 - develop a shared vision that encourages common implementation;
 - determine clear priorities focusing on student achievement and high-quality education;
 - promote continuous professional learning;

- provide a strong accountability system where leadership and responsibility are distributed; and
- organize structures that promote a community of learners;
- the percentage of supervised staff rating district/school leaders at least at the fourth of five performance levels (“Experienced Administrator”) on six standards from the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders:¹⁹
 - facilitating a shared vision of learning;
 - nurturing a culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
 - ensuring efficient and effective management of the organization and its resources;
 - collaborating with families and community members;
 - modeling a code of ethics and developing professional leadership capacity; and
 - understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context; and
- the percentage of staff rating the district or school leadership in the “Standards-Based Ideal” range on relevant items from *The Self-Study Guide for Standards Implementation*.²⁰

Element 5: Professional Development

Professional development helps teachers continue learning their craft. It is not restricted to teachers learning new instructional strategies. It includes learning opportunities for school and district administrators. Professional development can be structured, frequent, regular time for analysis of problems, exploration of solutions, and learning to effectively implement the solutions.

Definition

Professional development involves personal and team learning. As professionals, the administrator and teacher spend their careers improving their knowledge and skills. Professional development is at the engine of a learning organization.

Characteristics of effective professional development overlap characteristics of local accountability; namely, exploring problems and solutions, learning new strategies, and learning from results. Both professional development and accountability involve a careful analysis of current practice and impact on student learning. Accountability stresses making judgments about effectiveness and decisions about the next course of action. Professional development focuses on learning from results and practicing the indicated course of action.

Literature on professional development offers characteristics such as duration, intensive content focus, active learning, collective participation in planning and facilitation, and coherence among sessions and with policies.²¹ Teacher learning is effective when teachers can concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in the specific classroom contexts; they have sustained opportunities to study and experiment with new strategies and receive helpful feedback; and they collaborate with professional peers, both within and outside of their schools.²²

The California State Board of Education has adopted the California Standards for the Teaching Profession and Designs for Learning: A Framework for High Quality Professional Development.²³ District practices can be compared to these standards as part of the accountability process. Some districts, such as Elk Grove Unified School District, require presenters to explicitly identify standards to be covered in a workshop.

Purpose

Professional development is the primary means of learning innovations in standards-based curriculum, instructional strategies, and lesson planning, managing, analyzing data, using results, and planning action for improvement.

Professional development is the response to the accountability process that determines a need to improve. Professional development, done effectively, ensures that results have improved significantly by the next accountability review process. It is paramount that the accountability process includes an evaluation of the quality of professional development.

Required Features

Districts are not required to adopt the state standards regarding professional development. However, many districts use the state standards in planning and evaluating the district's professional development activities.

Accountability Indicators

Scoring guides or checklists in a local accountability system can be developed from literature that identifies the characteristics of effective professional development. The assessment instruments should allow a comparison of actual practice with California's standards for professional development. Criteria for indicators and assessment tools could draw from a variety of books and articles on research-based professional development, such as materials published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (www.ascd.org/).

Three indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure professional development are adapted from different sources:

- the percentage of teachers who give at least satisfactory ratings on important characteristics of professional development in four areas:
 - opportunities for individual and team learning;
 - practical application to the classroom;
 - thematic connection among a series of sessions; and
 - follow-up support services (e.g., coaching in classrooms);
- the percentage of workshop participants who consistently apply professional development concepts and skills at their work sites (district office, school, classroom); and
- the percentage of teachers who give at least satisfactory ratings on a checklist (from CDE's Standards for the Teaching Profession).

Element 6: Reporting and Using Results

Learning communities review data to see if improvement is occurring, find evidence of effectiveness, and discover areas that need further improvement. School and district results are communicated in a variety of ways to stakeholders, encouraging everyone to participate in celebrating success and planning improvements. The accountability system has a plan for reporting and using results, and a process for evaluating implementation to discover how this element itself can be improved.

Definition

There are two basic types of reports that focus on student results: individual test data and group summaries. First, test information about an individual student is reported for feedback to the teacher, student, and parent or guardian. Feedback allows these individuals to recognize what has been learned and to plan the next step in the student's education. Detailed diagnostic information helps the teacher tailor lessons to individual student needs. Test data are reported to make decisions about promotion, retention, or special instructional programs for individual students.

Second, group test results are reported to teams, committees, funding sources, and the public as evidence of impact on student learning. Group results in a standards-based system typically are in the form of percentage of students at performance levels. Results are plotted over time to indicate progress.

Data reports should be user-friendly, presenting important data in a structure that allows readers to easily understand and make instructional decisions about individual or groups of students. The district might develop a user-friendly database for access by principals and teachers so they can pose their own questions and seek answers. School staff might access a database residing on a school computer, the district's central computer, or an Internet site such as that provided by some education software companies and county offices of education.

The report card is a special report for individual students and their parents/guardians, not the general public. It should communicate summary results to students and their parents/guardians clearly and consistently and truly reflect achievement of district standards. Districts that have developed "standards-based" report cards have taken a variety of approaches. For instance, some report performance levels for many or all of the state standards, while others report performance levels for the "big idea" standards such as reading comprehension and just list the specific standards underneath for finer description of the area assessed.

Using results involves team learning at the individual, school, and district levels. Results that show meaningful improvement (goals reached) are acknowledged and celebrated publicly. Results that indicate a need for improvement lead to planning action. Leadership must schedule frequent times for reviewing results and making decisions. The district must provide ample, ongoing professional development and support services on analyzing data and using results to make sound decisions.

Purpose

The primary purpose of a local accountability system is the use of results to make informed, rational decisions about the best direction to improve teaching and learning. State results can be used once at the end of the year to make individual student and group or program decisions. Local results can be used at critical times during the year, such as quarters or trimesters, to monitor progress in student achievement and program implementation, and make adjustments as necessary. Continual refinement of instructional practices during the year is a rational approach to preparing students to understand the standards that will be measured by the state test at the end of the year.

The secondary purpose of a local accountability system is to report results publicly in a clear format at key times. Local assessments can yield highly accurate, informative results about local instructional initiatives or particular students or groups in a timely manner. Local assessments can be more sensitive than the state test to changes in the instructional program, perhaps showing greater gains than the state test. Data reports might emphasize the school's focus for improvement or key district standards assessed in a variety of ways. Confidence in reported data increases when local and state results show the same trends.

Required Features

IASA/Title I requires reporting the percentage of all students and various student groups at and above the performance standard of proficiency in reading, language, and mathematics. California posts required school reports on its Web site. Districts are responsible for submitting demographic data about students to the state or testing company so that test results can be disaggregated as required by federal and state legislation. Schools are also required to produce an annual School Accountability Report Card (SARC) for public dissemination to parents/guardians and the community according to prescribed data elements.

Accountability Indicators

One set of indicators addresses how well the planned process of reporting and using results was actually implemented. The purpose of using results is to guide decisions about ways to improve instruction and thereby improve student results. To determine if this purpose was accomplished, results about implementing an accountability process must be linked to the outcome of improvements in student achievement.

This leads to the second set of indicators that address the impact of the accountability process on student achievement. The ultimate proof that programs and processes are working is meaningful gains in student achievement.

District and school staff must examine the pattern of results for each of the six elements in the system, and consider their interdependence. Perhaps results were not used effectively because professional development on data analysis was missing or leaders did not allow adequate time for the process.

Two indicators that might be used in an accountability system to measure the “reporting and using results” address the district level:

- ratings by school leadership teams (using a scoring guide or checklist) that indicate district guidance, management, and support for reporting and using results at the school level; and
- the percentage of schools in the district making meaningful improvement, or maintaining high achievement levels, within both the local and state assessment systems.

Endnotes

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