

Local Accountability

A state accountability system is necessary but likely not sufficient to drive continual improvement in schools within a district. The district and each school must have a local system of accountability that builds internal responsibility and empowerment to continually explore the best practices that will help all students reach high standards. The local accountability system incorporates several purposes and types of decisions that define individual and collective responsibilities, and nurture individual and team learning for both adults and children.

Benefits of Local Accountability

A local accountability system is not bound by the tight constraints of the high-stakes, large-scale state system. Student assessment can be more frequent, more flexible, and combine a variety of measures in the local system. The primary focus of a local accountability system is to foster continual district and school improvement that impacts valued learning for all students.

The state tests are multiple-choice format (except for writing in grades four and seven). Limited resources and the need to establish adequate validity and reliability restrict methods of state assessment. Multiple-choice tests are not the best way to measure higher-order critical thinking skills or more authentic application (e.g., multimedia research reports with performance presentations or debate skills). Districts may avoid the high-stakes assessment limitations in a local system.

DISTRICT-LEVEL BENEFITS

Districts have the opportunity to select local performance assessments that help students master the state standards. The local assessment system can offer flexibility in timing and administration to strengthen accuracy of results. These local performance assessments should target the most highly valued content standards, skills that are not well suited to measurement by multiple-choice items, or standards most in need of improvement. The local accountability system should combine results from local assessments of particular standards with state tests.

A local accountability system can benefit a district in a variety of ways, such as the flexibility to:

- set goals for staff and student performance beyond state goals;
- expand goals to address district interest in particular student groups, programs, and processes;

- create local accountability indicators that are varied and sensitive to local conditions, either forming a composite index or a profile of separate data sources; and
- build a learning community with the capacity to evaluate district effectiveness based on results, and commitment to continually improve through co-ownership of decisions and student results.

SCHOOL-LEVEL BENEFITS

The literature on schools that are continually improving points to a common characteristic of data-driven decision making: students are frequently assessed, and school teams frequently review results and refine school practices throughout the year. Struggling students are identified early, instructional services are changed or added, and students' progress is monitored to see if the combination of instruction in classrooms and school interventions are helping to accelerate their learning.

A local accountability system can benefit a school in a variety of ways such as the flexibility to:

- set goals that are more frequent or rigorous than the district's or state's student achievement targets, or directly assess local curricular, instructional, and assessment improvement initiatives;
- expand goals and accountability indicators to target student groups and programs of specific interest to the school; and
- build a learning community with the capacity and will to evaluate school effectiveness based on results and to continually explore ways to improve teaching and learning.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BENEFITS

Accountability does not stop at the school team level. In continually improving schools, each certificated and classified staff member knows he or she is an integral part of the education system. Each person is a respected stakeholder with opportunities to influence the decision-making process and take a leadership role in a variety of ways. Local assessments provide necessary information at crucial periods throughout the year to make sound judgments about how to refine teaching strategies to meet students' needs.

Each teacher has primary responsibility for students in his or her classroom and secondary responsibility for all students in the school and district. Each teacher

understands that individual effectiveness is interdependent on schoolwide and districtwide effectiveness to educate all students. Educating a student to pass the High School Exit Exam and meet other long-range, challenging goals starts in kindergarten and spirals upward through all grades and teachers.

A local accountability system can benefit a teacher in a variety of ways such as the empowerment to:

- use detailed, diagnostic information provided by classroom, school and district assessments throughout the school year to guide decisions about students at risk of retention and needing interventions;
- monitor each student's progress toward year-end goals and give frequent, timely feedback to students and their parents/guardians;
- teach and engage students to monitor personal progress and take responsibility in setting learning goals; and
- evaluate personal effectiveness by frequently using data to decide what is working for all students and which students are not progressing toward challenging goals, and then exploring ways to improve and personalize instruction to meet each student's specific needs and interests.

Individual and System Decisions

The local accountability system provides individual student data to make decisions about individual students and the system of education within the school and district. Up-to-date results are available to make decisions about individual students and the system at critical periods during the school year.

Individual Student Accountability: California's Pupil Promotion/Retention (PPR) legislation and High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) require schools to make program decisions about individual students. Teachers, schools, and the district are responsible to offer effective classroom instruction targeting grade-level standards and swift interventions for students who need extra support. Districts are responsible for implementing a PPR policy that uses accurate data, early identification, and offers effective interventions so retention need not become a consideration, but effectively ends social promotion. The district is responsible for an articulated instructional program that prepares students to pass the CAHSEE.

System Accountability: School and district teams review grouped student data to guide decisions about the system of education — what is working effectively and what needs to be improved. Data are examined to identify where the system can be improved, not to blame individuals. System accountability is about team

learning and system thinking. Each person in the system takes personal responsibility. However, it takes a team to educate each student from kindergarten through twelfth grade with the requisite knowledge and skills to enter postsecondary education or the world of work.

External and Internal Accountability

EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

External accountability emanates from outside — the federal and state systems hold districts and schools accountable for student results, and the district system holds schools accountable. California’s accountability system publicly reports student achievement data, sets API growth targets for schools, and identifies schools for rewards or interventions. A district may set additional local goals for school improvement.

The state’s external accountability system is meant to raise the bar in schools and districts that have not had high expectations of students or offered high-quality instruction. Districts have reacted in one of two ways to public reporting of results and the threat of interventions. One unfortunate reaction is to narrow the curriculum and instructional methods. Preparation for multiple-choice testing is overemphasized. Rapid answers to factual questions and brief reading passages are favored over constructing reasoned responses, applying knowledge and skills to projects, conducting experiments, and reading and responding to full pieces of literature. In short, “one-size-fits-all” curriculum and instruction is endorsed to raise test scores.

A second and more desirable reaction is to use the state standards and assessment system as the organizer for standards-based schools and classrooms. In this approach, the curriculum is organized to target key content standards in the school and district, and instruction in each classroom is differentiated and personalized to challenge and peak the interest of students at different levels of mastery. A variety of instructional strategies addresses the diversity of learning styles and interests so that all students reach a common standard of proficiency on a core set of rigorous content standards.

INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Internal accountability emanates from within the organization. The district takes responsibility and reflects on its policies and practices to guide and support schools. The school takes responsibility and reflects on its practices to help all

students achieve high standards. Internal accountability is a form of self-reflection. Power is located within the staff for designing goals, monitoring progress, reporting results, recognizing success, and deciding what and how to improve.

Professional literature points to the school as the unit of change. However, the district has a critical leadership role. Each school is responsible for continually improving schoolwide practices. The district orchestrates change initiatives across the schools. The district leads a district improvement effort by:

- establishing districtwide goals and policies,
- equitably allocating resources,
- promoting high-quality instruction through staff development, and
- ensuring teachers have the skills, data, and time to reflect on student achievement and make informed decisions about individual and school practices.

The district guides and supports each school to implement improvements. The district provides stable, strong leadership with a long-range plan for improving each school. The district sets expectations for all schools to improve student achievement. The district empowers schools to make meaningful program decisions about ways to reach the districts' goals and a common vision of excellence. This empowerment process solidifies school commitment and professional passion to improve. Schools establish an internal accountability system within the framework of the district's external accountability system.

The district engages in internal accountability when district teams reflect on feedback about how district policies and practices helped or hindered schools to provide quality instruction for all students and sustained improvement initiatives. The district models internal accountability for schools.

BLENDING EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

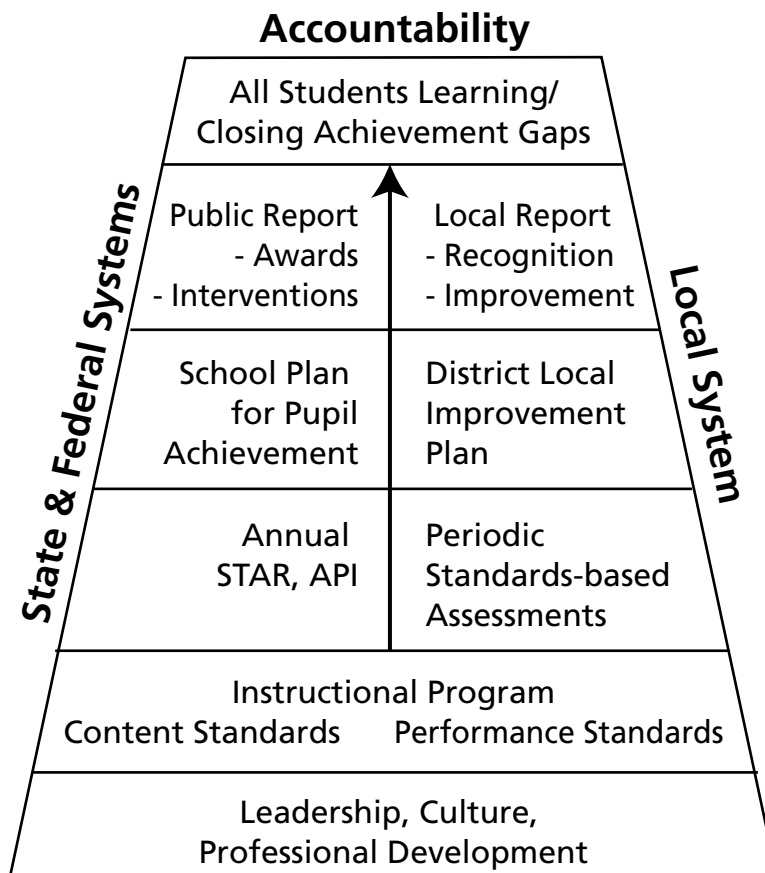
The key to successful integration of external and internal accountability is district alignment of the local system to the state system. That is, the local system must be responsive to the state system but go deeper on a more frequent cycle of inquiry and decision-making. The local system can go beyond the boundaries of the state system by offering:

- co-leadership between the district and schools on planning and implementing the system of instruction and accountability;
- more flexibility on when and how students are assessed;

- more frequent cycles of evaluation and inquiry about effective strategies;
- assessment of key district and school practices to provide process data;
- capacity to link process data to student outcome data for making data-driven decisions about district and school processes that impact student achievement;
- immediate feedback and frequent cycles of data analysis and decision-making during the school year to adjust processes to improve student learning; and
- a variety of reports that clearly communicate results to different audiences and for different purposes.

Figure 1 illustrates the blend of state and federal accountability with local school and district accountability to form a seamless system of support for student achievement. The goal of both external and internal systems is improving achievement for all students and closing gaps for underachieving students.

**FIGURE 1
BLEND OF FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS**



District and School Roles

District Role

Ideally, the district has an external accountability system in which the state and district hold schools responsible for excellence and an internal accountability system in which the district and each school take responsibility for excellence. There are five areas in which the district strives to excel.

Accountability Indicators. The district establishes measurable goals that are challenging yet achievable. The goals involve all stakeholders to commit to a common vision of excellence. Goals are related to standards and research-based strategies about leadership, professional development, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and program evaluation (reporting and using results). These are process goals. Outcome goals are related to student academic achievement, closing gaps among groups, and continual improvement for all students. Data that indicate progress toward process goals are linked to data that indicate student progress toward outcome goals. Each goal has one or more accountability indicators that define a goal in measurable terms. The district publicly reports the results of accountability indicators to the Board, staff and community.

Equitable Staff Resources. The district sets policies and contractual agreements so that schools with greatest needs have high-quality teachers. Recruitment brings high-quality teachers to the district, various support systems (e.g., mentoring) retain new teachers, and professional development and leadership opportunities expand skills and efficacy of veteran staff. Stability of high-quality staff helps to sustain school and district long-range improvement initiatives. The district and schools are able to keep moving toward goals rather than retracing steps or beginning anew.

Alignment to Standards. The district adopts state board approved textbooks and aligns curriculum, research-based instructional strategies, and assessments. The district provides ample, up-to-date curriculum materials and supplemental materials to staff and students. Core strategies are established in the district and in each school, with ample flexibility to address local needs and interests. The district supports professional development that gives teachers the knowledge and skills to implement the curriculum as intended. The district supports professional development that gives teachers the knowledge and skills to implement the curriculum as intended.

Program and Data Management. The district develops and maintains a student data management system linking state and local assessment data, demographics,

and programs/services. The district and schools continually monitor individual student progress and frequently examine whether any achievement gaps among groups are closing. Data are disaggregated in timely, user-friendly reports, especially for student groups required by the state and Title I. The district quickly responds to school requests for data reports or enables schools to have easy access to perform data inquiries and generate reports. Long-range planning with incremental, short-range steps and formative accountability supports strategic management.

Accountability Process. District and school managers ensure ample time for frequent cycles of accountability as an integral part of managing program improvement. The district develops and implements a variety of ways to:

- communicate student achievement and progress to teachers, students, parents and the community;
- communicate with the local governing board about the achievement status of schools, especially those in state or federal interventions and others in decile ranks one to five; and
- use data to inform decisions about individual students, groups of students, and school programs and district policies and practices.

School Role

The school role in a local accountability process is to:

- establish school goals and indicators aligned with the district and state;
- explore, adopt, and use standards-based curricula and research-based instructional strategies linked to student assessments and professional development;
- monitor student progress, quickly identifying students needing extra support to accelerate their learning and involve homes and community in intervention strategies; and
- review assessment results and make adjustments in curricula, instruction, and assessments to continually refine the educational program.

The principal:

- sets the calendar for the year to ensure frequent time and structures for staff to analyze results and make decisions;
- finds resources and establishes collaboration and coaching opportunities to support staff;

- frequently visits classrooms as follow-up to professional development and for accountability to observe effective implementation of standards-based instruction and provides coaching opportunities; and
- facilitates data analysis and school decision-making processes within and across years to produce informative and useful school reports and comprehensive school plans.

The teacher:

- collaborates with other teachers on curricular, instructional, and assessment priorities;
- engages in personal and team learning to continually grow as a professional in a learning community;
- frequently consults with peers, administrators, and coaches about strategies to meet the needs of students not making expected progress; and
- confers with students and their parents/guardians about academic progress and ways to improve.

Standards-based Accountability

A standards-based accountability system defines roles of responsibility and processes for:

- communicating results to the public;
- acknowledging and celebrating areas of effectiveness; and
- making decisions about areas for improvement.

Data are collected and analyzed about student performance and how district and school practices should be enhanced to maximize student academic achievement of content standards. The combined impact of district and school practices is linked to student results to decide how to improve practice to improve student learning.

The local accountability system includes the state assessment results with local standards-based assessment results to provide rich information for data-based decisions. Local assessments provide quick and frequent data for decisions within and across years. State assessments provide annual data for judging school and district effectiveness, and bolster confidence in local results when there is agreement between local and state results.

Educators in some schools and districts remark that they do not have time to reflect on results because they are too busy implementing. The question is whether they are making progress toward a measurable, clear goal of high-quality education for all students or just maintaining the status quo. Educators in districts and schools making sustained, meaningful improvement ensure time and build capacity as an organization continually learning from results.

In a standards-based accountability system, the district judges and continually improves its actions to guide and support schools in areas such as:

- establishing achievable yet challenging long-range goals with measurable (benchmark) indicators;
- allocating resources and setting policies that match highly skilled teachers to schools with the greatest needs;
- aligning local curriculum, instruction, and assessments to state standards;
- aligning the local accountability system to the state accountability system and concentrating on areas of local concern and value;
- capitalizing on its capability to use performance assessments to measure highest-priority standards and flexibility in accommodating students with diverse needs and interests;
- conducting districtwide professional development on districtwide issues and strongly supporting school-initiated professional development on school needs without switching the focus until goals are reached;
- nurturing a leadership style focused on changing the system rather than blaming individuals; and
- managing data collection, storage, analysis of progress toward standards, and communicating results that allows data-based decision-making at critical times.