



Making the Grade:

Accountability and Assessment
Under No Child Left Behind

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The shift to evidence-based education set in motion by the No Child Left Behind legislation raises the stakes for education technology leaders. It also presents a rare window of opportunity. As the Department of Education's John Bailey puts it, "every program is potentially an education technology program" as long as the case is made adequately about technology's contributions to improved student achievement.

Accountability has been redefined by the provisions of No Child Left Behind. Schools are being required to answer on the basis of results rather than inputs, outcome rather than process. As summarized by the Education Commission of the States, "Holding schools accountable for the performance of all students is a cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Under the new law, this accountability is based on whether or not schools, districts and states are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards the goal of bringing 100 percent of their students at least to academic proficiency by the end of the 2013-14 school year."

Students in all subgroups—including those who are economically disadvantaged, speak only limited English, or have disabilities—must show evidence of progress in reading/language arts and mathematics, as well as other measures such as

graduation rates. (See "NCLB Timelines, Deadlines and Milestones" for more.)

HIGH STAKES: A TIME HONORED TRADITION

Attaching significance to test scores is not new. Throughout the past century, scores on tests have determined which immigrants were admitted as citizens, which citizens could serve in the military, and which young people could attend which universities. What is new is the legislative requirement that schools must meet targeted levels of growth or face serious consequences. These include:

- **School Choice/Transfer:** Students in schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years can transfer to a better-performing school in their district. At the same time, technical assistance must be provided to the underperforming schools.
- **Supplemental Services:** Schools failing to meet AYP for three or more consecutive years must offer students from low-income families supplemental services. According to the U.S. Department of Education, supplemental educational services may include academic assistance such as tutoring, remediation and other educational interventions. They must

NCLB TIMELINES, DEADLINES, MILESTONES

In June, 2002, states submitted their consolidated applications to the US Department of Education, certifying their agreement to the five program goals of NCLB:

GOAL 1: By 2013-2014, all students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.

GOAL 2: All limited English proficient students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.

GOAL 3: By 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers.

GOAL 4: All students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning.

GOAL 5: All students will graduate from high school.

Adequate Yearly Progress

By the end of January, 2003, states must

supply their definition of Adequate Yearly Progress, calculating their starting points, and determining the minimum number of students required to constitute a representative sample. By May, they must begin providing evidence of progress in implementing their plans.

Testing

Starting in 2005-06, states must test all students annually in grades 3-8 in mathematics and reading or language arts. (Since 1994 states have been required to test at least once annually in mathematics and reading/language arts at grade levels 10-12.) By 2007-08, science assessments must be developed and administered not less than one time during grades 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12. The assessments must be aligned to state standards and include the participation of all students, including most students with disabilities and limited English proficiency.

Report Cards

Beginning with the current school year, states receiving Title I funding must prepare

and disseminate annual report cards that, among other items, include:

- Disaggregated achievement information by subgroups (race/ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic level, gender, migrant status, English Language Learners);
- Percentage of students not tested, disaggregated by student groups;
- Most recent two-year trend data in areas where assessments are required;
- Graduation rates for high school students and an elementary school indicator of the state's choice;
- Information about performance of districts meeting AYP requirements, as well as the numbers and names of schools identified for school improvement;
- Teacher qualifications/credentials, including percentage of teachers with emergency credentials and percentage of classes not taught by "highly qualified" teachers, disaggregated by high-poverty compared to low-poverty schools.

be provided outside of the regular school day and must be high quality, research-based and specifically designed to increase student academic achievement.

- **School Takeover:** Schools whose school improvement plans fail to produce acceptable results can see replacement of administrative/instructional staff and ultimately face closure.

Consequences for individual students failing to make adequate progress are not mandated by NCLB but a number of states have, as part of the accountability movement, implemented policies that tie promotion and graduation decisions to performance on state tests.

THE CONTROVERSY

What do the supporters of high-stakes testing see as benefits to this strategy? Among the beliefs are that students and teachers need high-stakes tests to know what is important to learn and to teach. Additionally, teachers need to be held accountable through high-stakes

tests to motivate them to teach better. It is felt that the stakes also motivate students to work harder and learn more. In addition, proponents believe that today's tests can "level the playing field" by focusing attention on all students and offer data that teachers, administrators and parents will use to improve student learning and school curriculum.

Many educational thinkers are convinced, however, that there is a big gap between the theory and the reality. Arguing against NCLB when it was being enacted, Richard Elmore wrote in *Harvard Magazine*: "This is an 'accountability bill' that utterly fails to understand the institutional realities of accountability in states, districts and schools. [The government is] sponsoring the single largest—and the single most damaging—expansion of federal power over the nation's education system."

While most politicians seem to be in the pro-testing camp, there have been some outspoken critics there as well—especially when it comes to judging individual students by their

progress on standardized tests. As the late Senator Paul Wellstone put it, “Making students accountable for test scores works well on a bumper sticker and it allows many politicians to look good by saying that they will not tolerate failure. But it represents a hollow promise. Far from improving education, high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity.”

The issue continues to polarize many in this country. In his April 2002 report, *Staying on Course in Education Reform*, Paul Barton of the Educational Testing Service’s Policy Information Center explains that educators “have a great many concerns about how standardized tests are being used in standards-based reform, often thinking that the tests are being misused [while] the people who stoke the fires that drive the fast-moving testing train dismiss the professionals as trying to avoid being held accountable.”

WHERE’S THE EVIDENCE?

In spite of the doubts, Barton points out, “Testing has taken on an aura of inevitability, and as the testing train gathers speed, few are willing to step in front of it.” But there are people on both sides of the issue attempting to monitor the progress of this train—and gather evidence about the effects it is having. In this era of research-based education, it is only right that we ask the question: What is the evidence that the use of high-stakes testing is improving American education?

Some of the most disturbing evidence against current accountability policy is presented by Audrey Amrein and David Berliner in their article, *High Stakes Testing, Uncertainty and Student Learning*, which reviewed the results from 18 states that attach severe consequences to scores on mandated exams. To determine progress, the researchers avoided using the state tests because such results “are easily manipulated through test-

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PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE: USING DATA TO REACH EVERY CHILD

Does the need to examine data and meet test-based accountability requirements derail efforts to teach higher order thinking and other essential but hard-to-measure skills? The experts at Timber Drive Elementary School in Garner, North Carolina, don’t think it has to. They’ve managed to improve test scores and other measures of student achievement while doing incredible things in the areas of collaborative, integrated technology-enhanced learning.

According to assistant principal Frank Creech, the key is using data to guide instruction. “We’ve been doing this for the last five or six years with disaggregated data from the North Carolina ABC’s of Public Education (our state-wide

[standardized testing]). The flexibility of our team approach enables us to break large classes down into smaller groups, targeting on skills and individual student needs.”

Timber Drive’s principal, Sue King, explains how it works: “Each year, when the state testing data arrives, we hire subs and spend time with teachers, looking at the data, child by child. A team comprised of every professional who works with any child who’s having difficulty confers about patterns we see in the data. We do not focus on remediation; we believe that an invigorating experience of learning is good for every child. There are multiple opportunities for each child to learn a concept. They may learn

it with Steve in the lab, with Nancy in the media center, or in class. We have such abilities to differentiate instruction, to use different modalities and media (like the Big6 and WebQuests) that we provide opportunities for all to grow.”

An example is a writing program that grew out of concern about fourth-graders’ low scores on a state writing assessment. King explains, “We brought in all the specialists (media, technology, administrators, and special ed) and created a cadre of writing coaches. We took the entire fourth grade population and divided them, by ability, among the staff, which resulted in groups of about eight students per staff. We zeroed in on

the needs for each specific group: what is our problem, what do we want to happen, what can we do to get there? The results were incredible, and set us on our path for continuous growth.”

Computer specialist Steve Moore adds, “Our administrators took a risk in allowing us to devote extra resources to building our team. It is a risk that has paid off. Of the 78 elementary schools in our district, Timber Drive is one of 11 that has met both Expected and High Growth standards for five consecutive years. This didn’t happen through remediation. It happened by strengthening learning for all students.”

SHINING THE LIGHT ON WHAT WORKS

In addition to providing data to help individual districts and communities monitor their own progress, standardized assessments also offer the nation an opportunity to draw broader conclusions about the factors that contribute to achievement. A careful reading of five studies highlighting schools and districts with above-average or rapidly-improving standardized test scores indicates that the following approaches can positively impact student performance:

Setting High Expectations of ALL Students

Common to virtually all the high-performing schools and districts was a clear belief on the part of teachers, administrators and community members that students in traditionally underperforming populations could, indeed, succeed at challenging courses and tests. This belief involved increasing participation of minority students in challenging high school academic courses, minimizing the time special education students spend outside of mainstream classrooms, encouraging all elementary grade students to participate in the sorts of activities traditionally reserved for gifted students, and so on.

Gathering Data Frequently and Using it to Focus in On Needs

As part of the high expectations, these schools made “no excuses” for poor test scores on the part of an individual or subgroup; instead, they intervened immediately, looking for a remedy. In order to do this, they checked student progress frequently—often on a weekly basis. As the authors of *Foundations for Success* observed, “One striking characteristic of the case study districts was their effective use

of data to guide instruction and decision-making. . . . In addition to using achievement data as a measure of end-of-year performance, [they] provided early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals and offered them training and support in how to use the data to diagnose achievement problems and devise instructional responses.” These districts focused in on the lowest-performing schools, as well as the lower-performing students, sometimes relocating teachers and resources to help turn a school around.

A Clear and Unified Vision

According to *Foundations for Success*, the large urban districts that performed the best were the ones where the district’s chief executive, the school board and local stakeholders shared a vision and goals that were clearly communicated to individual schools. Although this sort of top-down, district-wide approach was not necessarily attributed to success in the studies focusing on individual schools, these schools did have a shared, campus-wide plan focusing on comprehensive, research-based models of school improvement.

Administrators Who Play an Active Role in Curriculum

Another factor that appeared to play a major role in school success was the involvement level of school and district leaders. In the *eMINTS* and *Expecting Success* studies, principals in high-performing schools collaborated closely with teachers and support staff, taking an active role in instructional planning. In the districts profiled in *Foundations for Success*, the central office played an active role in guiding, supporting and improving instruction at the building level.

Collaboration Between Teachers

In at least two of the studies, productive interaction between teachers was identified as a crucial factor in improving student success. Both *Promising Practices* and *Expecting Success* found that faculty and staff in the schools they studied looked to one other for help and support in a variety of areas. This was encouraged by school administrators through large and small-group meetings, team teaching situations, and the formation of problem-solving teams to address particular needs.

Professional Development

Virtually all of the better-performing schools made high-quality teaching a priority by devoting considerable resources and attention to professional development. Approaches were varied and ongoing, including the use of workshops, peer coaching, grade-level planning periods and release time to allow teachers to observe and study.

Reinforcing Classroom Learning At Home

Several of the researchers cited parental involvement as crucial to student progress. Teachers at the successful schools tend to reach out to parents for information and support when children are having learning difficulties and to provide them with materials to use at home to help their children. Parents and other family members are viewed as an important part of the school community and the learning process.

THE STUDIES

Expecting Success: A Study of Five High Performing, High Poverty School (2002; www.ccsso.org/hps/hpsdisabilities.html)

Focusing on Texas elementary schools with low income levels, a high percentage of special education students participating in testing, and high scores on the state test (TAAS)

Promising Practices: How High-Performing Schools in Texas Get Results (2001; www.just4kids.org/US/US_bestpractices.asp)

Analysis of 17 high-performing, low-income Texas elementary schools with high TAAS test scores and ethnic diversity.

It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap (2001; www.ctredpol.org/improvingpublicschools)

A comparison of numerous studies and reports tracking minority students’ scores nationally on NAEP, SAT and other standardized exams.

Foundations for Success (2002; www.cgcs.org/task-force/achievegap3.html)

The Council of the Great City Schools’ report on three urban districts, in three different states, that did particularly well at raising standardized test scores.

eMINTS Evaluation Report (1999-2002; emints.more.net/evaluation)

A look at Missouri schools participating in a statewide technology-based reform program and the factors leading to their rising scores on tests.

preparation programs, narrow curricula focus, exclusion of certain students, and so forth.” Instead they used four standardized tests with similar domains: the ACT, SAT, NAEP and AP tests. “In all but one analysis,” they conclude, “student learning is indeterminate, remains at the same level it was before the policy was implemented, or actually goes down when high-stakes testing policies are instituted. Because clear evidence for increased student learning is not found, and because there are numerous reports of unintended consequences associated with high-stakes testing policies (increased drop-out rates, teachers’ and schools’ cheating on exams, teachers’ defection from the profession . . .), it is concluded that there is need for debate and transformation of current high-stakes testing policies.”

In *Predictable Casualties*, authors Mary Hatwood Futrell and Iris C. Rotberg of George Washington University cite evidence of the negative consequences of using tests to determine student promotion. They report that in states such as Kentucky and Texas, and countries including China, Ireland, and Kenya, holding students back due to poor test scores has increased the number of young people who drop out before receiving a high school diploma. It would be ironic if, in our zeal to address the achievement goals of NCLB, we actually had a negative impact on another goal—seeing that all students graduate from high school.

Other recent findings are more positive. For example, the Council of the Great City Schools in *Beating the Odds II* examined test scores for 57 major city school systems in 35 states and found encouraging evidence of progress in math and reading for a second year in a row. They gave the national standards and accountability movement credit. “As recently as six years ago, progress in urban education was at a standstill. . . . Among many observers, there was the nagging fear that

the struggle was lost and the effort wasted. What happened, of course, was the standards movement. The public reminded educators—particularly those in cities—why they were in the business in the first place and what they were being held responsible for delivering.”

But even the biggest proponents of testing have warnings to offer. In *Measuring What Matters: Using Assessment and Accountability to Improve Student Learning*, published by the Committee for Economic Development, the authors write, “Our purpose in this policy statement is to show that tests are important and that there are responsible ways to use them. . . . As business leaders we know that we can’t improve what we don’t measure. Tests are vital tools for managing and evaluating efforts to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education.” Dismissing the harshest critics as “a small but vocal anti-testing community,” they do, nevertheless, go on to say that, “While public support for tests remains strong, it could be undermined by unintended negative consequences of new assessment policies.”

COMMON GROUND

A closer look at recent articles and research reports concerning accountability, testing and No Child Left Behind shows a surprising amount of common ground. Whether starting with a hopeful or pessimistic perspective about the basic idea of high-stakes testing, most thinkers seem to agree on the following:

■ **TESTS ARE A MEANS, NOT AN END:** Virtually all of the articles conclude that there is a serious danger in viewing tests as a treatment rather than a measurement tool. The goal of testing should be to gather data that will help educators arrive at solutions. As the Center on Education Policy puts it in *It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement Gap*, “Policymakers are being

irresponsible if they lead citizens to believe that testing and accountability are the primary steps we need to take to raise achievement and close the gap.”

■ **DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING IS VITAL:**

The new requirements for broad collection of information, sophisticated disaggregation and quick turnaround of state assessment data to local districts challenge states to improve the usability of their data systems—many of which are still quite primitive. Similarly, it is vital for districts to have their own technology-based data management tools with which to analyze student progress on state and local assessments. Finally, it is important for teachers and other school personnel to be taught how to use these tools to track information and make informed decisions about curriculum and student learning.

■ **ASSESSMENTS NEED TO BE ALIGNED WITH**

STANDARDS: A number of the reports and articles pointed out that many states still have not aligned their mandated tests to the standards that are supposedly being addressed in their schools. In fact, according the Education Commission of the States’ NCLB Web page, in early 2002 only 15 states had testing programs that met new accountability requirements. Until such alignments occur, test results do not offer much information that can be used to judge or modify education programs and approaches.

■ **TEACH TO THE NEED, NOT TO THE TEST:** Since even the best-aligned tests are inadequate for measuring everything students learn from good teachers and exemplary learning experiences, attempting to raise scores by limiting instruction to items included on mandated tests—also known as “teaching to the test”—could limit education in disastrous ways. Instead, education leaders suggest “teaching to the need” which involves the use of test data and a variety of other measures to identify learning gaps and adjust instruction accordingly.

■ **TESTS AND OTHER MEASUREMENT TOOLS NEED**

ONGOING REVIEW AND IMPROVEMENT: As the authors of *Measuring What Matters* point out, “Assessment and accountability systems are works in progress and must be continuously reviewed and improved.” The goals of building better assessment tools include looking for ways to measure a full range of skills and performance objectives—not just those that are easily measured on multiple-choice tests. In *The Role Of Performance-Based Assessments In Large-Scale Accountability Systems: Lessons Learned From The Inside*, the Council of Chief State School Officers report on statewide efforts to incorporate performance assessments within existing or developing statewide accountability systems. Many educators hope that these efforts will not lose momentum as a way of developing a richer picture of student achievement and progress.

■ **TESTS ALONE SHOULD NOT BE USED TO MAKE IMPORTANT DECISIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL**

STUDENTS: As explained earlier, the use of standardized tests to make promotion and graduation decisions is particularly controversial. As the ETS’s Paul Barton explains, “No testing company or testing expert this author is aware of agrees that this is sound practice or proper use of standardized tests of the kind that are generally in use today.” Instead, most would agree that a wide range of factors must be considered when making such vital decisions about students.

■ **WE NEED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS**

THAT ARE FACING TOUGH ODDS: There seems to be fairly widespread agreement that improving achievement in low-income districts involves addressing a variety of challenges including a shortage of qualified teachers, poor facilities and a lack of advanced rigorous courses. Similarly, a number of the reports talk about the importance of using the data collected through assessments to provide special help to the students who are

struggling the most. Offering assistance of this sort is definitely encouraged by the NCLB legislation but there is a danger that such help might be too little, too late. How far will we go to address NCLB goals such as guaranteeing all students safe facilities and high-quality teachers?

■ **RESOURCES ARE REQUIRED FOR ALL OF THE**

ABOVE: As the authors of *Measuring What Matters* put it, “An educational system built on measuring student achievement can’t be constructed on the cheap.” The costs involved in creating and refining assessment tools, analyzing data and training educators to make use of these data are tremendous. And that’s just the start. In this age of financial insecurity and budget cutbacks, is it possible to move beyond testing for the sake of testing, beyond accountability as a punitive tool that exacerbates the problems of underachieving students and low-income communities?

Paul Barton sums up the challenge as follows: “The standardized test has become the favorite shortcut to raising student achievement, but it could become a shortcut across quicksand. Testing has considerable promise as an important tool in quality education. It would be very unfortunate if its promise sank from the weight of the burden placed on it in the mistaken belief that we can bypass the difficult work of changing the curriculum, developing and securing better instructional materials for the classroom, preparing the teachers, and developing quality indicators for tracking progress.”

LEARNING FROM ASSESSMENT

The accountability provisions of NCLB provide a yearly snapshot of each child’s performance, but the information generated by any single measure is not adequate to inform or shape instruction. If the purpose of assessment is to guide one’s actions on a path toward continual improvement, a flow of reliable information is necessary. This requires frequent assessments and powerful

IT systems that provide trend analysis for individual and subgroup performance.

In *Guiding Principles and Practices for the Design and Development of Effective Distance Education*, Lawrence Ragan formulates a series of principles that capture the role effective assessment can play. He notes, “Assessment should be used for three distinct purposes: 1) as a basis for making modifications while the course is in progress (formative evaluation); 2) as verification that individual students have gained knowledge or skills (certification); and 3) as an indicator of the extent to which the course has effectively met its goals (summative evaluation).”

Assessments need not be events, but can be embedded into daily practice. “Effective assessment complements the desired learning outcomes defined in the course and lesson objectives,” writes Ragan. “Select verbs carefully when writing course objectives [in order to] describe what students will be asked to do with the knowledge or skill in the world outside the classroom.”

Barton agrees with the need to embed assessment into the learning tasks, and sees technology as a great way of doing this. “What we need to do is explore the ways in which testing can support instruction and make the investment necessary to bring such testing online—literally. As we move toward the greater use of computers in delivering instruction, we should build assessment in.”

No Child Left Behind represents enormous challenges and opportunities for students, teachers, parents, school leaders and communities. Accountability may be the foundation, but only when we build upon this foundation will we actualize the promise of improved learning for every child. This is the perfect time to invite every American to pick up the challenge, share dreams and begin working to provide the learning we want for all our children.

See page 8 for additional resources.

MORE RESOURCES FOR MAKING THE GRADE

AASA's Assessment/ Standards Page www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/assessment/index.htm

The American Association of School Administrators has a web page devoted to assessment and standards. It links to most of the studies and articles cited here, as well as many others from such groups as the Center on Education Policy and the American Educational Research Association.

The Nation's Report Card nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

The National Center for Education Statistics offers this site which reports on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and national trends in the area of achievement and accountability.

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education www.ed.gov/offices/OESE

The Department of Education offers information on waivers, links to legislation and Federal Register reports, and a pdf version of *No Child Left Behind: a Desktop Reference*, a 180 page manual on how the program works.

Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation www.ericae.net

The federal Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) hosts a Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, which aims to provide balanced information about assessment and resources to encourage the responsible use of data to improve education.

ETS Research www.ets.org/research/index.html

The Educational Testing Service has a research page that links to dozens of studies on assessment and achievement. In addition to *Staying on Course in Education Reform*, the site features other Paul Barton articles including *Facing the Hard Facts in Education Reform*, which discusses some of the challenges that must be recognized if the nation is to reform its schools.

The Council of Chief State School Officers www.ccsso.org

The CCSSO Web site includes a variety of position statements, news releases and publications, including the two cited in this white paper.

The Committee on Economic Development www.ced.org/projects/educ.htm

Measuring What Matters, published by the CED's Education and Early Learning project, can be found at this site in pdf format, as can two other CED reports—on early education and teacher quality.

Council of the Great City Schools www.cgcs.org

The Council's Urban Education Task Force issues annual reports on test results for schools in nearly 60 urban areas. *Beating the Odds* (2001) and *Beating the Odds II* (2002) provided a city-by-city look at progress and achievement gaps, while *Foundations for Success* took a closer look at several higher-performing urban districts.

PBS: Teaching . . . Testing . . . Learning? www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/testing

The PBS series *Frontline* has created a companion Web site to its special report, "Testing Our Schools," which explored how the intense pressure to raise test scores is affecting the quality of teaching and learning in

the classroom. The site includes articles on the history of testing and the companies that dominate the testing market, as well as an interactive map to provide information on standards and testing in all 50 states.

Education Commission on the States www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=195

The Education Commission on the States provides a comprehensive collection of briefings on NCLB topics such as report cards, assessment tools, and AYP, as well as a database containing frequently-updated reports on what states are doing to meet NCLB requirements.

The National Conference of State Legislatures www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/ConsolPlan.htm

This site links to the plans submitted by the states for NCLB implementation.



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