



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE “FIFTY-FIRST” STATE: Alliance Holds Major Event Focused on Rethinking Accountability to Support College and Career Readiness

On October 16, the Alliance for Excellent Education hosted a major event on a broader vision of accountability to support higher and deeper levels of learning for all students as well as greater flexibility for schools and districts. The event featured the release of two new reports that present a new model of accountability for an imaginary “fifty-first” state and spotlight reforms and innovations that states and districts are already implementing around new accountability models.



In opening the discussion, **Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the National Center for Innovation in Education**, described what he called an “exciting transformation” underway in the United States around the higher standards now adopted in every state. Under these college- and career-ready standards, students must exhibit deeper learning competencies, including the ability to think critically and creatively, communicate in multiple forms, collaborate, and reflect on their own learning. He stressed that students cannot meet the expectations associated with the new standards without a very different teaching and learning process.

Describing the first report released at the event, *Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm*, jointly issued by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) and the Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky, Wilhoit said the primary goal of a new accountability system must be to improve teaching and learning in all schools while providing tools for continuous improvement and a means for identifying and addressing problems that require correction. “It is desirable and it is possible for us to begin to create a new accountability system that can do more than what we’ve done to this point.”

Wilhoit said the accountability system envisioned in report rests on three components: a focus on meaningful learning that is enabled by skilled and committed professionals and supported by

adequate and appropriate resources. He said such a system would produce continuous system improvement—not just test scores—and be reciprocal, with each level of the system taking responsibility for the contributions it must make to serve each child well. It would focus on meaningful learning for college, careers, and citizenship, using more valid and authentic assessments, reported in disaggregated form, and ensure adequate resources were allocated intelligently to meet student needs. Such a system would develop and ensure professional capacity and accountability and use multiple measures. It would focus on system capacity building and shift from a “test-and-rank” approach to an “assess-support-and-improve” model while reflecting ongoing input from students, parents, educators, and communities and providing transparent and accessible information to the public.

In describing a system of assessments to support accountability, Wilhoit stressed the need for a range of assessments, including rich local assessments and state tests designed to validate local results, that are connected to curriculum, instruction, and professional development in a productive teaching and learning system.

Following Wilhoit, **Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford Professor and Faculty Director of SCOPE**, discussed how the accountability system envisioned in the report could be constructed in an imaginary “fifty-first state” by borrowing individual elements from accountability systems already in place in states like Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, and others, as well as countries such as Canada and Australia. One interesting element she described was a digital portfolio of students’ work that would include students’ transcripts, grade-point-averages, short essays, and video clips that could be shared with colleges. She said the digital portfolio was a way of “blending rich information about learning with easily absorbable efficient information about learning.”

Moving from the imaginary fifty-first state to what is actually happening in the fifty U.S. states, **Stephen Bowen, strategic initiative director for innovation at the Council of Chief State School Officers**, and **Carmel Martin, executive vice president for policy at the Center for American Progress**, discussed *Next Generation Accountability Systems: An Overview of Current State Policies and Practices*, a new report authored jointly by their organizations that explores how new approaches to accountability are being pioneered by some states. It finds that states are “actively creating and implementing new ways to advance accountability systems that provide the resources necessary for system improvement while holding all stakeholders accountable for student success” and categorizes current state reform efforts into five broad areas: (1) measuring progress toward college and career readiness; (2) diagnosing and responding to challenges via school-based quality improvement; (3) state systems of support and intervention; (4) resource accountability; and (5) professional accountability.

The report also identifies barriers that states, districts, and schools must address, including transitioning to new assessments, developing richer measures of student and school success, staffing school improvement teams, creating resources accountability systems, and strengthening the teaching profession. It cautions policymakers developing accountability reforms to “give considerable thought to system coherence across all five areas, rather than targeting one area in isolation.”

During a question-and-answer session, Wilhoit, Darling-Hammond, Bowen, and Martin addressed questions from moderator **N. Gerry House, president and chief executive officer of the Institute for Student Achievement**, regarding how to bring to scale accountability innovations in individual states, key barriers to doing so, and how some of the United States's international peers were able to develop advanced accountability systems not just at a state level, but at the country level.

The final component of the event was a panel discussion of school, district, and state education leaders who described their system's unique approach to accountability and the benefits and challenges associated with it. It featured **S. Dallas Dance, superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools**; **Lara Evangelista, principal of Flushing International High School in New York**; **Paul Leather, deputy commissioner of education for the New Hampshire Department of Education**; and **Thomas Saenz, president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund**, who discussed the importance of accountability systems to closing achievement gaps and ensuring that every student has access to an equitable education.

Archived video from the event and links to the two reports are available at <http://all4ed.org/webinar-event/oct-16-2014briefing/>.



ASSESSING THE ASSESSMENTS: Chief State School Officers and Urban School Leaders Announce New Project to Improve Student Assessments

On October 15, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) announced a new partnership to evaluate and improve the quality and quantity of student assessments in U.S. public schools.

“Assessments are a critical part of public education because they help measure how every student is learning and making progress toward the goals we have set,” said **Chris Minnich, CCSSO executive director**. “Yet we as state leaders understand there is always room for improvement. As we transition to new assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards in every state, this is a great opportunity for state leaders to take a look at all assessments and make sure they are of the highest quality and deliver meaningful results.”

As part of the announcement, the two organizations released *Commitments on High-Quality Assessments*, a list of three principles to guide state leaders and district leaders in making sure every assessment administered is of high-quality, part of a coherent system of measures, and meaningful to students, parents, and teachers. The document also outlines steps that CCSSO and CGCS will take to improve assessments and assessment systems at state and local levels, including publishing an easily accessible list of all state assessments, eliminating redundant assessments, and improving the use of assessment results to enhance classroom instruction.

In a [statement](#), the Alliance for Excellent Education applauded the decision to review the full array of tests that students are required to take and urged states and districts to eliminate those that are duplicative or yield little valuable information to school systems. The Alliance also

cautioned that standardized tests, when done well, can inform important educational decisions and said the federal government should continue to require states to administer tests.

“Those who call for a halt to all standardized testing, or a halt to the federal requirement that states administer end-of-year tests, go too far. The answer to too much testing is not no testing,” the statement reads. “State tests allow teachers, parents, and policymakers to know whether schools are working and to make adjustments accordingly so that every child, regardless of zip code, receives an excellent education.”

The Alliance also outlined three principles to guide federal policy on state tests: (1) measure what matters; (2) yield actionable information; and (3) ensure equity.

The CCSSO/CGCS announcement is available at <http://bit.ly/1TXwIO>.



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS IN 2014: Support for Common Core Continues to Grow Among School District Leaders According to New CEP Survey

While the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have drawn opposition in some states, school district leaders continue to believe in them, saying that the CCSS in math and English language arts (ELA) are more rigorous than their state’s previous standards in these subjects and will lead to improved math and ELA skills among students in their districts, according to a new survey by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University. At the same time, district leaders report facing resistance to the standards both from within and outside of their education systems and identify several challenges in implementing the standards.

“It is clear that the political intensity that surrounds the Common Core has made an impact at the school district level,” said **CEP Executive Director Maria Ferguson**. “The fact that a growing number of district leaders—those on the front lines of implementing the standards—continue to view them as more rigorous than previous standards and more likely to improve student skills despite all the turmoil is an impressive show of support for the standards and what they mean for students.”

According to the report, *Common Core State Standards in 2014: Districts’ Perceptions, Progress, and Challenges*, about 90 percent of school district officials in states that have adopted the CCSS in math and ELA say that the new standards are more rigorous than their state’s previous standards in these subjects. That percentage represents a “notable increase” since 2011, the report points out, when less than 60 percent of district leaders held that opinion. It also finds a sizeable increase in the percentage of district leaders—from roughly 55 percent in 2011 to more than 75 percent in 2014—who believe that the CCSS will lead to improved math and ELA skills among students in their districts. The report attributes the increases to district leaders’ “three additional years of first-hand experience with implementing the CCSS in classrooms and with gaining a deeper understanding of the content of the CCSS.”

When asked about implementation of the new standards, district leaders acknowledge that they do not expect to achieve major implementation milestones until this school year or later. As

shown in the table below, more than 60 percent of districts said they would not adequately prepare teachers to teach the CCSS in math and ELA until School Year (SY) 2014–15 or later. Nearly 80 percent say that will not adopt CCSS-aligned textbooks and other instructional materials until SY 2014–15 or later.

School year in which districts expect to complete key implementation milestones <i>Percentage of respondents, 2014</i>				
	SY 2013-14 or before	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16 or later	Not sure
Implement CCSS-aligned curricula in math in all schools	37%	32%	27%	4%
Implement CCSS-aligned curricula in ELA in all schools	36%	36%	23%	6%
Adequately prepare all principals to be instructional leaders around the CCSS	36%	34%	23%	8%
Adequately prepare all ELA teachers to teach the CCSS	33%	36%	24%	7%
Adequately prepare all math teachers to teach the CCSS	30%	34%	30%	7%
Adopt CCSS-aligned textbooks and other instructional materials*	21%	29%	34%	16%
Have the necessary technological infrastructure to administer CCSS-aligned assessments [†]	32%	29%	26%	14%

“Although states expect to administer CCSS-aligned assessments this school year, it is noteworthy that about half of the districts in CCSS-adopting states have not yet completed key activities related to curriculum and teacher preparation that are likely to affect student performance on assessments,” the report notes. “In other words, many districts do not expect to have the key elements of a fully-aligned system in place before districts and schools are held accountable for student performance.”

Given this finding, it is no surprise that 89 percent of district leaders report facing major or minor challenges in having enough time to implement the CCSS before consequences take effect based on student performance on CCSS-aligned tests. District leaders also report challenges around professional development, curricula, new CCSS-aligned assessments, and resources.

When asked about opposition to the CCSS, 74 percent of school district leaders identify resistance to the CCSS from within the K–12 system as a challenge while 73 percent say the same about resistance from outside of the K–12 system. Resistance has grown since 2011 when only 10 percent of district leaders saw resistance to CCSS from within the K–12 system as a “major” challenge, compared to 25 percent in 2014. Resistance to the CCSS from outside the system has also become more of a major challenge for district leaders, growing from only 5 percent in 2011 to 34 percent in 2014.

Additionally, 62 percent of district leaders report concern about state officials reconsidering the adoption of the CCSS or putting implementation of the CCSS on hold.

To address opposition to the CCSS, 84 percent of district leaders say they are conducting outreach to explain how the CCSS are more rigorous than previous state standards while 76

percent of districts report conducting outreach to explain why student performance may be lower on CCSS-aligned assessments than on previous state math and ELA tests.

Common Core State Standards in 2014: Districts' Perceptions, Progress, and Challenges is available at <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=440>.



LINKED LEARNING: The Educational Approach that California Schools and Districts Are Using to Prepare Students for Success in High School and Beyond

Released earlier this month, two new reports from the Alliance for Excellent Education examine how an educational approach called “Linked Learning” is increasing high school graduation and college-going rates. Linked Learning combines rigorous academics, real-world technical skills, work-based learning, and personalized support to provide students with a relevant high school experience that prepares them for success in college and a career.

The first report, *Linked Learning: Using Learning Time Creatively to Prepare Students for College and Career*, released jointly with the Center for American Progress (CAP), examines how the Los Angeles, Oakland, Porterville, and Sacramento Unified School Districts are lengthening the school day and year and using time before school, after school, and during the summer to provide more learning time for students and teachers.

“The traditional school schedule is often inadequate to provide students with a college- and career-ready education,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance and former governor of West Virginia**. “Approaches such as Linked Learning, however, are blurring the lines between in-school and out-of-school time by integrating strong academics centered on college preparation, demanding career-based learning, and real-world experience, ensuring that high school graduates are better prepared to succeed in the twenty-first century.”

In the report, the Alliance and CAP offer several recommendations for how schools and districts can leverage the potential of Linked Learning–style approaches and increased learning time, including giving schools greater flexibility over their master schedules, common planning time for career and technical education teachers and academic teachers, and modified funding policies that permit and encourage schools to more creatively use time.

The Alliance’s second report, *Beyond High School: Efforts to Improve Postsecondary Transitions Through Linked Learning*, outlines how several California schools and school districts have successfully used Linked Learning to better prepare their high school graduates for success in college—an especially positive development given that two-thirds of the nation’s jobs will require at least some postsecondary education by 2020.

“Linked Learning is helping to plug the leaky education pipeline in California, but one state is not enough,” said Wise. “Every student who is at risk of falling between the cracks deserves the opportunity to be better prepared for life after high school graduation and to have the confidence to take on more challenging academics and careers. Linked Learning can help accomplish that.”

At Dozier-Libby Medical High School (DLMHS) in Antioch, CA, 97 percent students graduated on time in 2012 compared to the state and district averages of 79 percent and 66 percent, respectively. Porterville Unified School District (PUSD) boasted a 72 percent graduation rate for its English learners that same year, 10 points higher than the state average for English learners.

Not only are students graduating from high school, they are graduating better prepared for the job market and are more likely to enter postsecondary education. The Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART) in Clovis, CA, is comprised of 1,400 students from fifteen different area high schools attending career-focused classes, such as professional sciences and global economics. Roughly 80 percent of CART students go on to a four-year program, a two-year program, or a technical school.

Linked Learning has been especially successful in improving educational outcomes for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. For example, at PUSD—where 79 percent of students are Hispanic and 86 percent are low-income—the graduation rate for the Class of 2012 was higher than the state average.

While Linked Learning has recently expanded to Texas and Michigan, the report offers several policy recommendations at the state and federal levels that could help this approach make a broader impact. At the state level, the report emphasizes a need for an increase in the integration of academic and career and technical courses, and a greater focus on the transition between high school and postsecondary education. At the federal level, the report asserts that federal funding from programs such as School Improvement Grants (SIG) should be made available to districts to implement Linked Learning.

Linked Learning: Using Learning Time Creatively to Prepare Students for College and Career is available at <http://ampr.gs/lurgCgf>.

Beyond High School: Efforts to Improve Postsecondary Transitions Through Linked Learning is available online at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/BeyondHS/>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC, and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Ariana Witt; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).