

Appendix B

Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools

Accountability is a policy tool that has extraordinary power to reshape schools

Prevailing accountability pressures marginalize almost every effort not seen as directly and quickly producing higher achievement scores

ESSA doesn't improve the accountability problem enough

School accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. Systems are driven by accountability measures. This is particularly so under “reform” conditions.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the only measures that really counted were achievement test scores. These tests drove school accountability, and what such tests measured became the be-all and end-all of what was attended to by many decision makers. This produced a growing disconnect between the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance and the direction in which many policy makers and school reformers were leading the public.

The disconnect was especially evident in schools serving what often are referred to as “low wealth” families. Such families and those who work in schools serving them have a clear appreciation of barriers to learning and teaching that must be addressed so students can benefit from the teacher’s efforts to teach. These stakeholders stress that, in many schools, major academic improvements are unlikely until the impact of such barriers are reduced effectively.

At the same time, it is evident to anyone who looks that there is no direct accountability for how schools address factors interfering with student success at school. To the contrary, efforts essential for addressing barriers to development and learning often are devalued, further marginalized, and cut when achievement test scores do not reflect an immediate impact.

Thus, rather than building the type of system that can produce improved academic performance, prevailing accountability measures pressured schools to pursue a direct route to improving instruction. The implicit underlying assumption was that students are motivationally ready and able each day to benefit from the teacher’s instruction. The reality, of course, is that in too many schools the *majority* of youngsters do not fit this picture. Students confronted with a host of interfering factors usually are not in a position to benefit even from significant instructional improvements. The result is low test scores and an achievement gap.

As was the case with the No Child Left Behind Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a fragmented vision for a broad range of student and learning supports intended to promote equity of opportunity. As a result, there remains a fundamental disconnect between ESSA and the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance.

Adding a couple of “nonacademic” accountability indicators clearly is not a solution. Doing so will likely contribute to the trend to drive student and learning supports in ways that deemphasize any essential work that is not an accountability indicator. For example, efforts to improve attendance often only round up and bring truants back to school, but do little to help teachers re-engage these students in classroom instruction. This is a recipe for a revolving door.

Logically, well designed, systematic efforts should be directed at addressing interfering factors. However, current accountability pressures override the logic and marginalize almost every effort not seen as directly and quickly leading to higher achievement scores. Ironically, this works against what must be done and against gathering evidence on the impact of directly addressing barriers to learning.

Those calling for “multimetric” accountability capture the essence of the problem of emphasizing only one or a few nonacademic indicators. However, they have yet to face up to developing an accountability framework that effectively accounts for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. If the goal of a school accountability system is to improve schools so that they increasingly enhance equity of opportunity, these factors must be included in a comprehensive manner.

**Needed:
An expanded
framework for
school
accountability**

All this leads to an appreciation of the need for an expanded framework for school accountability – a framework that includes direct measures of achievement and much more. We view this as a move toward what has been called *intelligent accountability*. The following Exhibit highlights such an expanded framework.

As illustrated, there is no intent to deflect from the laser-like focus on meeting high academic standards. Debate will continue about how best to measure academic outcomes, but clearly schools must demonstrate they effectively teach academics.

At the same time, policy must acknowledge that schools also are expected to pursue high standards in promoting positive social and personal functioning, including enhancing civility, teaching safe and healthy behavior, and some form of “character education.” Every school we visit has specific goals related to this facet of student development and learning. Yet, it is evident that there is no systematic evaluation or reporting of the work. As would be expected, then, schools direct few resources and too little attention to these unmeasured concerns. Yet, society wants schools to attend to these matters, and most professionals understand that personal and social functioning are integrally tied to academic performance. From this perspective, it seems self-defeating not to hold schools accountable for improving students’ social and personal functioning.

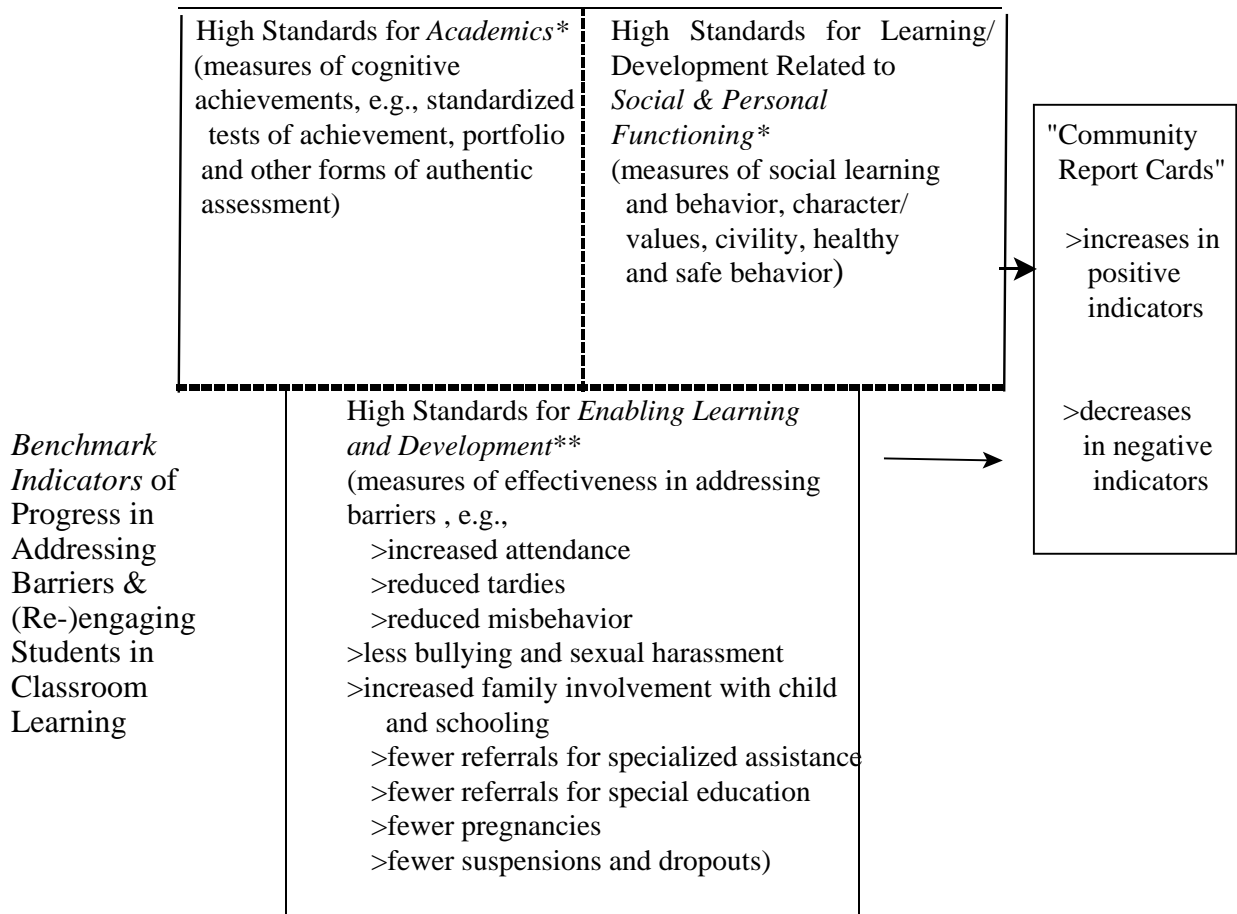
**It is self-defeating
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And, for schools where a large proportion of students are not doing well, it is also self-defeating not to attend to benchmark indicators of progress in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Schools cannot teach children who are not in class. Therefore, increasing attendance always is an expectation (and an important budget consideration). Other basic indicators of school improvement and precursors of enhanced academic performance are reducing tardiness and problem behaviors, lessening suspension and dropout rates, and abating the large number of inappropriate referrals for special education. Given this, the progress of school staff related to such matters should be measured and treated as a significant aspect of school accountability.

Exhibit

Expanding the Framework for School Accountability

*Indicators
of Positive
Learning and
Development*



*Results of interventions for directly facilitating development and learning.

**Results of interventions for addressing barriers to learning and development.

Context matters in holding schools accountable

School outcomes, of course, are influenced by the well-being of the families and the neighborhoods in which they operate. Therefore, performance of any school should be judged within the context of the current status of indicators of community well-being, such as economic, social, and health measures. If those indicators are not improving or are declining, it is patently unfair to ignore these contextual conditions in judging school performance.

Concluding Comments

While the Every Student Succeeds Act recognizes that significant numbers of students require supports to successfully meet challenging state academic standards, the legislation doesn't account for the nature and scope of the necessary supports. With the transition to state and local planning, the opportunity arises for escaping the weaknesses of the federal legislation and the limitations of the various initiatives that mainly continue to emphasize improving coordination and integration of support services and connecting schools with sparse community resources. With a direct focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, the opportunity is to unify student and learning supports and then develop a comprehensive and equitable system.

However, just adding one or two nonacademic indicators to accountability requirements will not help move transformation of student and learning supports forward. The work calls for an expanded accountability framework that focuses on academic instruction, efforts to improve social and personal functioning, and the direct interventions essential for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.