Principles for a State Accountability System
Approved January 23, 2017

For the past two decades, states have held public schools accountable for student learning as solely measured by standardized test scores. Unfortunately, absolute results from standardized tests tend to correlate strongly with family income and parental education. Additionally, the narrow focus on one set of metrics—test scores in two subject areas—has incentivized narrowing the curriculum and teaching-to-the-test.

The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) believes there are richer means of assessing student learning and school quality that provide a more complete, dynamic picture of students and schools than can a single standardized test. We need to re-conceptualize assessment and change a testing model that has limited value in furthering public education.

The new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) seeks to address these shortcomings by encouraging states to expand the measures used. However, even if states were to incorporate multiple measures, the structure of current accountability systems would still come up short—unfairly stigmatizing schools, promoting punishment over capacity-building, and failing to adequately inform stakeholders. Thus, Massachusetts needs to both rethink what is measured under ESSA as well as the process for how the state, districts, and schools work together within a new accountability system. In support of this aim, MCIEA has adopted the following principles for creating a fair and effective accountability system:

1. **Emphasize support rather than punishment.** Information leads to improvement when involved parties act to address gaps. When low performance is met with punishment, it triggers responses like data suppression or quick fixes designed to raise test scores, without necessarily improving student learning. Effective accountability systems use evidence to direct relevant support to schools, building capacity for improvement.

2. **Capture what communities want to know.** Accountability systems are designed not only to inform policymakers, but also to inform community constituencies. Insofar as that is the case, community members should have a role in determining the measures that are most important to know about student learning and school quality.

3. **Empower communities in the improvement of schools.** State education agencies should extend greater responsibility and ownership to districts by working to strengthen local accountability systems. Effective data systems empower local leaders to make decisions that fit the needs of their schools and communities. The state can offer an important resource by providing common guidelines, support, and comprehensive data.

4. **Create a system of reciprocal accountability.** In present accountability systems, schools are responsible for demonstrating responsible use of resources. Yet it is the responsibility of state and local agencies to ensure that resources delivered to schools are sufficient. In a reciprocal accountability system, data should be used not only to measure school performance, but also to measure state and local support for schools.

5. **Use multiple measures to assess and report on school quality.** Multiple measures of school quality, rather than a single standardized test, provides a more robust picture of student achievement, student engagement, and school progress. In order to realize their full potential, these measures must not be reduced to a single composite score, which prevents educators and parents from understanding the nuances of areas in which a school may be doing well and others that may need improvement.

6. **Assess student learning primarily through curriculum-embedded performance assessments.** Students should demonstrate what they know and can do through real-world applications. Curriculum-embedded performance assessments provide teachers and students an "instant snapshot" of how students are progressing that can be used to improve instruction and student learning.

7. **Place the design of performance assessments in the hands of teachers working together collaboratively.** Teachers, rather than external test-making companies, are best equipped to create and validate engaging performance tasks, as well as accurately score student work produced from these tasks. Engaging teachers in the generation of complex performance assessments also builds teacher capacity and ownership of the accountability system.

8. **Establish performance benchmarks for schools based upon the characteristics of a high quality school.** Theoretically, it is possible that all schools are doing good work, even if some are out-performing others. By measuring how schools are performing relative to target thresholds, we can learn more about where to direct attention and assistance. In such a system, we can eliminate leveling and ranking schools relative to each other, which sends a confusing message to the public about school quality and unfairly stigmatizes those at the bottom of distributions.

9. **Place greater weight on growth rather than absolute scores.** Due to the influence of socioeconomic factors like parental education and family income, students begin formal schooling at different starting points. Consequently, absolute scores reflect as much about families and neighborhoods as they do about schools. Thus, while an effective accountability system should continue to track absolute performance, student growth is ultimately a more informative indicator.

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