

# How States Can Hold Schools Accountable

## The Strong Schools Model of Standards-Based Reform

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Center on  
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# Table of Contents

Preface.....	i
Executive Summary .....	iii
Section I: Introduction.....	1
Accountability in Public Education: The Theory and Reality.....	1
State Accountability: A Necessary but not Sufficient Means to School Improvement .....	3
Roadmap for this Paper .....	3
Section II: Necessary Elements of an Effective State Accountability System.....	5
The Basic Mission of an Accountability System.....	5
Reciprocity: The Foundation of an Effective State Accountability System .....	5
The Elements of an Effective Accountability System .....	6
Section III: Overview of Current State Accountability Systems & Recommendations for States..	9
Accountability in Other States.....	9
Comparison of State Approaches and Recommendations for Other States: .....	13
General Summary of Accountability Across States.....	33
Section IV: The Strong Schools Model — A Possible State Accountability System .....	34
Underlying Philosophy of the Proposed Strong Schools Accountability Model .....	34
Roadmap for this Section: .....	35
The Strong Schools Model: A Proposed Framework for a State Accountability System.....	35
Section V: Expanding the Model—Implementation Issues .....	50
The Necessary Conditions of the Strong Schools Model.....	50
Financing Accountability .....	51
The Special Role of Districts and Other Entities.....	52
Potential Roadblocks to the Strong Schools Model.....	54
Concluding Thoughts .....	55
Appendix 1: Detailed Information About The Five Study States.....	57
Accountability Details: Texas.....	58
Accountability Details: North Carolina.....	63
Accountability Details: Kentucky.....	68
Accountability Details: New York.....	74
Accountability Details: California .....	79
Appendix 2: Technical Details of the Strong Schools Model’s Indicators of Performance .....	82
Appendix 3: Technical Details of Recognizing Success in the Strong Schools Model.....	88
Appendix 4: Technical Details Of Providing Assistance in the Strong Schools Model.....	90
Appendix 5: Technical Details of Creating a Safety Net in the Strong Schools Model.....	92
Reference Sources.....	94



## PREFACE

### *Accountability in Washington State:*

In the spring of 1999, the Washington State Legislature passed ESSB5418, which created the outline of a statewide accountability system. The state's 1993 Education Reform Act already committed the state to set standards for student learning, create a statewide exam (the WASL) to assess student progress toward these standards, and develop a system to hold schools and districts accountable for student performance. ESSB5418 offered the specific guidelines for the state's accountability system and created the Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission (AAA Commission) to provide "oversight of the state's educational accountability system."<sup>1</sup>

The AAA Commission—nine members appointed by the Governor with nominations from each party—has been charged with making recommendations for student and school performance targets and setting criteria for identifying schools in need of assistance, interventions, or recognition. In addition, the Commission is expected to make recommendations on the types of assistance, interventions, and recognition that the state education department should make available to qualifying schools.

The Commission's charge is an important and potentially daunting task. Washington's Commission does not face its problems alone, however. Nearly half the states nationwide have already designed or are in the process of developing elements of standards-based educational accountability systems.

The University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education recognized that lessons learned from other states' experiences could be of use to Washington's AAA Commission. In addition, other states attempting to build school accountability could also benefit from an analysis of the challenges and successes of implementing effective accountability systems.

Thus, in the fall of 1999, the author initiated a review of efforts across the country, and specifically in five states, to introduce performance accountability into education reform strategies. This paper is the result of the Center's analysis and serves as an extension to a 1997 publication from the Center, "Toward a K-12 Education Accountability System in Washington State," which provided a general framework for creating a state accountability system. The current research was undertaken with two primary goals:

- To identify lessons learned from other states' experiences with designing and implementing accountability systems and,
- To use these lessons to create a model for an accountability system that a state like Washington could use as a starting point.<sup>2</sup>

To meet these goals, the author conducted a literature review of states' efforts in accountability nationwide. The review included existing academic research and general analysis from *Education Week* and the *Education Commission of the States*. It also included a closer look at the lessons learned in five specific states: Texas, North Carolina, Kentucky, New York, and California.

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<sup>1</sup> ESSB5418: for text see [http://www.leg.wa.gov/pub/billinfo/1999-00/senate/5400-5424/5418-s\\_pl\\_04241999.txt](http://www.leg.wa.gov/pub/billinfo/1999-00/senate/5400-5424/5418-s_pl_04241999.txt).

<sup>2</sup> The recommendations presented in this paper are targeted toward the needs of and current conditions in Washington state. These conclusions and findings may, however, be of interest to leaders in other states.

While five states' experiences represent a relatively small sample, this subset includes many of the states that, by reputation, have been most active to date in developing full accountability systems. Nevertheless, the analysis in this paper is not intended to provide an exhaustive description of all states' experiences with accountability. It is designed, however, to offer Washington state planners and others the benefit of lessons learned by others, and to formulate issues that can spark productive discussion.

**About the Proposed Model:**

This paper's proposed accountability model, described in detail below, merges elements of different state accountability strategies that seem to be working well and fills in some of the remaining gaps with ideas that hold promise. Because each state and its political community are different, the proposed model cannot be the only plausible approach to accountability. The model does, however, offer a promising approach to accountability--one that promotes school improvement via a unique mixture of assistance, incentives, and school autonomy. It departs from the traditional rewards-penalties focus of accountability systems, incorporating strategies intended to build school capacity while ensuring that no student is left to flounder in a school that cannot improve.

**Acknowledgements:**

This paper and research were supported by grants from the Boeing Company and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions, however, are the author's alone and do not reflect the views of its sponsors. The author would like to thank several people for their important contributions to this paper. Paul Hill, Robin Lake, Christine Campbell, Mary Beth Celio, Marguerite Roza, Jim Harvey, and Carla Van Rossum all provided immeasurable assistance, advice, and consultation on this project. In addition, the author would like to thank the state experts interviewed for this report and those who confirmed the details of the five state accountability systems. Their generous offering of time and insights significantly enhanced this paper. The author, however, accepts full responsibility for the content of this paper and any errors contained within it.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ***Introduction***

Accountability is one of the latest buzzwords to sweep through K-12 education. Across the country, states are setting standards of learning for all students, creating assessments to measure progress toward these milestones, and talking about holding schools responsible for academic performance by rewarding successful schools and sanctioning those that fail to meet expectations. Yet, as some observers have noted, the “rhetoric about accountability often exceeds the reality.”<sup>3</sup>

While 48 states use assessments to measure student achievement, only a handful have created a comprehensive system for holding schools and districts responsible for the performance of their students.<sup>4</sup> Creating a comprehensive accountability system is politically and practically difficult. States must develop smart, clear, and politically feasible strategies to implement accountability systems effectively. Anything short of this will relegate the potential power of accountability—ensuring all students have sound learning opportunities—to nothing more than a soundbite.

Accountability need not be another fad dismissed when the next great reform idea emerges. States on the verge of creating an accountability system, like Washington state, can learn from the experiences of their peers and build an effective and enduring accountability system. While a strong accountability system will not transform public education by itself, it is a necessary first step in building an educational system organized around high expectations for all students.

The University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education recognized that states like Washington could learn important lessons about creating and implementing accountability systems from the pioneering experiences of others.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the fall of 1999, the author initiated a review of state accountability plans from across the country, emphasizing five states: Texas, North Carolina, Kentucky, New York, and California.

The Center also sought to weave lessons from other states into a coherent model for a state accountability system. The Strong Schools Accountability Model proposed in this paper is the result.

## ***Necessary Elements Of An Effective State Accountability System***

States’ experiences reveal three principles that underlie any workable accountability system:

- Focus on results. The mission of an accountability system is to assure that all students have access to schools that will help them learn, as evidenced by their ability to meet state standards of achievement. Measurement, rewards, and penalties are not goals, but means. The goal is effective schools and learning for children.
- Clarify goals and roles. The state must be clear about what such a system can do and what it cannot do. A state-run accountability system alone cannot identify all the intangible aspects that make a school “good,” nor can it single-handedly transform public education. Accountability, when implemented thoughtfully, can create the conditions within which

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<sup>3</sup> Jerald, Craig D. and Ulrich Boser, “Taking Stock,” *Education Week, Quality Counts 1999*, January 1999, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Education Week. “Quality Counts ’99: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure,” Vol. XVIII, No. 17, January 11, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The recommendations in this paper are targeted toward the needs of and current conditions in Washington state. These conclusions may also be of interest to leaders in other states.

schools focus on student performance and are supported in their efforts to do so. This is an important first step in transforming our educational system.

- Recognize that accountability is two-way street. Accountability must be seen as a reciprocal relationship—one in which schools, districts, and the state all have important roles and responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> The reciprocal nature of accountability means that a state cannot simply demand performance from its schools and districts, but rather must provide them with resources and freedom of action so they can improve instruction

Based on these principles and the analysis of other states' experiences, this paper identifies seven key elements of an effective accountability system:<sup>7</sup>

- Fair, reliable, relevant, and understandable indicators of school performance;
- Predictable and consistent incentives or consequences for performance;
- Opportunities for schools to build their capacity, ensuring tools and resources for schools that need to improve;
- Flexibility for schools to adapt to help their students learn and meet state standards of performance;
- A safety net, providing functional learning opportunities for students when school improvement is not possible;
- A comprehensive public information campaign that helps schools and the public understand the process; and
- An independent body guiding the system and providing checks and balances on the political oversight of the system.

No state has yet coordinated all seven elements into a coherent accountability system. Some states, however, have come much closer to doing so than others and can offer valuable lessons in how to implement these elements. This paper uses this seven-element framework to present findings and recommendations from other states' experiences and to offer the details of a new model for accountability.

### **Accountability In Other States: Findings And Lessons**

Nationwide, accountability remains a work in progress. Most states struggle with creating clear but fair indicators of school performance. Many are still searching for the right mix of performance incentives to inspire improvement without discouraging those with the toughest problems to solve. States, in general, have also not yet figured out how to build school capacity and create a safety net assuring all students a functioning learning environment. Most are still working on ways to ensure that schools have the necessary freedom of action to make needed changes in staffing, use of time, and teaching methods. And, few states have been able to get out in front of public fears about accountability with a public information campaign that is clear, accessible, and meaningful. Nevertheless, states like Washington can learn important lessons from the struggles and successes of others.

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard F. Elmore, "Accountability in Local School Districts: Learning to Do the Right Things," *Advances in Educational Administration*, Vol. 5, 1997, pp. 59-82. See also, Allen, Lauren and Anne C. Hallet, "Beyond Finger-Pointing and Test Scores," Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> This list is an expansion of the key elements described in the Center's earlier report: Hill, Paul T. and Robin J. Lake. "Toward a K-12 Education Accountability System in Washington State," UW/RAND: Center on Reinventing Public Education, December 1997. A more recent version of the report is available: Hill, Paul T. and Robin J. Lake, *State Standards and School Accountability*, Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy, The Brookings Institution, 2000.



States have tended to rely on a rewards-penalties approach to accountability. This approach presumes that schools will accomplish more, do better, and work faster when there are strong incentives for doing well and strong consequences for falling short of the mark. Some states have created “rewards,” often in the form of financial bonuses, to increase schools’ incentives to perform well. “Penalties,” in the form of interventions like reconstitution and takeover, are threatened to deter poor performance. This approach fails to recognize that some schools may want to respond and improve, but lack the resources or capacity to do so. In these instances, an accountability system must provide more than simply incentives and consequences. It must also provide opportunities for schools to build their know-how to help students improve. Some states are starting to recognize this oversight in the rewards-penalties approach and are making mid-course corrections to remedy it.

*Key Recommendations for Washington and Other States:*

The main body of the paper next delineates a series of recommendations for Washington state and others to consider when implementing each of the seven elements. Ten of these recommendations are listed below. These suggestions, gleaned from lessons learned in other states, are offered as essential foundations for an accountability system that will help schools improve:

- *Keep Measures of School Performance Simple:* Indicators of performance that are clear and easy-to-understand minimize misunderstandings about what is being measured and send strong signals about what matters. Complicated formulas and mathematical indices of performance may attempt to capture the complexities and nuances of education, but no amount of mathematical sophistication can measure many intangible aspects of learning. Instead complicated performance measures can leave schools and the public confused about what is actually being measured.
- *Look for the Patterns in the Numbers:* The most effective indicator will keep clarity as its driving principle, but will offer multiple layers of performance data to attempt to find the patterns in the numbers. The intent of an indicator system is to identify schools that consistently show the need for assistance or intervention or that consistently show the ability to exceed state goals.
- *Use Rewards to Accomplish Multiple Goals:* Typically, rewards are simply distributed to schools. Other schools do not have the opportunity to consistently learn what the recognized schools were able to do differently to inspire such change and success. This is a real missed opportunity in existing accountability systems. Rewards can be an opportunity for successful schools to mentor or link with other schools to share best practices.
- *Be Strategic with Scarce Monetary Resources:* When rewards carry high financial stakes, they represent, in effect, a transfer of funds from schools that need assistance to schools that are already succeeding. With limited resources available for educational improvement in most states, such a transfer can be hard to defend.
- *Stay Focused on the Needs of the Students:* In light of the challenges of school closure or reconstitution, states may be tempted to continue indefinitely forcing assistance into deeply troubled schools. This approach can lead to unlimited delays, dooming children to more months and years in schools that cannot teach them well. States must not lose sight of their first responsibility, which is to meet the needs of students, including those in chronically low-performing schools. An accountability system must have a strategy for helping schools improve and, when necessary, creating functional learning environments for all of its students.
- *Ensure that Assistance is School-Specific:* Building real school capacity requires on-site, school-specific assistance. Every school is different, as are the problems and challenges they face. The assistance and capacity-building they need, therefore, will vary. Providing the

range of assistance that schools require will necessitate a broader variety of assistance providers than any state can offer directly. Accountability systems that do not provide options to tailor assistance to the needs of the school and that do not support a variety of assistance providers able to meet these needs, miss a valuable opportunity to help some of the most dysfunctional schools and may indeed end up wasting money and time by giving schools assistance that does not address their specific challenges.

- *Offer Schools Broad Flexibility:* Schools must be able to make decisions about key inputs like instructional materials, financial resources, and the use of outside consultants or programs, if they are to feel accountable for the performance of their students.
- *Be Bold and Steadfast:* Creating an accountability system that consistently focuses on the needs of students will require making hard decisions about redesigning or transforming some chronically low-performing schools. The system will be under intense pressure at times and will need strong political tenacity and a clear commitment to the principles of accountability to endure and have an impact.
- *Recognize that Public Perception and Educators' Morale Matter:* Accountability systems presented with an adversarial tone and a lack of clarity are more likely to create defensiveness than progress. A thoughtful public information campaign, communicating a clear accountability system with understandable school performance indicators and a mission that focuses on supporting, not punishing, schools is an important key step in building public trust. States that are interested in building school capacity and treating accountability as a reciprocal relationship—one in which the state, districts, and schools work together to help students learn—will need a clear strategy to overcome preconceived beliefs about the intent and goals of accountability systems.
- *Create Checks and Balances on the Politics of Accountability:* An independent guiding body focused solely on accountability should work to minimize political influences so that it can serve as a stable voice and allow the system time to show improvements.

A comprehensive model of a state accountability system based on these principles is described in Sections IV and V of the body of the paper. The Strong Schools Accountability Model is grounded in the belief that accountability will only work when incentives for performance are meaningful and properly balanced and when schools have the capacity to respond to them. The model is built on the seven elements of an effective accountability system and is offered as a starting point for discussing accountability systems that can incorporate strategies to build school capacity while ensuring that no student is left to flounder in a school that cannot improve.

## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

In the decades since *A Nation at Risk* warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in American schools, states and districts across the country have searched for the secret to improving performance.<sup>8</sup> No one has yet found a silver bullet. Many states, however, have identified one essential ingredient: holding schools accountable for student performance.

To be accountable, in the most basic terms, is to be held responsible for something. More specifically, researcher Anthony Bryk notes that a more complete definition of accountability requires answers to the following three questions:<sup>9</sup>

- Who is responsible to whom for what?
- How will evidence be gathered and used to determine if these responsibilities are being met?
- What are the system responses to those who do or do not meet these standards?

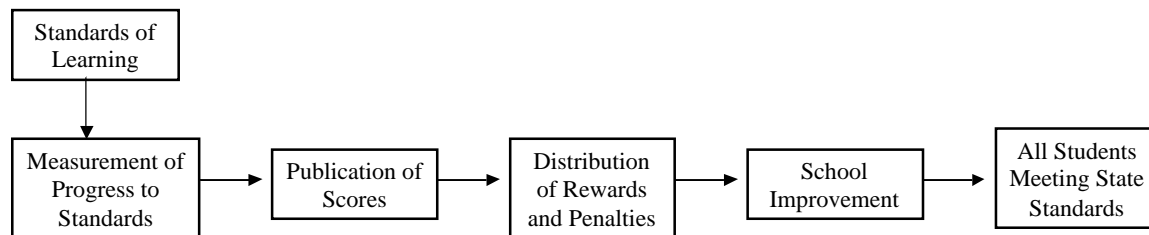
### *Accountability in Public Education: The Theory and Reality*

In the 1990s, states sought to answer these questions by saying: (1) schools (as distinct from parents, or individual teachers, or entire school districts) are responsible for student learning and that the state government is the party to whom schools are accountable; (2) evidence of performance would be gathered by the state via specially constructed achievement tests; and (3) state agencies, including school districts, would respond to school performance by rewarding effective schools and sanctioning or intervening in ineffective ones.

Though these broad answers left much unresolved, they did signal a new focus on results. Historically, schools and districts have been accountable for the inputs of education (i.e., whether the school provided instruction for 180 school days, whether the teachers met basic licensure requirements, whether specific subjects were covered in the curriculum). In contrast, the accountability movement that continues to gain momentum puts the focus on outputs (i.e., whether students are learning to read, write, and understand mathematical principles).

Today, in public education, the term *accountability* has taken on a very specific meaning. It refers to state-driven systems designed to hold schools and districts responsible for supporting and furthering student learning. Such accountability systems typically have followed the theory of action presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Common Theory of Action for State Accountability Systems**



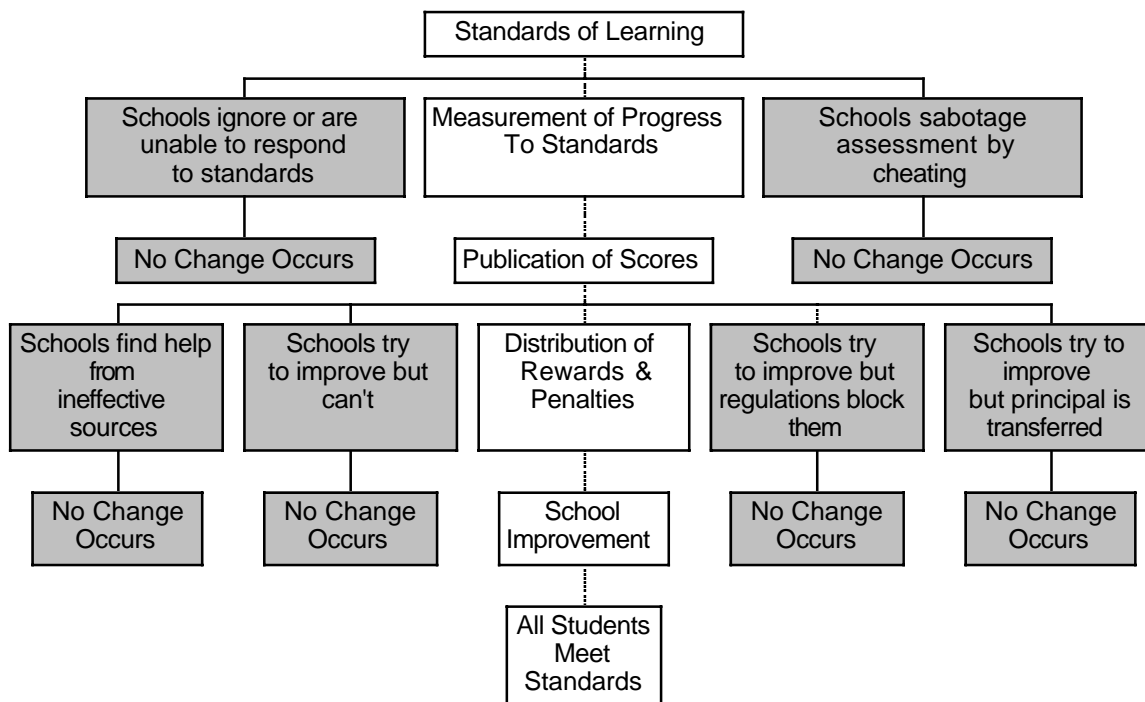
This approach is based on the theory that measurement, publication of scores, and rewards and punishments will inspire schools to accomplish more, do better, and work faster to

<sup>8</sup> National Commission on Excellence in Education, “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” Washington, D.C. : The Commission : [Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O. distributor], 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Bryk, Anthony S. “Observations About the Productive Uses of Assessment to Strengthen High Schools,” Remarks prepared for the Transforming Secondary Education Conference, December 6-7, 1999, Kirkland, WA.

help their students meet state standards. But it is very hard to make what looks so neat and tidy on paper actually work in practice. In the real world, the number of ways in which this theory of action can come undone are almost limitless. For example, even with the best will in the world, schools may find themselves unable to change simply because they do not know what to do, seek assistance based on the latest fad of the month, or find themselves hamstrung by state regulations or staff turnover. The result is the same: nothing really happens. Moreover, the theory of standards-based reform can fall prey to schools that have little incentive to pay attention to the standards. Recent press accounts indicate that anxious teachers and principals may also sabotage the standards by, in effect, cheating on the assessments. Again: no change results. As Figure 2 below describes, these developments march in tandem with the official version of how change is supposed to occur and may thwart what state and local policymakers had in mind.

**Figure 2: The Common Reality: Nothing Happens**



An effective accountability system must anticipate and plan for the real and complex world of schools and school systems. It cannot rely on an overly simplistic notion of school change. Instead, in order to reasonably expect schools to impact student performance, a standards-based accountability system must:

- Provide meaningful incentives that lead schools to take the standards and assessments seriously;
- Ensure schools have access to a variety of qualified external assistance providers when they may not know what to do to improve;
- Give schools the freedom of action to do what they need to do to help their students;

A standards-based accountability effort can lead to real school change and the potential for all students to meet state standards when it is crafted and implemented with these tenets in mind. These lessons will be reinforced in this paper's analysis of other states' experiences with accountability in Section III and in the Strong Schools Accountability Model proposed in Section IV.

### **State Accountability: A Necessary but not Sufficient Means to School Improvement**

The emergence of accountability for performance is an important tool in helping public education keep focused on its primary goal: supporting student learning. Accountability puts students and their learning in the forefront of policy-making decisions and ensures that no one loses sight of their needs, even while coping with the day-to-day complexities of school management.

State-level accountability systems are an important starting point for creating a public education system that is equipped to help all children learn, but policymakers and the public must recognize what a state-level accountability system can do and what it cannot do.

State level data and analysis about schools and districts is naturally limited. For the most part, it can only reveal, for example, whether students in a school are meeting or progressing toward state standards. Data from state-administered tests and other indicators of performance that a state could reasonably gather cannot reveal whether a school provides a caring environment for students, creates a love of learning, maintains close home-school relationships, effectively teaches materials not covered by the test, or is a good place for serious professionals to work. Nor can test data alone reveal whether school staff have a good strategy for improvement or are simply coasting. Making such determinations is complex and often subjective. No state data collection system could ever effectively gather and analyze such an intangible and ultimately subjective determination of a school.

Given these limitations, a state-level accountability system must have a clear focus on ensuring progress of all students toward state standards of learning. It must also leave room for parties other than the state government—e.g., parents, teachers, neighbors, local district leaders, employers, and other schools that receive the school's students after they graduate—to develop their own accountability relationships with schools. When parents have the ability to choose their child's school, when districts have the will and capacity to monitor school performance by actually observing the school in action, when external organizations take the initiative to track some of the more intangible aspects of school performance, and when a state keeps its eye on student academic achievement—then a school faces real incentives and pressures to meet all of the needs of its students. State accountability systems cannot and should not do this alone.

Moreover, a state that wants schools to improve must have more than an accountability system. Improving student performance, for example, requires a highly qualified and motivated teaching force and strong school leaders. State policies to sustain and improve the supply of quality teachers and school leaders are essential complements to accountability. Similarly, state policies that free schools from unnecessary regulations are also necessary to the success of accountability. Schools that have little or no control over their budgets, instructional day, and staff, will not feel accountable for the performance of their students. State accountability and these other factors complement one another: none, however, can create more effective schools all by themselves.

### **Roadmap for this Paper**

This paper is divided into five primary sections:

- Section I has introduced the ideas and challenges facing state accountability systems.
- Section II provides a framework delineating this paper's definitions of the necessary elements of an effective accountability system.
- Section III provides an overview of approaches to accountability taken by other states to date, with a focus on five states (Texas, North Carolina, Kentucky, New York, and

California) that have developed relatively comprehensive accountability systems. It compares their efforts to the definition of necessary elements of an effective system and offers a series of recommendations for Washington state and others to consider in developing an accountability system.

- Section IV offers a possible model for a new state accountability system—created by combining the most effective elements from existing accountability systems with new ideas that hold promise.
- Finally, Section V concludes with a broader consideration of the roles of key state, local, and private actors in implementing the proposed model and also explores the possible unintended consequences and the conditions necessary for it to work effectively.

This paper has been written for two audiences. Readers who want to explore more information about the basic ideas and impacts of state accountability systems will find Sections I through III most helpful. Readers who want a more intensive treatment of accountability issues and system design options (e.g., state staff members responsible for the detailed design and management of an accountability system, or accountability scholars, etc.) should also read the Strong Schools Model design described in Sections IV and V.

## SECTION II: NECESSARY ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

This project was initiated with the intent to define a logically complete accountability model—one in which expectations are clear, responsible parties have the capacity and freedom to do what is expected of them, performance information is valid and reliable, and consequences (both positive and negative) are consistent and predictable. The ideas presented in this section come from an analysis of other states' experiences, both positive and negative. They include features of other states' accountability systems that have worked well (providing practical answers to the basic questions of accountability mentioned in Section I: who is accountable to whom, for what, and with what consequence). They also, however, include suggested arrangements that have not yet been widely tried, in hopes of avoiding some of the challenges that have appeared in other states' systems.

Using these perspectives, this section defines several basic premises of accountability and offers seven elements that appear to be essential to the creation and implementation of a comprehensive accountability system. These definitions and elements will guide this paper's presentation of states' efforts to build accountability systems and the structure of the proposed model that follows in subsequent sections.

### *The Basic Mission of an Accountability System*

The primary mission of a state accountability system should be to assure that all students have access to schools that will help them learn and meet state standards of achievement. The role of an accountability system should be viewed as the means to provide three essential functions to schools and students:

- To direct resources to schools that need assistance;
- To provide alternative learning options for students in schools that cannot improve in a reasonable timeframe; and
- To celebrate, share, and sustain the success of schools that are meeting or exceeding state performance and/or improvement targets.

### *Reciprocity: The Foundation of an Effective State Accountability System*

Meeting these goals, however, requires an acknowledgement that accountability is ultimately a reciprocal relationship.<sup>10</sup> As researcher Richard Elmore notes, "every demand for increased performance through a formal accountability system should carry an equal reciprocal obligation on the part of the party making that demand to provide the capacity to meet the demand."<sup>11</sup> Without this reciprocity, those asked to perform will feel little pressure or accountability. Instead, they will feel justified in avoiding responsibility for low-performance simply because they believe achievement was not possible under the given conditions.

For example, when a researcher is asked to give a presentation, she may feel quite accountable for her performance—is she well-prepared, has she done good research, is she able to make crisp and clear points? She will not feel so accountable for her performance, however, if she arrives at the speaking engagement only to find that three other people are speaking at the same time, a piano recital is staged in the back of the room, and the audience is preoccupied with a stack of assigned reading. Under these circumstances, this researcher might feel quite justified

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<sup>10</sup> See Richard F. Elmore, "Accountability in Local School Districts: Learning to Do the Right Things," *Advances in Educational Administration*, Vol. 5, 1997, pp. 59-82. See also, Allen, Lauren and Anne C. Hallet, "Beyond Finger-Pointing and Test Scores," Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Elmore, *op cit*.

in accepting little responsibility for the quality and outcome of her presentation. Feelings of accountability and responsibility arise from a mutual sort of agreement—you provide me with the tools and environment conducive to high performance, and I agree to do what I need to do to meet your expectations.

In the educational arena, this reciprocity translates as follows: if a state wants to hold schools accountable for the performance of their students, the state must, in turn, ensure that schools have the tools and resources to make meeting these standards possible. Without this sense of reciprocity, schools may, in fact, not feel any pressure to respond because they believe the state is holding them to an impossible, unattainable ideal.

Few states that have built accountability systems have focused adequately on the reciprocal nature of such a relationship. Too many states have simply created standards and promised rewards or punishments without making certain that schools are actually equipped to respond to them. Such one-sided relationships will not produce the intended results. To be effective in practice, accountability systems need to acknowledge both sides of the reciprocal relationship—incentives to perform, and assistance and freedom to make that performance possible.

### **The Elements of an Effective Accountability System**

With this reciprocal relationship in mind, this investigation of other states' attempts to create effective accountability systems has led to the following list of seven key elements that should be an integral part of a state accountability system.<sup>12</sup> An accountability system should have:

- Fair, reliable, relevant, and understandable indicators of school performance;
- Predictable and consistent incentives for performance;
- Opportunities for schools to build their capacity, ensuring tools and resources for schools that need to improve;
- Flexibility for schools to adapt to help their students learn and meet state standards of performance;
- A safety net, providing functional learning opportunities for students when school improvement is not possible;
- A comprehensive public information campaign that helps schools and the public understand the process;
- An independent body guiding the system and providing a check and balance on the political oversight of the system.

While the author does not yet know of an accountability system in use that combines these seven elements simultaneously, the paragraphs below explain why each is critical to creating a system that works.

#### **1. Clear and Fair Indicators of School Performance**

Setting clear and fair indicators of school performance is the foundation of creating an effective accountability system. The process and criteria used to identify schools as either meeting performance targets, or in need of assistance or interventions, sets the tone for the entire

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<sup>12</sup> This list is an expansion of the key elements described in the Center's earlier report: Hill, Paul T. and Robin J. Lake. "Toward a K-12 Education Accountability System in Washington State," UW/RAND: Center on Reinventing Public Education, December 1997. A more recent version of the report is available: Hill, Paul T. and Robin J. Lake, *State Standards and School Accountability*, Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy, The Brookings Institution, 2000.



accountability system. What labels the system uses to categorize schools, how high the achievement bar is set—all are important decisions that will be watched carefully by the public and the education community. Ultimately, the indicators system that is used to assess school performance must be perceived as fair and justifiable, yet clear and easy to understand. Finding such a balance is a lofty task and one fraught with inherent tensions—for what is fair may not be readily comprehensible, and the information parents may want about a school may not be the information schools need in order to improve.

## **2. Predictable Incentives**

An accountability system must have predictable consequences for performance so that schools have strong incentives to focus on student learning. Recognizing and supporting schools that have met the state’s immediate goals, and intervening in schools where expectations are chronically not met, send strong signals for schools to focus on performance. Many states that have chosen to rely almost entirely on such incentives and consequences have found, however, that this element alone does not create a successful accountability system.

## **3. Assistance to Build School Capacity**

An accountability system, based on the principle of reciprocity, must include opportunities for schools to build their capacity in order to respond to the incentives offered. Some schools simply do not have the human and financial resources to help their students meet the state standards without additional forms of assistance. Such assistance, as authors Hill and Lake noted, must be “powerful enough to change the whole school, not just isolated parts of it, and (must be) applied consistently enough to make real improvements in teaching and learning.”<sup>13</sup> As will be discussed in subsequent sections of this paper, few states have adequately provided such capacity-building for schools.

## **4. School Flexibility and Autonomy**

The shift to accountability for performance requires that schools have greater flexibility and autonomy to address the needs of their students. Part of the reciprocal bargain of accountability is that a state will hold schools accountable for their students’ performance and will, in exchange, allow schools to make important decisions about how to teach, allocate time, and work with students who are struggling. Teachers and principals need autonomy to exercise professional judgment in making decisions about how to help their students meet state standards. Schools also need autonomy to use their funds in ways that support their improvement efforts. While several accountability systems have made visible attempts to reduce the input regulations on schools, many systems have not yet provided schools with real freedom to make such important decisions.

## **5. A Safety Net**

It is not enough to simply create incentives for schools to do better. When a school shows no promise or intention of helping its students learn to state standards, the state must step in and assume responsibility for providing the students with access to a functioning learning environment (e.g., a redesigned school, a new school, etc.). Such a safety net has three essential characteristics. First, it must be invoked promptly enough to preserve the learning opportunities of the students currently attending the school. Waiting years to make change will not work for students who are losing the only childhood they will ever have. Second, the decision to activate the safety net should be based on predictable and consistent criteria applied to all schools, thereby cooling some of the political heat of such decisions. Third, a state or district should have some reasonable evidence or belief that the alternative offered to students will measurably improve their learning and achievement. While an accountability system can hope never to need to utilize this element, a system without such contingency plans is incomplete. It is missing a primary element of assuring that all students have the opportunity to learn.

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<sup>13</sup> Hill and Lake, *op cit.*

## **6. Comprehensive Public Outreach System**

An effective accountability system also requires clear, easily understood explanations of the entire process—how schools are judged, what happens to schools that need help, and what happens to schools that are excelling. The public and the education community must be able to understand how the system works and what it is intended to do in order to create true acceptance and support. Accountability systems that are well-explained and documented minimize the risk for feelings of distrust, favoritism, and frustration.

## **7. An Independent Guide**

It is critical that an external, independent public entity with a sole focus on accountability guides the system. Accountability requires making hard decisions about rewarding schools and potentially closing or intervening in chronically low-performing schools. Too often, state agencies or legislative committees charged with overseeing such politically charged processes face strong temptations to cave under the pressure. To work, accountability needs consistency and stability—attributes that can be secured with the guiding presence of an independent, external entity. A statewide accountability commission is an essential first step in “insulat(ing) the accountability system from politics and stabiliz(ing) the expectations under which schools and local districts must work.”<sup>14</sup>

Some states have come much closer than others have to coordinating these seven elements. The next section of this paper will provide a general overview of accountability systems, with a special focus on five states, and will analyze important lessons for other states to consider when creating an accountability system.

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<sup>14</sup> Hill and Lake, *op cit.*

### SECTION III: OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES

The following broad conclusions summarize the general status of state accountability systems:

*States talk more about accountability than they actually put into practice:* While almost all states contend that they support accountability for performance, only a few have gone the next step and actually created a comprehensive system. As reporters have noted, “the rhetoric about accountability often exceeds the reality.”<sup>15</sup>

*No state has designed the “perfect” accountability system:* Most states have considered a full accountability system one with standardized indicators of performance, strong incentives (including rewards and penalties), and some limited forms of assistance for struggling schools. They have typically given less attention to comprehensive and concentrated efforts to build real school capacity, assurances of a safety net for all students in chronically low-performing schools, and utilizing a dedicated and clear communications strategy. Moreover, only a few states have actually implemented even the shortened version of a full accountability system. Instead, most states (about half) have implemented one or more aspects of accountability, without making a full commitment to the whole package.

*States have relied on a rewards-penalties approach, although this is starting to change:* To date, accountability systems have followed one general trend. For the most part, a “rewards-penalties” approach has emerged to provide the traction for many accountability efforts. “Rewards,” in the form of financial bonuses have been offered in many states to increase schools’ incentives to perform well, and “penalties,” in the form of interventions like reconstitution and takeover, have been threatened to increase schools’ incentives to avoid performing poorly. Some states are recognizing that this rewards-penalties perspective overlooks other important aspects of accountability, including building the capacity of schools so that they can improve. No state, however, has yet developed a strategy for making sure all schools can get the help they need, when they need it. Instead, many states have relied on the limited capacities of districts and state education agencies, which can only help so many schools at one time. As a result, states are making mid-course adjustments to their systems, and states beginning to build accountability systems are trying to pay heed to the lessons learned from their predecessors’ experiences.

#### *Accountability in Other States*

What follows is an overview of current trends, successes, and challenges in the key elements of accountability defined in Section II. It is based on general, nationwide data from *Education Week’s 1999 Quality Counts* edition and the *Education Commission of the States*, other academic research and writings about accountability, and a specific analysis of five states’ experiences. The five states (Texas, North Carolina, Kentucky, New York, and California) were selected because they represent some of the diversity in states that have made serious attempts to implement accountability systems.

Texas and North Carolina represent states often referred to as “high stakes” states, where high-performing schools are strongly rewarded and/or low-performing schools are replaced or subject to powerful interventions. Kentucky is an interesting case study because it is one of the long-time pioneers of accountability and has recently redesigned its system under significant public and political pressure. New York is a state that has taken action in chronically low-

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<sup>15</sup> Jerald, Craig D. and Ulrich Boser, “Taking Stock,” *Education Week, Quality Counts 1999*, January 1999, p. 81.

performing schools, and California is an example of a state just emerging on the accountability scene, trying new approaches to provide assistance and support.

For each state, the author conducted a literature and primary sources review of documents relating to the specific details of their accountability system. In addition, newspaper and journal articles describing states' implementation experiences were reviewed. When relevant and necessary, the author interviewed key accountability observers and policymakers in the states regarding their perceptions of the progress, successes, and weaknesses of the state's efforts.

Table 1 provides a brief synopsis of each state's accountability system. It offers a simplified summary of what is, in most states, a very complicated process. More specific analyses of the different approaches these states have taken to accountability will be offered subsequently. In addition, for further information about these five states' approaches, Appendix 1 contains a detailed description of each state's accountability process, including the state's calculations of school performance and the state's strategies for providing rewards or interventions.

**Table 1: Summary of Five States’ Approaches to Accountability**

	<b>Texas</b>	<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>New York</b>	<b>California</b>
<b>General Approach</b>	“High stakes” state, focused on achievement and improvement of all student groups, with history of tough consequences. A relatively stable system.	“High stakes” state with heavy reliance on financial rewards and emphasis on improvement.	“Average to high stakes” state, with rewards and assistance, fewer interventions. Pioneer of educ. reform and recent renovator of system.	Potentially “high stakes” state, with history of assistance and interventions in low-performing schools and proposed rewards program.	Potentially “high stakes” state, though only piloting initial elements of accountability system. Taking new and different approaches.
<b>Means of Evaluating School Performance</b>	<p>Categorize schools by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• % of students from all subgroups (racial/ethnic and socio-economic) passing annual state-specific TAAS exam.</li> <li>• Dropout rates.</li> <li>• Attendance rates.</li> <li>• Some provisions for improvement and comparisons to similar schools.</li> </ul>	<p>Categorize schools by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth/gain composite scores from annual assessments in grades 3-8 and end-of-course secondary examinations.</li> <li>• Performance composite: % of students scoring at grade level.</li> </ul>	<p>Uses Accountability Index:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weighted average combining student performance on subject area Kentucky Core Content Tests and attendance, dropout rates and “transitions to adult life” at secondary level.</li> <li>• State sets target index score. Individual school two-year growth targets are created to meet state target within 14 years.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Proposed:</i> Categorize Schools by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• % of students scoring at Level 2 or Level 3 on state-specific assessments in grades 4 &amp; 8, and end-of-course exams in high schools.</li> <li>• Other factors, like dropout rates may be considered.</li> <li>• May also be able to declare a “poor learning environment:” poor academic performance, parental complaints, and/or threats to health, safety, or “educational welfare” of students.</li> </ul>	<p>Uses Accountability Performance Index (API)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weighted average of student performance on standardized tests.</li> <li>• Pupil and certificated staff attendance rates and graduation rates.</li> <li>• State sets target index score. Schools below target have goal of closing gap between baseline and target 5% a year for all student subgroups.</li> <li>• Ranks schools statewide and within comparison cohort on scale of 1-10.</li> </ul>
<b>Rewards / Recognition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moderate monetary bonuses on basis of absolute achievement and improvement compared to similar schools.</li> <li>• Public recognition for categorical ratings.</li> <li>• Increased flexibility possible via waivers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep financial rewards, offering up to \$1500 per teacher bonus at fast-improving schools.</li> <li>• Rewards typically distributed on basis of improvement and given as individual bonuses to all teaching staff at a qualifying school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monetary rewards provided to schools.</li> <li>• Monetary rewards for: meeting growth target and reducing % of lowest-performing students; or for passing recognition points on the index scale; or for schools with absolute achievement in top 5% of state with no declines in last two years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Proposed:</i> Monetary and public recognition.</li> <li>• <i>Proposed:</i> Must have 2 years performance at Exceeding Standards rating, no student group below standard, satisfactory performance in all subject areas, better than average performance compared to similar schools.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Proposed:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be monetary, public recognition, and increased flexibility.</li> <li>• Distributed to schools meeting or exceeding growth targets for all student subgroups.</li> <li>• Details still being determined.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Summary of Five States' Approaches to Accountability (con't.)**

	<b>Texas</b>	<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>Kentucky</b>	<b>New York</b>	<b>California</b>
<b>Assistance for Struggling Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primarily district and regional service center responsibility.</li> <li>On-site “accreditation investigations” utilized.</li> <li>Improvement plans for schools and districts required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide “expert educators” to work for up to a year with lowest performing schools. Currently, small capacity program, working with 10-15 schools a year.</li> <li>Also provide grants for planning and implementation of changes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assign “highly skilled” educators to spend up to 2 years with low-performing schools. Serve as coaches and help guide improvement plan.</li> <li>Planning to launch additional “school audit” process for severely low-performing schools. External review team will help school assess needs.</li> <li>Regional Service Centers provide additional forms of assistance to schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided for Schools Under Registration Review (SURR). Receive a Registration Review visit (4 days, on-site) to help guide district and school improvement plan.</li> <li>Technical assistance provided by districts. State assistance is more monitoring and general assistance.</li> <li>Most low-performing schools are in NY City, where assistance has been prescriptive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pilot Program started in Fall 1999 (IIUSP): Low-performing schools apply to receive planning funds to hire external evaluator and create improvement plan. Additional funds available for assistance in implementation.</li> <li>Over 400 schools participating.</li> <li>Relies on list of approximately 80 approved “external evaluators.” This capacity needs to grow.</li> </ul>
<b>Intervention for Chronically Low-Performing Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Authority for reconstitution, closure, and public school choice options.</li> <li>Has exercised reconstitution authority—thus, “high stakes” reputation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Authority for takeover and public school choice options.</li> <li>Rarely invoked. Have tried other high stakes measures (teacher testing and personnel evaluations) but were overturned under pressure. New provision to be tested.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited interventions.</li> <li>Authority for students to transfer to other public schools.</li> <li>Audit process may allow for some personnel reviews, however, process and impact not yet clear.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chronically low-performing schools can lose “registration”, thereby closing them.</li> <li>Threat is real: State and districts have a track record of doing this.</li> <li>Must provide plan for alternative learning opportunities for students when closing or “redesigning” a school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools in the IIUSP pilot that do not improve face potential of: closure, reassignment of staff, “reorganization of school,” chartering options, and public school choice options for students.</li> <li>Exact details still to be determined.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Reactions / Perceptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has endured ongoing public criticism for over-reliance on annual TAAS exams.</li> <li>Has seen improvements in student test performance.</li> <li>Has provided schools and districts with advance notice of increasing requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant public and educator backlash to attempts at “high stakes” interventions.</li> <li>General acceptance of rewards approach, though some criticism that it has gone too far—81% of schools in 1998-99 received some reward.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faced significant public dissatisfaction with previous assessment system (concerns about costs and reliability).</li> <li>Addressed this pressure by creating new, renovated accountability program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seems to have general support of parents and business community.</li> <li>Some hesitation from education field, though some schools that have been through SURR process and improved, acknowledge it is valuable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too soon to tell much about the program.</li> <li>Some schools have argued that initial API data has been incorrect, creating some mistrust.</li> </ul>

### **Comparison of State Approaches and Recommendations for Other States:**

This section compares the implementation of accountability in these five states and nationally to the seven elements of an effective system defined in Section II. A detailed narrative description of the findings for each element is provided. In addition, “Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider” are included for each element. These recommendations reflect further interpretations of additional, important lessons that can be drawn from states’ experiences.

#### **1. Fair, reliable, relevant, and understandable indicators of school performance.**

##### **Trends in Indicators of School Performance:**

- *States have tended to rely on student assessment data, though how they use it varies dramatically.*
- *All states are struggling with the inherent tensions of trying to build a fair and reliable, yet understandable process for assessing school performance.*
- *No state, including the five highlighted in this paper, has created a performance indicator system that has met with universal satisfaction from all of its constituents.*

To date, accountability systems have largely been driven by student performance data—either from standardized national assessments or from state-specific, criterion-referenced examinations. States have varied, however, in how they use this information and how they combine it with other measures of school performance. As Table 2 indicates, most states consider at least a few other measures of school performance (like attendance rates and drop-out rates).<sup>16</sup> States have found including factors like dropout rates to be important, if only to minimize the potential for a school to “game the system,” for example, by encouraging potentially low-scoring students to drop out.

States have typically used the data described in Table 2 to take one of two approaches to creating indicators of school performance. Some states have attempted to create mathematical models that attempt to account for the complexities of students, schools, and learning. In their attempts to provide a fuller, more "fair" picture of a school's performance, these measures often become so complicated as to render them incomprehensible to most school and community members. Other states have chosen to provide straightforward, simple measures of school performance. These states use indicators that are clear and easy-to-understand, but often face criticism of being "unfair" or dismissive of the challenges some schools may face by being too simplistic.

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<sup>16</sup> Note: The tables used in this section are derived from data contained in Education Week’s *Quality Counts* ’99, January 1999 edition. These tables are accurate to that date, but in the time since that publication, some of the data may have changed. Specifically, it is important to note that California’s efforts, which are quite new, are not included in any of these data charts. In addition, the tables incorporate characteristics of Kentucky’s interim accountability model, whereas this analysis focused on Kentucky’s long-term accountability model to be implemented in the 2000-01 school year.

**Table 2: Summary of State Approaches Nationwide to Defining Indicators of Performance**Source: Education Week, *Quality Counts '99*, January, 1999.

<b>Indicators of Performance</b>	<b>Number of States</b>
<i>Number of States that Evaluate and Assign Ratings to Schools or Identify Low-Performing Schools</i>	19*
<b>Type of Indicators Used</b>	
Test Scores Only	7
Test Scores + Quantitative Measures (e.g., drop-out rates, attendance rates, etc.)	9
Test Scores + Quantitative + On-Site Visit	3
<b>Definition of Low-Performance for Schools</b>	
Compare to an Established Benchmark Only	8
Compare to Benchmark + Consider School's Past Performance	7
Compare to School's Past Performance Only	2
Compare to Other Schools Only	1
Compare to Benchmark + Compare to Other Schools	1
Adjust Any of Above Comparisons for School's Demographics	3
* As of January 1999, 7 of these 19 states only identified low-performing schools.	

North Carolina offers an example of a rather complicated indicator. On the surface it seems quite straightforward—schools are basically judged on their students' annual improvement. Improvement, however, is compared to a school's "expected growth" composite. The expected growth composite is the result of a mathematical formula that compares the school's average student growth in one year to statewide average growth for that grade and subject, adjusted for characteristics called "true proficiency" and "regression to the mean." The basic math concepts are not overly complicated, but the creation of "true proficiency" and "regression to the mean" coefficients is quite complex and requires significant statistical understanding. In some instances, schools need to use a software program made available by the state to estimate their performance. While such a complicated formula may take account of some factors that raw test scores cannot, the result is a system that does not readily lend itself to deep explanations or understanding.

California's indicator also provides additional complexity that may create more confusion than clarity. The Academic Performance Index (API) appears to be a relatively straightforward measure of school performance. It uses a weighted average to calculate a school's performance composite score. The state then uses this score (plus growth rates) to compare the school to schools statewide and also to a cohort of schools serving similar students. Each of these



comparisons results in a ranking of 1-10 (10 being highest) of the school's performance. This multi-step ranking process has two potential disadvantages. First, it means schools and the public have to make sense of more than one rating of a school. What does it mean, for example, to have a 5 on the statewide ranking, but an 8 on a similar schools rating? What are schools or parents to do with this seemingly contradictory information?

Second, the rating system of 1-10 has the potential to send the signal that the state system is saying more about a school than it can possibly know. Being a "10" has symbolic meaning in our society. Everyone would like their child to go to a "10" school. People will differ, however, in the criteria they would use to describe a "10" school—because after all, the ideal or perfect school would do much more than teach children to read and write effectively. Those other, less tangible attributes of a school that would truly make it a "10" are not accounted for in the rating system used in California. Instead, the accountability system is only saying that the school is a "10" for performance on basic reading and math assessments and other quantitative measures. In an attempt to meet the tension of being fair and understandable, the California indicator may imply more than it reasonably can about a school.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Texas and New York use indicators that are relatively clear and easy-to-understand. Texas categorizes schools into ratings like Academically Acceptable or Unacceptable on the basis of the percentages of students from all subpopulations meeting the state standards for performance, and dropout and attendance rates. The criteria are clear—a school must have at least 90% of all students passing, less than 1% dropping out, and 94 % in attendance to earn "Exemplary" status. Schools know where they stand and can see what they need to do to improve their status. New York's proposed model is similarly straightforward. Schools would be categorized into ratings like "Farthest from Standard" or "Exceeding Standards" primarily based on the percentage of students performing at Level 2 (just below or close to meeting standards) and Level 3 (meeting standards) on their statewide exams. Again, the indicators for performance are clear and easily interpreted. Legislators and state education department staff can readily offer a reasonable description of the indicator and the public and schools can feel like they at least understand how they are being judged. Such straightforward indicators, however, often draw criticisms that they over-simplify the complexity of schools.

#### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

The following three implications for states to consider are drawn from the analysis of accountability efforts to date.

- ***Keep it Simple:*** Indicator systems will always be controversial. There is no one accurate, fair, reliable, yet clear and easy-to-understand measure of a school's performance. Rather, states must choose among imperfect proxies for school performance. States that have chosen to keep such indicators simple, straightforward, and clear have, in this analysis, handled this tension most effectively. Certainly such approaches will at times overlook the nuances and complexities of education, but rigorous statistical analysis of the same types of imperfect proxies may only marginally increase validity at great cost to clarity.

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<sup>17</sup> A discussion of indicators used to assess school performance is not complete without acknowledgement of the value-added model created by Professor William Sanders of the University of Tennessee. Professor Sanders' model tracks individual students over the course of their school careers and calculates annual "gain scores" for them. Schools, then, are assessed on their production of reasonable student gains. Tennessee currently uses this model and several other districts and states have expressed interest in the model, which compares each child's performance to his/her past performance. While the theory is straightforward, the mathematical calculations conducted by Professor Sanders are relatively complex. The method offers important insights into school progress and can add to an understanding of a school's performance without necessitating adjustments to scores by SES or other factors, but it is not easy to explain to the public or schools. Nevertheless, the value-added approach is clearly a hot topic in assessing school performance. (For more information, see "Sanders 101," *Education Week*, May 5, 1999.)

- ***Look for the Patterns in the Numbers:*** The most effective indicator will keep clarity as its driving principle, but will offer multiple layers of performance data to attempt to find the patterns in the numbers. The intent of an indicator system, after all, is to identify schools that consistently show the need for assistance or intervention, or that consistently show the ability to exceed state goals. Some states are making progress in this direction by using on-site visits to learn more about schools, though such programs are still in their early stages.<sup>18</sup> At some point, some human judgment about a school is necessary to ensure a fair, yet understandable indicator.
- ***Consider Student Achievement First:*** In the process of settling on a series of indicators of performance, most states have struggled with the tension between reporting basic student performance data and “adjusting” this data for demographic characteristics. In the name of fairness, some will argue for a system that “massages” or adjusts student scores on the basis of the challenges they face. There are reasons for states to be wary of such well-intended approaches. First, such adjustments can send the signal that the education system expects less from certain students than from others. This simply cannot be the case: state standards lose their force if they apply only to some students. Second, such adjustments undermine what can potentially be a powerful component of accountability: helping to identify schools that need additional support and making sure these schools get the resources they require. Trying to adjust performance scores can potentially mask schools that need additional support to meet the needs of their students and level the playing field. An accountability system does need to recognize that schools face different challenges and it will need to acknowledge the gains and improvements of those who overcome such challenges. It must do so, however, without losing sight of the students and schools that could most use assistance. This will require states to consider student achievement first.

By offering different priorities or levels of school performance indicators, the model proposed in Section IV of this paper attempts to stay focused on state standards of learning while acknowledging the differing needs of students and their schools.

## **2. Predictable and Consistent Incentives for Performance**

States that have built accountability systems that follow the rewards-penalties approach have created two forms of consequences: rewards for meeting state expectations and "interventions" or "sanctions" for falling short of the goals. States have, for the most part, been much more consistent and predictable in distributing rewards than in imposing sanctions.

### *Trends in Rewards for Successful Schools:*

- *States are using rewards—including financial rewards—as incentives for performance.*
- *States often distribute financial rewards to schools that meet several layers of “successful school” criteria. Such rewards, though potentially complicated, are typically distributed consistently and predictably.*
- *Few states have used rewards as a way to share information about what works.*

Many states incorporate rewards as a popular and publicly palatable means of creating incentives for schools to focus on student achievement. Rewards have varied from financial

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<sup>18</sup> Rhode Island has developed the School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) program. The SALT program includes a four-day school-site visit conducted by a team of primarily teachers. The teams focus on answering three guiding questions: "What evidence is there that students are learning to high standards? What do teaching and learning practices look like in this school and how do they relate to what students are learning? How does the school function as a learning community?" (see *Education Week, Quality Counts*, January 1999). Massachusetts also currently uses an “inspectorate” system to evaluate all of its charter schools before their renewal decisions.

bonuses to forms of public recognition, and have been offered to individuals (e.g., as teacher bonuses) or to schools as a whole.

As of January 1999, 19 states offered some sort of performance incentive rewards. Table 3 provides a summary of the various ways states have distributed rewards and recognition. Most states make financial rewards available, although the magnitude of these rewards vary substantially. North Carolina, for example, invests heavily in the rewards approach to accountability, spending more than \$100 million in bonuses in 1998.<sup>19</sup> Other states, like Texas, invested less than \$3 million in 1998 in financial rewards and relied more heavily on public recognition as a means of reinforcement.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 3: Summary of State Approaches Nationwide to Distributing Rewards**

Source: Education Week, *Quality Counts '99*, January, 1999.

<b>Rewards or Recognition</b>	<b>Number of States</b>
<i>Number of States that Provide Some Reward or Recognition to "Successful" Schools</i>	19*
Provide Schools with Money	14
-- Allow Part or All of the Money to be Used for Salary Bonuses	9
<b>Indicators Used to Distribute Rewards</b>	
Test Scores Only	4
Test Scores + Attendance Rates	3
Test Scores + Attendance + Dropout Rates	4
Test Scores + Attendance + Dropout Rates + Other	3
Test Scores + Other Measures	3
Test Scores + Attendance + Other Measures	1
Other Measures Only	1
Give Rewards Based on High Performance + Improvement	9
Give Rewards Based on High Performance	5
Give Rewards Based on Improvement	5
* Note: These 19 states are not identical to the 19 states listed as having a system of rating and evaluating schools in Table 3. Only 11 states are common to both charts (FL, IL, IN, KS, KY, MD, MI, NV, NM, NC, TX).	

<sup>19</sup> Archer, Jeff. "A Little Something Extra: Bonuses for High Achievement," *Education Week, Quality Counts 1999*, January 11, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

While some states, like North Carolina, distribute rewards on rather basic measures (e.g., did the school meet its improvement target), in truth, Table 3 greatly simplifies the actual criteria many states use to distribute financial rewards. Some states base their rewards allocations on the basis of several different layers of criteria. Under a proposed system in New York state, for example, rewards would go to schools that have exceeded state standards for at least two years, and have no student group performing below standard, and have satisfactory performance in other subject areas beyond the basics tested by the state, and who perform better than average as compared to similar schools.

As another example, Texas provides monetary rewards only to schools that have met the state's basic performance targets for all of their student groups and that show a significant gain on a "comparable improvement indicator," which compares the school's improvement with that of other schools serving similar students. Many states, then, are combining their indicators to create criteria for distributing financial rewards. But, in almost all cases, such rewards are distributed on a clear schedule of criteria—that is, schools that meet the criteria automatically receive rewards. In this sense, rewards have generally been used as a predictable and consistent consequence for performance.

#### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

The process of distributing rewards has presented accountability systems with several challenges from which five key lessons emerge:

- ***Remember that Non-financial Rewards Matter:*** Many states may be overlooking the impact of non-financial rewards that schools and school staff seem to value. Anecdotal evidence from Texas, for example, indicates that the extensive and effective media attention given to schools that are designated "exemplary" has been a strong motivator. Other states, however, often assume large financial rewards are essential—despite the fact that the evidence on their superior motivating efficiency is not yet clear.
- ***Beware of Potential Side-effects:*** States may have miscalculated some of the behavioral consequences of rewards. In particular, they may have ignored the potential disincentive financial rewards can create for teachers to want to work in low-performing or troubled schools. When rewards are given to high-performing or fast-improving schools, teachers in historically low-performing schools may face strong incentives to move, thereby further reducing the capacity of the struggling school. Thus, a powerful rewards program has the potential to actually increase the divide between functional and low-performing schools. Some states, like North Carolina, are considering ways to off-set such disincentives, including providing additional bonuses to teachers who make improvements in more challenging schools.
- ***Reward Schools, Not Individuals:*** It has become clear that any form of reward or reinforcement should be focused on the school as an organization. A reward system can reinforce staff members working together as a unit. Several states have recognized this potential power and have moved away from programs that provided individual bonuses. Texas, for example, removed a proposal for principals' bonuses because of concerns about their divisive impact on whole school morale. Rewards that simply acknowledge individuals and their work offer too great a temptation to create divisive internal competition within a school.
- ***Use Rewards to Accomplish Multiple Goals:*** Few states have used rewards as an opportunity to share information about what is working in schools that are succeeding. Recognizing and celebrating success is undoubtedly important. However, states can also use rewards as a means of spreading important information about school changes that make a

difference by partnering strong schools with struggling schools or by providing opportunities for high-performing school staff to publicly share information about how they made improvements. Typically, rewards (financial or public recognition) are simply distributed to schools. Other schools do not have the opportunity to consistently learn what the recognized schools were able to do differently to inspire such change and success. This is a real missed opportunity in existing accountability systems.

- ***Be Strategic with Scarce Monetary Resources:*** States need to recognize the potential for expenditures on rewards to reduce funds available to struggling schools. When rewards carry high financial stakes, as in North Carolina, they represent, in effect, a transfer of funds from schools that need assistance to schools that are already succeeding. With limited resources available for educational improvement in most states, such a regressive transfer can seem illogical and hard to publicly defend.

The model proposed in Section IV is an attempt to use these lessons to create a recognition system that is helpful for sustaining school improvement, but not the primary centerpiece of accountability.

#### *Trends in Interventions or Sanctions for Low-Performing Schools:*

- *States are using sanctions or interventions as incentives and to send strong political signals.*<sup>21</sup>
- *Many states have authority to intervene in chronically low-performing schools, but often rely on districts or local education agencies to intervene first.*
- *Intervention options have ranged from reconstitution or takeover, to supply-side options allowing groups to apply to run failing schools. No approach has escaped controversy.*

Along with rewards, states have also relied on the threat to intervene in a low-performing school. This penalties portion of the rewards-penalties approach has been used as more than simply a means of fixing a low-performing school. As researcher Jennifer O'Day notes, intervention in particular schools also communicates a general threat to other low-performing schools and signals that the state is serious about reform.<sup>22</sup>

As Table 4 shows, as of January 1999, 20 states nationwide had the authority to intervene in some way in a low-performing school. Interventions such as closure, takeover, and reconstitution (replacing the principal and some percentage of staff, along with intent to create a new philosophy and curricula), have typically been reserved for schools that are low-performing academically and have been struggling financially and organizationally.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> O'Day, Jennifer. "Reconstitution as a Remedy for School Failure," *CPRE*, <http://www.upenn.edu/gse/cpre/docs/resrch/a-2.html>, abstract only.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Ziebarth, Todd. "State Takeovers and Reconstitutions Policy Brief," Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org>.

**Table 4: Summary of State Authorities to Intervene in Chronically Low-Performing Schools.**

Source: Education Week, *Quality Counts '99*, January, 1999.

Interventions	Number of States
<i>Number of States with Authority to Take Some Alternative Action in "Failing Schools"</i>	20*
<i>Note: Some states have more than one authority listed below.</i>	
Authority for Closure	11
Authority for Takeover	10
Authority to Replace Principal or Teachers	10
Revoke School Accreditation	8
Authority for Reconstitution	7
Students May Enroll Elsewhere	7
*Note: The same 11 states (FL, IL, IN, KS, KY, MD, MI, NV, NM, NC, TX)	

Table 4 simplifies a much more complicated reality. In truth, while 20 states have the authority to use such interventions or sanctions, very few states have actually made use of this power. Many of the interventions, including reconstitution and replacing principals and teachers, are done not at a state's request, but rather by a district. In Texas, for example, the state often warns a district that it is about to intervene in a school, giving the district time to take action first. In addition, other states intervene directly in districts, rather than in schools. New Jersey and Mississippi, for example, have district accountability systems. Thus, Table 4 may, in some respect, under-represent the existing power to use sanctions or interventions.

Some states have followed through on their threats to intervene, as New York and Texas prove. New York has revoked the registration (or accreditation) of several low-performing schools, in effect closing them. It has also encouraged schools to undergo "redesign," which in New York City includes the option of replacing up to 50% of the staff and creating a new instructional approach at the school. During the 1997-98 school year, 16 of the 86 elementary and middle SURR schools met all of their performance targets and the majority of SURR schools improved their performance from the prior year in the areas for which they were cited for low-performance.<sup>24</sup> Thus, New York is having some success with redesign and interventions, though the road is long and filled with detours. Clearly, it is a challenge to transform chronically low-performing schools.

Texas has also met the political challenge that often accompanies threats of closure and school transformation, and has reconstituted a handful of schools.<sup>25</sup> Texas, too, offers a mixed record with respect to the impact of such interventions. Specific, statewide data about the effects of such interventions is hard to find, since districts often reconstitute schools before the state intervenes. Nevertheless, a high school reconstituted in San Antonio in the mid-1990s has

<sup>24</sup> "Status Report on Schools Under Registration Review," a report for the New York State Board of Regents prepared by the state Department of Education, January 11, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Again, it is important to note that in Texas, districts often reconstitute schools before the state intervenes.

improved significantly and is now nominated for a Blue Ribbon reward.<sup>26</sup> Other schools reconstituted in the state have shown moderate student improvements at the cost of significant political battles. As in New York, intervening in a school is neither a guarantee of success nor an assurance of failure. Tough interventions can be done well with promising results for students. They can also be done hastily and with such a political cost as to render the chances for transforming the learning environment unlikely.

Moreover, neither of these states' approaches to such tough sanctions should be characterized as universal and consistent. The interventions have typically been saved for the most egregious schools overwhelmed with multiple problems. But they have occurred, thereby sending a strong signal to other low-performing schools that they could face similar sanctions if they are unable to make improvements.

Table 4 may also, however, over-represent the prevalence of sanctions and interventions. It reflects states' powers, not necessarily their actions. In fact, only 55 schools in just three states (TX, NY, and OK) had been closed or reconstituted by a state as of January 1999, though, many more schools may have been closed or reconstituted by their districts.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the general trend holds that interventions, like closure and reconstitution, are relatively rare. Across the board, states have had difficulty applying sanctions or interventions with any consistency or predictability.

Such difficulties are not unexpected. States and districts have found that the political barriers to dramatic interventions are high and that the results can be disappointing. If a struggling school still has some capacity left, sanctions and interventions can actually destroy them. Parents and teachers with options may flee schools at risk for intervention, leaving the school with less capacity with which to make change. And, as the track record for such interventions remains inconsistent, many districts and states may find it challenging to muster the political will to take action on behalf of students.

Other intervention strategies have also faced tough political battles. North Carolina, for example, tried to instill tough sanctions on low-performing schools only to be met with overpowering political pressure. North Carolina had a provision that would have required teachers in low-performing schools to pass a basic skills test in order to continue teaching. This provision was eliminated after intense pressure from the state's teachers union.<sup>28</sup> The state has tried additional strategies, including a current provision allowing teachers at low-performing schools who receive two consecutive substandard performance evaluations to possibly be recommended for dismissal if their substandard performance is due to a lack of general knowledge.<sup>29</sup> The state is likely to face an intense political battle over this provision, and it is unclear if it will stick. As a result, the state has, in effect, come to emphasize rewards over penalties.

In short, interventions or sanctions are now utilized mostly as threats and political signals, and less as cures or remedies for individual schools. Some states, however, are taking a different approach, by not closing or intervening in low-performing schools, but creating opportunities for families to leave. Florida, for example, has launched the nation's first state-

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<sup>26</sup> See San Antonio Independent School District website for information about the school, at : <http://www.saisd.net/factfig/perform.shtm>.

<sup>27</sup> Education Week. "Quality Counts '99: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure," Vol. XVIII, No. 17, January 11, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy Manzo, Kathleen. "NC Lawmakers Revoke Teacher-Testing Plan," Education Week, June 17, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Communication with State of Kentucky Department of Education.

wide private school voucher program, providing students in chronically low-performing schools with the option to attend other public or private schools.<sup>30</sup>

Other states, like Colorado, are considering policies that would provide the option of converting low-performing schools into charter schools, thereby transforming the structure of the school and providing new avenues for accountability.<sup>31</sup> Still other states explore the idea of contracting out low-performing schools to school management organizations. The impact of these approaches is currently unclear and will be important to follow.

*Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

Based on this analysis, four suggestions are offered for Washington and other states to consider:

- ***Recognize That Transforming Low-Performing Schools is Difficult, but Necessary:*** Though few states or districts have a consistently positive record of success with interventions, they are nonetheless necessary if the state is to fulfill its obligation to protect the educational opportunities of children. Research on the key factors of success show why interventions like reconstitution are tricky. As Jennifer O'Day notes, successful reconstitution requires: "visionary leadership as well as sound management at the school site; a fundamental and public break with the failure legacy at the school site, and a clear and ubiquitous focus on instruction and student learning."<sup>32</sup> These are exactly the most challenging elements of running any school.
- ***Be Prepared for Controversy:*** High stakes interventions also generate controversy, and state leaders should be prepared to ride over rough waters when the time comes. Vocal supporters can come out in force when a school is threatened with reconstitution or closure. In addition, teachers unions and educators in general have been rather skeptical of these approaches, creating further pressures for states and districts to back away. Such potential controversy is not, however, reason to avoid intervening on behalf of children stuck in schools that cannot improve. Rather, it is a reality that states need to acknowledge and prepare for.
- ***Focus on Doing Interventions Right:*** Many efforts to intervene in failing schools have not been done in ways that could succeed. Districts have tried to reconstitute schools just weeks before the new school year begins, or without taking care to gather together a highly qualified staff or to ensure that a new school is launched with a strong focus and mission. Instead, too often schools find themselves demoralized and hastily put back together, and students find themselves in learning environments only marginally better than they had before. Such an outcome need not be the norm. Instead, states need to recognize that such interventions are not quick solutions, but can be successful when they are given time, concentrated resources, and focused effort.
- ***Stay Centered on the Needs of the Students:*** In light of the difficulties of school replacement or reconstitution, states may be tempted to continue indefinitely forcing assistance into deeply troubled schools. This approach can lead to unlimited delays, dooming children to more months and years in schools that cannot teach them well. States must not lose sight of their first responsibility, which is to meet the needs of students, including those in chronically low-performing schools. An accountability system cannot be shy about staying focused on the needs

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<sup>30</sup> At the time of the writing of this report, the Florida voucher program had been declared "unconstitutional" by a state circuit court. Appeals were planned and the final decision was not yet clear.

<sup>31</sup> Charter schools are publicly financed schools with explicit performance contracts with their authorizer—typically a district or university—and serve as schools of choice.

<sup>32</sup> O'Day, Jennifer, *op cit*.



of its students. The proposed model in Section IV provides some ideas about how states can stay focused on maintaining children's learning opportunities.

### **3. Opportunities for schools to build their capacity, ensuring tools and resources for schools that need to improve.**

#### *Trends in Providing Assistance to Low-Performing Schools*

- *States vary in the type of assistance they provide to low-performing schools.*
- *States are recognizing a need to focus more attention than they have on assistance and school capacity-building.*
- *States are recognizing that building school capacity is intense work.*

In their emphasis on rewards and penalties, most states have neglected comprehensive assistance. This trend, however, is changing as more states are recognizing that they need to build school capacity before they can effectively hold schools accountable for performance. Assistance provision is, in fact, one of the fastest growing areas of accountability.

States vary quite dramatically, however, in their definitions of assistance. In general, states seem to take one of three approaches (or some combination thereof) to defining assistance, including:

- Requiring schools to take general actions (e.g., attendance in specific professional development courses, adopt a whole-school design, etc.).
- Mandating a particular administrative process (e.g., requiring school improvement plans, etc.).
- Providing opportunities to match the specific needs of the school with specific forms of assistance (e.g., giving schools guidance and access to resources to help them align curriculum, address organizational development issues, or improve in-classroom interactions.).

The states that were studied emphasized the last two definitions of assistance. The depth and breadth of such assistance provided, however, varied.

States also differ in their specific approaches to providing assistance, as Table 5 shows. As of January 1999, 19 states provided some form of assistance—but again, the definition of this assistance varies. Most states have determined that assistance should be mandatory for low-performing schools. Not enough longitudinal data has been collected, however, to ascertain whether state-provided assistance works as well for schools that would voluntarily request it as it would for schools that are forced unwillingly to receive it.

Most states require districts to be involved in assistance. Some states, like Texas and New York, delegate virtually all responsibilities for providing school assistance to districts or regional service centers. In addition, most states provide additional funding allocations for schools that qualify for assistance.

**Table 5: Summary of State Efforts to Provide Assistance**

Source: Education Week, Quality Counts, 1999.

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Number of States</b>
<i>Number of States Providing Low-Performing Schools with Opportunities to Receive Assistance</i>	19*
<b>Evaluation of Needs / Conditions of Assistance</b>	
Have Schools Write an Improvement Plan	19
Offer Immediate Access to External Review Team, or Provide Options for Review Later in the Process	19
Require Districts to Also Assist Failing Schools	13
Make Assistance Mandatory for Low-Performing Schools	11
<b>Common Types of Assistance Offered</b>	
<i>Note: States may offer more than one type of assistance below.</i>	
Potentially Assign an Expert Educator to the School	12
Provide Access to Additional Funds	11
Provide or Make Available Professional Development for School Staff	7
Require or Strongly Encourage Schools to Choose from Research-Based Programs or Models	3
* Note: The same 11 states (FL, IL, IN, KS, KY, MD, MI, NV, NM, NC, TX)	

Most states use several methods of evaluating the specific needs of a particular school before allocating assistance. All 19 states require schools to write an improvement plan. In addition, as of January 1999, 13 states sent out an external review team immediately upon designating a school as low-performing to help assess a school's particular areas of concern. The remaining six states held the option to provide such an external review at some point during the assistance process.<sup>33</sup> While schools and principals are at times anxious about such a review, many accountability observers in the study states reported that schools seem to appreciate the opportunity to receive feedback on their work and suggestions for improvement.

States vary in how they create external review teams. Most states, including New York and Texas, use existing or retired teaching, administrator, and state department of education staff. In states like New York and Texas, then, the external review is a state-supported and state-

<sup>33</sup> Education Week. "Quality Counts '99, *op. cit.*

provided service. This approach helps to ensure some consistency in the reviews conducted. This approach may also, however, limit both the number of schools that can be visited and the perspectives and areas of expertise represented on the teams.

California has taken a different approach in its new pilot program, the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (IIUSP). California's model provides state funding for schools to purchase an external review from a marketplace of state-approved reviewers. This approach recognizes that state-supplied resources may not be sufficient to address all of the issues that may impair low-performing schools. Providers range from independent consultants, to university faculty, to large consulting organizations. In California, the external review is a state-funded, but externally provided, resource for schools. To be sure, California's marketplace approach does not solve all problems—the capacity, quality, and consistency of providers undoubtedly needs to be expanded in California—but the program is new and it will take time to see how the marketplace responds.

Once reviews or needs assessments have been completed, many states rely on state agency employees to provide assistance. Some states have found success in providing on-site mentors or coaches for low-performing schools. Kentucky's program of "highly skilled educators," for example, who are available to spend up to two years in a school guiding lessons and mentoring staff, has shown promise in helping schools make changes in teaching and the school environment that seem to have an impact on student learning. Of the 53 schools that were assigned distinguished educators in 1994, 100% reversed a declining trend in performance and 66% have moved into the rewards category.<sup>34</sup> While some of these programs anecdotally note that there are periods of trust-building and adjustment when such an outside mentor arrives at a school, many programs report that over time the schools and faculty are grateful for the on-site, long-term guidance and assistance.

Such assistance is, however, not always available. The capacity of Kentucky's "highly skilled educator" program, for example, is limited by state funding for the program. When the legislature reduced the program's funding by 40% in 1994-95, the program could support only 23 educators for about 150 eligible schools that at the time could volunteer for assistance.<sup>35</sup> Since then, as the program's popularity and effectiveness has increased, funding has grown and apparently stabilized. Today the program supports approximately 60 highly skilled educators. Though time and an effective program have helped stabilize Kentucky's assistance efforts, states just starting out in accountability will want to remember the all-to-common struggle of securing enough capacity for this important function.

Finally, states and districts are also providing more generalized forms of assistance. New York, for example, offers reading and math institutes for staff members from low-performing schools. These workshops are intended to expose key faculty members to the latest research on promising instructional methods in these areas. Other states provide similar opportunities. Whether such general, one-size-fits-all programs can make a significant difference in some of the deeply rooted problems that hamper low-performing schools is not yet clear.

#### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

States interested in accountability systems may want to consider the following suggestions developed during this look into other states' experiences with accountability:

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<sup>34</sup> Communication with Kentucky Department of Education.

<sup>35</sup> Elmore, Richard F., Charles H. Abelman, and Susan H. Fuhrman. "The New Accountability in State Education Reform: From Process to Performance." Holding Schools Accountable: Performance-Based Reform in Education, Ladd, Helen (ed.), Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1996.

- ***Focus on Building Real School Capacity:*** States are still learning how to effectively help schools build capacity. Few states ask schools to take responsibility for their own improvement and then give them the necessary flexibility and access to resources to reasonably do so. As states are learning, building school capacity is a more complicated task than sending schools generic “assistance” to quickly improve test scores. Rather, establishing a core mission and coalescing a staff around a shared vision of good instruction is hard work. The key to building real school capacity is to actively engage schools in the transformation process, giving them the flexibility to make changes and providing them with resources and advice that will enable them to truly reconstruct their whole learning environment. This can be an intense and long-term process.
- ***Ensure that Assistance is School-Specific:*** Building real school capacity requires on-site, school-specific assistance. Every school is different, as are the problems and challenges they face. The assistance and capacity-building they need, therefore, will vary. Certainly, some schools can improve with the presence of an experienced educator who can model lessons, share insights into effective teaching approaches, and provide feedback on classroom interactions. Such assistance can be valuable, but it cannot fit all situations. Some schools may face decidedly different challenges. In particular, schools that are loose associations of individual teachers who prefer to work independently often have great difficulty coalescing around a shared mission or vision. Schools in these situations may need an external consultant trained in organizational development to help them build a sense of coherence and shared effort.<sup>36</sup> Accountability systems that do not provide options to tailor assistance to the needs of the school miss a valuable opportunity to help some of the most dysfunctional schools and may indeed end up wasting money and time by giving schools assistance that does not address their core needs.
- ***Support and Sustain a Variety of Assistance Providers:*** Providing the range of assistance that schools will need may necessitate a broader variety of assistance providers than any state can offer directly. The state education agency can be an effective supplier of some school assistance services, as evidenced by the success of Kentucky’s “highly skilled educators” and other states’ experiences with similar programs. Securing funding for such state systems, however, has proven to be a real challenge for many of the states investigated, thereby limiting the number of schools that can be served. Thus, state assistance providers alone may not have the staff power to reach all schools that need help. Moreover, state departments of education lack the breadth of capacity to address all of the deeply rooted organizational issues low-performing schools may face. In some instances, external providers may be able to offer other forms of assistance more thoroughly and efficiently and may open schools to new approaches and ideas.
- ***Minimize the Stigma Associated with Assistance:*** It will be important for states just beginning an accountability process to think about ways to reduce the association of receiving assistance with being punished. In most other sectors in society, organizations receive external help as a means of continuous improvement. The private business sector spends significant resources on external consultants, not because businesses are “failures” but because they seek solutions. States interested in moving away from the rewards-penalties approach to accountability will have to find ways to ensure that assistance is viewed as an empowering tool. Perhaps the first step in minimizing the stigma associated with assistance is ensuring that assistance is not commanded from the top-down, but rather that it recognizes the individuality of the school and involves the staff actively in the transformation process.

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<sup>36</sup> Still other schools may not be able to turn-around their performance in a timeframe that will work for students currently attending the school—and the accountability system needs to provide options for students in these schools. The “safety net” section of this paper (Element 5) discusses these options.

The model proposed in Section IV of this paper provides some suggestions for creating this kind of capacity-building assistance for schools.

#### **4. Flexibility for schools to adapt to help their students meet the state standards of performance.**

##### *Trends in Providing Schools with Flexibility and Autonomy*

- *Some states have made attempts to provide some forms of flexibility and autonomy.*
- *In most instances, however, schools have not had the level of control over resources and key decisions that, in other fields, both public and private, would be considered necessary preconditions to performance accountability.*

Part of the shift to accountability for performance, in theory, is greater flexibility and autonomy for schools to do what they need to do to help their students learn. Each of the five states studied contends that it has begun to offer schools more flexibility as part of their accountability strategy. In many instances, however, it is hard to determine what exactly this means.

Texas took perhaps the most dramatic steps to provide school flexibility by rewriting and drastically simplifying its state education code before launching its accountability system. Schools and districts now have much broader opportunities to make decisions.

Other states provide less dramatic opportunities for greater school flexibility. Some states are offering the chance for schools that meet or exceed state targets to request waivers from some regulations. The theory is that schools that are doing well have “earned the trust” of the state and can thus be given additional freedoms to continue to serve their students. Texas and the proposed system for New York provide for such additional waiver opportunities.

Some states have recognized the need to extend waiver opportunities more broadly. Offering waiver opportunities to “trustworthy” schools is important, but can create a potential “Catch-22” situation. A school can only get a waiver when it is high-performing, but a regulation for which it needs a waiver may be the very barrier keeping it from being high-performing. California has recognized this situation and provides waiver opportunities to the low-performing schools participating in their pilot project (IIUSP). Texas also allows for the request of additional waivers from schools when the external review team recommends such actions.

Certainly the shift to accountability for performance has loosened some of the regulations on schools, but to what extent this has been offered and to what extent schools have utilized it, remains an open question.

##### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

This analysis has uncovered four important lessons for other states to consider about school flexibility:

- ***Offer Schools Broad Flexibility:*** No state has experimented with the radical decentralization and autonomy that would give schools the level of control over resources and key decisions that, in other fields, are considered preconditions to performance accountability. States have not devolved financial control for key inputs like teachers, instructional materials, and consultants to schools. Instead, most schools retain control over a very small portion of their operating budget—oftentimes not even having control over critical resources like professional development funds. In addition, schools have not been given the authority to make key decisions

about how they want to function. In California, for example, schools are under significant pressure to meet the state's class size reduction mandates, even if this means lowering standards for teacher quality at the school. Until schools have the sort of flexibility and autonomy to make such decisions, they will continue to be torn dysfunctionally between meeting compliance requirements and performance standards. States must recognize this dilemma and help schools avoid it.

- ***Ensure that School Leaders and Staff Know They Have Flexibility:*** Though Texas dramatically overhauled its state education code, an observer from an external education group in that state noted that not all schools and districts have capitalized on these opportunities. Some have been so trained and ingrained in the regulatory system that the new flexibility has, for them, been in law only. An accountability system can overcome this barrier, however, by ensuring that all schools and school leaders understand their freedoms and what this literally means for a school. In addition, states need to ensure some consistency in granting schools flexibility. Nothing will make schools more hesitant to assert autonomy than to feel that the rules might suddenly be reversed. Ensuring that schools and their staff have an understanding of the freedom and flexibility possible is important in setting the tone for an accountability system that recognizes that everyone, including the state, districts, and schools, must take responsibility for student learning.

- ***Provide Additional Waiver Opportunities, but Recognize Their Limitations:*** In some instances, it may be politically necessary to rely on waivers. Dramatic overhauls of the state education code may simply not be feasible. In these instances, broad authority for waivers needs to be available both to successful schools to sustain their success, and to struggling schools to help them improve. It is important to note, however, that waiver options cannot replace the sort of broad flexibility described above in Texas. Waivers leave the basic state and local rules and regulations intact, and school staff and leaders know they can be re-imposed at any time. Thus, waivers are important and may need to be available to provide flexibility, but they are not a replacement for greater forms of school autonomy that ensure schools will recognize and believe that the fundamental rules have changed.

In addition, however, states that are able to provide schools with broad flexibility may still need to offer additional opportunities to waive specific remaining rules and regulations. Additional waivers can complement broader school authority by providing opportunities to remove regulatory barriers from specific aspects of collective bargaining agreements, district-mandated programs, or other regulatory requirements. Such additional flexibility specific to a school's particular needs may be essential for improvement.

The model proposed in Section IV of this paper provides an example of broad flexibility for schools.

## **5. A safety net, assuring functional learning opportunities for students when school improvement is not possible.**

### *Trends in Providing Students with a Safety Net:*

- *Some states have provided a safety net for students in some schools.*
- *No state has yet created an effective safety net for all students in all chronically low-performing schools.*

As noted previously, several states (New York and Texas specifically) have been active in intervening in chronically low-performing schools, and in some instances have been successful in creating more functional learning environments for students. In these states and many others, however, there are still schools in operation that are not improving even after several years of being flagged for poor performance. Many of these states have the power to

intervene in low-performing schools but do not delineate the timeframe or conditions under which such interventions will absolutely occur. As a result, interventions fall prey to the intense pressures that can come from community and staff members who can mobilize vocal opposition to making changes at even a chronically low-performing school. Thus, because there is no consistent safety net, students cannot count on any intervention on their behalf. Moreover, it is not enough simply to take drastic action. A true safety net is one with reasonable plausibility that the intervention will result in improved learning opportunities for students. Ensuring this is not easy.

Other states, like Kentucky and North Carolina have implemented only a few interventions for chronic low-performance. Kentucky relies on providing students with the option to attend a higher performing public school. This policy will lead to the creation of a solid safety net only if there are enough functioning schools to accept all the transferring students. Without additional and targeted efforts to ensure a stable supply of space at such functioning schools, offering students choices may prove more symbolic than meaningful. North Carolina's retreat from tougher personnel interventions (like basic skills testing for teachers and personnel evaluation redesign) have, in effect, weakened the strands in the state's safety net.

California's new pilot program, IIUSP, holds out the claim of providing interventions for schools that fail to improve. California has a list of possible intervention options for schools that are not improving, including reassignment of staff, public school choice options for students, chartering options, "reorganization of the school," and potential closure. The state has not yet delineated exactly which actions will be taken and under what circumstances they will occur. Moreover, given that the IIUSP is currently a pilot program with a finite number of participants, a full safety net for all schools in the state has not yet been created.

Finally, states are experimenting with allowing students to transfer to independent schools and allowing independent parties to create new public schools in hopes of creating a safety net. The jury is still out, literally in some cases, on whether or not such approaches will be successful. Florida's voucher program, which provides private school tuition vouchers for students in chronically low-performing schools, is currently under judicial consideration for its constitutionality. Even if the policy survives judicial review, it is likely to face an extremely heated political battle. Moreover, it is not clear if the policy will ensure an adequate supply of good schools to serve the voucher students, nor whether the voucher amount offered is enough to cover the tuition at good schools. Nevertheless, it is a policy with a strong intent to provide a safety net option for students in chronically low-performing schools, and if proven constitutional, it will be interesting to follow its ramifications, consequences, and impact.

#### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

States contemplating the creation of an accountability system may want to consider the following issues that result from this analysis of other states' experiences:

- ***Recognize that Interventions Can Work:*** This discussion is not intended to indicate that no successful interventions have been implemented by states. Rather, as discussed previously, interventions like reconstitution have shown success and promise when they have been given time, leadership, resources, and political cover. In addition, some states are experimenting with options for a safety net that may hold promise. Colorado's consideration of chartering failing schools and New York City's practice of creating a separate "Chancellor's" district for low-performing schools are examples of ideas that suggest some hope for providing schools with the freedom and autonomy to make deep and meaningful changes. This discussion is intended to indicate, however, that no state has yet woven such interventions into a complete safety net that

protects the learning opportunities of all students in all schools deemed low-performing. This is the challenge facing states.

- ***Be Bold and Steadfast:*** To meet this challenge, states will need to be bold and steadfast. Creating a safety net will require the political will to take dramatic action on behalf of students in chronically low-performing schools. It will necessitate a willingness to face political challenges from those who benefit from the status quo at a school. Such political commitment will require a very focused, unwavering, and consistent message from the state's leaders. It will also necessitate serious, ongoing communication with the public and with educators, clarifying the need for, and goals of, a safety net.

It is clear that states continue to struggle with finding ways to ensure that all students are in functioning learning environments. States attempting to change the way schools are held accountable will need to recognize this challenge and plan for it. As one potential starting point, several strategies for providing a safety net for all students are provided in Section IV of this paper.

## **6. A comprehensive public information campaign that helps schools and the public understand the process.**

### *Trends in States' Use of Public Information Campaigns*

- *States are recognizing that public information efforts are important to building the public's and schools' understanding of the process.*

Building an effective public information campaign that will both help schools understand what they need to do to improve and help parents and community members understand what the process means is another element of accountability not given the attention it deserves. This is perhaps understandable—states have been overwhelmed with creating the right indicators and balancing rewards and interventions. Nevertheless, the lack of a clear communication strategy has proven problematic for some states where public anxiety about the system has created intense pressure and conflict.

New York has undertaken significant efforts to provide useful information about its accountability system to schools and the public. The State Department of Education produces several easy-to-understand brochures about the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) process, which include success stories of schools that have received assistance and improved. Such information is both necessary to build support for the system and to show schools that it is possible to turn around student achievement. Observers in New York note, however, that the state still faces a potential public relations challenge in convincing schools and the public of the importance and value of their full accountability system, reinforcing the truism that accountability, even with a clear, well-functioning information system, rarely enjoys smooth sailing.

Texas has also attempted to provide detailed information about the accountability system to schools and the public. Each year, the state department of education publishes an Accountability Manual that lays out the entire process and highlights any changes from previous years. In addition, the Texas Business Education Coalition (TBEC) has played an active role in distributing clear, public-friendly explanations of the system and how it works. The Prichard Committee in Kentucky, another independent, external group of community leaders, has also taken on the challenge of providing general information to the public about that state's accountability efforts.

In general, however, state accountability systems exist amidst much anxiety and confusion. Some people fear that accountability systems are out to get schools and will end up



punishing schools without recognizing the schools' hard work. Others worry that school performance is not being judged fairly. Much of this anxiety stems from states' lack of efforts to share upfront and openly with the education community and the public their intentions, reasoning, and rationale for creating the accountability system. Confusion and distrust all too often emerge from a lack of clear communication.

### Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:

States building accountability systems may want to consider the following lessons gleaned from this look into other states' experiences with accountability:

- **Recognize that Public Perception and Educators' Morale Matter:** Accountability systems need public support. The public needs to know that making hard decisions about school performance is important and that such decisions are made fairly and consistently. In addition, accountability systems must maintain the morale of educators. Too many accountability systems have put educators on the defensive and have forced them into a corner where their only recourse is to lash out at the standards-based system. Communicating a clear accountability system, with understandable and believable school performance indicators, and a mission that focuses on supporting, not punishing, schools is an important key step in building such efforts.
- **Send Clear and Consistent Signals:** A clear accountability system is also important to ensure that schools have transparent and stable signals about what they are expected to do and what types of improvement are acceptable. Without such clarity and stability, schools are left to aim for moving targets—creating discontent and accusations of unfairness.
- **Work to Overcome Pre-existing Anxieties about Accountability:** A public information campaign will be essential if states are to reverse some of the negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with the rewards-penalties approach to accountability. States that are interested in building school capacity and treating accountability as a reciprocal relationship—one in which the state, districts, and schools work together to help students learn--will need a clear strategy to overcome preconceived beliefs about the intent and goals of accountability systems. Several strategies for implementing such a campaign are offered in Section IV of this paper.

## **7. An independent body guiding the system and providing a check and balance on the political oversight of the system:**

### Trends in Providing an Independent Guide

- *States often rely on a short-term, public advisory committee or panel to help design their accountability system.*
- *Few states have a long-term external body with authority to provide an ongoing check and balance on political oversight of the system.*

Most states have used some sort of short-term advisory committee or blue ribbon panel to participate in the process of creating or refining their statewide accountability system. These committees provide an opportunity for all of the relevant players in public education to air their views and are intended to create general acceptance of the system. Typically, such committees are comprised of principals, teachers, superintendents, state education department staff, parents, university faculty, and representatives of the business community. Such committees are charged with developing the basic framework for, and specific details of, the accountability system.

Some states continue to use such advisory bodies in the ongoing implementation of their accountability system. Texas provides an example of this ongoing external check on the system.

The Texas accountability system is supported by an annual review process to finalize details of the current year's system and to plan for "big picture" recommendations. Advisory groups of educators, legislative staff, professional organizations, and business representatives are involved. Final decisions about the rating standards and criteria, however, are the sole responsibility of the commissioner of education. In addition, Texas' accountability efforts have been closely followed by the Texas Business Education Coalition (TBEC).<sup>37</sup> As its name implies, TBEC is a coalition of business executives and education leaders who promote and support education reform. TBEC was a consistent and strong supporter and influencer of Texas' accountability system and remains a force in sustaining the system's intent.

Kentucky's accountability system has also been supported by an independent guide of sorts. The accountability system itself was designed by a formal advisory council. As in Texas, the process has also been followed closely by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of parents, business leaders, and citizens.<sup>38</sup> It has provided a consistent external check on the education system by producing clear, accessible reports about the progress of accountability and standards-based reform in the state, and by actively offering suggestions and solutions to emerging questions about the system. Like TBEC, however, the Prichard Committee is an external organization with no explicit authority to act on behalf of the state.

California has created an accountability advisory system to help oversee the creation of the pilot state accountability program. This committee has had relatively broad influence. It remains to be seen, however, whether this advisory group will have ongoing authority once the primary elements of the system are in place. Many states across the country rely on their advisory panels or blue ribbon commissions more in the early stages of developing the system and then leave implementation to the state department of education.

#### *Suggestions for Washington and Other States to Consider:*

Washington state has created the Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission to help create and oversee the state's accountability system. Some in the state have questioned the need for another layer of bureaucracy. The independent guide envisioned in this paper is not, however, another layer of bureaucracy, but rather a means of providing consistent support for accountability when political pressures intensify. The following recommendations summarize suggestions for creating an effective and efficient independent guide:

- ***Recognize that Accountability Needs Consistency:*** An independent guide for the system has the potential to provide much-needed focus and stability to accountability. Accountability systems that have endured, like Texas' system, have done so, in part, because of the stability of the system. The rules have not changed frequently and the system has stayed true to its original course. Schools know what to expect and have had a chance to respond. An independent guide or commission with a sole focus on accountability can provide states and schools with this sort of stability.
- ***Create Checks and Balances on the Politics of Accountability:*** An independent guide cannot escape politics. A key issue to consider, however, is how to minimize the politics of the commission. One approach is to ensure that the commission members have staggered, multi-year terms, under appointment from the governor—much like the Supreme Court Justice process. This will not remove all political considerations from such appointments, but will limit their

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<sup>37</sup> TBEC website: <http://www.tbec.org>.

<sup>38</sup> Prichard Committee website: <http://www.prichardcommittee.org/cipl/cipl.html>.

impact. Further suggestions for creating such an independent guide are provided in Section IV of this paper.

### **General Summary of Accountability Across States**

Nationwide, accountability remains a work in progress. All states spend a lot of time talking about it. Some have spent time implementing portions of it. A few have learned from their experiences and are making potentially beneficial adaptations to it.

The rewards-penalties approach that has emerged as the basis for most states' accountability systems, however, has not yet answered three specific questions that an effective accountability system will address:

- *How to make sure schools that need to improve, and that recognize the need, can get effective assistance?*
- *How to put low-performing schools under pressure to improve without weakening them so they cannot improve?*
- *How to ensure that students are not left to flounder in a school that has little capacity or will for improvement?*

In short, no state has yet developed the “perfect” accountability system. Most states struggle with creating clear but fair indicators of school performance. Many are still searching for the right mix of performance incentives to adequately inspire improvement while discouraging stagnation. States, in general, have also not yet figured out how to build school capacity, while still providing a safety net assuring all students a functioning learning environment. Most also are still working on ways to ensure that schools have the necessary flexibility to balance their accountability expectations. And, many states are still trying to get out in front of public fears about accountability with a public information campaign that is clear, accessible, and meaningful.

It is clear, nevertheless, that important lessons can be learned from looking at the experiences of other states. As shown, some states have developed promising approaches to addressing some of these issues. Even though no state has yet done it, it is entirely possible to consider an accountability system that might address all seven elements of accountability delineated in this paper. Section IV, which follows, attempts to offer a model for such a system.

## SECTION IV: THE STRONG SCHOOLS MODEL — A POSSIBLE STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

This section proposes a framework for an accountability system that addresses the seven elements described in Section II of this paper. While this model was created with the circumstances of Washington state in mind, it could apply, with adaptation, to other states.

### *Underlying Philosophy of the Proposed Strong Schools Accountability Model*

The proposed model, the Strong Schools Accountability Model (hereafter referred to as the Strong Schools Model), is grounded in the belief that accountability will only work when incentives for performance are meaningful and properly balanced and when schools have the capacity to respond to them. The Strong Schools Model is also driven by the conviction that the ultimate goal of an accountability system should be to ensure that every student is in a school that will help him/her learn and meet state standards of achievement. Finally, the model is focused on schools as the locus for change. Ultimately, the test of an accountability system should be whether it promotes or discourages *school level* action on behalf of student learning.

The Strong Schools Model offers a departure from the existing rewards-penalties approach. Rather than assuming that all schools will either respond to a reward for a job well-done or will improve solely in an effort to avoid a punishment, the Strong Schools Model introduces a third key motivating element. Some schools, in fact, will need assistance in building their organizational capacity before they can respond to these incentives. The Strong Schools Model sees accountability as something bigger than simply a way to pass out recognition and punishment. Rather, as described in Section II as the primary vision of accountability, the Strong Schools Model sees accountability as a means of:

- Directing resources to schools that need assistance,
- Providing alternative learning options for students in schools that cannot improve,
- Celebrating, sharing, and sustaining the success of schools that are meeting or exceeding state performance and/or improvement targets.

In short, the Strong Schools Model is premised on the recognition that accountability is a reciprocal relationship—if the state is going to hold schools accountable for performance, the state also has an obligation to make sure that schools have access to what they need to actually meet these goals.

In addition, this model is quite transparent about what a state accountability system can do and what it cannot do. It does not try to create a judgment about a school that considers all of the tangible and intangible aspects of schooling and learning that are undoubtedly important. Rather, it recognizes that a state accountability system is just the first step in creating school accountability. The state can play an important role in holding schools accountable for basic student achievement, but it will be constrained by the limits of practicality in the types and depths of information it can provide about schools. Given these constraints, the Strong Schools Model recognizes that other forms of accountability are vital. State legislatures and departments of education must provide opportunities for other partners in accountability, such as local district leaders, parents and community organizations, and ultimately, a school's teachers and students. This model is based on the assumption that a state accountability system is not the whole solution to school improvement.

The Strong Schools Model acknowledges, however, the potential power and impact of an effective state accountability system. Such a system can ensure that schools that need to improve receive the additional funds, human resources, and advice or consultation they need to meet their

students' needs. It can also assure that no student is left to flounder in a school that is incapable of making improvements to help them meet state standards of learning. And finally, the Strong Schools system builds upon successes, serving as a powerful tool for sharing information about what has worked in schools that have made improvements and met state performance targets. As the first fundamental steps, these are powerful ingredients in helping our schools help our students.

### **Roadmap for this Section:**

This section describes a general framework for the proposed Strong Schools Model employing the same approach used to analyze the other states' accountability systems: viewing it through the lens of the seven elements of an effective accountability system. For these elements, a series of general operating principles that guide the model are delineated and examples of how these principles can be implemented in a state accountability system are offered.

The Strong Schools Model was designed with some specific technical criteria in mind. The main text that follows chronicles the basic design of the system. The specific details are included in technical appendices at the end of this report and referenced in the main text. Those charged with creating accountability systems may find such details helpful, though general readers should be able to grasp the concepts of the Strong Schools Model without such specificity.

### **The Strong Schools Model: A Proposed Framework for a State Accountability System**

#### **1. Fair, reliable, relevant, and understandable indicators of school performance.**

The Strong Schools Accountability model relies on an indicator process that attempts to balance the challenges of fairness and clarity as discussed earlier in this paper. Section III highlighted three suggestions for states to consider when selecting indicators of school performance: keep it simple, look for the patterns in the numbers, and consider student achievement first. Building upon these lessons, the Strong Schools Model is guided by the following key operating principles:

- ***The system must be clear, rationale, justifiable, and understandable.*** Schools need to be able to readily see what they need to do to improve. The public needs to easily understand what the state is and is not measuring about a school.
- ***The system should start by looking at basic student assessment performance data, but provide opportunities for looking beyond test scores to find the patterns in the performance indicators.*** As will be described in subsequent paragraphs, it is possible to create a system that uses several levels of data to create a deeper picture of a school's performance while still offering a process that is clear and easy to understand. The key lies in using the multiple indicators of performance as a method of prioritizing schools' and students' needs. The Strong Schools Model starts by looking at basic measures of student performance on statewide assessments. Such initial raw data helps determine which schools need a closer look—at which point additional performance data is analyzed. These deeper layers of performance data (e.g., additional test scores, teacher climate surveys, breakdowns of performance, etc.) should, however, be used in a prescribed order that keeps the focus on high levels of achievement for all students.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Organizations nationwide are working on developing additional, complementary indicators of school performance. The National Education Association (NEA), for example, has developed the "KEYS Survey" designed to help schools evaluate their performance, assets, and challenges. For more information see [www.nea.org/schools/keys.html](http://www.nea.org/schools/keys.html). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has also developed a series of

- ***The indicators should focus on both absolute levels of achievement and rates of improvement.*** A school’s scores on state tests indicate whether students are learning what they will need to succeed as adults. Thus, a low-performing school is a problem even if it is improving. The system should recognize improvement but also ask whether a given school is the best available learning environment for the children it serves.
- ***The system should recognize that ultimately, human judgments about the school’s needs will be necessary to appropriately assign assistance and interventions.*** Quantitative measures alone will not provide enough information to ensure that the proper resources (financial, human, or otherwise) are allocated to meet the specific needs of a school. This sort of determination requires a closer look at the school and an assessment of its intangible qualities—such as the learning environment, the effectiveness of teaching and leadership, etc. Such human judgment visits should be conducted by a select number of external evaluation teams under contract with the state. These teams should be specialists in school evaluation, not simply one-time associations of individuals brought together to evaluate one school.<sup>40</sup>
- ***The system should raise achievement expectations over time.*** Texas, for example, started its accountability system in 1994 designating schools with at least 25% of all students passing the statewide TAAS exam as “Academically Acceptable.” This bar has been raised each year. While the Strong Schools Model does not make recommendations about the specific initial cut-off point selected, it seems reasonable for the system to acknowledge that the shift to accountability for performance will take time and adjustments. To start out at the ultimate goal is to prescribe failure for many schools that, with time, might have been encouraged to meet the goal.

*Examples of an Indicator System Following These Basic Principles:*

The Strong Schools Model uses an information pyramid patterned after the work of education researcher Anthony Bryk from the University of Chicago.<sup>41</sup> As Figure 3 shows, the pyramid provides a way to prioritize data.

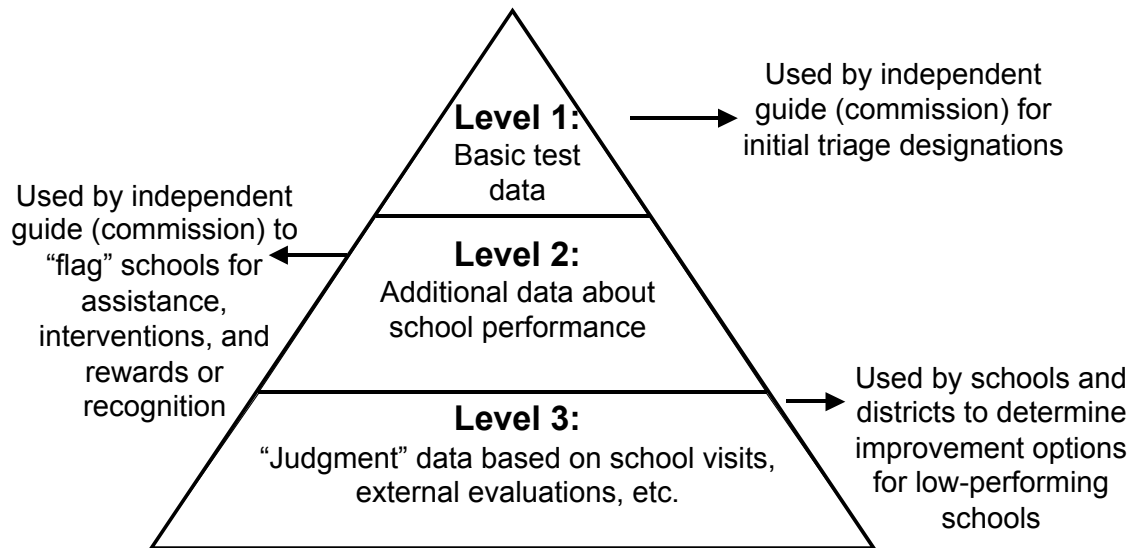
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guidelines for identifying schools in need of assistance, contained within their initiatives to address low-performing schools. For more information, see <http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/index.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> For example, in Massachusetts, charter schools receive an external evaluation by a state contracted reviewing organization. The organization specializes in training teachers, administrators, and others to serve on re-occurring evaluation teams. The model is based on the “inspection” system long-used in England.

<sup>41</sup> Bryk, Anthony S. and Kim L. Hermanson, “Educational Indicator Systems: Observations on Their Structure, Interpretation, and Use,” *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 19, 1992.

**Figure 3: Proposed Information Pyramid for an Accountability Indicator System<sup>42</sup>**



All schools’ performance will be analyzed and evaluated based on Level 1 data, which includes an average of all student’s scores (or the percent of students meeting standards) and improvement rates over a two-year period, as well as basic information about the number of enrolled students not tested, the number of students who have dropped out during the current school year, and a simple measure of the school’s ability to meet the needs of all of its students.<sup>43</sup> Based on this raw data, some schools will be making adequate progress. Others will require a closer look, either because the school appears to need assistance or because the school may be eligible for a reward or recognition.

The call for a “closer look” will initiate the analysis of more in-depth Level 2 information, including breakdowns of student performance, value-added or comparative measures, and teacher survey results of the school’s climate.<sup>44</sup> This second layer of data is still performance-based, but is considered in an attempt to find the patterns in the numbers that might indicate if a school is deserving of recognition or is in need of assistance. Depending on the Level 2 findings, Level 3 data from site visits by external evaluators may be collected to help determine the nature of assistance offered to the school or to determine if immediate interventions are required.

The Strong Schools Model’s use of progressively deeper information is similar to the process used by a hospital emergency room to “triage” or allocate medical resources to many patients with varying needs. In a hospital, the intent is to make certain that all patients receive appropriate care according to their needs and in a timely fashion. Initial information is gathered to ascertain which patients face life-threatening conditions—e.g., profuse bleeding, unconsciousness, chest pain, etc. Patients in extremely perilous conditions are quickly assigned to receive a closer look, whereupon much deeper information is gathered to create a full picture

<sup>42</sup> Adapted from: Bryk, Anthony S. and Kim L. Hermanson, “Educational Indicator Systems: Observations on Their Structure, Interpretation, and Use,” *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 19, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> These additional pieces of information will help determine if a school has artificially increased its basic performance data by encouraging some students not to take the test, or even drop-out. For a more detailed explanation of these measures and their meaning, see Appendix 2.

<sup>44</sup> See Appendix 2 for a complete and detailed list of the types of information proposed for Level 2.

of the patient’s medical condition. Other patients, judged in no immediate danger are treated differently and perhaps directed to other departments or providers.

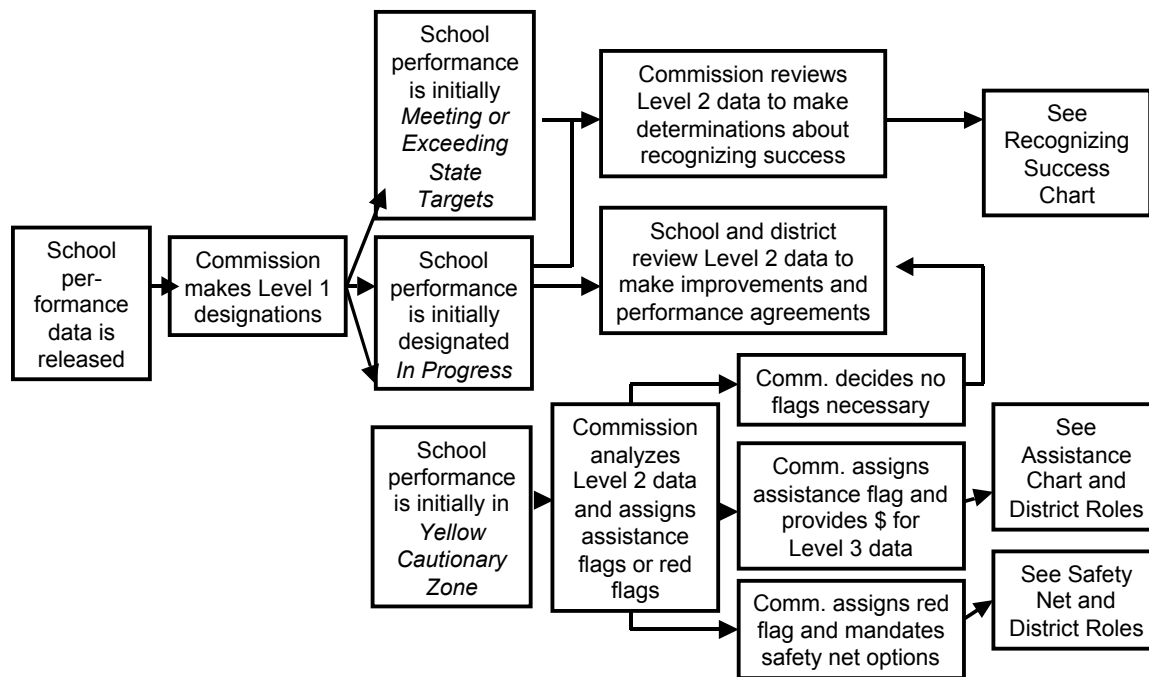
In a hospital, medical professionals are looking for the patterns in the various health statistics they collect (e.g., temperature, blood pressure, blood tests, etc.). They do not expect to know everything about every patient, but develop progressively deeper pictures of patients who are evidently in trouble. Once they have this broader picture the medical professionals can decide what treatments are necessary. Sometimes their further investigation indicates that the initial warning signals were misleading and the best approach is “watchful waiting.” Other times the patterns of data indicate that a major intervention is necessary.

In the Strong Schools Model, the accountability system’s independent oversight body (hereafter referred to as the commission) would follow an analogous “triage” approach to make its decisions about schools in need of assistance, interventions, and in fact, recognition. While hospitals only handle patients who are ill or injured, a parallel “triage” approach can be used to identify and ultimately recognize schools that are doing very well.<sup>45</sup>

The Strong Schools Model Decision-Making Process

Figure 4 provides another look at the same data included in the information pyramid. It provides an overall summary of the Strong Schools Model and the data that drives it.

**Figure 4: Decision-Tree for Strong Schools Accountability Model**



<sup>45</sup> In addition, an effective accountability system will have options for reviewing the performance of public alternative or niche schools and for incorporating the performance of special education students. Other states have made such provisions, although an analysis of this part of accountability is beyond the scope of this paper.



In brief, Figure 4 describes the following steps. First, the school performance data is released, describing the school’s performance on the statewide standards-aligned assessment. The commission uses this Level 1 data to initially assign schools to three categories:

- *Meeting or Exceeding State Targets*
- *In Progress*
- *In the Yellow Cautionary Zone*

Schools that are either *Meeting or Exceeding State Targets* have met all of the state’s immediate goals for student performance and improvement on the statewide assessment. These schools and possibly some of those that are *In Progress* and making rapid improvements, may be eligible for recognition and/or rewards. The commission will use Level 2 data to make these determinations.

Schools that are *In Progress* have met some but not all of the state’s immediate goals. They may have met the state’s improvement targets but not yet met the targeted achievement levels or vice versa. These schools will receive Level 2 data about their performance and should work with their districts to make improvement plans and performance agreements delineating how they will improve and how the district will help them do so. These schools are, in effect, assigned “watchful waiting.”

Schools that fall in the *Yellow Zone* are schools that require a deeper look and possibly some assistance. The commission will look at Level 2 data from these schools in an attempt to deduce a telling pattern about the school’s performance. The commission has three options based on the Level 2 data. First, the commission can decide that the Level 2 data indicates that a school is close to a breakthrough and can treat it as though it were *In Progress*, thereby not flagging it for assistance. Second, the commission can decide that the school needs additional help and can “flag” the school for assistance—which means initially providing it with funding for an external evaluation and potentially funding additional assistance for implementing improvements. Third, the commission can place a “red flag” on a school indicating that this is a school in need of more drastic interventions. For example, schools that have been in the *Yellow Zone* for more than two full accountability cycles may require such state-appointed red flags. Intervention options, which will be described later in this paper, provide assurances to students at these schools that a functioning learning environment will be made available to them.

The commission’s decisions to flag a school in the *Yellow Zone* should be driven by clear, transparent, and automatic criteria. The commission should establish at the outset a list of Level 2 thresholds that will be used to determine whether or not a school in the *Yellow Zone* receives a flag. This transparency is important because schools need to have a clear picture of what to expect. It is also important in limiting concerns about favoritism and subjectivity.<sup>46</sup>

Level 3 data will be collected by an external evaluation team that makes a multi-day, on-site visit to assess the assistance needs of the school. Level 3 data should include observations of teaching and leadership in action; interviews with faculty, parents, and students; and evaluations of classroom student work. The state would select a limited and highly qualified group of evaluation specialist organizations to receive a contract to evaluate schools requiring a Level 3

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<sup>46</sup> The accountability system must, however, account for exceptions. Districts should have an opportunity to appeal a school’s designation. If there are extenuating circumstances at a school that provide additional insight into a school’s performance, the commission should have an opportunity to consider them. Such appeals, however, should only be granted in instances where the information has a relevant impact on student performance—simply noting, for example, that a school has a “challenging” population of students is no excuse for not working to meet the state standards of learning. The state must make a conscious effort to keep focused on the needs of the students in such schools.

look. These organizations would be experts in school evaluation and would provide extensive training opportunities to prepare educators and specialists in instruction and organizational development to work together on a re-occurring basis to evaluate schools.

Schools will use the Level 3 data to create an improvement plan. This plan may include provisions for additional funding or resources necessary for implementation. It will also form the basis for a performance agreement between the school and its district, delineating intermediate performance targets for the school and clarifying how the district will help the school gain access to the resources or expertise it needs to improve.

Appendix 2 at the end of this report contains a more detailed description of the specific types of data that could be collected for Level 1, 2, and 3.

## **2. Predictable and Consistent Incentives for Performance**

Creating balanced and meaningful incentives is an important part of accountability. Schools should be encouraged to meet performance targets and should be discouraged from falling below them. “Encouraging” such behavior can take the form of external incentives—rewards or recognition for meeting or exceeding targets and consequences for low-performance. “Discouraging” low-performance can take the form of school-based assistance and interventions in chronically low-performing schools. The Strong Schools Model’s treatment of both types of incentives is discussed below.

### *Incentives to Encourage Success:*

Among the findings from the analysis in Section III of states’ experiences with “reward” systems were the following lessons learned: remember that non-financial rewards matter; use rewards to accomplish multiple goals; and be strategic with scarce monetary resources. Based on these lessons, the Strong Schools Model incorporates mechanisms of recognizing success that are designed to:

- Provide the flexibility and autonomy schools need to continue to improve.
- Publicly recognize and celebrate schools’ achievements.
- Share information about the approaches schools have used in attaining their success.

With respect to successful schools, the state’s main interest is in doing what it can to help these schools sustain their efforts. Sustaining success is not a given. It takes hard work and concentrated effort to continue to improve and achieve at high levels. Schools that are doing well need to be given additional freedom and autonomy to exploit success, solve problems, and renew staff and community commitment. These schools may need additional control over their professional development funds or may find that specific regulations are proving barriers to the next breakthrough.

In general, successful schools need to be largely left alone. District interventions can put these schools at risk—particularly the principal shuffle, in which districts move leaders from high-performing to troubled schools. This policy runs the risk of dismantling the delicate balance formed at the effective school and is not, in and of itself, a guarantee of improvement at the low-performing school. When things seem to be working in a school, an accountability system needs to let it continue to do so, and should instead focus on building the capacity of schools where things are not working. All schools with final performance ratings of *Meeting* or *Exceeding State Targets* should be rewarded by enhanced flexibility and autonomy.

Helping schools sustain success also requires recognizing and celebrating a job well-done. The Strong Schools Model recognizes the need for such reinforcement. Specifically, the model proposes a series of performance and improvement rewards to schools that meet

established, consistent reward criteria. These criteria, as described previously, should be a mixture of Level 1 indicators and a few select Level 2 indicators. For example, the state could offer the following rewards:

- High Performance awards: given to schools that show consistent high performance levels for all of the populations of students at their school, with minimal percentages of students scoring in the lowest percentiles.
- Improvement awards: given to schools that show high rates of improvement for all student populations and that show significant movement of students up and out of the lowest percentiles of performance.

Such rewards, which should always be based on clear, consistent, performance-based criteria will not necessarily go to all schools simply meeting a state's immediate goals, but rather those that have met these additional criteria. This ensures that the rewards will continue to carry meaning and significance rather than serve as a basic entitlement to any school that simply meets the state's basic standards.

In addition, as noted in Section III, the Strong Schools Model recognizes that the real power of rewards for success is in creating examples for others to follow. The Strong Schools Model, then, includes an additional reward:

- Innovation awards: given to schools that have made improvements via clear, deliberate, and potentially replicable models.

Schools that can articulate their strategy for improvement and want to share it with others can apply for the innovation rewards, which would be distributed after an external review team saw the model in action. Part of the reward would include recognition and opportunities to share the strategy. In addition, if any reward is to be financial, the innovation rewards deserve such remuneration, because they reward schools that have made improvements and can articulate how those improvements were made.

It is important to note, however, that while the Strong Schools Model does use recognition and rewards as a critical element and potential motivator, it does not use rewards alone. Its primary focus is on getting assistance and capacity-building support to schools that need to improve. The model uses scarce resources strategically, maximizing the amounts that can be used for schools struggling to improve. Thus the Strong Schools Model allocates relatively little money for rewards, relying primarily on public recognition and other forms of celebration that may be valuable to schools and teachers.<sup>47</sup> While there is some evidence that financial rewards are motivating, there are also indications that factors like public recognition are also motivating without the side-effects of transferring funds from troubled schools to successful ones.<sup>48</sup> There may be specific instances when financial rewards are important politically and symbolically, but there should be strict limits on expenditures for this purpose.

Finally, the Strong Schools Model encourages other entities, including local districts and community organizations, to provide their own additional rewards and recognition for schools on criteria that they find valuable and meaningful. As stated previously, the Strong Schools Model takes seriously the recognition that a state-level accountability system is merely a starting place for developing school accountability.

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<sup>47</sup> The Strong Schools Model also strongly encourage states to ask schools what kinds of rewards or recognition they would find meaningful. To date, most states have simply assumed that monetary bonuses and plaques or flags were motivating. Asking teachers and staff would undoubtedly yield additional insights.

<sup>48</sup> Kelley, Carolyn, Allan Odden, Anthony Milanowski, and Herbert Heneman III, "The Motivational Effects of School-Based Performance Awards," *CPRE Policy Briefs*, RB-29-February 2000.

Appendix 3 at the end of this report contains a more detailed description of the implementation process for recognizing and sustaining success.

### *Incentives to Discourage Low-performance*

As described in Section III, an accountability system also needs incentives to discourage low-performance. Though educators care about children and will work hard to teach effectively, some schools fall into unproductive habits. When staff members are divided or discouraged about their ability to teach children effectively or of their students' ability to learn, exhortation to do better and rewards for other schools do not affect them. Threats or "penalties" for low-performance can effectively communicate a sense of urgency and may motivate change when a school is not focusing all of its energy and capacity on the right things, but it may have little impact on a school that lacks the capacity or will to respond.

Other states, following the rewards-penalties approach to accountability, have assumed that most, if not all schools, would be able to change if only the negative incentives were strong enough. The Strong Schools Model recognizes that this is not always the case. Some schools may be willing to change but lack the capacity to know what to do. Others may simply be unwilling to change, regardless of the potential cost. In these instances, a school is either in need of assistance and should have access to it, or it is intractable and should be replaced.

Continuing to rely on penalties when a school lacks the capacity to change or is resolutely unwilling to do so will fail to address the needs of the students and may, in fact, exacerbate the problems at these schools. Penalties, for example, will only make a school less attractive to good teachers and conscientious parents. If a school has not responded to the accountability system's pressures to improve, there is little point in driving the school to worse and worse performance. In these instances, the accountability system must determine if the school is inclined and capable of improving and if not, provide an alternative. Individuals at the school site may consider such actions penalties, but, in fact, the focus has shifted from penalizing an existing entity to creating a new one from which to build student achievement.

The Strong Schools Model recognizes that low-performance at a school may have different ultimate sources. For schools that need motivation and can respond to incentives, the model includes public ratings of school performance and has clear criteria for further threats of interventions in the Safety Net mechanisms (described below in Element 5) if the schools choose not to respond. For schools that need help in building their capacity to respond to the accountability system, the model offers opportunities for assistance (described below in Element 3) and shares examples of what has worked through its rewards mechanisms. For schools that are incapable or unwilling to improve, the Strong Schools Model provides clear Safety Net mechanisms to provide the students in the school options to learn in functional environments.

Certainly, many schools can be improved with effective assistance—and by all means they should have the opportunity to do so. However, the alternative for schools that show no indications of the capacity or willingness to improve is not for the state to punish the staff. The alternative is to abandon efforts to motivate, incentivize, or buy change at the school, and instead work to create new options for the students in the school. Elements 3 and 5 below address these "consequences" for low-performance.

### **3. Opportunities for schools to build their capacity to ensure that those that need to improve have the tools and resources to do so.**

An accountability system can be a way to direct resources to schools that need additional help to reach all of their students. Assistance can be a support to be leveraged, not a stigma to be tolerated. It must be presented not as a way for schools to avoid the next, more stringent

intervention, as it is in many states. Rather, assistance should be offered as a recognition on behalf of the state that accountability is a reciprocal relationship—one in which the state accepts responsibility for creating circumstances that allow a well-motivated school to succeed.

The Strong Schools Model is built on six principles of assistance:

- ***Schools face a variety of challenges and there are no silver bullet solutions applicable to all schools.*** Some schools are low-performing because their curriculum is not aligned with the state standards. Others struggle because the faculty has always worked in isolation without the benefit of a shared sense of mission. Others still are caught in a culture of low-expectations and little sense of efficacy to help their students reach the state standards. These are very different problems and require very different types of assistance to fundamentally change the learning environment in the school. A one-size-fits all approach to assistance bulldozes the unique and varied character of schools.
- ***Assistance must be school-specific and on-site in an effort to address the special needs of each school.*** This approach requires a major shift from the professional development programs of today. While there may still be a need for general professional development programs that keep teachers up-to-date on specific curricular areas and the state standards, for the most part, assistance in low-performing schools should be school-specific and can be neither general nor the same for every school.
- ***Building school capacity is a more complicated task than providing quick fixes for small changes in improved performance.*** Rather, building school capacity requires a commitment to find the source of a school's struggle and providing the resources and time to address the issues at the school's core.
- ***A variety of qualified assistance providers will be necessary to meet demand for the variety of school needs.*** Given this need for intense, in-depth assistance to meet a variety of needs, the Strong Schools Model relies on an open marketplace of external providers to meet demand.<sup>49</sup> This marketplace of external assistance providers should include, but not be limited to the following types of providers:
  - Specialized training providers (i.e., curricular specialists);
  - Principal or teacher coaches from successful schools;
  - Direct providers of instruction;
  - Management consultants or educational consultants;
  - School turn-around specialists (i.e., organizational development consultants);
  - Whole-school design organizations

These providers have the potential to cover the broad range of assistance schools might need. It is clear that the state and local education agencies should be one of the providers of these kinds of assistance—and in fact, in the early years, they will bear heavy burdens while the supply side of the marketplace responds to the new demand. Schools, however, should have additional options for help—options not constrained by the size or expertise of the state department of education.

- ***The state should play a key role in assuring the quality of assistance providers.*** The state will need to play a strong oversight role, assuring the quality of assistance providers. Ongoing evaluations of assistance providers and basic qualifications checks will be essential to ensuring that schools are actually getting the assistance they need. The state can further their quality assurance role by encouraging the dissemination of performance evaluations of

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<sup>49</sup> These providers should be separate and distinct from those who provide the external review for a school to avoid the appearance of direct conflicts of interest.

assistance providers by recipient schools. The state will also play an important venture-capitalist role, by sponsoring start-up for assistance providers and by developing a quality assurance mechanism for overseeing them.

- ***The provision of assistance should be accompanied by the presence of a performance agreement.*** The performance agreement should delineate what sort of assistance will be provided to the school and, in turn, how the school will show intermediate improvements. This document should be a written, formal agreement between a district, the assistance provider, and a school. The agreement should delineate exactly what assistance will be provided to the schools by whom and also should clarify the reasonable intermediate (e.g., one-year and two-year) improvement targets the school will show as a result of the assistance. This agreement lets schools and districts know if they are on-track in improving performance, provides a clear definition of each party's roles and responsibilities, and ultimately defines each group's accountability to the other. Without such a document, schools may feel that the entire burden for change is upon them and districts may feel that they have few options to determine a school's intermediate progress.

Appendix 4 at the end of this report provides more specific details about implementing these principals of assistance in the Strong Schools Model.

#### **4. Flexibility for schools to adapt to help their students meet the state standards of performance.**

A policy structure alone cannot ensure good schools. Good schools need to be problem-solving, initiative-taking organizations that focus every effort and resource on students' learning. An effective accountability system can help create a conducive environment for such schools. Accountability puts all of the faculty of a school in the same boat, where collaboration and focus become integral to moving forward. Collaboration and focus, in turn, help to create good schools.

Creating problem-solving, initiative-taking organizations means providing schools with the autonomy and flexibility to make real decisions. The Strong Schools Model allows for such autonomy by adopting the basic recommendations about flexibility from Section III of this paper: schools need broad freedom of action, they need to know exactly what freedoms they have and do not have, and they need additional opportunities to request waivers from remaining regulations if they stand in the way of effective teaching and learning.

Freedom of action at the school level is important for two primary reasons. First, schools need to be free to adapt instruction to the needs of their current students. Second, school staff must know that the important decisions are theirs as professionals--not those of distant others who have taken matters out of their hands. When school staff are recognized to have such professional judgment, they are more likely to accept responsibility for their results and the decisions and choices they make.

The Strong Schools Model calls for broad changes in the way funds and decisions are allocated to schools. Schools become cost centers—able to spend their entire funding allocations in ways that they determine will best meet the needs of their students. Schools also become the locus of decision-making and control. Schools should be relieved of the burdensome regulations that have accompanied accountability for inputs and should be given the freedom to pursue different approaches that have results for their students.

Schools will also need to have the ability to pool existing categorical funds into meaningful amounts of money to guide and fund their improvement. Schools today are too often hamstrung by grants or funds that can only be used in specific ways—leaving them with few available resources to focus on broader issues of school mission and organization. As Hill and

Lake note, “Fundamental improvements...can require major changes in school staffing, instructional materials, teacher training, and student assessment. Such changes are possible only when schools are relieved of regulation and have freedom to reallocate funds.”<sup>50</sup>

In the proposed Strong Schools Model, freedom of action and responsibility would be located in schools. Districts would have important roles to play, though their primary function would shift from controller of funds and allocator of resources to supporter of school improvement efforts. A district should focus on providing access to the resources and expertise schools may need to improve or to sustain their improvement. Districts would also manage detailed performance agreements with their individual schools, delineating both how they will help schools improve and how the school will prove it is making progress. Schools, however, would remain whole organizations given the freedom to guide their destiny and held accountable for the decisions they make along the way.

In addition, the Strong Schools Model calls for an extensive public information campaign (described below in Element 6). This campaign would include clear efforts to educate school leaders and faculty about their autonomy and would build their capacity to make use of such flexibility.

Finally, as described in Element 3 above, the Strong Schools Model will also allow for additional forms of flexibility via the use of waivers. While schools should have broad flexibility in general, there will be instances when additional waivers will be necessary (e.g., hours and days of operation, reducing administrative staffing to increase the number of people in the classroom, contracting with independent organizations—colleges and other schools—to provide instruction in subject areas not adequately covered by existing staff, etc.). Such opportunities may be important to both struggling schools and successful ones.

#### **5. A safety net, providing alternative learning opportunities for students when school improvement is not possible.**

As the analysis in Section III uncovered, an accountability system must recognize that some low-performing schools will not be able to change dramatically enough to improve their basic performance levels. Though many low-performing schools can develop effective new approaches to instruction, a few are too weakly staffed or too internally divided to do so. In these instances, a state must fulfill its responsibility to the children by intervening to create alternative learning opportunities. The state must create a series of interventions that, in effect, build a safety net to ensure that all students attend a school with a functioning learning environment able to help them learn to state standards.

No state has effectively managed this “safety net-building” process, yet without it, an accountability system is incomplete. The ideas presented here, therefore, are logical, but untested. As states continue to work on their accountability systems they will undoubtedly learn more about how to create options for children in persistently failing schools.

#### ***Short- and Long-Term Safety Net Strategies***

The Strong Schools Model takes a two-tiered approach to providing a safety net. First, it recognizes the need for immediate, short-term interventions when it becomes clear that a school is not capable of improvements soon enough to salvage current students’ learning opportunities. Students should immediately have options to attend other public schools, including those outside

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<sup>50</sup> Hill and Lake, *op cit.*

of the district if the space and options are not available in their district.<sup>51</sup> In fact, within their district, students from persistently failing schools should have first-choice among all public school options. Such measures, however, are not complete solutions, particularly if there are few good alternatives or if all desirable placements are full. They are, rather, temporary signals that the school system is serious about its responsibility to children.

Second, the model acknowledges the need for short-term fixes to always be followed by a series of longer-term solutions. This paper offer several ideas and encourages states to consider others. While pursuing such options may prove expensive and politically challenging, they may be necessary, unless the state is prepared to acknowledge that nothing can be done about the quality of education available to some children. The commission will have to grapple with the key issues of what are “reasonable” expenditures and timeframes for such interventions.

The Strong Schools Model offers four long-term options:

- Redesigning the school, while, if necessary, the students are taught by an effective “mobile” school.
  - Moving the school to a special “accountability” district.
  - Opening a new school in the area
  - Releasing a request for proposal for management of the school (e.g., for community nonprofit organizations, or existing school providers to assume management of school, etc.).
- ***Redesigning the School, While Students Attend a “Mobile” School:***

States could create time for chronically low-performing schools to undergo dramatic redesign. Too often approaches like reconstitution or redesign have occurred under extremely tight timeframes—timeframes that are unreasonable for a dramatic organizational transformation. If necessary, the state could, in effect, “buy” the necessary time by funding cadres of mobile faculty and staff. These mobile school faculties would be whole teams, travelling as a unit. They would take over instruction at a chronically low-performing school for some time period (half-a-year to a full-year), while the existing faculty has an opportunity to work on redesigning a more effective learning environment. The mobile team would focus on the basics, making every effort to help students improve to the state standards. The team would be comprised of expert teachers who have experience working successfully with students scoring below the standards.

While the team worked with the students, the faculty of the low-performing school would receive extensive external assistance in planning for a new organization and a new instructional approach. Existing faculty who felt uncomfortable with the process or the new direction of the school or whom the school leadership determined would not effectively meet the school's requirements could apply to transfer to other schools. New faculty brought into the school would need to accept the school’s new focus and mission.

Mobile team teachers could commit to a two-to-three year period of service and could receive extra compensation for their duties. Such service will be intense and undoubtedly quite challenging. Experienced teachers who finish their mobile service and chose to return to a stable school would be extremely valuable additions to a school’s staff. The state could make additional funding available to provide incentives for these highly experienced teachers to move

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<sup>51</sup> As mentioned previously, some states and districts are experimenting with private school vouchers for students in chronically low-performing schools. Such policies are quite new and their effects are not yet clear. The feasibility of utilizing such an option will depend on the availability of good private school options and the political environment of the state considering the accountability system.



to high-needs schools. This incentive would leverage the specialty skills of these teachers both for the time of their service in the mobile school team and afterward. In addition, the mobile faculty could also include recently retired teachers, with provisions that allowed them to maintain their retirement benefits while re-entering the workforce.

- ***Opening a New School:***

Another option is for the commission to instruct the district to open a new school in the same geographic area as the existing low-performing school. This approach may work well with clusters of low-performing schools. The state can help the district ensure that the new school has a high potential for improvement by investing in adequate assistance for the start-up and planning of the new school. Supporting a new schools incubator, which would provide the new school faculty and staff time and assistance to plan and prepare, would be a first step in assuring the success of the new environment. The state could also offer incentives for neighboring higher-performing districts to collaborate in the creation of the new school.

- ***Releasing an Request For Proposals for Management of the School:***

The commission could also instruct the district to release a request for proposals for the management of the low-performing school. Existing school providers (i.e., educational management organizations) and local community groups with relevant expertise may choose to apply for the opportunity to run the school. The local district and the commission could have some final oversight in the selection of the most appropriate provider and could create clear performance agreements with the provider to ensure that the learning environment is improving for the students.

- ***Moving the School to a Special “Accountability” District:***

A state may also want to consider creating a separate governance structure for schools that are chronically low-performing and in need of intervention. Some schools may benefit from the redesign options that are possible when the school is in an environment that allows for significant autonomy, oversight, and assistance. Schools in the accountability district could have access to a “mega-waiver” that would give them significant freedom from existing state and local rules. In exchange, however, they would be held tightly accountability by the state superintendent. New York City provides a model for this type of movement, with the creation of the Chancellor’s District as a means of oversight for chronically low-performing schools.

Creating a separate governance structure for chronically low-performing schools removes them from the policy environments in which they continued to struggle and provides the opportunity for increased flexibility—e.g., increased ability to make decisions about personnel and hiring—and increased technical support and assistance. Chronically low-performing schools are different than other schools. A new “accountability district” could recognize the different needs of these schools and provide direct oversight and assistance to them.

*Activating the Safety Net:*

Selecting one of these long-term safety net options will depend both on the depth of the challenges facing the existing school and the human, capital, and financial resources available in the school’s community. A state need not rely solely on one of these interventions, but rather should have a repertoire of such options to tailor their actions to the needs of the school and its students. While the options described are not low-cost, if they actually result in new learning environments that work for the students, then they are likely to be far more efficient than other approaches that only scratch at the surfaces of the schools’ performance issues.

Perhaps the most difficult question related to building an effective safety net revolves around clarifying which parties have authority to demand them. In the Strong Schools Model,

the state would bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that students are not left to flounder in low-performing schools, but districts and local communities would have an opportunity to offer a viable plan to intervene first. As part of the safety net process, the state would notify a community and district that the students at a school were in need of safety net options and the commission would compile a list of possible interventions. The community could, however, offer its own plan for intervention, and if the commission deemed it feasible and likely to improve the learning opportunities for the students, the local plan would be implemented first. Ultimately, the commission, however, will have the final responsibility for selecting the best safety net option for the students in the school. Further details about the actual safety net process can be found in Appendix 5 at the end of this report.

The Strong Schools Model's safety net approach provides three primary benefits. First, it ensures that students are not left to flounder in schools that cannot improve. It sends the strong signal that the state does not tolerate such situations, and that it is willing to provide new options on behalf of the students. Second, it balances local control with state responsibilities. Local districts have the first opportunities to help low-performing schools in the initial assistance phases (see Element 3). Local districts and communities also have the opportunity to present their own viable plan for building a safety net when such interventions are deemed necessary. The model, however, provides the chance for the state to be impatient with districts that are either unwilling or unable to provide a safety net for its students. Third, this approach provides several different safety net options, including some that may be effective in rural communities (e.g., the mobile school option) and others that may be beneficial in urban areas (e.g., opening a new school). Such variety creates a broad safety net that can help ensure learning opportunities for students.

## **6. A comprehensive public information campaign that helps schools and the public understand the process.**

The Strong Schools Model also calls for the commission to play a key role in launching a large-scale public information campaign to generate understanding and support of accountability for performance. As the analysis in Section III revealed, a public information campaign needs to send clear signals about the way the accountability system will work, and it needs to overcome pre-existing anxieties about accountability.

A state may best be served in this process by working with an experienced and knowledgeable public relations or public affairs firm. Accountability systems live or die by their public perception. It is worth investing in public information efforts that will appropriately explain the system and the reasons for its existence. This effort need not be propagandized, but rather should be grounded in a clear strategy to make sure the public is informed about what the accountability system is and what it is not. Debunking the myths before they occur will be a key strategy to starting the accountability system off right.

In addition, such a strategy can play an essential role in setting the tone for the whole system. To date, accountability systems have generally been met with hesitation and skepticism by educators and members of the public who view them as punishment or ways to "get" public schools. The proposed Strong Schools Model takes a decidedly different view, choosing instead to think about accountability as a way to drive resources to schools that need assistance; provide alternative learning options for students; and celebrate, share, and sustain schools that are exceeding state performance targets. Such basic tenets of an accountability system designed to build strong schools will be lost, however, if they are fumbled in a misguided, haphazard explanation of the plan to educators and the public. A comprehensive public relations strategy can help guide the tone of the system's main messages and send a strong signal that accountability is not only about performing better but also about providing the support necessary to do so.

## **7. An independent, external body guiding the system and providing a check and balance on the political oversight of the system:**

Finally, as described throughout this paper, the Strong Schools Model is driven by an independent accountability commission charged with both creating and overseeing the system. Washington state has already created such a commission with some of the necessary powers and functions.

The commission should be much more than an advisory panel. It needs the authority and public presence to make recommendations to the state department of education regarding:

- School performance goals and means of assessing school performance.
- Criteria for distributing recognition and/or rewards to successful schools.
- Criteria for providing assistance to schools that need to improve.
- Recommendations for creating and supporting a variety of assistance providers and holding them accountable for the quality of services they provide schools.
- Criteria and recommendations for intervening in chronically low-performing schools.
- Assessments of districts' performance in improving their schools.
- Ongoing evaluation of the accountability system and process.
- Building public understanding and support for the system.

Ultimately, a state's department of education will have the final authority in running the accountability system. However, the commission can provide an important external check on this potentially political process. The mission of the commission should be to keep the state focused on the intent of accountability and to avoid potentially derailing political distractions. As Hill and Lake note,

Establishing a statewide accountability commission would emphasize that improving school performance is everybody's business. A powerful statewide commission is a safety measure. Its existence might encourage educators to act more quickly and aggressively on behalf of children in weak schools. It is also a final protector for children whose schools and districts will not act.<sup>52</sup>

The commission should be small enough to be efficient, but large enough to provide representation of teachers, school administrators, parents, and business and community representatives. Commission members should be appointed by the governor and should hold delimited, staggered terms, so that no one governor appoints a majority of the commission during one of his/her terms in office. A commission created on these terms has the potential to give a state accountability system the time it will need to become an ingrained and accepted part of our public education system.

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<sup>52</sup> Hill and Lake, *op cit.*

## SECTION V: EXPANDING THE MODEL—IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

This section expands and broadens the Strong Schools Model by acknowledging that it is not self-implementing. There are important additional issues that must be considered, including the necessary conditions for effective implementation, financing the model, the role of districts and other governmental and private actors in supporting it, and the potential roadblocks to the model's success.

### ***The Necessary Conditions of the Strong Schools Model***

Individual states may need to make minor adjustments or adaptations to the accountability model proposed in this paper. An accountability model should, after all, reflect a state's values and priorities. It must be noted, however, that there are necessary conditions that must be present in order for the basic framework of the Strong Schools Model to work effectively. This section concludes with a description of these conditions and an explanation of their importance. Some of these conditions may be present in Washington state, others may not yet be in place. The full list is included, however, as a reminder that all of these supporting components are necessary to strike the delicate balance of an effective accountability system.

The necessary conditions for the Strong Schools Model include:

- ***Use of a standards-aligned, valid and reliable, unbiased, annually up-dated, and generally accepted assessment that includes opportunities for critical thinking and understanding.*** The proposed accountability model must be driven by a reasonable and effective assessment of student learning. The assessment must be aligned to and based on the state standards of learning. Because consequences are attached to performance on these assessments, the state must have reassurances that the assessment is valid, reliable, and unbiased. The assessment must be challenging but attainable for the students in specific grades. It need not be offered every year, but rather at regular and reasonable intervals if it maintains validity and reliability. It must also be regularly updated so that all potential topical areas are covered and assessed. And, finally, it needs to be an assessment that is generally well-regarded by the public and educators as a fair assessment of student learning. Without these tenets, the assessment is likely to be an unpredictable indicator of performance and the entire system will rest on shaky ground.
- ***Availability of additional, incremental student and school performance data to ensure that teachers and schools have early information to guide their instructional approach for each student.*** The Strong Schools Model implies the need for data analysis information centers that support several school districts in an area. These centers can provide analyzed data for schools to use in decision-making about human resource needs, financial management, and instructional approaches.<sup>53</sup> They can provide schools with consolidated data reports highlighting important trends and information comparing the school to others in the district or area. This sort of institutional capacity would free schools from having to manage data collection and analysis, while still providing them with valuable information to guide good decision-making.
- ***Pressure or efforts to create an adequate capacity of school assistance providers.*** The Strong Schools Model also necessitates that a state can stimulate an adequate supply of external reviewers and assistance providers. Since demand for such providers has historically not been as high as it will be under the accountability model, many states do not yet know the ultimate capacity of such providers. States need to assess, however, whether

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<sup>53</sup> For suggestions of this kind of data collection, see Roza, Marguerite. "Rethinking Data Systems for Urban School Districts," a presentation prepared for the Washington State Education Policy Forum, March 2, 2000.

potential may exist, and to consider what sort of incentives and support will be necessary to assure an adequate supply of quality providers.

- ***Commitment from state leadership to make tough decisions and stick with them.*** The proposed state accountability model also needs a strong commitment from state leadership. States have to be able to commit to a plan of action. Threats without action will eventually backfire. An effective accountability system needs the consistent support of state leaders who recognize the need to make politically hard decisions on behalf of students. A state that shows signs of wavering on the creation of a safety net; or a state that tries to prescribe teaching methods thereby violating the principle that schools are responsible for making key decisions, for example, will not be able to support the accountability model proposed in this paper.
- ***Opportunities for other entities to also hold schools accountable.*** State leadership must also work hard to ensure that the state accountability system does not crowd out other forms of accountability that are necessary for effective schools—accountability to parents, teachers, and the broader community. A state system must include opportunities and incentives for these additional groups to also get involved in helping schools focus on student performance. Community groups should help disseminate further information about school performance, and parents should have the ability to choose their child’s school. Ultimately, the most effective forms of accountability will be those that encourage a school to create its own forms of internal accountability. A state system cannot do this on its own.
- ***Support from other aligned educational policy initiatives—i.e., efforts to increase teacher and leadership supply, etc.*** An accountability system must be supported by educational policies that respect and promote school-level decision making and that respond to the needs schools will have, such as efforts to promote teacher and leadership quality. The proposed accountability model needs to be considered one of the centerpieces for the state’s education reform efforts and other future policies need to work with, not against it.

### **Financing Accountability**

The Strong Schools Model is not a low-cost approach to accountability. Providing assistance, external reviews, and real options for a safety net are all labor and cost-intensive strategies. Existing funds for school improvement, assistance, and professional development should be pooled to provide schools and districts access to funding sources to meet their specific needs. These resources, when pooled together, could be quite large. Additional allocations, however, may be necessary. A state serious about accountability should recognize this potential and prepare for it.

Costs should be shared when possible. The state may, for example, want to consider asking districts or schools for some sort of matching responsibility as a condition for receiving assistance funding.

In addition, the state and districts should think creatively about external sources of funding for some of the important supporting initiatives to complement this proposed system. Philanthropy, for example, could help fund regional data processing centers or the public relations campaign described in Element 6. Philanthropy may also be interested in supporting additional efforts to recognize schools and to help build a clearinghouse of best practices from the innovation reward schools. The core funding for the accountability system should come as a government responsibility, but the state may need to look to outside resources for additional support.

## *The Special Role of Districts and Other Entities*

The Strong Schools Model also recognizes the importance of holding districts accountable and of encouraging other entities to be involved in the entire process.

### **1. District Roles and Responsibilities**

In the Strong Schools Model, districts' primary functions are to help their schools improve or sustain their success. To do this, districts should:

- Provide the environment successful schools need to sustain their success, which may include leaving them alone;
- Help schools find appropriate assistance resources and negotiate waivers from regulations when necessary;
- Provide some direct assistance as necessary;
- Review school improvement plans and assign assistance resources according to need and feasibility;
- Enforce performance agreements between schools, assistance providers, and the district;
- Oversee safety net options for schools deemed incapable of improvements.

These roles create districts with the core duties of supporting and helping schools.

Given this vision of a district's primary role, the Strong Schools Model holds districts (and potentially groups of rural districts) accountable for helping schools improve or sustain success. This approach still provides districts with performance accountability, but it ensures that the incentives for districts will complement, not compete with the incentives for schools. When districts and schools are held accountable for exactly the same thing, there is the potential for the district to try to centralize and control the options available to schools. When districts are instead held accountable for the support they provide their schools to improve or sustain success, they face incentives to work in partnership with schools.

More specifically, the Strong Schools Model employs a state-run district accountability system similar to the one proposed for schools. This state accountability system would:

- Provide assistance to districts that are struggling to support their schools;
- Assure new alternatives for schools in districts that are incapable of providing necessary support (e.g., chartering the district, board takeover, etc.);
- Sustain, celebrate, and share information about districts that are effectively supporting school improvement.

A parallel information pyramid would be constructed by the commission to assess the performance of districts. Level 1 indicators would include the percentage of a district's schools in the *Yellow Zone* that moved out of the zone in one accountability period and the percentage of a district's schools that were *Meeting* or *Exceeding State Performance and Improvement Targets* that continue to do so. This sort of indicator gives districts incentives both to help their lower performing schools effectively and to avoid impairing their higher performing schools in the process.

Level 2 indicators could include a more detailed evaluation of the performance agreements created by the district, school evaluations about the supportiveness of the district, and other performance-based data. Level 3 visits could also be conducted for districts deemed in need of assistance.

Assistance options could include peer coaches from other successful districts and organizational or management consultants. Safety nets would also be available, including options for chartering out the district, takeover by the state or a school management organization, or replacement of the superintendent.

At the same time, districts would be given greater flexibility and autonomy. Districts, for example, would have the authority to allocate their portion of the state’s assistance funds to schools. They would have strong incentives to allocate this money efficiently and effectively to schools according to their needs and the feasibility of their improvement plans. They would also have clear incentives to take seriously the creation of strong performance agreements with schools and assistance providers. This sort of district accountability system would remain focused on assuring schools that they have the support they need to help their students meet the state standards.

## 2. General Governmental Agencies’ Roles and Responsibilities

The Strong Schools Model offers clear roles and responsibilities to all levels of government agencies. Table 6 provides a summary of the necessary roles of such agencies.

**Table 6: Summary of Governmental Agencies’ Roles and Responsibilities**

Agency	Roles and Responsibilities
<b>Governor and Legislature</b>	Appoint commission, ensure adequate funding for school and district assistance efforts, provide flexibility for schools and districts.
<b>State Superintendent of Public Instruction</b>	Conduct statewide assessments, report Level 1 results to commission, provide flexibility for schools and districts, create and sustain variety of school and district assistance providers, order interventions in schools when districts have not done so and in districts that are not helping schools improve.
<b>Independent Guide/Commission</b>	Oversee and evaluate accountability system, set thresholds for rewards and assistance designations, recommend schools for immediate intervention if such designation is not made by districts, recommend districts for intervention, render decisions on innovation/replicable model rewards.
<b>Districts</b>	Enforce improvement/performance contracts with schools, distribute assistance resources, assure school alternatives for students in chronically low performing schools, sustain schools that are working, and avoid undue regulations or burdens on schools.
<b>Schools</b>	Ensure that all students are meeting state standards, work with external assistance providers as necessary, recognize that improvement is imperative, and focus all efforts on student performance.

In addition, the Strong Schools Model relies on active and clear roles and responsibilities for non-governmental agencies. Table 7 summarizes these roles.

**Table 7: Summary of Non-governmental Agencies' Roles and Responsibilities**

Agency	Roles and Responsibilities
<b>Philanthropy</b>	Assist in creating and sustaining a variety of assistance providers, target funds to address specific needs of schools, provide opportunities for ongoing evaluation of assistance providers, support initiatives to gather necessary school level data to support accountability, assist in creation of a clearinghouse of innovative effective practices.
<b>Unions</b>	Serve as assistance providers, assist in creation of clearinghouse of innovative effective practices, assist schools in overcoming barriers to improvement, support accountability movement and assist in public information efforts.
<b>Independent Organizations</b>	Serve as assistance providers, assist communities in developing additional indicators of school performance, serve as informational “watchdog” groups monitoring other indicators of school performance

Tables 6 and 7 highlight that accountability is not simply a state function. It requires concerted efforts on behalf of many different groups.

***Potential Roadblocks to the Strong Schools Model***

No accountability system is without roadblocks or potential unintended consequences. This section acknowledges the potential challenges to the Strong Schools Model and suggests strategies for addressing them before they occur. Each of these concerns are legitimate and should give pause for thought. They can, however, be addressed and should not be reasons to avoid the positive benefits of a Strong Schools accountability system.

Specifically, the Strong Schools Model may face four potential roadblocks:

- ***The accountability system could create an intensely test-focused environment, narrowing the depth of learning being offered.*** Critics of existing accountability systems often worry that the systems’ reliance on testing as a means of assessing school performance narrows teachers’ incentives to solely teach to the test and ignore other aspects of learning and achievement. Test preparation, it is feared, will overpower real learning. This concern is warranted when a poorly-designed assessment tool is used to test students. Tests that offer little opportunities for higher thinking, focus on rote memorization rather than exhibiting understanding, and are not updated annually leave open the option to focus on test-specific preparation and not inspiring learning. Assessments, however, that are based on critical thinking can require a depth of understanding that test preparation tactics cannot mask. Moreover, assessments that are carefully aligned to a state’s standards for learning will lead to teaching to the standards, which is the ultimate goal of standards-based reform.
- ***The accountability system’s reliance on student academic performance, particularly in the “basic” subject areas, could crowd out teaching and learning in other subject areas.*** This is a legitimate concern, especially for low-performing schools that will be desperate to raise scores. However, a properly designed accountability system can make “crowding out” much less likely, in two ways: First, performance on other assessments that may be offered in other subject areas, should be considered in Level 2 data. Second, assistance providers and districts should be providing examples and strategies to help schools integrate different



subject matter into learning the basics. For example, lessons from schools that have used science principles to help teach math or that have enhanced their reading programs by integrating social studies and the arts can be extremely valuable to schools struggling to keep a balanced curriculum. Some schools are finding ways to cover a broad range of subjects by increasing their focus on the reading, writing, and math content within them.<sup>54</sup> The key is recognizing the potential for this pressure to narrow the curriculum and consistently working to minimize it.

- ***The accountability system can create “high stakes” that could lead to undesirable attempts to game the system—e.g., cheating, exclusion of students, etc.*** Any accountability system that provides consequences for performance has the potential to tempt some into “gaming the system.” Administrators and teachers in other states have already been charged with cheating, tampering with the security of the assessments, and exempting large portions of students from the exams all in an attempt to raise their overall performance scores. Such activity is clearly reprehensible and unprofessional. An accountability system can take strong measures to minimize such behavior by taking swift and public action against schools proven to utilize such methods. For example, the state could rate a school’s performance as “academically unacceptable due to testing violations,” if it is proven that such injustices have occurred. Such a scarlet letter would undoubtedly be an incentive to avoid such practices. In addition, the state or local districts could offer “audits” of schools’ testing procedures, leaving open the potential that any school might be randomly selected to be reviewed. Most importantly, however, gaming the system needs to become professionally unacceptable. An accountability system that is respected, trusted, and believed to be just and fair will go a long way in encouraging educational professionals to protect its integrity.
- ***The accountability system’s reliance on student academic performance in specific subject areas could standardize schools, thereby denying the presence of niche, focused, or alternative schools (e.g., environmental schools, etc.).*** These schools, which may be extremely productive for their students, may require a Level 3 data collection visit to adequately assess their performance. External evaluators will need, therefore, to be open to different modes of instruction and may need special guidance in assessing specialized schools. At the same time, niche or alternative schools should not be exempt from meeting the state’s standards in the basic subject areas. All schools should be held accountable for helping their students meet the state’s basic standards of learning.

These suggestions will not absolutely rule out any potential roadblocks to the proposed accountability system. They can, however, guard against these consequences by keeping the focus of the system on helping all schools support their students efforts in learning.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Grounded in lessons learned from other states’ experiences with accountability, the Strong Schools Model offers a framework for creating an accountability system that will meet the seven elements defined in Section II of this paper. It complements incentives for performance with options for capacity-building and offers a safety net to ensure that no student is left to flounder in a dysfunctional school. It recognizes that accountability is a three-way relationship with state, district, and school-level responsibilities. The model also recognizes that public perceptions and educator morale matter and uses a comprehensive public information campaign to communicate the specifics of the system. Most importantly, it keeps a clear focus

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<sup>54</sup> Lake, Robin, Maria McCarthy, Sara Taggart, and Mary Beth Celio, “Making Standards Stick: A Follow-up Look at Washington State’s School Improvement Efforts in 1999-2000,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, May 2000.

on its primary goal: to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and meet state standards of achievement.

A state accountability system may not be the silver bullet solution to overcoming the potential culture of mediocrity foreseen in *A Nation at Risk*, but without it, we assure ourselves a system more concerned with hours and days, units and buildings than with the learning and achievement of our students. State accountability must be the starting line for our marathon effort to ensure all students have an opportunity to learn and achieve.

## **APPENDIX 1: DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THE FIVE STUDY STATES**

NOTE: The information included in this appendix was accurate and correct to the author's knowledge and interpretation as of April 2000. As accountability systems are ever-evolving, specific details contained in this appendix may have changed since the time of writing. Drafts of this appendix were reviewed by representatives from each of the five study states. The author, however, accepts full responsibility for any error, misinterpretations, or oversights contained in this appendix.

### Accountability Details: Texas

When the education field talks about state accountability systems, one state is always mentioned: Texas. Cited time and again as a state that has implemented one form of accountability to the fullest, Texas is either heralded as an example of accountability done well or held as a warning of a state that has put testing and the basics ahead of real learning. Texas has clearly taken a “high stakes” and very serious approach to holding schools accountable for helping students reach state standards of academic performance.

Texas’ approach has yielded positive performance results. In 1997-98, scores on the state-designed Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) rose for the fourth year in a row.<sup>55</sup> Texas is also one of the few states in the nation closing the achievement gap between white and minority students.<sup>56</sup> Such success has not come without controversy and criticism, however. “TAAS-mania,” some critics worry, is reducing classrooms to test prep centers rather than places of critical thinking and less tangible forms of learning. Such concerns, however, are not uncommon for a “high stakes” testing state.

Texas launched its accountability system with a massive reform of the state education code.<sup>57</sup> Texas significantly reduced the mandates on districts and schools in an effort to give them the freedom and autonomy to meet the established state standards. Texas also created financial and public recognition rewards for high-performing schools and offers assistance and interventions for low-performing schools.

Many states have followed Texas’ lead in developing accountability systems. Others have created new approaches to accountability in a concerted effort to take a different approach than Texas has. In any case, Texas’ approach to accountability remains a critical one to understand.

#### **Indicators**

Texas has adopted one of the more simple and straightforward indicator systems to assess school and district performance. The driving force of the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) in the state of Texas is student performance on the annual TAAS exam, given each spring in grades 3-8 and 10 and covering the subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics. TAAS performance scores are combined with dropout rates and attendance rates to designate a categorical ranking to each public school and district in the state (see Table 1 below). The four rating levels are set in state statute. They are *Exemplary*, *Recognized*, *Academically Acceptable (district) / Acceptable (campus)*, and *Academically Unacceptable (district) / Low-performing (campus)*.

As Table 1 indicates, absolute performance levels of all students determine school ratings. In order to receive a rating, the district or school must meet all three of the TAAS, dropout rate and attendance rate targets. Otherwise, the next lower accountability rating will be assigned. The one exception to this rule is that certain levels of improvement in TAAS performance and dropout rates (the Required Improvement category) can help a district or school earn an Academically Acceptable or Acceptable rating if they might otherwise have earned an Academically Unacceptable or Low-Performing rating.

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<sup>55</sup> Johnston, Robert C. “Greater Expectations: Texas Concentrates on Improving its Already Extensive Accountability System,” *Education Week, Quality Counts 1999*, p. 177.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Mendel, Ed. “Education Reformers Study Texas,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 20, 1999.

**Table 1.a:**  
**Accountability Rating Standards for Schools and Districts in 1999**  
 Source: 1999 Texas Accountability Manual, Texas Education Agency

	<b>Exemplary*</b>	<b>Recognized*</b>	<b>Academically Acceptable / Acceptable</b>	<b>Academically Unacceptable / Low-Performing</b>
<b>Spring 99 TAAS</b> • <b>Reading</b> • <b>Writing</b> • <b>Math</b>	At least 90% passing each subject area ("all students" and any student group <sup>1</sup> )	At least 80% passing each subject area ("all students" and any student group)	At least 45% passing each subject area ("all students" and any student group)	Below 45% passing any subject area ("all students" or any student group)
<b>1997-98 Dropout Rate</b>	1.0% or less ("all students" and each student subgroup)	3.5% or less ("all students" and each student subgroup)	6.0% or less ("all students" and each student subgroup) <sup>2</sup>	Above 6.0% ("all students" and each student subgroup)
<b>1997-98 Attendance Rates<sup>3</sup></b>	At least 94.0% (grades 1-12)	At least 94.0% (grades 1-12)	At least 94.0% (grades 1-12)	At least 94.0% (grades 1-12) <sup>4</sup>
<b>Required Improvement</b> (can earn the Acceptable rating if school or district meets these requirements but not all of those above.)	Not applicable	Not applicable	For each TAAS subject area with less than 45% passing ("all students" and each student group) actual change between 1999 and 1998 TAAS met or exceeded the change needed to reach 50.0% passing within 5 years  AND/OR  For any dropout rate above 6% ("all students" and each student group) actual change between 1997 and 1998 dropout rate met or exceeded the change needed to reach a 6.0% rate within 5 years.	For each TAAS subject area with less than 45% passing ("all students" and each student group) actual change between 1999 and 1998 TAAS was insufficient to reach 50.0% passing within 5 years  AND/OR  For any dropout rate above 6% ("all students" and each student group) actual change between 1997 and 1998 dropout rate was insufficient to reach a 6.0% rate within 5 years.

\* A district cannot be designated Exemplary or Recognized if it has one or more low-performing schools

<sup>1</sup> Student groups are African American, White, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged.

<sup>2</sup> If a school or district would be rated Academically Unacceptable or Low-performing solely because of a dropout rate higher than 6.0% in one student group (not all), then the school or district will earn the rating of Academically Acceptable/Acceptable if the dropout rate for that student group is less than 10% and has declined from previous year.

<sup>3</sup> A district may appeal to use 1998-99 attendance rates if failure to meet the attendance rate criteria is the sole reason it or one of its campuses did not earn the Exemplary or Recognized rating.

<sup>4</sup> If failure to meet the attendance rate standard is the sole reason that a district or school would receive a rating of Academically Unacceptable or Low-Performing, then that requirement will be waived.

Texas' approach to assessing school performance has balanced a focus on closing the achievement gap with assurances that all students are meeting the state standards. Thus to be exemplary, a school or district needs to not only have an average passing rate of 90% in all subject matter for all of its students, but it must also have a 90% passing rate among numerically significant student groups. Currently, these student groups are African American, White, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged, and are counted at a school when at least 30 students from a group are tested and the group accounts for at least 10% of the school's population. Minimum size criteria have also been established for dropout rates.

It is important to note that Texas has been ratcheting up the pass rate necessary to obtain the Academically Acceptable rating for districts and the Acceptable rating for schools. In the early years of implementation, there was also a phase-in for increasing TAAS standards at the Recognized rating level. The state plans to continue to raise the bar for acceptable performance over time.

In addition, Texas uses a series of Additional Indicators to acknowledge district and school performance outside of the accountability rating system. These indicators are not considered in the rating of a school, but are reported on annual performance reports and can lead to districts and schools earning additional "acknowledgement" recognition.<sup>58</sup>

In 1999, the Additional Indicators included: college admissions testing results<sup>59</sup>, TAAS/TASP equivalency<sup>60</sup>, campus Comparable Improvement (math), and campus Comparable Improvement (reading). Comparable Improvement acknowledgements are determined separately for reading and math and are applicable only to schools. The other Additional Indicators are applicable to districts and schools with graduates.

To calculate comparable improvement in 1999, each school was analyzed against a cohort of 40 other schools that "closely match" the campus.<sup>61</sup> The comparison groups are determined by the following criteria: percent African American, percent Hispanic, percent White, percent Economically Disadvantaged, percent limited English proficient, and percent mobile students.<sup>62</sup> Calculating Comparable Improvement depends on an analysis of the Texas Learning Index (TLI) which can measure longitudinal individual student growth from year to year. For each school, the average gain score for the students with a prior year test score is compared to the gain achieved by the 40 schools in the school's comparable cohort.<sup>63</sup> The schools are then placed into quartile groups, such that the highest performing 10 schools out of the 40 school cohort are in the top quartile of their comparison group and so on.

## Rewards

Texas launched its reward and recognition program, the Texas Successful Schools Awards System (TSSAS), in 1992. While the ratings system is largely based on absolute performance, financial rewards in Texas are distributed based on a combination of absolute performance and comparable improvement. In 1998-99 the program distributed approximately

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<sup>58</sup> In order to earn these additional acknowledgements, a district or school must have at least received a ranking of Academically Acceptable or Acceptable. See 1999 Texas Accountability Manual.

<sup>59</sup> The state looks at the percentage of students tested and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding a score of 1100 or 24 on the SAT or ACT, respectively. See 1999 Texas Accountability Manual.

<sup>60</sup> The TASP is an exam given to students enrolled in institutes of higher education in Texas. The TAAS/TASP equivalency measures the number of students who scored high enough on their first attempt to pass the TAAS exit examination that they have a 75% chance or better of passing the TASP. See 1999 Texas Accountability Manual.

<sup>61</sup> The comparable school groups are recreated each year to account for any demographic shifts in school populations.

<sup>62</sup> Mobile students are defined as students who have spent less than 83% of the assigned school days in the school.

<sup>63</sup> High scoring students on the TAAS are excluded from this calculation, since their gains will not, mathematically, be as large. Instead, the number of high-performing students is calculated as a separate indicator used for comparison within the comparable schools cohort.

\$2.5 million to schools.<sup>64</sup> This financial rewards allocation was primarily distributed to schools that are rated Exemplary, Recognized, or Acceptable and who show significant gain in performance on their Comparable Improvement indicators. A smaller portion of the allocation went to schools that showed innovative and effective approaches to increasing parental or guardian participation in the school.<sup>65</sup>

Aside from financial rewards, Texas grants schools rated as Exemplary with exemptions from a limited number of statutes and rules. The intent is to entrust schools that have shown reliability in meeting student performance expectations with increased flexibility.

In addition, Texas has made it a practice to provide extensive public recognition to schools receiving awards, acknowledgements, and high ratings. Positive media attention has certainly been used very effectively as a reward. Conversely, negative media attention for low ratings is seen as a “sanction.”

### **Assistance**

Providing assistance to low-performing schools is more often a district and regional service center responsibility in Texas. The state has stepped in when the local education entity has not been responsive to assisting schools, but for the most part assistance has been designated as a district and local education agency responsibility. Therefore the type of assistance provided to low-performing schools has varied.<sup>66</sup>

There are, however, several consistent actions that occur for low-performing schools upon a mandate from the state. For example, on-site “accreditation investigations” by a peer team of educators and administrators are scheduled for low-performing schools. The peer team can make an appeal for a change in the schools’ rating if they feel such a change is warranted and justified. Typically, however, the on-site investigation is intended to assess the school’s progress and plans for improvement and to offer observations and suggestions for improvement.<sup>67</sup> On-site investigations are also required for Academically Unacceptable districts.

In addition, all low-performing schools must prepare a student achievement improvement plan. Districts with low-performing schools are also required to prepare improvement plans, delineating how they will help schools improve.

### **Interventions for Chronic Low-Performance**

Texas has the authority for several different forms of intervention in chronically low-performing schools. The state has the authority to reconstitute low-performing schools, however, it has rarely invoked this authority directly. Rather, in keeping with the state’s focus on local control, the state has warned districts before they intervene and districts have responded by typically calling for the reconstitution or other intervention themselves. Reconstitutions may also occur locally, without state directives. Reconstitutions, while relatively rare, have occurred in Texas and have helped create the state’s reputation as a “high stakes” state, though it is difficult to find data on how many schools have actually been reconstituted across the state.

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<sup>64</sup> 1999 Texas Accountability Manual, Texas Education Agency, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/99/index.html>

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* In the past, Texas had a proposal to provide the financial rewards directly to principals as bonuses. This approach was met with protest and instead the financial rewards are distributed to schools where they are to be used for “academic enhancements.”

<sup>66</sup> An interesting program to note: In 1992, a consortium of professional associations of school boards, administrators, and the state education department created a Peer Assistance Team program. Peer Assistance Teams, including at least one former superintendent and one board member, are assigned to local districts who request governance assistance. Peer Assistance Teams focus specifically on governance and mediation issues. See <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/tri/index.html>.

<sup>67</sup> On-site investigation teams can make recommendations for low-performing schools to receive waivers from some state statute or rules that may be barriers to their improvement.

In addition, the state may intervene by closing a school or program.<sup>68</sup> Most typically, however, the removal of a school's principal has been a common intervention for chronic low-performance.

The state can also intervene in chronically low-performing districts.<sup>69</sup> The state can appoint a state monitor to participate in and report back to the state on the district's improvement efforts. If the district has been rated as Academically Unacceptable for more than one year, then the state can appoint a board of managers to oversee the district. If it has been Academically Unacceptable for more than two years, the state can annex the district into another district.

### **References:**

Primary sources found on the Texas Education Agency web site at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/>, including:

- "Accountability and Accreditation" homepage  
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/tea/account.html>.
- "1999 Accountability Rating System" homepage  
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/99/index.html>, which includes a downloadable file of the 1999 Texas Education Agency Accountability Manual.
- "Texas Successful Schools Award System" homepage  
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/TSSAS/>.

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<sup>68</sup> See 1999 Texas Education Agency Accountability Manual, Appendix A, Texas Education Code Sec. 39.131, at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/99/index.html>.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*



### Accountability Details: North Carolina

North Carolina launched its statewide accountability system in 1996 with the passage of the ABC's of Public Education Plan. The ABC's plan, which was created with strong bipartisan support, has shown signs of positive impact on low-performing schools. It has also, however, endured persistent criticism, particularly regarding some controversial proposed interventions in low-performing schools.

Under this political pressure, North Carolina's accountability system has grown into a heavily rewards-based system. In 1997-98, the state spent more than \$117 million on performance incentives distributed primarily as bonuses to teachers at rapidly improving schools.<sup>70</sup> In fact, North Carolina is a particularly interesting case study example because of its reliance on the rewards aspect of performance incentives.

#### **Indicators:**

North Carolina uses a rather complicated method of calculating a growth/gain composite score and a performance composite score to rate schools into one of six categories:<sup>71</sup>

- Schools of Excellence: school had expected growth/gain and had at least 90% of students performing at or above grade level.
- Schools of Distinction: school had at least 80% of students performing at or above grade level, no criteria for growth/gain.
- Schools Making Exemplary Growth/Gain: schools attained an exemplary growth/gain standard.
- Schools Making Expected Growth/Gain: schools attained expected growth/gain standard but not exemplary growth/gain standard.
- Adequate Performance/Schools of No Recognition: did not meet expected growth/gain standard, but do have at least 50% of students scoring at or above grade level.
- Low-performing Schools<sup>72</sup>: fail to meet growth/gain standard and have statistically significantly less than 50% of students performing at or above grade level.<sup>73</sup>

Student performance is assessed annually in grades 3-8 on state-designed, standardized, multiple-choice, end-of-grade assessments in reading and math, with additional writing assessments in grades 4 and 7.<sup>74</sup> At the secondary level, students are assessed by end-of-course exams in English (I and II); Algebra (I and II); Economic, Legal, and Political Systems; Physical Science; Chemistry; Physics; Biology; Geometry; and US History.<sup>75</sup> The use of a composite score means that a school's performance on reading and math are merged into one score for the

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<sup>70</sup> Archer, Jeff. "A Little Something Extra: Bonuses for High Achievement," *Education Week, Quality Counts 1999*, January 11, 1999 and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Press Release, "Education Week Lauds North Carolina's Accountability Efforts," January 7, 1999, accessible at [http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/news/edweek\\_report.html](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/news/edweek_report.html).

<sup>71</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "1998-99 ABCs Report Card, Volume I – Executive Summary," [http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/abc\\_results/results\\_99/executive\\_summary.html](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/abc_results/results_99/executive_summary.html).

<sup>72</sup> In addition, North Carolina has a designation of "Violated Testing Requirements," for schools with egregious testing practices. The school receives this designation and is automatically ineligible for incentive awards for that year. Schools that violate testing requirements for two successive years may be designated as "low-performing" by the State Board of Education.

<sup>73</sup> The state education department calculates a confidence interval for schools scoring below 50% on their performance composite to ensure that their performance is statistically significantly below 50%.

<sup>74</sup> "State Board of Education, North Carolina Statewide Testing Program," North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, [http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/testing/abcs\\_testing\\_program.html](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/testing/abcs_testing_program.html).

<sup>75</sup> In addition, tenth graders take the North Carolina High School Comprehensive Test in reading and mathematics.

school. Thus a school can be below standard in some subject areas and above standard in others and still meet its overall goals.

The growth/gain composite is the combination of a separate growth composite score and a gain composite score calculated for each school.<sup>76</sup> The growth composite is calculated for grades 3-8 and 10 in reading and math. Because North Carolina assesses students annually, the state can calculate growth scores for matched groups of students. That is, each school can have an average actual growth score for each grade level. This actual growth is compared to a standardized expected growth goal at each grade level.<sup>77</sup> Schools that meet or exceed their expected growth goal earn the designation “making expected growth/gain.” Exemplary growth is defined as meeting or exceeding approximately 110% of the expected growth goal.

Gain scores follow a similar calculation pattern and are tabulated for writing assessments in grades 4 and 7 and for the end of course assessments given at the secondary school level.

The performance composite for a school is defined as the percent of students who perform at or above grade level on the end-of-grade or end-of-course tests.<sup>78</sup> A school’s performance on both its performance composite and its growth/gain composite determines its rating or classification as listed above. While dropout rates and SAT performance results are included in state reports about achievement, they are not calculated into the accountability indices.

#### **Rewards:**

North Carolina provides financial rewards to all schools that meet their expected or exemplary growth/gain scores. Schools making expected growth/gains will receive \$750 per certified staff member and \$375 per teaching assistant in the year 2000.<sup>79</sup> Schools making exemplary growth/gains will receive \$1500 per person for certified staff and \$500 per person for teaching assistants.<sup>80</sup>

In addition, North Carolina provides financial rewards to the 25 Most Improved K-8 Schools in the state and the 10 Most Improved High Schools in the state, as determined by the highest values on the exemplary growth composite. The state provides banners, plaques, and public recognition for Schools of Excellence and Schools of Distinction.<sup>81</sup>

In 1998-99, of the approximately 2000 public schools assigned an ABC rating, 50 schools received the Schools of Excellence recognition (at least 90% of students performing at or above grade level and meeting expected growth/gain targets) and 408 were celebrated as Schools of Distinction (at least 80% of students performing at or above grade level).<sup>82</sup> Also in that year, 58% of schools reached their exemplary growth/gain composite score and an additional 23% met

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<sup>76</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Determination of Meeting Expected and Exemplary Growth Standards in the K-8 ABCs Model,” <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/conf/accountability/handouts/9f.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Some statistical adjustments are performed on these scores to assure that the scores are comparable from year to year. The expected growth score for a school is calculated by adding together three factors: 1) the statewide average rate of growth in the relevant grade and subject, 2) an estimate of the “true proficiency” of the students in the school—which is a comparison of the school’s scores to the statewide average adjusted by a statistically derived constant, and 3) an estimate of the movement of students’ scores due to “regression to the mean”—which is also a comparison of the school’s scores to the statewide average adjusted by a statistically derived constant.

<sup>78</sup> See “Determination of Meeting Expected and Exemplary Growth Standards in the K-8 ABCs Model” above. Note: In North Carolina, at or above grade level is defined as Achievement Level III or IV on the state test.

<sup>79</sup> See “1998-99 ABCs Report Card, Volume I-Executive Summary” cited above.

<sup>80</sup> All bonuses are gross amounts, before taxes.

<sup>81</sup> These schools will receive their due financial rewards if they also met their expected or exemplary growth gains. See “1998-99 ABCs Report Card, Volume I-Executive Summary” cited above.

<sup>82</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Press Release: “More Students Proficient at Reading and Mathematics Under ABCs,” August 5, 1999.

their expected growth/gain composite.<sup>83</sup> Thus, 81 % of the state's schools were eligible for the financial rewards described above.

### **Assistance:**

In 1998-99, only 13 schools qualified as low-performing on North Carolina's improvement-based rating scale.<sup>84</sup> This extremely low number has left the state open to some criticism that its bar for performance is not high enough. The number of low-performing schools has, however, declined from 123 in the program's first year. In addition, the State Board of Education continues to investigate options for "raising the bar" of achievement.

In any case, the low-performing schools with the lowest achievement records and the least growth/gain are selected to receive assistance. This assistance is typically in the form of a team of 3-5 experienced, "expert" educators who work on the school-site for a year to help the faculty align the instructional program with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.<sup>85</sup> In the past, the assistance team program has been able to work with about 10-15 schools a year. Of the schools that have thus far received such assistance, nearly all have met their expected growth/gain score at the end of the school year.

In addition, the state education department provides department staff to serve as mentors or assistants in schools that are eligible to receive assistance (the tier of schools whose performance places them just above the schools assigned Assistance Teams). The state has provided general funding for low-performing schools to support professional development and to purchase additional materials, supplies, etc.

North Carolina has also recently offered several grant opportunities for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to help schools not yet meeting their targets.<sup>86</sup> Planning grants of about \$10,000 and upcoming implementation grants are available with the intent of helping schools address underlying barriers to better performance, not just to provide quick fixes for improvement. In the fall of 1999, grants were given for the creation of intervention designs to meet the needs of students not yet meeting state standards, and also for models of human resource development and the integration of technology in the curriculum. These grants have ranged from \$5000 to \$150,000 per LEA.<sup>87</sup>

### **Interventions for Chronic Low-Performance**

North Carolina's interventions for chronic low-performance are less defined than their rewards structure and their plans for providing assistance. Like many other states, North Carolina often relies on replacing school leadership when improvement is not forthcoming. In addition, the state has the authority for takeover of a chronically low-performing school and can provide students with the opportunity to enroll elsewhere if they attend a chronically low-performing school.<sup>88</sup> Such granted authorities, however, have not been utilized on a frequent nor regular basis.

North Carolina's lack of definition in these areas may be the result of three factors. First, few schools in the state have been identified under the indicator system as chronically low-

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Press Release, "North Carolina's Low-Performing Schools Make Progress," July 7, 1998, accessed at [http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/news/low\\_performing\\_news.html](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/news/low_performing_news.html).

<sup>86</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "NC School Improvement Grants," <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/edreform/process.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Additional grants, including Ready for School grants to prepare students for kindergarten, and Partnership Grants, to allow principals and superintendents to attend state meetings and prepare community partnership plans are also available.

<sup>88</sup> Education Week, Quality Counts 1999, Volume XVIII, Number 17, January 11, 1999.

performing. Currently, only small numbers of schools are designated low-performing and most of these schools have, with assistance, subsequently met their improvement targets. Thus, the need for providing comprehensive definition has not yet been clear. The state is beginning to dialogue, however, about other options for schools that continue to have difficulty sustaining progress.

Second, the state has proposed some rather controversial, strong intervention strategies, only to be met with the threat of lawsuits and significant political upheaval. For example, North Carolina did have a provision that would have allowed the state to fire teachers who taught in low-performing schools and who could not pass a standardized test of basic skills. This intervention was eventually revoked by the legislature under pressure from teacher union leaders.<sup>89</sup> Now, the state has the provision that teachers at low-performing schools who receive two consecutive substandard performance evaluations from assistance teams at the end of the year may be recommended for dismissal if their substandard performance is due to a lack of general knowledge.<sup>90</sup> This provision has not yet been implemented and will undoubtedly face heavy challenges.

Third, the state has developed an accountability system with a strong emphasis on performance incentives or rewards. In practice at least, North Carolina's accountability system is much more focused on creating positive incentives to encourage performance improvements, rather than offering the threat of sanctions.

### References:

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- "Reporting Section" homepage (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/reporting/index.html>), including further information about ABCs program.
- "ABCs Report Card" ([http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/abc\\_results/results\\_99/executive\\_summary.html](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/abc_results/results_99/executive_summary.html)).
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<sup>89</sup> Kennedy Manzo, Kathleen. "NC Lawmakers Revoke Teacher-Testing Plan," *Education Week*, June 17, 1998.

<sup>90</sup> Communication with North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

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### *Accountability Details: Kentucky*

Kentucky is considered the pioneer of statewide education reform in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1990, the state launched the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which called for a variety of new initiatives, including some early elements of accountability. Since that time, Kentucky's accountability system has undergone rather dramatic change, including a recent shift to a new version of the state's standardized assessment and thus a new mechanism for identifying schools for rewards or assistance.

Kentucky had been under pressure for several years to make changes to the original state assessment system, the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). Critics contended that the KIRIS results were unreliable and heavily dependent on a free-answer method, which was too costly to administer and consistently grade.<sup>91</sup> After some heated debate in the state legislature, a new statewide assessment and accountability system, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) was adopted. CATS includes a new student performance assessment, the Kentucky Core Content Tests, which incorporates some of KIRIS' emphasis on written, open response<sup>92</sup> prompts with a section of multiple choice questions.<sup>93</sup>

Along with the new assessments, Kentucky has made adjustments to its rewards, assistance, and intervention mechanisms. Explaining the details of Kentucky's accountability system is therefore a complicated task. The explanation provided in this appendix will include information about Kentucky's long-term plan for accountability that will start in the 2000-01 school year.<sup>94</sup>

Kentucky is an interesting case study because it provides insight into a statewide system that has reflected on its changing needs and made adaptations to the system in response.

#### **Indicators:**

Kentucky uses an index to categorize school performance. The accountability index is a weighted average combining a school's academic and nonacademic performance indicators. The index is largely driven by student performance on the Kentucky Core Content Tests in the areas of reading, math, science, social studies, writing, arts and humanities, practical living and vocational studies.<sup>95</sup> Each of the subjects is weighted and student performance is weighted, such that a school's score is the composite score of the weighted averages of the number of students scoring at each of the eight performance levels on the various subject-area state assessments.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Jacobson, Linda. "KY District Questions Fairness of Accountability Proposals," Education Week, February 17, 1999.

<sup>92</sup> "Open response" questions include those that require students to derive an answer and explain or extend their understanding of the answer.

<sup>93</sup> White, Kerry. "KY Bids KIRIS Farewell, Ushers in New Test," Education Week, April 22, 1998.

<sup>94</sup> An "interim" accountability system has been in place for 1998-99 and 1999-2000 while Kentucky gathers consistent data from CATS.

<sup>95</sup> According to the state, "all students are included in accountability, even special education students who cannot take the regular test with or without modifications," (personal communication).

<sup>96</sup> Students can score in the following categories, listed from lowest performance to highest, with the corresponding weights assigned to student scores at these levels: nonperformance (0), medium novice (reading, mathematics, science, social studies, alternate portfolio, writing on-demand prompt, writing portfolio, arts and humanities, practical living and vocational studies) (13), high novice (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies) (26), low apprentice (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies) (40), medium apprentice (reading, mathematics, science, social studies, alternate portfolio, writing on-demand prompt, writing portfolio, arts and humanities, practical living and vocational studies) (60), high apprentice (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies) (80), proficient in all content areas (100), and distinguished in all content areas (140).

In addition, the accountability index includes information about attendance rates and retention rates at the elementary level; attendance, retention and dropout rates at the middle school level; and attendance, retention and dropout rates and “improving the transition to adult life” at the secondary level.<sup>97</sup>

The state has set a target score of 100 for all schools on the 140-point index scale. The state constructs a “goal line” for all schools scoring below the 100 score target. The goal line is, in effect, a straight line starting at each school’s individual baseline score in the year 2000 drawn to the goal score of 100 by the year 2014.<sup>98</sup> Thus, every school has the goal of reaching the 100 score target within 14 years, with some schools having a steeper course of achievement than others. This approach means that every school can foresee its expected targets for the next 14 years and can plan accordingly.

In addition, the state constructs an “assistance line” for each school. This line begins at one standard error of measurement below the school’s baseline accountability index and is drawn to one standard error of measurement below the target score of 80 in the year 2014. Thus, the assistance line has a slightly flatter slope and lower starting point than a school’s goal line. The assistance line, in effect, provides a “cushion” for schools based on margins of error on the tests, small school size, and cohort effects. (See State of Kentucky Department of Education website at [http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/long\\_term.asp](http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/long_term.asp) for graphical depiction of this system).

Every two years the state assesses a school’s performance. Schools that are performing above or at their goal line are considered to be “meeting goal” and may be eligible for a reward. Schools that are performing below their goal line but above their assistance line are considered “progressing” and they may be eligible for some reduced reward.<sup>99</sup> Schools that are performing below their assistance line may be selected to receive a scholastic audit to determine what kind of assistance is necessary and may be eligible for school improvement funds.

### **Rewards:**

To be eligible for rewards, a school must be above its goal line on the accountability index and must also have a biennial dropout rate less than or equal to 5.3% or a dropout rate that is at least 0.5% lower than its dropout rate in the previous biennium.<sup>100</sup> In addition, the school must also reduce the percent of novices (lower scoring categories) so that by 2014, the school will have 5% or less scoring in the novice range of performance.

Schools can also receive rewards for meeting five distinct “recognition” points on the way to the state target score of 100. The recognition points are milestones of performance that have been set by the state for which a school can receive a one-time reward for surpassing.

Schools that score in the top 5% of all schools, are scoring above the fourth recognition point, meet the dropout rate requirements and the novice reduction requirements, and have not shown score declines in the last two cycles are eligible for financial “Pacesetter Rewards.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> In addition, 5% of a school’s accountability index is comprised of their performance on a national norm-referenced test.

<sup>98</sup> In fact, the actual goal line is drawn from a school’s baseline score minus one standard error of measurement to one standard error of measurement below the target score of 100. The baseline score is a combination of the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 accountability indices. See <http://www.lrc.state.ky.us/kar/703/005/020.htm>.

<sup>99</sup> Schools are only eligible for the reduced reward in the “progressing category” if their scores are above their scores of the last biennium.

<sup>100</sup> A school with a dropout rate in excess of 6% will not be eligible for a reward. See 703 KAR 5:020. “The formula for determining school performance classifications and school rewards” accessible at <http://www.lrc.state.ky.us/kar/703/005/020.htm>

<sup>101</sup> Schools that meet these criteria are eligible if they are not eligible for other rewards this cycle. See [http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/long\\_term.asp](http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/commrel/cats/long_term.asp).

Kentucky has determined that the rewards distributed will “not exceed 1.75% of the amount of funds paid to certified personnel in the last year.”<sup>102</sup> Schools then receive constant “shares” of rewards depending on their performance, but the actual amount received will vary both on the basis of state expenditures on personnel, and the number of schools earning rewards. The shares are distributed as follows:<sup>103</sup>

- Designated as meeting goals: receives 3 shares times the number of certified FTE staff at the school.
- Designated as progressing: receives 0.5 shares times the number of certified FTE staff at the school.
- Passes a recognition point: receives 1 share times the number of certified FTE staff at the school.
- Designated a Pacesetter school: receives 1 share times the number of certified FTE staff at the school.

Thus, the value of a share is the total number of shares earned divided into the amount of money available for rewards (1.75% of the allocation to certified personnel last year). One share cannot, however, exceed \$2000 in value.

Rewards funds are given directly to schools, where school councils (or the principal if there is no school council present) determine their use.

#### **Assistance:**<sup>104</sup>

Kentucky has also instituted the STAR program (School Transformation Assistance and Renewal) as a means of assisting schools. As part of the STAR program, "distinguished" or "highly skilled" educators have been assigned to low-performing schools to provide mentoring, coaching, and outside perspective since 1994.<sup>105</sup> In the first two years of the program the distinguished educators were assigned to schools in decline--that is, schools that were declining compared to their previous performance level. During the 1996-98 cycle, distinguished educators were assigned to schools in the decline and crisis categories - those schools that were declining more than five points compared to their previous performance level. In the summer of 1998, the offer of highly skilled educator assistance was made to the 73 lowest performing schools in the state. In the next accountability cycle, the program will serve the bottom one-third of all schools below their assistance line.

From 1994-95 until the 1997-98 school year, the focus of the STAR program and the distinguished educators was facilitation of change, focus on results, improved test scores, personnel evaluation, transformation planning and curriculum alignment. A greater emphasis upon teaching and learning came with the changes legislated in 1998. Since then, emphasis has included improved teaching and learning that results from mentoring, coaching, and the development and modeling of lessons.

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<sup>102</sup> See 703 KAR 5:020. “The formula for determining school performance classifications and school rewards” accessible at <http://www.lrc.state.ky.us/KAR/703/005/020.htm>.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*

<sup>104</sup> The author would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the Kentucky Department of Education who provided assistance with the details of this section. The author accepts responsibility, however, for any inaccuracies or errors.

<sup>105</sup> Under Kentucky's old accountability system, these expert educator helpers were called "distinguished educators." Under the new CATS system, they are renamed to "highly skilled educators," however their primary purpose remains basically unchanged. "Highly Skilled Educators" are either teachers or administrators who choose to apply for the program and are accepted after a rigorous selection process.



The Kentucky General Assembly has funded a cadre (currently about 60) of highly skilled educators. Selected for their expertise and experience, the educators complete an intensive 3-week summer training program to prepare them for their in-depth work.<sup>106</sup> The highly-skilled educators spend up to two years in a school and receive a salary equivalent to 135% of what they would have received for 240 days of employment in their local district. The highly skilled educators have three primary duties: 1) to help improve teaching and learning at their designated schools by mentoring teachers and offering classroom assistance, 2) to help facilitate the creation of a school improvement plan, and 3) to help the school implement its improvement plan.

The practice of providing on-site assistance to schools has served Kentucky well. Of the 53 schools that were assigned distinguished educators in 1994, 100% reversed a declining trend in performance and 66% moved directly into the rewards category. Kentucky's assistance program has been copied by several other states and serves as the basis for the assistance program cited by the Federal Reauthorization Act.<sup>107</sup>

In addition, Kentucky is planning to launch a "scholastic audit" process to help determine the specific assistance needs of some low-performing schools.<sup>108</sup> The process is anticipated to be fully in place by 2002.<sup>109</sup>

More specifically, Kentucky has proposed to categorize schools falling below their assistance lines into three groups:<sup>110</sup>

- “‘Level 3’ means a classification assigned to a school that has an index score that places it in the lowest one-third of all schools below the assistance line.
- ‘Level 2’ means a classification assigned to a school that has an index score that places it in the middle one-third of all schools below the assistance line.
- ‘Level 1’ means a classification assigned to a school that has an index score that places it in the highest one-third of all schools below the assistance line.”

Level 3 schools would be triaged to receive the most assistance, including a full scholastic audit conducted by a team of educators, administrators, university faculty members, and parents assigned by the state and led by a highly skilled educator.<sup>111</sup> The scholastic audit team will make a site visit and review the school's portfolio of student work and self-study assessments.<sup>112</sup> Based on the scholastic audit team's observations and recommendations, both the

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<sup>106</sup> In a few isolated cases involving smaller schools, one highly skilled educator serves two small schools in the same geographic area. The state has also have placed two highly skilled educators in one large county wide elementary school.

<sup>107</sup> In addition to the Highly Skilled Educators' program, the state's eight Regional Service Centers provide training, professional development, technical assistance, program design and development, and specialist advice to schools. For more information see <http://www.kde.state.ky.us/oapd/rsc/default.asp>. The state is also working on a CD-ROM project called "Getting to Proficiency," designed to help all teachers instruct all students to reach the level of proficient defined by the state.

<sup>108</sup> The Kentucky Department of Education will also conduct scholastic audits of a sample of randomly selected schools.

<sup>109</sup> See state document KRS703k5120.rtf, "Assistance for Schools, Guidelines for Scholastic Audit," located at <http://www.kde.state.ky.us/olsi/improve/schaudit/schaudit.asp>.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> The scholastic audit team is also supposed to make random visits of higher-performing schools to provide comparisons and observations of what "successful" schools look like to aid their observations of schools in need of assistance.

<sup>112</sup> The school's portfolio includes the school's consolidated plan; state assessment results; student achievement data; portfolio writing analysis data; school survey data; the school report card; district technology inventory; school handbook and master schedule; school-based decision making policies and meeting minutes; teacher lesson plans; district evaluation plan; curriculum alignment documents; examples of student work; and a listing of professional development activities (see document KRS703k5120).

school and its home district will create improvement action plans. Level 3 schools may also be eligible to receive school improvement funds and receive assistance from a highly skilled educator. State law also includes the option to remove or transfer school personnel who do not respond to professional growth plans identified by the scholastic audit team.<sup>113</sup>

Level 2 schools are to receive a scholastic review coordinated by a designee of the Commissioner of Education and with assistance from their local district. These reviews are also intended to provide important external observations and recommendations for improvement. Level 2 schools may also be eligible for school improvement funds.

Level 1 schools conduct a scholastic review and self-study with assistance from their district office staff and the state department of education. Level 1 schools may also be eligible for school improvement funds.

### **Interventions for Chronic Low-Performance**

Kentucky has focused relatively less attention on providing interventions in schools with chronic low-performance. The state does provide students with the opportunity to attend a school that is meeting or exceeding its goal thresholds if their home school has a pattern of chronic low-performance. Under the new accountability program, students in schools that are designated Level 3 assistance schools for more than two consecutive biennia will have such an option.<sup>114</sup>

In addition, under the new accountability plan, the scholastic audit team may recommend the removal of a school council member for schools that are designated "in need of assistance" for more than two consecutive biennia. Finally, the scholastic audit process does carry with it the opportunity for the audit team to make personnel recommendations about principals and teachers at the schools they review.<sup>115</sup>

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- "Commonwealth School Improvement Funds and STAR Toolkit" homepage ([http://www.kde.state.ky.us/olsi/improve/startool/star\\_tool\\_kit.asp](http://www.kde.state.ky.us/olsi/improve/startool/star_tool_kit.asp)).
- "Scholastic Audit" homepage, (<http://www.kde.state.ky.us/olsi/improve/schaudit/schaudit.asp>).
- "703 KAR 5:020. The formula for determining school performance classifications and school rewards." <http://www.lrc.state.ky.us/kar/703/005/020.htm>.

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<sup>113</sup> See document KRS703k5120.rft located at <http://www.kde.state.ky.us/olsi/improve/schaudit/schaudit.asp>.

<sup>114</sup> According to KRS703k5120, "The superintendent shall select the receiving successful school in the home district or make arrangements with a neighboring district with the student transfer to be effective beginning with the next school year after the school is classified as a Level 3 school for two (2) consecutive biennia. If two (2) districts cannot agree, the superintendent of the student's resident district shall request the Commissioner of Education to resolve the issue and make a decision on the placement of the student."

<sup>115</sup> The audit team, in effect, makes such a recommendation to the Commissioner of Education, who in turn can make the recommendation to the local superintendent. This authority is not scheduled to be in place until 2002-2003.

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### *Accountability Details: New York*

The state of New York is in the midst of finalizing details for a comprehensive, statewide accountability system. The Board of Regents in 1999 directed the State Education Department to revise the state's school accountability system to reflect new state assessments and graduation standards. The State Education Department has used the last few months to gather public feedback on the proposed system and iron out some of the more specific details.

The proposed statewide System of Accountability for Student Success (SASS) will complement the state's ongoing intervention program, the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) initiative. In New York state, all public schools must be "registered" or accredited by the state education department. The SURR program, launched in 1989, identifies schools farthest from meeting the state's standards for academic performance and then provides these schools with an in-depth Registration Review visit conducted by a team of experienced educators, culminating in the school's and district's creation of an improvement plan. If there is no improvement in the school within a designated time period, then the school loses its registration and, in effect, must close. The upcoming state accountability system will continue the SURR process and supplement it with rewards and recognition for high-performance and improvement.

As of March 1, 2000, 97 of the state's 105 SURR schools are located in New York City.<sup>116</sup> Rather dramatic interventions and assistance have been attempted in these schools in an effort to improve their performance. New York is one of the few states that has a relatively long record of closure and reconstitution. In addition, through the creation of a special Chancellor's District of low-performing schools in New York City, very prescriptive, focused, and directed forms of assistance have been provided to schools. Thus, New York provides an interesting case study example because of its record of providing interventions and assistance and its emerging plan to create a full accountability system.

#### **Indicators:**

Ultimately, New York's SASS program will designate a school's performance on specific criteria as "Farthest from State Standards"; "Below Standards"; "Meeting Standards." Eventually, a fourth designation, "Exceeding State Standards" may be added.<sup>117</sup> Students in New York are assessed through state-specific, multiple-choice and free-answer examinations of English language arts and mathematics in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.<sup>118</sup> Students are given scores ranging from Level 1 (low-performing, below standards) to Level 4 (exceeding standards). Level 3 is considered a passing or "meeting standards" score.

For elementary and intermediate schools, the state will create a series of cut-points, such that schools with fewer than a specified percentage of students scoring at Level 2 or fewer than a set percentage of students scoring at Level 3 will be considered as performing "Farthest from State Standards." Schools that are performing "Farthest from State Standards" and with performance "most in need of improvement" will be designated as SURR.<sup>119</sup> Schools with high annual dropout rates can also be identified as SURR.

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<sup>116</sup> SURR Brochure 2000, New York State Department of Education.

<sup>117</sup> The Exceeding Standards category will be phased in for the 2000-01 school year.

<sup>118</sup> Elementary level examinations in science and social studies are also being developed.

<sup>119</sup> "Design of a System for Accountability for Student Success," a policy development memo prepared for the February 7, 2000 Board of Regents meeting by the State Education Department.

Elementary and intermediate schools will be considered for the designation of Exceeding Standards, under the existing SASS proposal, if the school has at least 90% of its students at or above Level 2 and a “substantial majority” at or above Level 3.<sup>120</sup>

At the secondary level, students are assessed through the Regents Examinations that cover English language arts and mathematics.<sup>121</sup> Regents Examinations are scored on a point scale, with specific cut-points indicating passing. The SASS proposal would hold high school’s accountable for the percentage of students who pass the Regents Examinations within four years of their first entry into ninth grade.<sup>122</sup>

In addition, any school can be placed in the SURR designation if it is deemed a “poor learning environment.” According to the state education department, a poor learning environment is defined as:

- “The school’s students do poorly on any of the State’s standardized tests, and
- That school is the subject of persistent parent complaints to the Education Department, or
- It has conditions that threaten the health, safety, or educational welfare of its students. These conditions may include such things as a high rate of student absenteeism, inordinate levels of violence, an excessive number of suspensions, and a significant percentage of uncertified teachers.”<sup>123</sup>

The use of the poor learning environment provision to designate a school for SURR is currently under active consideration by the Commissioner.

After a school’s performance is initially designated as “Farthest from State Standards,” the school’s district has an opportunity to appeal the designation with additional performance information on other criteria. After reviewing the data submitted, the Commissioner determines whether or not the school is also “most in need of improvement.” If the Commissioner so determines, then the school is identified as a SURR. This “appeals” process allows for the introduction of additional data about school performance and circumstances before the Commissioner renders a final classification for the school.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to these indicators, New York’s SASS proposal offers provisions for holding districts accountable for performance. The district accountability provisions are still in draft and will be taken up by the Board of Regents later in 2000.

### **Rewards:**

The criteria for receiving rewards or being considered a “recognized school” under the SASS proposal would be somewhat more rigorous than simply meeting the Exceeding Standards rating. Rather, to be eligible for a reward, a school would need to have all of the following:<sup>125</sup>

- Two full years of performance at the Exceeding Standards level,
- No student group performing below standard,
- Satisfactory performance in other subjects, including social science and science, as demonstrated on performance measures sent to the state education department,
- Better than average performance as compared to similar schools.

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<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Regent’s examinations in social studies and science may be included in the accountability system at a later date.

<sup>122</sup> Currently, high schools are held accountable for the percentage of students that pass the competency tests by the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

<sup>123</sup> SURR Brochure 2000, New York State Department of Education.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> “Design of a System for Accountability for Student Success,” *op cit.*

Thus, rewards are reserved for schools that are performing exceptionally above others.

In addition, a school may receive some sort of recognition or increased flexibility if it can show rapid progress under the proposed SASS plan. Rapid progress is defined as, “a school that closes the gap in any year between the State standards and its current level of performance by 30 percent.”<sup>126</sup>

To date, the SASS proposal has not indicated whether the rewards offered will be public recognition, financial bonuses, or otherwise. The State Education Department expects to provide the Board of Regents with a proposal relating to rewards and incentives in the fall of 2000.

**Assistance:**

When a school is given the SURR designation, several key steps automatically occur. First, the local board of education for the district in which the school is located must provide public notification of the designation. The district must directly inform the parents of students attending the SURR school and make a public announcement at the next school board meeting.

Second, the state will assign a Registration Review team of expert educators, administrators, curriculum specialists, parents, state staff members, and school board members all from outside the school. The Registration Review team is charged with providing an audit of the school’s resources, programs, and plans for improvement. They do so by conducting a four-day on-site visit, specifically assessing instruction, curriculum, assessment, school management/leadership, professional development of staff, parent and community involvement, school discipline and safety, instructional supplies and materials, physical plant, and the district-level support for school improvement efforts.<sup>127</sup> The Registration Review team typically consists of 8-12 individuals who are charged with the following tasks:

- “Determine if the school is an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning;
- Assess the school’s total educational program and its effectiveness; and
- Identify classroom and school practices that must be changed to improve student achievement, and specifically recommend making these changes.”<sup>128</sup>

On the fourth day of the Registration Review, the team presents their findings and recommendations orally to the entire faculty and staff of the school. A written report is submitted to the state education department and returned to the school and district. This report is intended to help both the school and the district develop an improvement plan for the school.

Third, the district is assigned the task of creating a “corrective action plan” to address the issues and recommendations highlighted in the Registration Review report. The school is then required to create its own “comprehensive education plan” based on the district’s plan and on the Registration Review findings. This school-level plan is created with input from the state education department staff member assigned to monitor the school and the team leader of the Registration Review visit.

Once the plans are created, the primary responsibility for providing support and assistance for improvement lies with districts and the schools themselves. In some districts, like New York City, the district plays an active and very directed role in helping schools improve, with some SURR schools being placed in a separate Chancellor’s District designed to give them

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<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> SURR Brochure 2000, New York State Department of Education.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

more accountability and assistance. In New York City, the district provided additional funding, significant amounts of on-site professional development, extended staff planning time, and redesigned time schedules, including a 90 minute literacy period, guided by the Success for All program of instruction every day.<sup>129</sup> Such assistance initiatives were district-led, not mandated by the state.

The state does provide additional oversight, however, for SURR schools. Every SURR school is assigned a state education department liaison. The liaison monitors the school's implementation of its improvement plan and can provide technical assistance in implementing it. In addition, the state education department provides general professional development workshops focused on the basic state standards. The state also provides education department liaisons to assist in the implementation of Title 1, early childhood, and limited English proficiency programs in districts with at least one SURR school. Again, however, New York views assistance provision as primarily a function of districts and schools.

SURR schools and other schools deemed below standards have annual progress goals designed to help them gauge their improvement. As the state education department notes, "as a general rule, schools will be expected to reduce the gap between their base level of performance and the State performance standard by 20 percent."<sup>130</sup> This expected or "required progress" is intended to occur annually.

### **Interventions for Chronic Low-Performance**

SURR schools are typically given up to three years to make significant improvements. If adequate improvements are made in this timeframe, then the school's district can petition to have the SURR designation removed for the school. If adequate improvements are not made in this timeframe and the district offers no explanation of extenuating circumstances, then the state may withdraw the school's registration, in effect closing the school.

When a school's registration is revoked, the Commissioner of Education for the state of New York must come up with an educational plan for the students who once attended the school, delineating where the students will go to school and how the new effort will be funded. The local district that serves the students must implement the Commissioner's plan.

Before the state revokes the registration of a school, the local district can also decide to take intervening action. In these instances, the district has two primary options.<sup>131</sup> First, it can close the school. A district considering closure must submit a closure plan to the state education department explaining new plans for meeting the needs of the students that had attended the school. Second, the district can decide to "redesign" a school, in effect closing it at the end of a school year and re-opening it with a new curricular design and potential changes in staff in the next fall. Again, the district must submit a plan for redesign to the state, delineating the new school's mission, curriculum and instruction, etc. This plan must be approved by the Commissioner of Education and by an external review team before the redesign is allowed to proceed. A redesigned school retains the SURR designation of its predecessor until it shows significant improvement.

New York state is one of the few states that has actually taken such interventions in low-performing schools. According to Education Week's 1999 Quality Counts report, New York has "reconstituted" or "redesigned" 46 schools and closed three more.<sup>132</sup> Such actions have been

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<sup>129</sup> Olson, Lynn. "Failing Schools Challenge Accountability Goals," Education Week, March 25, 1998.

<sup>130</sup> "Design of a System for Accountability for Student Success," *op cit*.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>132</sup> Education Week. "Quality Counts '99: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure," Vol. XVIII, No. 17, January 11, 1999.

particularly prevalent in the New York City school system. The proposed SASS accountability system is likely to retain these options for interventions.

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### Accountability Details: California <sup>133</sup>

California is a relatively new entry to the accountability field, piloting the first elements of its system during the 1999-2000 school year. The Golden State's immediate focus has been on identifying and then providing assistance for low-performing schools. Accountability efforts related to recognizing success and providing interventions for chronic low-performance will be phased-in over the next several years.

California presents an interesting case-study because it has taken a decidedly different approach to providing low-performing schools with help for improvement. Instead of relying on state department of education staff and resources, or local district staff and resources, California's Immediate Intervention Underperforming Schools Program (IIUSP), has created a marketplace of external reviewers competing to assist low-performing schools in developing improvement plans.

The state-funded program is designed to provide low-performing schools that want external assistance access to qualified reviewers who are charged with helping them better understand the particular aspects of the school that need further work. Schools that create viable improvement plans approved by their reviewer, their district, and the state, are then eligible for additional funds to implement their proposed changes. Schools that show improvement will then be removed from the lists of underperforming schools, while those that fail to improve face the threat of state interventions, including the possibility of closure.

In late 1999, 430 schools were selected to participate in the pilot from an applicant pool of over 1000 schools statewide.<sup>134</sup> Each school could select from a state-approved list of approximately 80 external evaluators. Schools are currently in the process of using the external evaluator's observations to develop a solid improvement plan. While the program is too new to draw conclusions about its impact, it offers an interesting approach to assisting low-performing schools, and its early phases of implementation offer some important lessons.

#### **The Basics:**<sup>135</sup>

The IIUSP is a voluntary program. Schools that scored below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in the state's achievement tests during 1998 and 1999 were eligible to apply for the pilot program. The selection process included criteria that rural, suburban, and urban schools be represented and that the pool of selected schools include a range of schools from the lowest five deciles of performance on the state performance assessments—i.e., the pilot pool could not have more than 86 schools from any one decile. It is interesting to note that if there were not enough applicants in one of the designated deciles, then the state had the authority to randomly select a school in that decile to participate. Such authority, however, was not exercised in this first round of the pilot. Otherwise, the application process was voluntary, though one observer in California noted that many schools were “volunteered” by their district.

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<sup>133</sup> This state detail review is formatted slightly differently than the other four study states because California's accountability system is quite new and many of the typical elements are not yet in place.

<sup>134</sup> It is important to note that of the 430 schools participating in the IIUSP, 77 of them have already received federal grants to focus on planning for improvement. Their timeline is thus a bit different. The description provided in this case study covers the typical experience of one of the 353 schools just receiving planning funds for the first time.

<sup>135</sup> Data in this section is referenced from the California Department of Education, “Immediate Intervention Underperforming Schools Program Description,” accessible at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/iiusp/>, “Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, Academic Performance Index information, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa/api/>), including Powerpoint presentations describing calculation of the API, and “Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999” homepage <http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa> including text of SBX1 1 Senate Bill, 1<sup>st</sup> Ext. Session.

Once selected, pilot schools receive \$50,000 to fund an external evaluation. External evaluators range from individual consultants, universities, and private consulting organizations, to regional educational laboratories, county offices of education, and other educational consulting groups. Districts have been called upon to help schools choose an appropriate external evaluator.

Selected schools must also create an improvement committee, which must include faculty and staff representatives and a majority of “nonschool site personnel,” with at least 20% parents or guardians of students at the school. The external evaluator is charged with working with this improvement team and also informing the entire school community about the progress of the school. In fact, by March 15, 2000, the evaluator, school site, and improvement team must submit a concrete plan of action including intermediate growth targets for student performance and requests for additional funding necessary to meet these targets. This plan must be signed by the evaluator and approved by the local district, before its submission to the state for approval and fund allocation. Up to \$200 per pupil is available for improvement implementation grants.<sup>136</sup>

Schools that fail to meet their growth targets face the possibility of a range of interventions from their local district and ultimately the state, including reassignment of staff, public school choice options for students, chartering options, “reorganization of the school,” and potential closure. The exact details of these scenarios, however, have not yet been decided as the state has been focused on providing assistance alternatives for schools.

In the future, IIUSP schools will be selected based on their performance on the state’s new Academic Performance Index (API). The first API scores for all schools in the state were released this January. The API is largely driven by performance on standardized tests<sup>137</sup>, although it includes pupil and certificated staff attendance rates, and graduation rates (for secondary schools). Each school receives a score of 200 to 1000 on the API. The state has adopted an interim target score of 800 for all schools. Schools that fall below the 800 standard have improvement targets determined, based on closing the gap between their current performance and the state target by 5%. To meet the growth target, a school must also show that all “numerically significant student subgroups” meet or exceed at least 80% of the school target.<sup>138</sup>

Schools also receive a statewide ranking of 1-10 on the basis of their API performance and growth compared to other schools. In addition, each school receives a ranking of 1-10 on the basis of their API performance and growth compared to a cluster of schools that serve similar

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<sup>136</sup> The recipient school must match the state funding for implementation.

<sup>137</sup> In the initial years of the API, the index will use Stanford 9 test results as the state continues to work on its own state exam. It is also important to note that the API calculation is actually a weighted average of student performance. Subject matters are given different weights for grades 2-8 (e.g., math performance is 40% of total score, reading is 30% of total score, language and spelling are 15% a piece) and performance deciles are given different weights (e.g., the percentage of students scoring in the 80-99<sup>th</sup> percentile are weighted by 1000, whereas those in the 1-19<sup>th</sup> percentile are weighted by 200). This latter weighting is structured to create greater incentives to move students from the lowest percentiles up by making the weighting score differentials highest among the lowest deciles (e.g., the weighting factor jumps from 200 for the 1-19<sup>th</sup> percentile to 500 for the 20-39<sup>th</sup> percentile, while a similar jump at the top end is from 875 to 1000).

<sup>138</sup> California uses the term “comparable improvement” to refer to the growth targets for numerically significant student subgroups. A numerically significant student subgroup must have at least 30 students and represent at least 15% of the total student population or must have at least 100 students at a school, regardless of the percentage of the total school population represented. The subgroups used to date include: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, Filipino, African American, White non-Hispanic, and socio-economically disadvantaged. Socio-economically disadvantaged is defined as either receiving free or reduced lunch or having neither parent with a high school diploma or equivalent.

demographic populations.<sup>139</sup> The 1-10 rankings are created to ensure that there are roughly equal numbers of schools receiving each ranking.

California intends to include rewards for schools that are meeting or exceeding their growth targets in the next few years.<sup>140</sup> This Governor's Performance Award Program will also be available for schools participating in the IIUSP program that meet their performance targets. The exact details of the program are still being defined, although \$96 million has been allocated for the 1999-2000 school year.

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<sup>139</sup> California law indicates that the following characteristics are used to determine cohorts of comparable schools: student mobility, student ethnicity, student socioeconomic status, percent fully credentialed teachers, percent emergency certified teachers, percent of English language learners, average class size per grade level, and whether the school is or is not a multi-track year-round school.

<sup>140</sup> According to the state's plans, in order to be eligible for rewards, a school must not only meet its schoolwide growth target but also its target for each numerically significant student subgroup. Rewards are anticipated to be both monetary and nonmonetary and may include options for requesting waivers from regulations.

## APPENDIX 2: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE STRONG SCHOOLS MODEL'S INDICATORS OF PERFORMANCE

The following pages provide more detailed information about the specific data gathered in the Level 1, 2, and 3 collection process of the Strong Schools Model's Indicators of School Performance.

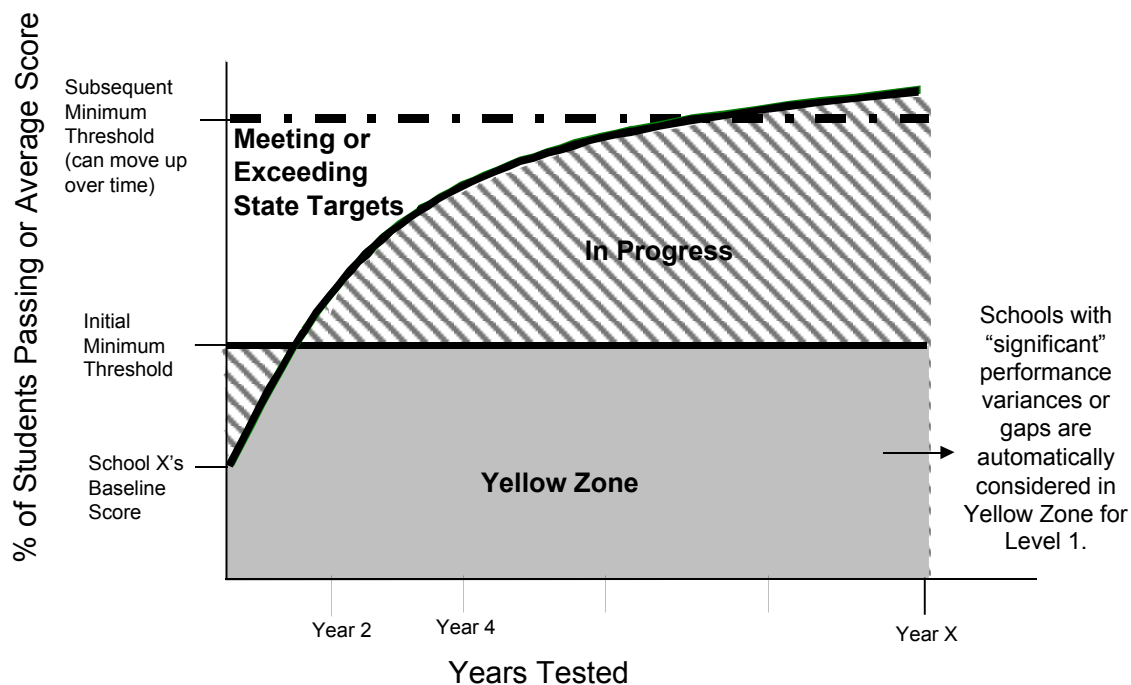
### A Closer Look at Level 1 Data

Level 1 data is basic student performance data consisting primarily of absolute levels of achievement for a school (e.g., the percentage of students “passing” the assessment or the school’s average score on the assessment) and the improvement rates of the school (e.g., this percentage or score was an X% improvement over last year).

#### *An Example of How Level 1 Works*

Figure 2.a provides one possible conceptualization for how Level 1 data could be used to assign schools into the initial three categories described in Section III.

**Figure 2.a: Possible Use of Level 1 Indicator**



The commission would begin by setting an initial minimum threshold of performance, indicating that it will consider it unacceptable for any school to be performing below this rate. This initial minimum threshold should rise predictably over time, as indicated by the dotted line in Figure 2.a.<sup>141</sup> Next, the commission would establish some target improvement rate for schools to meet over time. In the figure above, this target rate is the curved slope. As drawn, Figure 2.a

<sup>141</sup> It is important that the commission make careful considerations before setting the initial minimum threshold and the improvement target rates for a school. These decisions cannot be perceived as arbitrary or unpredictable. Rather, they should be grounded in an understanding of general school research, for example, highlighting reasonable yet challenging rates of improvement on the state’s assessment and with a recognition that the state will need to provide assistance to many of the schools falling into the “Yellow Zone.”

presumes that this rate would account for greater percentage improvements in the early years, when small but immediate changes in instruction may yield greater results. The percentage rate of improvement flattens over time as improvement becomes more challenging.<sup>142</sup> The slope of this target improvement line will be unique for each school, depending on its baseline score.

As indicated in Figure 2.a, schools above both the curved improvement line and the straight minimum threshold line can initially be considered as *Meeting or Exceeding State Targets*. Schools with performance that falls below one of the lines but not both can initially be considered *In Progress*. Schools with performance measures below both targets can be considered initially in the *Yellow Zone*. In addition, schools with significant performance variances or gaps, described below, will automatically be initially considered in the *Yellow Zone*.

#### *Enriching Level 1 Data: Preventing the Gaming of Averages:*

The basic Level 1 data can be enriched with some simple analyses conducted by staff before the commission reviews the initial Level 1 categorizations. Some critics of accountability systems, for example, worry that schools will encourage greater dropouts to ensure that potentially lower performing students do not drive down the school's average score. Dropout rates, then, should be included in a school's performance—and can be done by recording a score of 0 for each student who left the school without enrolling in another program. Thus, schools with high dropouts will have fewer students passing the state exam and a lower average score. Level 1 performance data should also meet basic qualifications of validity, including a check that the number of students taking the assessment was reasonable and the exemptions from the exam were limited to acceptable cases.

Finally, Level 1 data should include some clear measure of the school's ability to meet the needs of all of its students. Schools that meet the initial average targets for performance and improvement, but show wide discrepancies among the performance of some of their students should not slip by a Level 2 look by the commission. All schools should be evaluated by how well they serve all students, and those that show a significant gap between high- and low-performing students should automatically be considered in the *Yellow Zone*, ensuring that the commission will look at the Level 2 performance data from the school and that appropriate assistance can be made available if necessary.

Certainly, schools will exhibit some variance among student performance. A check on the range of this variance, however, is important to protect against the potential for a school to focus all of its efforts on certain students rather than meeting the academic needs of all of its students. Ensuring that schools with such variance patterns receive a Level 2 look will provide much more in-depth information about the school's ability to serve all of its students.

There is no one right way to measure and evaluate this potential variance in a school's scores. States will need to consider which approach best meets their needs and fits with their state data collection system. The Strong Schools Model contends, however, that a state must utilize some measure to clarify the basic performance data included in Level 1. Not doing so could mask a school that appears on average to be doing well, but is not serving some of its students well. The Strong Schools Model offers three possible options as ways to ensure that a school is meeting the needs of all of its students:

- *A measure of the proportion of students scoring below a very low threshold* (e.g., in Washington state, scoring in the Level 1 range on the WASL). Schools that have significant

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<sup>142</sup> It is also possible, however, to consider this target improvement line as a straight line, indicating a constant rate of improvement over time. It is less likely, however, that many schools will show such constant growth.

percentages of students scoring in this range, while still meeting the average targets have a large variance in performance that warrants a deeper look at the data.

- *A measure of within-school variance on student scores.* This index can calculate the range of clusters of scores within the school. Schools that showed large clusters at the highest and lowest performance levels would trigger a Level 2 look by the commission
- *A measure of an achievement gap:* A third option is to compare average test scores of students in different demographic or income groups (e.g., students eligible/not eligible for free lunch; students of color/whites). This approach focuses on ensuring that a school is not harboring a large achievement gap in its efforts to meet the average targets.

In order to select an appropriate measure, a state should be clear about what it wants to guard against in the Level 1 indicator. If the state is concerned that some schools may be under-serving some students while still generating a strong average, then one of the first two options may prove sufficient. If, however, the state is concerned that schools may be under-serving specific populations (e.g., high poverty students or minority students), then the third option is more appropriate.

In any case, schools placed in the *Yellow Zone* because of their performance on one of these variance indicators are not necessarily targeted for assistance or intervention. Rather, they are guaranteed of a further look by the commission, who upon considering their additional indicators of performance can decide what actions, if any, are necessary. Level 1 indicators insist that an accountability system err on the side of caution, so that no school can slip by a second look if it is not educating all of its students.

#### *Achieving in All Core Subjects:*

In general, Level 1 data should be analyzed separately for the basic subjects tested—typically, reading, mathematics, and writing. Looking at performance by subject matter reduces the incentives for a school to sustain low-performance in one basic area with high-performance in another. Certainly, the commission may decide to pay more attention to schools that fall in the *Yellow Zone* for all subjects or for more than one subject, but if the state wants students to meet the standards in all three areas, then it needs to measure each of the subject performance scores separately.

#### *Evaluating Biennially*

Level 1 data should be collected and distributed to schools annually, however, the commission will only assess school performance biennially. The commission will then consider the two year average of a school's Level 1 data. This two-year measurement allows for smoothing the potential impact of cohort effects and provides opportunities for schools to make improvements, while still keeping schools focused on the importance of student achievement.

#### **A Closer Look at Level 2 Data**

Level 2 data is extremely important to the Strong Schools Model, providing a look beyond a schools' test scores that can help clarify and expand the initial designations of performance. Though Level 2 data pertains directly to performance, it provides a deeper explanation and level of understanding about the school's achievement. Level 2 data can help the commission decide if the pattern of information indicates a school that will need assistance to improve or a school that deserves recognition for achieving beyond the state's targets.

The Strong Schools Model proposes that the following types of data be included in general Level 2 collections:

- A break-down of performance by the percentage of students scoring at each level of performance on the state exam (e.g., the percent of students moving from the lowest level of performance to the next highest, etc.).
- Performance data for numerically large sub-populations (i.e., based on SES indicators, limited English proficiency, mobility, race and ethnicity, etc.). (Not included in Level 2, if used as option in Level 1).
- Comparisons to schools with similar baseline scores.
- Value-added or other longitudinal gain measures as are available, showing student gain scores over time.
- Other standardized test score data, including performance measures in other subject areas.
- Course-taking patterns in secondary schools.
- Teacher surveys relating to school climate and leadership.
- School leadership evaluations.
- Presence of a major improvement initiative.

Each of these measures provides valuable insight into a school's performance. The first few help place the school's general performance score in some larger context. It is important, for example, to understand where the school is seeing improvement or decline in student performance. Similarly, if not calculated into the Level 1 indicator, it is also important to note if a school is under-serving particular groups of students.

Comparisons to schools that started at the same baseline, or calculating a value-added or other longitudinal measure of performance that compares student gain scores over time can also offer important insight into whether or not a school's Level 1 indicator presents a consistent and accurate picture of its actual performance.<sup>143</sup> In addition, a school's performance on other standardized tests that are already being administered can either confirm the standards-based information or indicate that the Level 1 indicator may be masking or exaggerating the actual performance of the school.

The remaining data on the proposed Level 2 list includes additional information designed to interpret how deeply rooted the school's issues may be. Course taking patterns, climate surveys, leadership evaluations, and the presence of a major improvement initiative all can help indicate if this is a low-performing school with the chance to turn things around or one in need of serious assistance. Schools with isolated, leaderless, combative environments, in which few students are offered or challenged to take high level courses, and which have never managed to launch an improvement effort are clearly in need of external assistance or immediate intervention. Similarly, a school that shows some indications of improvement, along with an inspiring new leader with a major improvement strategy and a shift to a collaborative climate may be close to the verge of a breakthrough. This additional information provides a richer level of understanding about the potential for the school to make change.

The commission will undoubtedly need assistance in collecting and analyzing such information for schools. The state can assist in this process by either designating a specific

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<sup>143</sup> Value-added measures, as conceived by statistician William Sanders of the University of Tennessee, attempt to calculate the actual gain a school added to a student's test score. Value-added measures require annual assessments of students and are based on quite complicated statistical methods that can be virtually indecipherable to the non-mathematician. As such, such methods may not be appropriate as the initial driver on a standards-based accountability system. They can, however, provide additional insights into a school's performance that when considered along side other indicators of performance can add depth to the understanding of a school's situation.

budget source to such accountability-based data collection and analysis or by providing a contract for a data analysis center or organization to support the commission's work in this way.

After analyzing Level 2 data, the commission can make its final recommendations for categorizing a school's performance. Schools' performance can be rated as follows:

- *Exceeds State Targets*—the school has received some recognition or reward.
- *Meets State Targets*—the school is acknowledged to be meeting state targets, but does not meet additional criteria for a reward. The school continues to work with its district to continue to sustain achievement.
- *In Progress*—the school is not yet meeting all of the state's standards, but there is reason to believe it will improve on its own with the help of the district. (If it is rapidly improving, it may be eligible for an improvement reward).
- *In Need of Assistance*—the school is not meeting state targets and will receive funding for a Level 3 external review and potential funding, human resources, or consultation to help build its capacity.
- *In Need of Immediate Interventions*—the school has either shown no signs of improvement or is unwilling to make improvements, and the state will step in to assure a functioning learning environment for the students.

The criteria used for Level 1 and Level 2 designations should be made public and accessible. The commission should only promote its official list of how schools performed after the Level 2 data analysis has been completed.

### **A Closer Look at Level 3 Data**

Level 3 data should be collected for schools considered *In Need of Assistance* or *In Need of Immediate Interventions* and should look beyond test scores to provide human judgment about what a school needs to do to improve. Level 3 data, provided by an external evaluation team that makes a multi-day, on-site visit to assess a school's situation, is used by schools and their districts to help guide an improvement strategy.

The Strong Schools Model encourages the state to release a request for proposal to contract with a limited number of external evaluation teams. While some states have relied on a state-funded and state-run team to handle all external evaluations, the Strong Schools Model recognizes that the demand for such visits could exceed the capacity of only one provider. In addition, having more than one provider opens the possibility for evaluators to learn from the innovations of other evaluators. Thus, the state can ensure an adequate supply of reviewers by offering a limited number of contracts to groups of individuals or organizations that they feel meet the criteria to be effective evaluators. Evaluators need consistency and over time, the evaluators will become more astute and efficient in their evaluation of schools. The limited marketplace ensures that the evaluators will work with a number of schools and have this chance to learn and improve themselves. It also allows the state to manage some consistency among the providers.

In addition to creating the limited marketplace, the state would need to play a key role in providing quality assurance oversight of these providers. External reviewers should be evaluated on their basic credentials and over time should be approved based on their track record in helping schools improve. The state should only renew external reviewer contracts when evaluators have effectively and honestly assessed their schools' situations. In addition, the state should play a strong quality assurance role in disseminating information about the providers to schools and districts.



The state would also need to guard against potential conflicts of interest between external evaluators and assistance providers. External reviewers need to be considered experts in evaluating the needs of a school. This expertise should be considered distinct from providing schools with specific forms of assistance. External reviewers should not be direct assistance providers, nor should they have direct affiliations with such groups.

Finally, the commission should develop some general guidelines to be followed by all external reviewers. The commission should provide the general categories of evaluation that providers will use when reviewing a school.<sup>144</sup> Actual decisions about how to assess a school's performance, however, should be left to the professional discretion of the providers. If they are sufficiently held accountable for their performance by the state, they will face strong incentives to honestly and constructively assess schools.

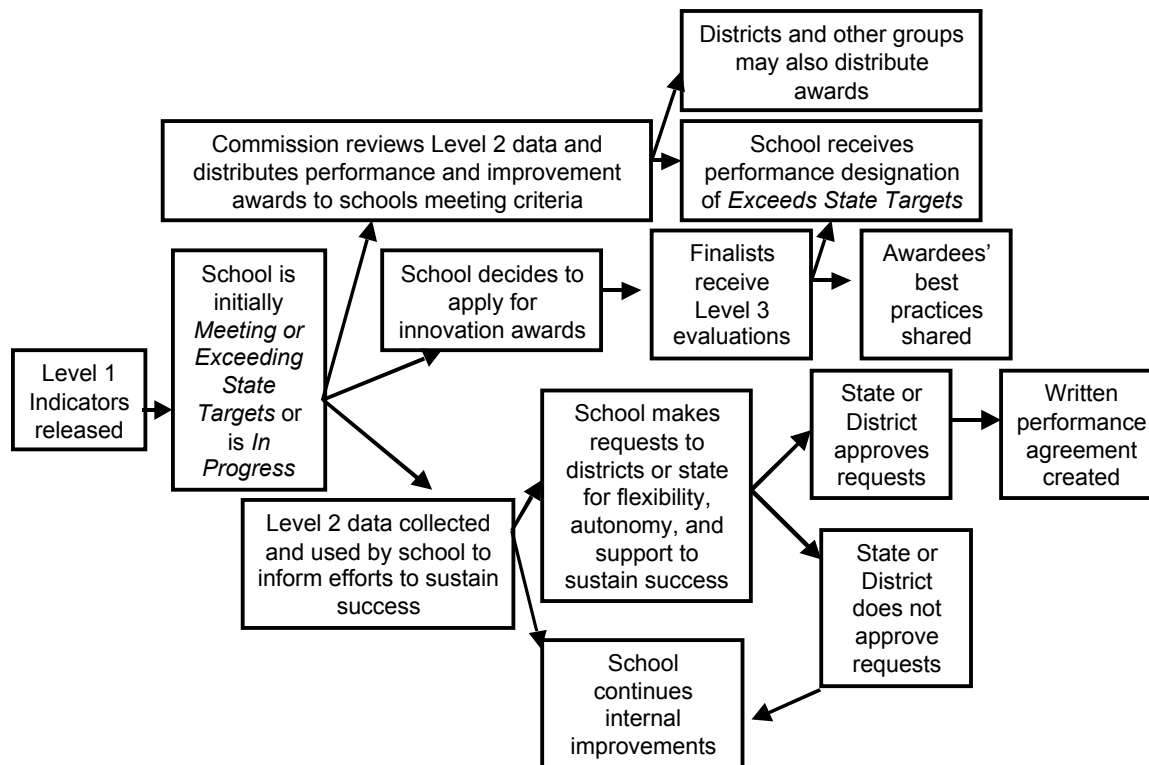
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<sup>144</sup> Examples of this kind of broad guidance are available. The state of Massachusetts, for example, mandates that all charter schools undergo an "inspection" by an external "inspectorate." The inspectorate is guided by several general, guiding questions. The process for assessing a school's performance with regard to these questions, however is left to the professional judgment of the organization that has been contracted to provide these reviews. In this instance, the Massachusetts contractor has worked closely with a British school inspection firm to create an inspection review process that is consistent yet flexible.

### APPENDIX 3: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF RECOGNIZING SUCCESS IN THE STRONG SCHOOLS MODEL

This appendix details one possible approach to implementing the incentives for performance in the Strong Schools Model. Figure 3.a and the description that follows combine the operating principles and guidelines described in Section IV into a tangible process for recognizing and sustaining schools that are meeting state targets for performance and/or improvement.

**Figure 3.a: Decision Tree for Proposed Approach to Recognizing and Sustaining Successful Schools**



Briefly, schools with Level 1 performance ratings of *Meeting or Exceeding Standards* or schools considered *In Progress*, but with high improvement rates on the Level 1 indicators are included in Figure 3.1. The commission will review these schools’ Level 2 data and compare them to their set thresholds for the high performance rewards and improvement rewards. Schools that meet these criteria will automatically receive these rewards, which will consist of public recognition and other forms of acknowledgement that schools value. These schools will then receive a final performance designation of *Exceeding State Targets*.

Schools that meet the Level 1 targets, but do not meet the additional rewards criteria will be designated *Meeting State Targets*. Schools that are *In Progress* but receive an improvement reward will retain their *In Progress* status but will be specially noted as a reward recipient. In addition, schools may also be eligible for local or community awards distributed by other organizations on the basis of alternative criteria.

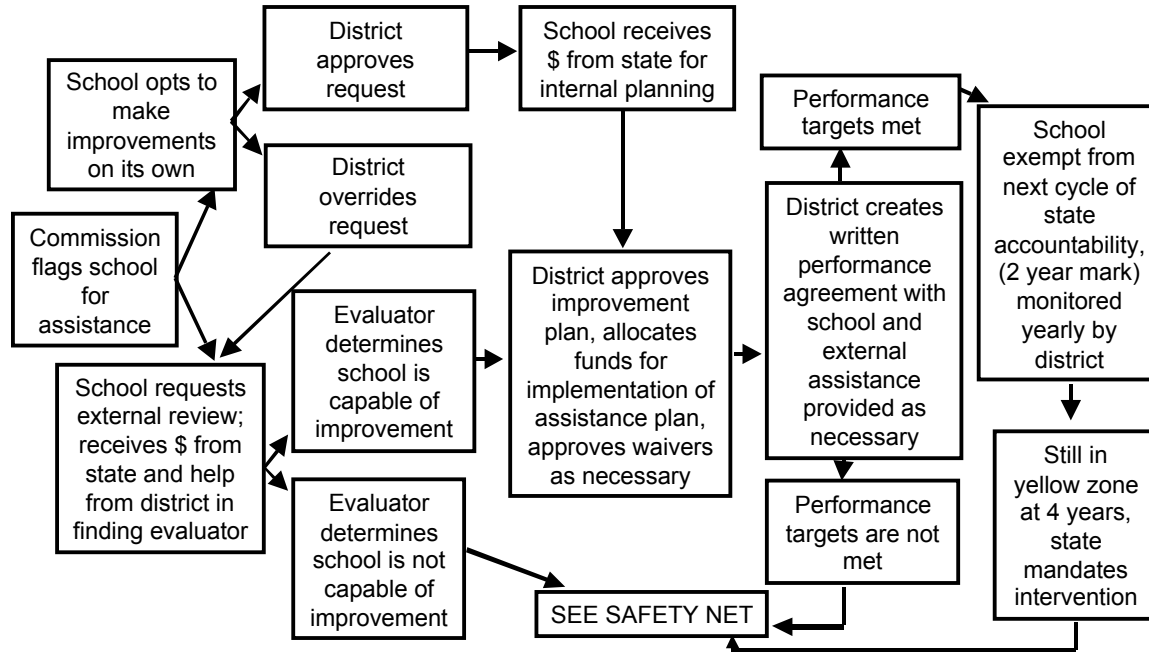
Schools *Meeting or Exceeding State Targets* may also choose to apply for the innovation rewards. The application for such rewards should be simple and straightforward. The commission then would review these applications and create a pool of finalists. An external review team should then provide an on-site visit to these schools to see the innovation and strategy in action. This step is important for two reasons. First, it provides the necessary human judgment to determine if something innovative and potentially replicable really is happening at the school. Second, it provides external review teams with the opportunity to see successful schools—which can provide an important perspective in their primary duties of reviewing struggling schools. The external reviewers will make recommendations to the commission about the school’s strategy and awardees will receive a financial reward and have the chance to share their information with other schools.

Finally all such schools should review their Level 2 data with their districts and make plans for sustaining their efforts. Successful schools may decide that they will continue on their own, whether or not any rewards are forthcoming. They may also decide that they need some additional freedom or authority to sustain their success. They can request waivers and if granted by the district or state, the school should enter into a written performance agreement with its local district, designating what additional freedoms it will be given, how it will use them, and what improvements it will show as a result.

## APPENDIX 4: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF PROVIDING ASSISTANCE IN THE STRONG SCHOOLS MODEL

This appendix details one possible approach to providing assistance in the Strong Schools Model. Figure 4.a and the description that follows combine the operating principles and guidelines for assistance described in Section IV into a tangible process for ensuring that schools receive assistance appropriate to their needs.

**Figure 4.a: Decision-Tree for Proposed Model to Address Schools In Need of Assistance**



Once a school is “flagged” for assistance, the school staff have two options. First, they can decide they would prefer to make improvement efforts on their own. The school’s district has the option to approve or override this request based on its understanding of the capacity of the school to do so effectively. If the district agrees that the school is likely to be able to make a sound improvement strategy on its own, then the school receives an allocation from the state for internal planning. This district oversight authority is important, because (as described in a subsequent section of this paper) districts will be held accountable for the improvement of their schools. Given the reciprocity of accountability, districts need to have the authority to make decisions about the assistance their schools will receive.

The school can also, however, request external assistance or the school’s district can demand it. The school will then receive funding from the state to pay for an initial external review. This funding should be larger than the amount provided to schools choosing self-guided assessments and improvement strategies because the costs of external reviewers will be higher. In addition, the school should receive support from its district in selecting an effective and well-suited external evaluator. The evaluator will then make the on-site visit to the school.

External evaluators have two options. They can either decide that the school is capable of making improvements in a reasonable time frame for the students at the school and can delineate recommendations for the types and intensity of assistance that will be appropriate. The school should then use this report to guide the creation of a school improvement plan.

Additionally, however, an external evaluator should have the option to determine that the school is in such a state of disarray that improvement in a reasonable time frame will not be possible. This safety net option, which will be described in more detail in Element 5 below, will undoubtedly be invoked only rarely. However, when an evaluator holds little hope for improvement there is no warrant to continue to pour money—and children’s learning opportunities—into a clearly dysfunctional school. What is needed is a new learning environment for the students. Districts should heed the evaluator's warning in these instances and work to instigate safety net options.

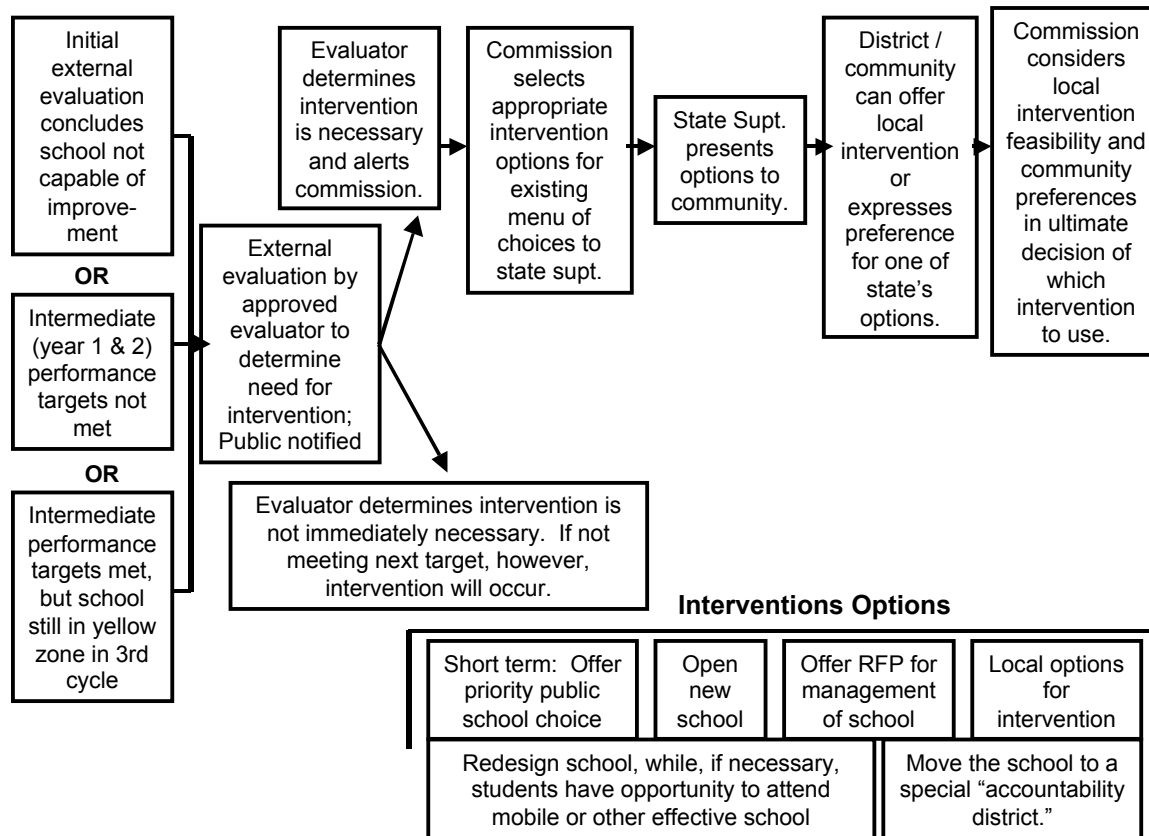
As will more often be the case, however, once a school is deemed capable of improvements, its district must approve the school’s improvement plan. This plan can include requests for funding, additional external assistance, other resources, and waivers from regulations and rules that may prove to be barriers to improvement.

Upon approving the improvement plan, the district should create a written performance agreement with the school and the external assistance provider if there is one. If the school then meets the short-term (one-year) performance targets delineated in the agreement, then the school will be exempt from the next cycle of state accountability and will instead be held accountable by the district based on the performance agreement. If the school remains in the “yellow zone” at the next state accountability checkpoint (which would be year four) then the state should mandate that Safety Net mechanisms be utilized by the district. In addition, if the school does not meet the intermediate performance targets at any point, then the district should intervene with the appropriate safety net mechanisms as described in the following paragraphs.

## APPENDIX 5: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF CREATING A SAFETY NET IN THE STRONG SCHOOLS MODEL

This appendix details one possible approach to creating a safety net in the Strong Schools Model. Figure 5.a and the explanation that follows offer a description of how the Strong Schools Model would implement a safety net for students attending chronically low-performing schools.

**Figure 5.a: Decision-Tree for Proposed Model for Safety Net Interventions**



Schools become eligible for the safety net via one of three paths. Some, presumably a very small number of schools, may be deemed incapable of improvement by their initial Level 3 evaluation, indicating that immediate interventions need to be considered. Other schools may not meet the intermediate performance targets that they agreed to with their district upon receiving assistance. These schools will have had two years and access to the assistance their evaluator and district deemed necessary to meet their intermediate performance agreement goals. These goals, it should be noted, were created by the school itself, in partnership with its district and reflect intermediate performance targets that all parties believed were possible. They will represent indications of progress, not expectations of closing the entire performance gap of the school. Students in schools that are not able to show such intermediate measures of progress need new options. Finally, some schools will have met their intermediate performance targets but may still find themselves meeting neither the state’s improvement goals or performance thresholds (e.g., they remain in the *Yellow Zone*). By this time, the school will have received state and district assistance for at least three years and it is reasonable to expect them to have at least met the state’s improvement goals.

At this point, the schools and the community they serve need to be notified that the safety net options may be initiated. Additionally, one of the state's approved external evaluators needs to conduct an on-site evaluation of the school's situation. The evaluation should determine if interventions are, in fact, warranted and should also assess the local district's ability to intervene in the school. This process can serve as a second-opinion and ensure that schools on the verge of a breakthrough receive consideration. If, however, the evaluator determines that an immediate intervention is not warranted, but the school continues to fall below its goals, then intervention should be automatic in the following year.

The evaluator may also confirm for the commission that an intervention is immediately necessary to preserve the learning opportunities of the student. The commission will then compile a range of safety net options appropriate for the school from the menu of options legally available to the state (i.e., the long-term options list described in Section III). These options will be presented to the state superintendent who will then share them with the local community and district.

At this point, the district will have the chance to offer its own plan for assuring the learning opportunities of the students in the school. Local districts should have such an option to intervene in their school, if their plan is feasible and likely to improve the student's learning environments. In addition, the community should have the opportunity to express its preferences about which intervention option is most acceptable. The commission will then consider if the local option is feasible and preferable. If it is not, it will take into consideration the community's preferences in making the ultimate decision about which intervention to use. The commission will always make its final decision, however, on the best option for the students in the school.

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