

# State Accountability Systems in the COVID Era and Beyond

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# Introduction

**Robin Lake and Maria Worthen**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the U.S. education system in both immediate and long-term ways, calling into question how K-12 accountability will function in the 2020–21 school year and well into the future.

States face considerable uncertainty about how to meet federal and state accountability requirements for this school year and beyond. It's unclear whether and how states can administer state assessments for students attending school virtually,<sup>1</sup> and many accountability requirements are on hold given the unprecedented disruptions. School and policy leaders recognize the singularity of this moment: not only must they lead through a crisis, but they can plant the seeds for future systems that better meet the needs of all students.

This brief presents a set of ideas and themes to begin to inform those challenges.

The school closures and interruptions have uncovered some of the fundamental technical and political flaws in the current accountability paradigm that were already under reconsideration before the pandemic. It is also the case that pre-existing models of schooling and accountability must adapt to a future in which schools deliver more instruction virtually.

The pandemic offers an important opportunity to improve on existing state accountability systems. In particular, the pandemic has highlighted the need for accountability systems to shift toward:

- Evaluating individual students' mastery of content, not just grade-level standards and average scores.
- Demonstrating that schools are adding value when continuous, uninterrupted assessment scores are not available.
- Navigating the complexity of challenges schools face in achieving equitable outcomes and measuring how well they are overcoming them.
- Recognizing teaching and learning that occurs after the final year of state-mandated assessments—typically 10th or 11th grade—which neglects students' diverse postsecondary and career pathways.
- Finding ways to account for the possibility that students in the same school have had extremely different learning experiences, some fully virtual (possibly even taking courses from other schools or programs) and others partially or fully in live instruction.
- Identifying methods to judge the effectiveness of COVID-19 innovations, such as learning pods, tutoring, and small-group online instruction.

<sup>1</sup> It made little sense to require statewide summative assessment and accountability interventions at the end of the 2019–20 school year. With school buildings closed across the country and many students unaccounted for, any large-scale assessment efforts would not capture the full extent of student learning or needs. In response, the U.S. Department of Education offered states immediate relief in the form of waivers from testing and school identification and improvement requirements. A similar decision has not been made for the 2020–21 school year; the incoming Biden Administration Education Secretary will need to do so quickly.

It is clear that the customary consequences for schools (rewards, assistance, penalties, closure and replacement) are impractical for this year. However, it will soon be more important than ever to know whether approaches to instruction that developed in the crisis should be continued, built upon, or abandoned. The stakes are very high for students whose futures depend on adult and institutional responses to the lost learning time, social isolation, and other hardships they have endured during the pandemic.

The need to adapt and innovate, then, could not come at a more critical time to ensure that the basic tenets of accountability and measurement, transparency, and informed decision-making can emerge stronger. How can we approach this challenge given the present chaos and uncertainty? What new approaches can be imagined during this “pause”? Most importantly, how can we ensure students’ best interests are at the forefront?

State and district leaders are seeking answers to these tough questions even as they focus on the day-to-day reality of managing through a crisis: COVID-19 has revealed long-standing inequities in our schools. This is a moment to build new and better approaches, not revert to the status quo.

This brief provides insights from national experts on education policy representing a diverse set of perspectives. The proposals are primarily taken and edited from a roundtable discussion with a state leader who asked us a simple question: Should their state hold schools accountable this year? And if so, how? The resulting discussion included a range of thoughtful and creative ideas. There was, by no means, perfect agreement, but there were important common threads. We share both the tensions and commonalities here to provoke further discussion.

## Ideas for states to consider in 2021

CRPE convened a group of education policy experts for a discussion of what state accountability should look like in 2021 and beyond. Perspectives ranged from stalwarts who helped design previous state and federal accountability policies to advocates who believe accountability must be redesigned from the ground up.

The group brought an array of creative ideas to the question: “What should accountability look like this year?” Though the ideas took very different tacks, a few striking areas converged.

First, clarity about student outcomes and instructional effectiveness is needed now more than ever. While this is an unprecedented year rife with irregularities and data challenges that may make traditional “high stakes” accountability inappropriate, the stakes are still very real and very high for students. There has never been a more important time to ensure schools and school systems successfully move students forward, address lost learning time, and address racial and income disparities. Each proposal offers thoughtful solutions to this dilemma, but none argues against institutional accountability altogether.

Second, accountability systems must evolve. Policymakers should use this year to lay the groundwork for new models that will be more effective, just, and politically viable than current approaches. State leaders can use this year’s interruption of business as usual to experiment with new approaches and see how they are received.

Third, parents need information about their children’s progress and the effectiveness of options. Most of the proposals emphasize transparency and the urgent need to get information into the hands of parents, educators, and school leaders to ensure that every child is well served. This strategy has both short- and long-term merit. This year, there is a natural constituency for data and results. Some parents have had to take nearly full responsibility for their children’s learning during this pandemic. Others have seen firsthand both the frustrations and advantages of virtual instruction. Teachers need reliable information to pinpoint their students’ needs—several of our contributors saw this as a critical base on which to build. This may be the year to cement the idea that no matter what, data and information matter.

Test scores are necessary but not sufficient: parents would know whether their children have had consistent, well designed instruction, using the best available materials and methods. But in addition to test results, parents should also know about outcome measures like AP course completion, student engagement, attendance, and social-emotional well-being. Schools with special missions and approaches should provide evidence that these matter to students. Still others on the panel proposed establishing school-specific goals.

**This may be the year to cement the idea that no matter what, data and information matter.**

In this year of all years, when reliable and comparable test scores will be hard to come by and evidence-based interventions are at a premium, these ideas may have particular merit and credibility. At least, they may be worth trying as pilots.

## Policymakers have four options

**Elizabeth Chu**

*Executive Director, Center for Public Research and Leadership, Columbia University*

We’ve considered at least four scenarios with our partners and in our work:

1. Put accountability systems on hold for another year. Note: we do not recommend taking this approach.
2. Stick as close to the previous accountability system as possible, only making adjustments where necessary given the pandemic. Example questions to consider: How to handle growth—e.g., through two-year/skip-year growth models? How to weight last year and this year in measures that rely on multiple years of information?
3. Create a system that is unique to this moment. Example questions to consider: How to create a system that is more focused on support than on consequences? How to move away from norm-referenced tiering categories? How to judge the quality of family engagement, the quality of service provision in varying modalities, student engagement, and attendance?
4. Imagine what a new accountability system might be and use this moment of disruption to start the transition. Example questions to consider: What might a broader, equity-focused set of metrics include? How to employ rigorous, qualitative review to better supplement quantitative measures? How to capture the entire pipeline of education service provision?



When asked to participate in these debates, one problem—identified in this document—always comes up: there are fewer “eyes” on or into what’s happening within the system than before because the usual data collection mechanisms have been postponed. But at the same time, there suddenly are many more eyes on what’s happening because (1) families are in a position now to see instruction happen before their eyes and to participate in it more deeply and in a more informed way, and (2) in a number of contexts/schools/districts/CMOs, teachers and families are speaking with each other more frequently and fruitfully than ever before.

One way to diminish the various tensions noted (for example, between tweaking versus transforming and between the usual measures versus new, broader ones) and to pursue some of the objectives (for example, to reset the purpose of measurement away from evaluation and toward learning and improvement) is to take concerted steps now to learn more from the new eyes on the system. Families now have a longitudinal view of their children’s work and progress over the year. School systems can tap into this understanding at multiple points during the year and meaningfully engage a broader range of stakeholders in measuring and improving school quality.

**One way to diminish tensions and pursue objectives is to take concerted steps now to learn more from new eyes on the system.**

## Go big on transparency and prioritize

**Robin Lake**

*Director, Center on Reinventing Public Education*

I was trained to think of government as the primary arbiter of accountability, but maybe this is the year to arm parents with information. Government will have little standing to enforce any real consequences this year, so let’s use this moment to finally give parents meaningful information about how their children are doing. Parents should have a right to see the results of any diagnostic or formative test used to assess their children and to see evidence that gaps in foundational skills are being addressed. Consider using online assessments like [New Classrooms](#)’ new diagnostics to allow students to self-assess. Think about this as a chance to hear from families about what information they really want and solidify future support

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for accountability. Consider a statewide survey that asks parents what they most want to know, such as basic skills, social-emotional health, or career-readiness indicators. A personalized student profile that helps parents know what skills their child has and hasn’t mastered and what help will be provided could be a powerful tool. Maybe this is the year to begin to pilot and test it.

To support this kind of radical transparency, states should also consider zeroing in on “gateway” subjects and skills—those that students will need to successfully engage in next year’s content. This is especially critical for math so that students don’t miss foundational skills. Evidence suggests passing 9th grade algebra, for instance, is a leading indicator for successful high school completion. Ask districts and schools to test in the skills needed to

pass essential classes, like algebra, and ask them to report how many students are on track to read by 3rd grade. State standards and tests would benefit from a common-sense whittling down to make them less time-consuming to administer and more meaningful to parents and teachers. If meaningful state assessments are not possible this year, states should at least have districts collect and report on how they are measuring learning loss and what they are doing to catch students up.

I was also trained to think of accountability in terms of outcomes, but without much in the way of meaningful standardized tests this year (though I support continued testing regardless), maybe this is a year to focus on inputs. Just as we expect doctors to abide by a medical standard of care—proven interventions for particular maladies—we ought to expect schools to use an educational standard of care—evidence-based interventions like high-dose tutoring and effective literacy interventions. Government need not close schools for failing to employ these practices, but parents should have the right to know if they are being employed.

## Get creative, but measure student growth

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

*President Emeritus, Thomas B. Fordham Institute*

The testing hiatus and “data hole” resulting from school closures and federal waivers in spring 2020 have made calculation of year-to-year achievement growth difficult or impossible in the short run. Variability in school operations and attendance during the 2020–21 year also bedevil such calculations. Schools may have to substitute two-year growth (i.e., spring 2019 to spring 2021) as best it can be gauged, provided of course that they remain assiduous about 2021 assessments.

A recent Fordham analysis made clear that student growth calculations for most schools can be accurately estimated with a one-year lapse in state assessments, but few schools will be able to do that if there are [no state assessments](#) in spring 2021. That would be devastating for results-based school accountability, for teachers and school leaders wanting to know which of their students gained or lost how much learning during the pandemic, and for parents seeking accurate information about learning losses for their own children. It’s fine if states opt to suspend their summative school ratings for a year or even two. But not to insist on achievement and growth data is to doom educators, policy leaders, parents, and taxpayers to flying blind—not even knowing which children and which schools have the most catching up to do.

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I urge careful improvisation in the near term and a resumption of familiar calculations, comparisons, and ratings as soon as possible. I agree with the Data Quality Campaign, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Collaborative for Student Success, the Education Trust, and a host of civil rights organizations that states can and should continue to measure student growth in 2021. Even if federal ESSA waivers again become available, states should shun them. By measuring student progress between the 2019 and 2021 annual assessments, state leaders can still get the vital insights they will need to understand and continue to support student learning.

## Focus on data that will drive greater equity

Virgel Hammonds

*Chief Learning Officer, KnowledgeWorks*

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the foundations of a traditional education system, raising questions about the feasibility of maintaining traditional assessment and accountability systems. Rather than compound the logistical challenges with efforts to administer standardized assessments and accountability systems this spring, states and districts should consider ways to use the data they already collect to better target resources toward historically

**A successful recovery requires a willingness to think differently about how we measure success, how we target resources and supports to the students who need them most.**

underserved communities that are suffering disproportionately from the pandemic. We know what regions have suffered from prolonged school closures, high virus incidence rates, connectivity issues, food insecurity, and high educator turnover. We also know that communities are collecting a lot of data on social-emotional needs, student engagement, and lost instructional time. School system leaders must be transparent with this data so families and community organizations can rally to help the system recover.

But recovery should mean more than a return to normal. A successful recovery requires a willingness to think differently about how we measure success, how we target resources and supports to the students who need them most. Despite our best efforts, we have made little progress over the past decade in closing achievement gaps between students of color and their peers. The pandemic has exacerbated these inequities, igniting a new urgency for national and state conversations about how to improve assessment and accountability systems so we are better equipped to address the impacts of this crisis.

## Be creative now, but start looking to the future

Patricia Levesque

*CEO, ExcelinEd*

The priority for 2021 should be to assess every student on the state assessment to determine mastery of the state standards. States may need to modify tests to overcome administrative challenges of remote administration or length of test. Assessment results should be transparently reported for each school, district, and state by subject and achievement level, and for each student group. The participation rate must be reported to show whether results are generalizable and comparable statewide and year over year. These pieces of information are invaluable to policymakers and education leaders for directing resources and support to students.



States should capture and communicate information on when and how the tests were given and any notable differences between this year's test administration and previous years' conditions.

Parents, especially now as a key facilitators of their children's education, need individualized information on their children through multiple modes of communication: parent portals, personalized video reports like the data narratives produced by [Spotlight Education](#), and hard-copy score sheets with resources for parents on how to further help their children in areas of improvement when using Khan Academy.

All of the above are more important this year than applying grades/ratings, attempting new growth calculations, or tying consequences to scores.

States should also start thinking about tiered accountability structures at the state, district, and school levels and future data points to begin collecting for these systems:

1. Postsecondary outcomes: What happens to students after they leave high school? How many go to college, technical school, the military, or straight into the workforce?
2. School climate: student/teacher surveys, such as Illinois' [5Essentials](#) surveys, to improve the classroom and school learning environment.

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## Focus on what schools have control over

**Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger**

*President and CEO, Data Quality Campaign*

States, districts, and schools should use all of the data and information at their disposal to focus on school accountability and provide clear, understandable information about school quality. However, this is not the moment to publicly rate school performance.

One thing is certain: states must administer assessments this spring. Without assessments, leaders will be without a comparable data point on learning for all students. But it's important that state leaders pursue necessary changes to assessments to ensure that they are not a burden on students, parents, or teachers.

**Without assessments, leaders will be without a comparable data point on learning for all students.**

Given the pause in state assessments in 2020, leaders should consider opportunity, equity, and outcomes in an accountability system for this school year—areas that schools and systems have some control over at this point.

Growth data is the most equitable measure of student performance, and can be calculated absent 2020 results. The best place to start is by using 2021 assessment data to calculate skip-year growth.

Schools already have the following indicators and can use them to understand school and student progress this year:

- access to effective teaching (including diversity of the teaching workforce)
- access to rigorous coursework (AP, IB, dual enrollment)
- access to academic supports
- on-time graduation
- postsecondary readiness (including enrollment, entry to the workforce, etc.),
- school climate
- school engagement (access to remote learning, attendance/chronic absence, other measures of academic engagement)

Transparency is key. Each and every one of these indicators must be disaggregated across all student groups in order to ensure that states and schools are serving all students.

## Decide your values, let data follow

**Laura Jimenez**

*Director of Standards and Accountability, Center for American Progress*

State accountability systems are primarily based on data from statewide, summative assessments; this year, however, these data will be missing or incomplete. CAP believes states can work with their test vendors and technical advisory councils to administer some modified version of their assessments to glean high-level data for policy and administrator decision-making, but not for accountability. Provide whatever data are available to parents. Graduation requirements might be modified for the 2020–21 school year, but states can continue to collect and report graduation rates.

With that assumption in mind, states should begin with identifying their values for this year (equity, quality, or transparency, for example) and use that to guide accountability design. These recommendations assume that assessment and accountability systems are only somewhat objective proxies for equity, quality, and transparency.

**Graduation requirements might be modified for the 2020-21 school year, but states can continue to collect and report graduation rates.**

States should consider using other, nonassessment data as a check on equity, quality, and transparency. For example, a state could require an annual report with an assessment based on districts' reopening plans and other data, including attendance by mode of instruction (virtual, in-person, hybrid) and length of day/week, student engagement surveys, conditions for learning (access to wifi, computer, high-quality curriculum), and social-emotional well-being. The state could inquire and intervene in those districts that were least effective at addressing any of these factors.

Taking such an approach signals that accountability is a priority for the state, provides richer data on nonassessment factors related to achievement, and paves the way for innovating the accountability system for future years. However, such a process could be burdensome and decision-makers would need to use caution in making decisions based on them due to data quality issues.

## Let schools set their own goals, but be transparent

Eric Lerum

*Chief Operating Officer, America Succeeds*

Two foundational blocks shouldn't move: state summative assessments and data transparency for families and policymakers. They should both be a part of whatever states come up with while including whatever caveats are appropriate.

That said, ultimately this year is going to come down to what districts and schools can do for their students, and that's going to vary. The traditional model of the state telling schools and districts what they're expected to do probably just won't work this year (more than most).

I recommend the state acknowledge schools' limitations for accountability, and let three questions be their guide: What are you going to do for students? Can that be measured? What are you committing to as a goal? Then, allow schools to come up with additional measures (the state could start with a preapproved list) that they can use to supplement or replace the accountability plan they would have followed in an ordinary year. Measures could include progress on formative assessments, progress for particular student populations, behavior and attendance measures, and progress toward postsecondary plans.

**The traditional model of the state telling schools and districts what they're expected to do probably just won't work this year.**

This approach would 1) allow schools to work toward goals they feel are important to their students and their mission, 2) allow the state to hold schools accountable to something that they have said they want to be accountable for, and 3) pilot approaches that could form the basis for new accountability models that resemble performance-based contracts between charter schools and authorizers.

I wouldn't recommend strict accountability this year in any but the most egregious cases, but I do think this kind of framework would provide the state strong leverage with schools and districts because it is more responsive to the needs and direction of individual schools and flexible to community circumstances.

# To get a complete picture, collect as much data as possible

**Mike Magee**

*CEO, Chiefs for Change*

Here's what we at Chiefs for Change have recommended to state leaders:

1. Implement standards-based state tests to every extent practicable in the 2020-21 school year.
2. Develop alternate plans to collect evidence of student learning based on standards-based tests (that provide reliable information on grade-level performance) in the event traditional state testing cannot be feasibly implemented, and plan to allocate the funds necessary to do this.
3. Continue to collect and report non-test-based measures of student and school performance, such as graduation rates, AP results, attendance, online engagement and connectivity (where relevant), and FAFSA completion by school and student group.
4. Alternatively, if necessary, perform state-level analysis of district-based interim tests, or tests administered to smaller samples within the larger population (with sufficient numbers to validly disaggregate by student group down to the school level so that the assessments can serve their historic civil rights purpose).

States implementing curriculum-aligned interim assessments should have a clearer and more accurate understanding of what has happened with learning during the pandemic. Such assessments could provide valuable information to the field and inform future innovations in assessment and accountability.

**Place a strong emphasis on getting actionable information in the hands of parents and school principals.**

Beyond that, I would consider trying to round out the picture as much as possible (and to the extent feasible) with:

1. Postsecondary outcome data. Recognizing that we still lack good workforce and military data, what can states say with clarity about what happened to last year's graduating seniors?
2. School climate and social-emotional well-being. Consider surveying students (with the Panorama tool, for example, or an equivalent) to get some sense of the effect of the pandemic on social-emotional and mental health, sense of belonging, etc.

Finally, I second what others have said about transparency. Place a strong emphasis on getting actionable information in the hands of parents and school principals.

## Ask, “Are the kids doing worthwhile work?”

Mike Petrilli

*President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute\**

**Let’s supplement the tests and surveys with something more concrete: the work that students are expected to complete.**

Let’s supplement the tests and surveys with something more concrete: the work that students are expected to complete. We know from studies by TNTP, the Education Trust, and others that the quality and rigor of assignments vary widely by school, contributing to achievement and expectations gaps rather than narrowing them. For instance, TNTP’s influential 2018 report, *The Opportunity Myth*, contrasts 8th-grade English language arts assignments from two different schools. In one school, students were asked to read a book-length memoir (*A Mighty Long Way*, by one of the Little Rock Nine), and write an essay analyzing the role the press played in portraying and influencing the events surrounding desegregation. In the other school, students were assigned a short informational text written at the 5th-grade level.

The students at this second school then were tasked with answering a few multiple-choice questions and filling in the vowels in related vocabulary words.

Surely we want educators to emulate the first school and not the second. It would be fair to evaluate schools at least in part on the quality and challenge of the work they assign to their students. In the wake of the pandemic, these student assignments have become dramatically more transparent to us parents, thanks to the learn-at-home experiment, with our kids completing their work in our own living rooms. After all, what remote learning fundamentally did was to put distance between what teachers do and what their students do, given that they can’t be in the same physical location. And while the teacher side of that equation has gotten much attention from reformers and the research community in recent decades, there’s a stronger case that what kids do (or don’t) all day is what really matters.

*\*This was originally published in Education Next.*

## Use flexibilities in ESSA to provide more useful data

Maria Worthen

*Founder & Principal Consultant, Education Policy Strategies*

When it comes to selecting indicators for accountability, we should prioritize educators’ and parents’ needs for timely, actionable data over policymakers’ and researchers’ desire for comparable, large-scale data.

State policymakers can take advantage of existing flexibilities in ESSA to redesign accountability systems. School report cards should include multiple measures of student learning aligned to the multiple facets of equity, rather than relying on a single summative

school grade. They should prioritize assessments that are embedded in students' learning process and inform and support teaching and learning in ongoing ways. This will ensure that assessments add value for educators, students, and families.

States can take advantage of the pause in federal accountability to pilot new ways of rating schools and identifying them for improvement. Do not let the temporary nature of this situation distract from the opportunity to address the long-term need for better accountability models. For example, states can:

Measure student outcomes in ways that are actually aligned to and support the curriculum (states participating in the innovative assessment pilot can lead the way here).

Ask how data that students, teachers, and families already use can be aggregated together for accountability purposes, rather than collecting additional data just for policymakers.

Finally, think about how accountability can become more reciprocal. Rather than just asking schools to feed data up to the state, set up systems that help schools make sense of the data to inform instructional strategy at the school level, and to target resources and supports.

## Major themes in rethinking accountability

### Areas of convergence

The experts we spoke with all advise state leaders to take a pause from traditional K-12 school accountability this year in light of the challenges of the pandemic. It's significant, though, that they also urge policymakers to consider using this moment to begin to rethink accountability in ways that address the shortcomings of prior efforts, but that still ensure every student is fully prepared for the future.

This is important because it means that a deep national conversation about the future of accountability policy is not only possible, but that it could be constructive. The fact that there was so much overlap in recommendations represents a starting point for dialogue. Although the group did not attempt to reach consensus on recommendations, here are some of the common actions implied:

**A deep national conversation about the future of accountability policy is not only possible, but could be constructive.**

**Operating as normal this year is not an option.** We must prioritize supporting student learning and well-being. Not only is high-stakes accountability counterproductive, it's not feasible this year. Instead:

- Communicate that stakes will not be attached to data collected this year.
- Focus on what is feasible to collect and forget the rest.
- Consider opportunity, equity, and outcome indicators in an accountability system for this school year—areas that schools and systems have some control over at this point.



**Revisit the assumption that outcomes are the sole indicator of excellence.** Without assessment for accountability, many states don't even have the option of looking at standard outcome and learning growth measures; the current situation opens up some space to think about what could be different. *How students spend their time and the rigor of their work matter. Evidence-based student interventions matter.*

- Think about how to capture data from every stage of the pipeline of education service provision as part of transparency and accountability.
- Expect schools to use evidence-based interventions, such as high-dose tutoring and effective literacy interventions.
- Honor parents' right to know if evidence-based strategies are being employed in their child's school.

**Transparency matters, even if it's not all the same data, or comparable data.**

- *Focus on transparency and support:* Share data that make sense in their unique contexts, and send a signal of support, not accountability.
- *Get actionable information in the hands of parents and school principals.*
- *Enable collaboration:* Transparency of results is important for evaluating priorities and empowering stakeholders to take part in the pandemic response and recovery.
- *Parents are a key constituency for data:* Make whatever data are available as easily accessible to parents through as many different means and modes as possible.

**Assessment matters for learning, transparency, and accountability.** It is important to continue to assess students in a way that provides feedback on their progress, even with disruptions to annual statewide assessments.

- *Assess as many students as possible:* Do whatever you can to put in place a statewide assessment for as many students as possible, even if it is not perfect.
- *Be intentional about the assessments you use:* Prioritize assessments that are learning-embedded, and that provide actionable, timely data for learners and educators.

**This is an opportunity to think differently about accountability for the long term.** Recovery should mean more than a return to normal.

- *Redefine accountability systems' core constituencies:* Several experts encouraged states to get clear on who the constituency is for accountability—what is it for and to whom does it matter? How could we design it to support the success and well-being of each unique student?
- *Consider the impact of accountability system designs:* Ask how to create a system more focused on support than on consequences; how to move away from norm-referenced tiering categories; how to judge the quality of family engagement and the quality of service provision in varying modalities, student engagement, and attendance.
- *Interrogate whether accountability systems are truly supporting equity:* Think about a broader, more equity-focused set of metrics.

- *Update systems designs to reflect current education research:* Several experts pointed out our evolving understanding of how children learn and the importance of supporting their individual trajectories.
- *Keep an eye on innovative pilot programs.* States implementing curriculum-aligned interim assessments and technology-based assessments during the pandemic could provide valuable information to inform future innovations in assessment and accountability.

## Areas of tension

While the experts agreed that now is an important time to reconsider accountability in education, there were many different perspectives on what that should look like and how much change is necessary. Questions raised by these areas of tension include:

- *Should changes be transformational, or should they tweak around the edges?*
- *Should qualitative data factor into accountability, and if so, what is an acceptable balance between quantitative and qualitative data? How much of an accountability is purely for transparency and how much is used to assign consequences or to allocate support to educators and schools?*
- *Should the improvement process be a more interactive and reciprocal process between districts and states, or should it be top-down?*
- *Could we have a conversation about what our assumptions about accountability are, and can we begin to challenge those assumptions?*
- *Who is the primary constituency of state accountability systems?* Some emphasized parents as the core constituency. Others urged a focus on providing districts, schools, and educators with the information and support they need to deliver the best possible education to students. Interestingly, there was very little talk of state and federal policymakers needing data to make policy decisions.

## The path forward

State leaders face an unenviable task: to lead through a crisis while planning for the future. But this opportunity is too important to waste. The variety of perspectives in this brief provide a jumping-off point for a meaningful debate on the future of accountability, keeping in mind some of the following recommendations.

The comments from each expert in this paper are nuanced and merit being considered in their entirety. As leaders engage in similar conversations, we suggest considering the following:

**Have the conversation about what's working and what's not.** Which flexibilities extended during the pandemic should be kept? How could we build on them and improve them in the long run?

**Question fundamental assumptions.** What is the purpose of accountability? How are the concepts of transparency and accountability distinct and how do they overlap? How should they interact, or not interact?

**Commit to working toward a politically sustainable solution.** We cannot throw up our hands and say this is too complicated; the stakes are too high for children. How can we set up the conversation to be constructive, supportive, and to minimize power imbalances? As our conversation demonstrated, agreement is possible across different ideologies and constituencies.

**Plant seeds now for building better systems in the future.** How can we begin to shift gears while acknowledging the tremendous pressures educators, leaders, students, and families are under right now? What are the changes we have the political will to tackle today, what changes are feasible more than halfway through the 2020–21 school year, and what decisions might need to wait until next year? Which ideas will lay the foundation for long-term transformation and success? How can they be piloted and rolled out if they prove effective?

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow’s challenges. Since 1993 CRPE’s research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

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