

A4PEP's Plan to Redesign State Accountability

Draft as of 8-21-22

Definition of the problem

Colorado's current high stakes accountability system fails to meet all students' individual learning needs or adequately support struggling schools and districts, and it fails to consider the professional judgment of teachers.

Root causes

- Focus on standardized testing and punitive sanctions rather than on multiple measures and positive interventions.
- Lack of consideration of students' vastly different experiences, needs, and learning styles.
- Development of public education laws and policies without adequate input from educators, parents, school board members, and education scholars.
- Chronic under-funding of public schools by the government at both the federal level (insufficient funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and state level (Negative Factor ["Budget Stabilization Factor"]), inadequate school finance).
- Political attacks on curriculum, teachers, unions, and public education as a whole.

Details of the problem

#1 - Use of standardized testing as the basis of accountability

- Uses tests in only two subjects, language arts and math.
- Testing in English only with little accommodation for students with other native languages.
- Few accommodations made for students with disabilities.
- Narrows the curriculum to the tested subjects, removing opportunities for greater academic exploration by students.
- Prioritizes academic achievement over longitudinal growth – by comparing achievement by grade levels year-to-year rather than by cohorts of students.
- Is based on standards that don't take into account varied child mental and social development and thus are often developmentally unrealistic or inappropriate, especially in math and the primary grades.
- Creates an overly narrow period of time for instruction, because of the timing of the “testing window” and the amount of time taken for preparing for and administering the tests.
- Diverts millions of dollars to corporate test publishers rather than classroom instruction.

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Details of the problem - #1, use of testing, *continued*

- Is an unfunded mandate for districts, which must provide their own funding for the administration of the tests.
- Focuses on punitive measures rather than adequate supports to promote improvement.
- Does nothing to help teachers address individual student learning, because test results are not received in a timely manner.
- Limits teachers' professional judgment about the implementation of curriculum and lessons, and minimizes educators' ability to improve their instructional practices.
- Robs time from classroom instruction.
- Stifles students' creativity, authentic critical thinking, and problem-solving.
- Adds stress to students, parents, and educators and impacts their physical and emotional well-being, engagement, and efficacy.
- Doesn't account for the impact on ratings of students who opt out of testing.

Details of the problem

#2 - Failure to Serve Diverse Student Populations

- Ignores the challenges and lack of opportunities experienced by diverse populations, such as low-income students, English language learners, students of color, and students with disabilities and different learning styles.
- Overlooks the extent to which “achievement gaps” continue to persist, even in higher-achieving schools and districts.
- Discounts the link between low performance and high poverty (and other risk factors) in school and district ratings.
- Fails to require adequate resources to support students’ learning needs or life challenges.
- Disincentivizes teachers to work in high-needs schools.
- Unfairly characterizes schools with a majority of struggling students as “failing,” giving the impression that educators and schools are failing the students.

Details of the problem

#3 - Under-funding

- As a result of TABOR, the Negative Factor (“Budget Stabilization Factor”) in the School Finance Act has short-changed schools by a total of more than \$10 billion over the past decade.
- The federal government’s obligation to fund 40% of IDEA has never been fulfilled, averaging around only 14%, and the state obligation to fund 40% of special education averages only 21%.
- The state has not adequately funded the actual costs of providing categorical programs, especially:
 - Special Education
 - English Language Learners
 - Gifted and Talented
 - Transportation
- Low pay is causing a disincentive for people to become teachers or paraprofessionals.

Issues to address in solving the problem

- Use of the accountability ratings to identify low-performing schools and districts, with minimal support for improvement.
- Failure to take advantage of the ESSA allowance to redesign our accountability system.
- Too many federal and state mandates and limitations.
- Persistent achievement gaps and inequitable access to opportunities, as well as decrease in equity between schools and districts, causing increased segregation and poverty.
- Drops in teacher recruitment and retention and use of inexperienced teachers and unqualified substitutes, especially in high-poverty areas.
- Low numbers of students in educator pathway programs.
- Lack of paraprofessionals and other education support personnel.
- COVID impacts on mental health and relationships, contributing to gaps in instruction and learning.
- Outside forces continuing to harm the learning environment, such as social media and a culture of bullying.
- Extreme lack of day treatment and in-patient mental health facilities.
- Inadequate federal and state sources of funding.

Strategies to solve these problems

- Change the purpose of the accountability system to identify the extent to which schools and districts are succeeding or need to improve student outcomes, not to give them performance ratings or downgrade/remove their accreditation for poor performance.
- Support efforts to reauthorize ESEA/ESSA to reduce standardized testing requirements and eliminate punitive mandates.
- Redesign the indicators of success (ratings) in the state accountability system, so that instead of basing it on percentages of students who score “proficient,” it is based on:
 - The degree to which students show academic growth, but also including the lowest-performing students (students who scored non-proficient in the past 2 years) as a disaggregated subgroup. (Ensure that assessments in kindergarten through 3rd grade are developmentally appropriate and observation-based.)
 - An adjustment on academic growth calculations on a sliding scale based on the percentage of students who are English learners or special education, as well as other at-risk students as described in the state funding formula.
 - The extent to which English learners are acquiring English language skills, but not requiring them to take the regular standardized tests, unless they are determined to be proficient enough in English to take the tests.

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Strategies – Redesign indicators, *continued*

- The extent to which English learners are acquiring English language skills, but not requiring them to take the regular standardized tests, unless they are determined to be proficient enough in English to take the tests.
- Test scores of students with disabilities (on either an IEP or 504 plan) only if adequate and appropriate accommodations are provided and the plan, teacher, and parent(s) agree that testing them is reasonable.
- Graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, and students enrolled in apprenticeship and technical education programs.
- The extent to which schools and districts are making progress towards their improvement goals.
- The resources provided to help students succeed academically, such as literacy interventions, special education services, English learning programs, etc.
- The supports provided for the “whole child” to address the challenges that are present in the local community, such as counselors/social workers and their ratios to students, programs available to students and families to assist with life challenges (e.g., adult learning, social supports, food pantry), etc.
- The degree that supports from the state are used.
- The extent to which parents/families are involved in improvement planning (on accountability committees) and there is collaboration with teachers and students.

Strategies - *continued*

- Provide staffing and supports to address the needs of all students, including the impacts of COVID and other learning interruptions.
 - Provide funding that would allow districts to hire more teachers, social workers, counselors, instructional coaches, interventionists, nurses, and paraprofessionals, ensuring optimal class sizes and staffing.
 - Do “community asset-mapping” to identify the services available from organizations/non-profits and/or public agencies to be working together and not siloed.
 - Utilize “wraparound services” from local, state, federal, and non-profit organizations, as well as public libraries, to meet the specific needs of students and their families, including basic nutrition, health care, and family literacy programs.
 - Connect with community organizations and centers and public agencies to do outreach to families.
 - Provide guidelines for effective mentoring programs for teachers, using “master teachers” and National Board-certified teachers more effectively.
 - Encourage the use of professional development that focuses on how to address the needs of at-risk students.
 - Provide affordable before- and after-school programs within the school system.
 - Ensure that all teachers and administrators have training to work collaboratively with parents through equitable family engagement.
 - Promote credit-recovery programs and effective tutoring.
 - Provide different pathways for students to learn and earn credits toward graduation.

Strategies - *continued*

- Focus more on early childhood.
 - Coordinate with early childhood councils and local coordinating organizations for the Colorado Preschool Program.
 - Provide better transitions from preschool to kindergarten and from kindergarten to 1st grade.
 - Ensure that primary teachers (K-3) are educated on early childhood development and the indicators of school readiness.
 - Utilize a version of the Environmental Rating Scale system to assess kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms.
- Reduce paperwork and bureaucracy.
 - Utilize a “work calculator” to identify the amount of time spent on paperwork, in order to find areas that take excessive amounts of time.
 - Find ways to simplify processes in order to reduce required paperwork.
 - Reduce caseloads (and/or class sizes) to optimize educators’ effectiveness and individual attention to students.

Strategies - *concluded*

- Provide dedicated, sustainable, adequate funding for public schools and districts.
 - Continue to work on and try to pass ballot measures to solve the “fiscal thicket.”
 - Educate the public about the causes of the funding problem.
 - Support (or recruit) legislative candidates at the state and national levels who understand the problem and are interested in solving it.