**Introduction**

***The Current Challenges***

Accountability systems work to the degree that they engage the knowledge, skill, and commitment of people who work in schools.[[1]](#footnote-1) Current state accountability systems strive for simplicity in reporting, efficiency in execution, and a narrow focus of measurement towards a few identified student outcomes. Unfortunately, these particular objectives serve to disengage the practitioners charged with using these systems to improve their schools. Many school level practitioners find the simplified, efficient, and focused accountability systems with mostly summative yearly testing far too reductive for the complex and nuanced learning environment in which they work. Many have long since disengaged from the system designed to improve their schools. Even those finding useful ways to engage with the current system may find the testing requirements overly burdensome, developmentally inappropriate, and far too narrow to truly capture a specific school’s impact on the learning needs of today’s K-12 students.

***Design Objectives***

To address these challenges, our accountability system proposal originates from the following design objectives:

* **Maximize student learning time** - Utilizing evolving technology-based assessments, our primary objective would be to maximize student learning time while still capturing valid student and school quality data.
* **Performance-Based Assessments to inform instruction and ensure accountability** - Competency-based assessments will allow schools to move away from a pass/fail culture and instead allow schools to capture evidence tied to the progression of an academic standard for each student. By relying more fully on student work instead of grades or proficiency benchmarks, teachers, parents and especially students will be able to generate continuous dialogue centered on the student’s strengths, as well as areas of needed improvement.
* **Peer Learning** - A valuable objective for our state system would be to create the conditions and provide the infrastructure for schools to learn from and connect with a diversity of other educators in order to provide insight and spread learnings about these specific structures and programs.

**Proposed Accountability System**

***A Balanced Approach***

Our state accountability system will meet ESSA requirement for annual reading and math assessments in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, but in time, the system will reimagine assessment to meaningfully inform instruction and become - itself - a teaching tool for teachers and a learning guide for students. The system would begin with summative exams at the end of the year in English Language Arts, Math and Science. The test chosen would be the PARCC or a test like it to ensure a focus on students’ ability to think critically.

***Measuring Growth through Formative Assessments***

In choosing formative assessments, our design goals are to maximize student learning and inform instruction. Assessments should be useful tools which help teachers and give students new opportunities to think critically and problem-solve, while also guiding their upcoming lessons.

Examples of assessments which meet both of these goals already exist. The Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, for example, gives the student the opportunity to read and discuss a book 1:1 with his/her teacher. Through the student's oral reading and question responses, the teacher determines which comprehension and fluency lessons the student needs next and the child's instructional and independent reading levels. The Add+VantageMR assessment offers a similar learning experience for students in math, providing teachers with an abundance of data to inform their instruction immediately, while ensuring that minimum time is taken on assessment itself.

Student growth measures enable educators to elicit actionable feedback each year using a “growth to proficiency” approach for each student by subject area. This particular approach is already in use in many schools and districts in a response to intervention model. The state will provide a curated list of state-approved formative assessment vendors to measure individual student growth in each subject area. Districts, principals, and teachers will choose one, and may nominate a different assessment that may be more appropriate to their context. Criteria for approval include alignment to state (or quality national or international) standards, breadth of skill assessment, and documentation of year-to-year growth which correlates with existing statewide growth measures. Each school will report results by student which will allow for disaggregation into subgroups.

Additionally, Students in grades 3rd through 12th will take a series of four cross-disciplinary standard formative assessments. Using technology, students will spend a short amount of time, typically just 10 to 30 minutes, answering online critical thinking questions that utilize skills gained in Math, ELA, Science and Social Studies. This formative testing will allow teachers to get immediate feedback about what students know and how they are applying it within the content areas. In this way, the assessments can immediately and thoughtfully inform instruction. Teachers will be encouraged to best practices tied to the cross-disciplinary standards. An additional section will be added for English Language Learners that allow English Language Learners to demonstrate mastery of the English language through reading, speaking, listening and writing.

Formative assessment data will be reported to the district and state, but will not be used for school ranking or classification. The goal of the formative assessment within the accountability system is to teach children and inform instruction, and the only expectation is that each district employ a state approved formative assessment battery.

***Transitioning to Competency-Based Assessment and Summative Student Sampling***

Our state would apply to become one of the ESSA pilot states for innovative assessment.[[2]](#footnote-2) If approved, we would work to create a competency-based system. Our state DOE, in partnership with interested school districts, would work to develop a Performance Assessment of Competency, similar to the PACE being implemented in New Hampshire, to meet our goals of minimizing student time taking standardized tests and creating a more meaningful assessment to inform instruction and offer state-level information on the attainment of standards by all children.

The state DOE would provide extensive professional development and work with pilot districts to craft a competency-based rubric based upon state standards. A state RFP would incentivize the design of performance tasks and portfolios which both measure growth on achieving state standards and provide meaningful information for teachers as well as student learning opportunities. In addition, teachers and students could upload artifacts and accompanying reflections to explain why and how the work meets the standard. Teachers from the pilot districts and DOE leaders would examine the artifact submissions and choose acceptable models for the rubric. This exercise would lend itself to additional peer learning across schools, as discussed below.

Once pilot systems successfully have implemented the performance assessments, the ongoing formative assessments would continue, and annual state standardized testing will be replaced by a NAEP-like state assessment to compare student achievement in districts and schools in certain grades and subject areas over time. A representative sample of students - a subset of each grade level at each school - will take a small portion of the state assessment every two years. These scores will be aggregated and publicly disclosed at the school, district, and regional level, but student- and teacher-level results will not be reported. This state-level system will produce reliable and valid estimates of what students know and can do across the state and provide insight into growth by subgroups such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, disability status, English proficiency, and urban/rural/suburban environments. This will allow for meaningful differentiation in school performance for state and district leaders with minimal disruption to instruction.

***Additional******Indicator of School Quality and Tool for Improvement: Peer Site Visits***

To ensure that the accountability system engages educators to the fullest and promotes learning from fellow practitioners, we propose a structure of school quality visits conducted by trained peers using an agreed upon framework. The three-stage visit would consist of pre-visit interviews and data discussion, an onsite visit focused on collecting more data and observations in a few selected areas of school quality, and a follow up presentation of gathered information and data and implications for next steps from the visiting team. We propose that any specific school team would either participate in a visit or host a visit each year.

This mixed method approach of data gathering can not only help a school improve through purposeful and intentional reflection with knowledgeable, committed and engaged fellow practitioners, but it can also gather much needed information on the in-school mechanisms that are predictive of better outcomes for students. The important first step in this work is the development of standardized processes and frameworks for the school quality visits. The presence of standards and infrastructure allows for the generation of valid data and information; it also provides a great foundation for a rich knowledge base of promising practice for those looking for programmatic and structural strategies to improve their schools. These visits will also be useful as more and more schools begin to use competency based assessments. Schools can meet to calibrate their beliefs that an artifact meets a given state standard.

Examples of these peer visits for the purpose of growth and evaluation are already operating at scale. These include such diverse groups and purposes as college accreditation, International Baccalaureate site visits, and Big Picture Learning. Teacher education certification programs are also often evaluated by peer programs on behalf of the DOE, allowing the DOE to conserve resources while also encouraging programs to learn from one another. Below we detail one way to envision a two-year cycle of peer reviews.

**Peer Visit Cycle**

***Year One***

**Stage I: Pre-Visit Activities**

School A hosts School B.

* School A identifies a focus area, which the principal, faculty and community believe needs improvement.
* School A organizes focus groups (administrators, staff, students, community members) and gathers data related to the focus area, which includes surveys of parents, teachers, and students.
* School B interviews focus groups prior to visit, and designates a window of time during which the visit will take place.

**Stage II: Site Visit**

* School B visits School A sometime during the designated window for general observation of instruction, school structures, team meetings and professional development.
* School B reviews school level data, and conducts observations in identified focus areas.

**Stage III: Findings and Next Steps**

* School B presents findings and recommendations.
* School A discusses recommendations with School B and an action plan is developed.
* At the end of the year, School A shares its progress on the action plan with School B.

In Year Two, these stages will be repeated. However, School B will host School A. The structure of the site visit framework would provide for ratings of a variety of metrics based on the schools’ demonstration of “developing towards competency,” “competency” and “mastery.” These categories could then provide a total point calculation to become one component of our school rating system.

*Note*: An additional benefit of this relationship is that, if both schools are implementing the competency-based assessments, they can share student artifacts and work to calibrate their assessments of student work.

***School ratings***

Our school rating system would emphasize growth and the percentage of students reaching proficiency on the summative assessment, which includes, English, math, science and English language proficiency. Those measures would be weighted at 60% of a rating total. The remaining 40% would be comprised of the site visit framework (20%), high school graduation rates (10% where applicable), and narrowing achievement gaps of student subgroups (20% for elementary and middle schools and 10% for high schools.) The site visit frameworks, including qualitative and quantitative summaries of each school observation metric, would be available to the public along with individual school ratings.

**Recommendations for the Department of Education**.

The state’s new accountability system must be accompanied by a state system of support for schools demonstrating high rates of students below proficiency or low rates of narrowing achievement gaps of student subgroups. This system should also reflect the limits of state capacity and the empowerment of local school systems through a state-level approach that facilitates peer site visits but does **not** attempt to create new internally-staffed site visit programs, as an additional goal of these visits is to encourage peer learning and collaboration.

In closing, our proposal aims to encourage educators to collaborate and share meaningful assessment practices that ultimately lead to more personalized instruction for every student. While the end product looks very different than the current structures and systems in place, we are hoping that through a thoughtful transition plan, the means to getting there can be feasible for states and districts that may need time and support to implement it.

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1. Elmore, R. "Leadership as the practice of improvement." *Improving school leadership* 2 (2008): 37-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ESSAPrimer-Assessments.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)