The Role of Accountability Systems and Regional Accreditation in

Improving K–12 Education

By Mark A. Elgart, Ed.D.

cognia®

The Role of Accountability Systems and Regional Accreditation in

Improving K–12 Education

By Mark A. Elgart, Ed.D.

In the United States, more than 58 million students are enrolled each year in public, private, and home-based K–12 schools. The goal of the nation's system is to provide what every parent wants for their children: a quality education that will enable every student to achieve their highest potential as an individual, be ready for college and career, serve effectively as a citizen of a free society, and find a fulfilling role in a changing global marketplace.

How can we be sure that every student receives the best education possible? How do we know how well institutions are meeting academic requirements and fiduciary responsibilities that are crucially important to policy makers and the public? What do schools need to know about their own operations that can help them continuously improve and achieve the results that we expect?

> "...voluntary regional accreditation process, which has a focus on continuous improvement, can better impact accountability and support schools, families, and the communities they serve."

Accountability systems and voluntary regional K–12 accreditation can work together to address these questions. The two enterprises typically operate separately to achieve their different purposes using different types of data. This paper provides an overview of the role of accountability systems and regional accreditation in ensuring high quality K–12 education and how accountability, regional accreditation with a focus on continuous improvement, and state policies can work together in mutually reinforcing ways. States that use information from a voluntary regional accreditation process, which has a focus on continuous improvement, can better impact accountability and support schools, families, and the communities they serve.

Together accountability systems and regional accreditation information can be used to improve schools and outcomes for students by better informing accountability and supporting schools.

Accountability and Continuous Improvement

In most states, accountability systems are based on student achievement, graduation rates, indicators of postsecondary and career readiness, and other factors, such as school climate. State accountability systems are predominantly designed to supply policy makers with information in the areas that are most important to them. Accountability systems were not designed to identify the root causes for performance or explain why results are what they are. They capture a snapshot in time—an assessment of the current state. While these data can be used to display a history of performance, it is not forward looking to consider what factors are impacting student success or how to drive improvement.

Incorporating a regional accreditation process, specifically one with a third-party review, within a continuous improvement framework, picks up where accountability leaves off. Authentic accreditation complements accountability systems by enabling leaders a holistic view that looks ahead to help determine whether conditions are right for improvement and establishes a pathway forward. It pairs data with next step action. With a focus on continuous improvement, an independent standards-based accreditation review process looks at accountability data and performance, and challenges institutions to take next step actions to foster ongoing improvement in areas research says impact learning. An accreditation process with authentic engagement looks behind the numbers and deeper into school quality factors like culture, learning environments, student engagement, leadership capacity for sustaining improvements, and more. Accountability factors incorporated into a true system of continuous improvement guide improvement and establish a pathway forward.

> “With a focus on continuous improvement, an independent standards-based accreditation review process looks at accountability data and performance, and challenges institutions to take next step actions to foster ongoing improvement in areas research says impact learning.”

Traditional Accountability

Traditional accountability assumed that, by complying with rules and expectations, students will make progress in their learning (Anderson, 2005). The traditional measure is a standardized test, which is a useful tool to take the temperature of performance at a particular point in time but has at least one serious limitation. Because it assumes that all students who attend school learn at the same rate and in the same way, a standardized test alone cannot be an accurate measure of every student’s performance. Today, learning science tells us that there is great divergence how students learn and in what time frame, and that many students learn best when they are intrinsically motivated, engaged in their own learning, and have agency to make decisions that increase their ownership of their learning (Murphy and Ferrara, 2022). To meet the needs of all students we must broaden the discussion of accountability toward measures of self-directed learning for each student. We must move toward a system of more authentic measurement in which students demonstrate what they know and have learned, and how well they are progressing along a pathway of knowledge and experience that will foster their success.

Accreditation

Professional accreditation is deeply rooted in the notion of continuous improvement, which is itself grounded in systems thinking from the late 1930s. Many professions, organizations, and industries use this approach to solve problems from a holistic perspective (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Schools and other educational institutions are categorized by theorists as “living systems,” meaning that they are comprised of various interconnected parts both inside and outside of the institutions—classrooms, teachers, students, leaders, and outside stakeholders. The guiding premise is that the extent to which organizations can make sense of these interconnected elements determines their level of success. Related practices such as the Total Quality Management (TQM) theory, popularized in business management, have since

reinforced the premise of ongoing self-improvement for both practices and people.

A code of beliefs, ethics, or comportment by which professionals voluntarily adhere, conduct their work, or are held to account in the trades industry or professional practice, is common in various training and education programs and in hospital administration, for example. Member institutions and the professionals who practice within the field agree to meet or exceed the standards established by the group—in commitment to individual and collective responsibility as stewards of their profession or field of practice.

Voluntary membership in organizations with a common set of standards demonstrates a commitment to best practices, third-party review, high-quality service, and ongoing improvement. It is the professional members themselves who establish norms and expectations to which individuals or member institutions collectively agree to abide. This approach is also used in accreditation of schools, in which members and organizations establish norms and expectations for how schools operate, use resources, are led, and improve from day to day.

Continuous improvement

An effective continuous improvement system in a school places emphasis on the learner's experience, stakeholder engagement, and data collection and analysis to guide and inform both planning and execution of a school's improvement journey. In a previous white paper, Meeting the Promise of Continuous Improvement, continuous improvement is defined as "an embedded behavior within the culture of a school that constantly focuses on the conditions, processes, and practices that will improve teaching and learning (Elgart, 2017). This holistic approach supports several specific goals for effective school leadership.

- ***Identify and focus on what matters most for improvement in your institution***. School improvement varies even among schools with similar performance or demographics. Some issues may require instructional solutions based on best practices, while others may fall more squarely on a leader's judgment or ability to move the culture.
- ***Address all the factors that affect performance***. Continuous improvement helps school leaders shift the focus from outcomes (such as test scores or absenteeism) to the multiple factors that contribute to them.
- ***Provide organizing principles for improving performance***. Identifying root causes of issues allows school leaders to identify specific actions to address and prioritize—and not be distracted by less important issues.
- ***Set clear goals***, to engage both school and community stakeholders around a common issue and focus everyone on a common strategy or action to make progress.
- ***Create a culture of improvement at all institutions***—including low-performing schools and those that excel.

Leaders and their teams must conduct a deep and thorough analysis to determine the most salient issues for their school. With this process, leaders can identify root causes, educate, and engage stakeholders inside and outside the school, as well as develop a plan directing a school's limited resources toward the actions most likely to improve overall performance, assess progress, and make midcourse corrections.

Accountability Systems

State and federal accountability systems, including federally required components for Title 1 schools, have additional mandated measures specific to school performance involving multiple indicators of school quality and student success. Many of these systems include performance ratings and displays which help policy makers and legislators make decisions and communicate with the public about which schools have achieved their goals or need more support, as well as those that are excelling.

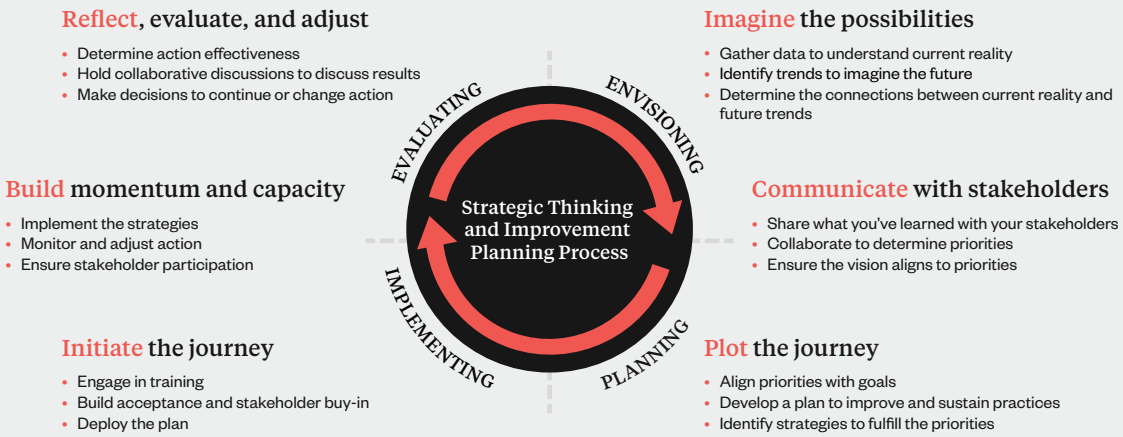
The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It requires states to include at least one 'indicator of school quality or student success' in the accountability system that 'allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance' and is 'valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide,' in addition to the required annual assessment data in their accountability systems, graduation rates, progress of English learners, and an indicator of student academic progress. Schools and school districts also must report disaggregated data for performance indicators, to inform stakeholders about performance of different subpopulations such as students from racial and ethnic groups, with disabilities, from low-income families, and who are English learners.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) published an overview of state accountability systems. (ECS, 2021). It showed that states are taking advantage of the significant flexibility in the types of indicators and assessments allowed under ESSA. ECS reports that the most common measures of school success are chronic absenteeism, college and career readiness, and school climate or safety. The District of Columbia and many states include chronic absenteeism (or some measure of student and/or teacher attendance) in their school quality and student success indicators. Most states now include at least one college and career readiness measure as part of their state accountability system. Over the last four years, a growing number of states are now including a measure of school climate in their school reports.

While many states go beyond federal requirements for measuring the performance of specific subgroups, accountability data tends to be highly standardized to allow performance comparisons across settings, even when those settings are heterogeneous in their educational context (large and small districts, rich and poor schools, older and younger students; Weiss, 2012).

These accountability systems inform parents, advocates, and the community about how well schools are performing and provide important data to, for example, determine how to use resources more effectively, identify under-performing schools that need more support, as well as those with programs and practices resulting in high performance or progress that can be used as model practice.

Continuous Improvement System



Regional K–12 Accreditation

Regional K–12 accreditation is a private, not-for-profit system of voluntary self-regulation carried out by the education profession to help improve practices and results. Accreditation is a useful process for traditional public schools or districts, public charter schools, as well as for non-public schools. All types of institutions can seek K–12 regional accreditation on a voluntary basis. Accreditation is a rigorous, multi-year process in which school and district leaders work with teams of peer reviewers to demonstrate that their schools meet or exceed standards set by the profession, which are based on research about what helps improve school and student performance.

Four regional organizations accredit more than 30,000 schools and districts in the U.S. and other countries, according to School Administrator magazine (Chion-Kenney 2021). Those organizations are the New England, Middle States, and Western Associations of Schools; and Cognia, which historically has accredited schools primarily in the southern, northwestern, and north central regions of the U.S.

K–12 accreditation holds schools accountable to standards of quality for teaching and learning, and for school programs and processes. School accreditation is similar to efforts to ensure constant improvement in U.S. hospital performance in which survey teams visit hospitals every 12 months to three years to evaluate their clinical care and administrative practices, and to determine the quality of care of patients, programs, and processes.

Education accreditation is a means to ensure that schools are constantly improving and benefit all students. The process encourages the spread of research-based and student-centric practices that can help raise student and school performance, encourage innovation, and continually enhance the capacity of the system to serve young people.

Unlike compliance measures, accreditation identifies what graduation rates, test scores, and other indicators cannot tell on their own—what takes place in the school that leads to its results. Accreditation looks at dozens of indicators—from student engagement to parent communication and community involvement, to use of technology for learning, to professional development, instructional quality, and leadership. The process shares information with schools about how well they perform, where they fall short, and what they can do to be even more successful.

As part of the process, teams of experienced experts as well as principals, superintendents, teachers, and professionals from peer school districts, work closely with school and district officials to look at every aspect of what the institution does. The multi-year process provides a deep view into the vital systems of the institution: the effectiveness of instruction, availability and strength of student support, leadership and governance, financial management, and the use of data in decision-making.

Accreditors are engaged in both evaluation and resulting initiatives. They:

- Provide their seal of approval after institutions make needed changes
- Work closely with school and district leaders to develop an ongoing improvement strategy
- Help teams demonstrate that they have achieved key standards according to clear indicators of performance, including measures of what students learn

Accreditation provides actionable data that helps schools and districts continuously improve. An institution's accredited status also tells students and their families that the school or district offers quality instruction, support for student success, and diplomas that have value in the marketplace. It signals employers that they can trust the diploma their new hire brings to the job and that the school or district effectively prepares students to enter, grow in, and change careers, and to apply knowledge across all contexts, as educated workers and active citizens in a democracy.

How accreditation works

Accreditation helps educators look beyond symptoms for the root causes of challenges schools face. The process forces all schools and districts to closely analyze all aspects of their performance that are crucial to strengthening institutional excellence, improvement, and innovation. If the public wants to know how well a school is really performing, a test score or graduation rate or even a school climate measure will only reveal so much.

But the peer-review process asks crucial questions that reveal the basis of student and school performance. These questions include:

- What kinds of activities are students asked to do in the classroom, and how well do those activities align with the intended curriculum?
- How well are school initiatives being implemented?
- What does the school do to support its lowest-performing students and keep all students engaged?
- What is happening in the informal culture and learning environment of the school, and how does that affect student learning?
- How active are parents in the school community?
- What is the school's reputation in the larger community?
- How are teachers hired, given their teaching assignments, and supported in their early years?
- How does the school ensure that teachers have meaningful opportunities for ongoing professional development?
- What are school leaders doing to build the morale of teachers and staff?

The answers to these questions speak volumes about performance and invite analysis and discussion critical to raising performance, making up for lost learning, or closing achievement gaps. The questions are implicit in the accreditation standards that define the practices of a quality education institution and provide the criteria for improvement. Every five to ten years, regional accreditors formally review and revise their standards and procedures to reflect the most current education research, respond to changing needs of educators and learners, and strengthen the applicability of the standards to institutional improvement.

Every school and district is a work in progress that can improve its performance. The institutional review process can go beyond accreditation. In some states such as Kentucky, the process also provides detailed feedback and mentoring to leaders of low-performing schools. The process can help all institutions; even schools with high test scores need this kind of review to reveal their limitations and blind spots. The accreditation process yields data and evidence that expose areas for change. In creating a culture of continuous improvement, the process is as important as the outcome.

How leaders use accreditation data

Because accreditation is voluntary and focuses on improvement, it is typically welcomed by school and district leaders. It provides what researchers say are crucial supports and conditions for using data to raise school performance. In "Data for Improvement, Data for Accountability" (2012) in the Teachers College Record, former University of Michigan education dean Janet A. Weiss identified several factors that are crucial to help educators turn useful data into action. These include:

- Translating data into meaningful guidance and making data easily digestible
- Creating respectful and supportive collaborations to support data use by individual teachers
- Directing data to teachers and administrators who have direct control over the curricular and instructional choices that lead to student learning
- Removing fear of evaluation and judgment by presenting data to educators in a context that empowers them to conscientiously review and address weak performance

Research has consistently identified school culture as a primary factor driving school improvement that can be improved over time through continuous improvement practices. But continuous improvement is challenging for policy makers to assess—it takes time and does not always seem sufficiently tangible. The process can appear soft and disconnected from outcomes. At the same time, it is very difficult to accomplish. It cannot be represented in a single test score or school grade. Fundamentally, it is impossible to legislate school culture. However, tending to school culture is essential to improving student performance.

How decisions are made: the importance of peer review

Accreditation relies on one of the education field's most effective means of validation—the process of rigorous peer review.

The process was described by journalist Jennifer Oldham in a 2017 piece for Education Next:

> The reviews have expanded to encompass detailed documentation and data analysis, days of on-site visits, in-depth meetings to chart progress and discuss future goals, and a culminating report detailing strengths, weaknesses, and a school's or district's final accreditation status. Onsite reviewers volunteer their time, but districts typically cover their room and board, and may pay a reviewing fee as well. Districts also invest hundreds of hours to complete the self-assessments that are part of the process and pay annual dues.

The team or committee of reviewers forwards its report to the regional body's decision-making board for its consideration and approval. That accrediting commission is responsible for:

- Awarding candidacy or initial accreditation
- Approving continued accreditation with or without conditions
- Imposing or removing conditions for accreditation or monitoring
- Approving and monitoring substantive changes that institutions make
- Removing an institution from candidacy or changing its accreditation status

If an institution is denied or removed from candidacy or has its accreditation status changed, it can formally appeal the decision of the Accrediting Commission. The appeal is reviewed by an appeals committee composed of members who must attest to having no conflicts of interest or involvement in the adverse decision.

During the period between formal reviews, institutions must provide regular updates to the accrediting agency. The updates may include financial reports, recommendations for improving teaching and learning, and description of actions that encourage better stewardship of the district or school to ameliorate key problems. The agency monitors changes of a substantive nature that affect the quality, structure, or accountability of an institution.

Who benefits from accreditation?

Accreditation is critical for all stakeholders of K–12 education including students and families, community members, and postsecondary institutions, as well as policy makers.

Students, families, and communities invest significant time and financial resources in school. Regional accreditation provides assurance that the institutions that educate students in a community are well run, of sufficient quality, and provide:

- Diplomas that meet agreed-upon standards with value in the marketplace
- Opportunities to transfer credits, from one school to another in their own or a different region, and assurance that transfer credits are of comparable academic rigor
- High school diplomas that are recognized by colleges and universities
- Evidence of a community's schooling quality that attracts businesses and homeowners

Educators including teachers, school leaders, counselors etc.

- Focus on improving teaching and learning environments
- Recommendations that reflect the root causes for improvement
- Identification of the effective practices that support student success
- Continuous improvement is a part of the school and district's culture to ensure that they are responsive to an ever-changing world

Higher education institutions need validation from external experts that students who apply for college admission attended and graduated from high schools and school districts that are on par with their peer institutions. Accreditation assures colleges and universities that:

- The school is focused on preparing students for their next level of learning

- The school's programs are designed to prepare students for the ever-changing world in which they will live, work, and learn
- Students earn a diploma that ensures college and career readiness

Policy makers want to know that money directed to schools will provide a significant return on investment in the form of a well-educated citizenry and a career-ready workforce. Accreditation provides assurance that institutions are:

- Transparent about the academic and other educational services they provide
- Fiscally responsible and investing in continuous quality improvement to serve the needs of their students, states, and communities
- Able to serve a wide range of student needs to help reduce the equity gap

Confusion About Accountability and Accreditation

Accountability and accreditation are two distinct processes with different goals. Nonetheless, the distinction between them sometimes evades state lawmakers and/or education agencies, reducing the impact of both processes. Four examples of the impact of such misunderstanding follow.

Example 1: What's in a Name? In some instances, state lawmakers or education officials call their accountability system "accreditation." State officials might say that a school that has reached the state's performance goals has been "accredited" by the state. This misuse of the term is confusing and counterproductive. For one thing, the accountability system does not include the rigorous, long-term process of peer review. Additionally, the evidence gathered about performance through the accountability system is too limited in scope and context to provide insight into school improvement needs. In short:

1. State accountability identifies one-time performance against a small set of indicators.
2. Accreditation provides the evidence and guidance needed to help schools jump-start or continually evolve a comprehensive improvement effort.

Example 2: Compulsory accreditation. In some cases, state officials are so persuaded of the value of accreditation that they want every school and district to undergo the peer review process and use accreditation as the basis for determining needs for improvement. However, many schools are simply not ready or willing to invest the time and effort in self- and peer review. Accreditation—in conjunction with state accountability—is certainly a powerful strategy for identifying performance goals and supporting improvement efforts, but accreditation loses its impact when it is compulsory. For accreditation to be effective, schools need to be ready and willing to invest the time in self-reflection and peer review. It will not be effective in schools or districts unwilling to abide by the rigorous process and make meaningful changes.

Example 3: Checklist accreditation. Fifteen states use a checklist of discrete data points with quantifiable cut scores for performance to determine which schools get more money for high performance or special attention to improve. They erroneously refer to this practice as their own state accreditation process. But this is not accreditation, because it does not involve professionals reviewing practices in the schools, nor does it focus on improving quality and results. The results of the process are used for fiduciary purposes; they are not focused on growth or improvement.

"For accreditation to be effective, schools need to be ready and willing to invest the time in self-reflection and peer review. It will not be effective in schools or districts unwilling to abide by the rigorous process and make meaningful changes."

Example 4: Legislative changes to accreditation. In some cases, lawmakers addressing accreditation want to underscore the importance of key aspects of accountability (such as test scores and financial management) and limit the focus on other areas (such as instructional quality and student engagement), decisively narrowing the indicators that accreditors address. Such an approach duplicates the existing accountability system and can undermine school improvement.

Reducing accreditation to a few narrow measures adding to school rankings merely identifies the schools that are not doing well and targets them for punitive actions; it provides no actionable information about what factors, in combination, are leading to poor performance. Nor does this approach help the institution achieve better performance. It overlooks two essential characteristics of accreditation:

- Accreditation is not just about what a school has or has not accomplished already, but also about building its capacity to succeed in the future.
- Accreditation is governed not by individual states but by member institutions of the regional accreditation bodies that must adhere to the standards of the profession and focus on giving educators the most actionable evidence possible.

Accreditation from a regional agency is highly cost-effective because it relies on the contributions of education experts, and provides low-cost tools for measurement, including parent and community surveys, classroom and student observation, and data dashboards for regular monitoring. It provides training for educators on what works for continuous improvement. To create its own internal accrediting body, a state would have to create a new bureaucracy to review institutional data, manage site visits and determine accreditation status, and provide support systems for ongoing improvement. Few states have sufficient resources or staff to carry out such a program. States that seek to create a system of accreditation would do so at a high cost to taxpayers and lack an assurance of quality.

State Accreditation

Approaches to K–12 accreditation vary state to state and can be loosely grouped into three types based on policies. State education departments that "accredit" schools, states that require an approved accreditor, and states with no requirement for accreditation.

Fifteen states[1] require schools to be approved by a process overseen by the state education department. The process typically includes some form of testing requirement or performance checklist, along with a desk audit to verify the data, conducted approximately every five years or the approval of a continuous improvement plan. Some states require accreditation based on a list of approved accreditors which include state, regional, and other independent accreditors. Regional accreditation standards represent a "higher bar" than state requirements. The regional accreditation also affords a more seamless transfer of high school level credits as students move schools between states and countries. School officials believe coming from a school that is regionally accredited will benefit students who pursue postsecondary education regionally, nationally, or internationally. Replacing regional accreditation with a single accreditor recognized only in one state limits students' choices and may restrict them to lower quality options.

States that require an approved, regional accreditor

Collaborative arrangements in five states—Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Utah—make it possible for schools to meet accreditation requirements or qualify for state incentives by pursuing regional accreditation, avoiding duplication of effort and redundant reporting. Collaborative agreements differ from state to state, but generally allow:

- Regional accreditation as a substitute for some or all of the state's requirements
- Elements of regional accreditation's process or reporting in place of a similar process or report in the state's system
- A site review by a regional accreditor that replaces the state's on-site external review

[1] Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Virginia, and Wyoming. South Carolina, however, also allows for regional accreditation.

Benefit of state-endorsed regional accreditation include:

- State-awarded scholarships available only to students from accredited schools
- Ease of credit transfer and/or grade placement
- Distance or online learning credits required to be from accredited provider

Two states, Nebraska and West Virginia, allow schools to choose from a list of accreditors that include state, regional or independent accreditors. In addition, some states allow regional accreditation in lieu of state accreditation.

Well-established regional accreditation agencies provide maximum assurance that students are eligible to attend colleges anywhere and transfer credits or grade placements easily to other schools—especially to school out of state. Businesses and military employers who recruit and transfer talent from across the country, and whose populations are more apt to relocate for job opportunities, have a vested interest in preserving regional accreditation. They stand to lose out in talent recruitment and acquisition if their employee's children cannot easily transfer academic credits when they move for career or military deployments.

States with no requirement for K–12 accreditation

In 28 states and the District of Columbia[2] there is no academic requirement for state or regional accreditation. Schools may pursue regional accreditation voluntarily, out of a desire to engage in a formal continuous improvement process that will earn them nationally recognized credentials.

Several states—including Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, North Dakota, and others—use the accreditation process extensively to support state and/or locally led efforts at continuous improvement and/or help low-performing schools improve.

Blending the Strengths of Accountability and Accreditation

ESSA has moved accountability beyond the narrow approaches to school improvement that are focused solely on student test results, shifting accountability power from the federal government to the states. But too few states have taken the opportunity to build new accountability and improvement systems that provide schools more flexibility to improve while maintaining ambitious goals of improving learning outcomes, and thus opportunities, for all students.

Some elements that have been introduced—such as multiple measures of student learning and school climate, and new supports and interventions—are likely to improve results. But states only have gone part of the way in developing approaches in which continuous improvement and accountability meet.

Even when schools and their leaders are committed to reach beyond compliance to improvement, they often take an "adults first" mentality—centered on what teachers and leaders must "do" to improve student achievement, as demonstrated by an outcome. In these cases, root causes and the process changes required to address them often are overlooked in favor of monitoring additional outputs—such as fluctuating results from interim assessments. And while it is certainly critical to determine whether students are learning, it is difficult to change that vital outcome without understanding how they are learning, and whether teaching and learning in a classroom, school, or system meet the needs of individual students and engages them in learning.

ESSA has helped move accountability forward, broadening some of the indicators to move beyond graduation rates and math and reading scores. For greater impact, accountability can be coupled more closely with accreditation by leveraging it to strengthen the commitment to continuous improvement. Some states have moved in this direction, but all can consider strategies to further strengthen their accountability systems.

[2] Alabama, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Broaden the kinds of information gathered

States can continue to refine the additional measures they use to hold schools accountable. These indicators should measure what matters most in improving performance. In considering school quality factors, so-called "non-academic" factors materially impact academic success, and we should look at how well educational institutions identify and address those factors. These non-academic factors include areas such as culture, effectiveness of teaching and learning, quality of leadership, student engagement, and resource allocation. These pieces are just as important to student learning as proficiency on tests and graduation rates. Equally important, effectively measuring, monitoring, and improving the complex conditions of any system (whether education, healthcare and hospitals, the economy, or the criminal justice system) require information about a multitude of internal and external factors and how they have changed over time. These measures can be benchmarked to determine progress, and/or compared with industry standards or other similar entities as a means of making judgments.

Use assessments to guide corrective student/school-level actions over time

Statewide assessments remain important and valuable in both accountability and continuous improvement models. Education agencies would be well served by looking at testing not as a one-time event, but as a view of student achievement over a multi-year period. Benchmark or interim assessments offer real-time data that can drive supports and ultimately improve results and growth.

Identify new ways to support low-performing schools

States need to find more effective ways to identify the causes and conditions of low performance to develop more effective solutions. In recent years, Kentucky has instituted a diagnostic review process that takes into consideration all aspects of school performance—instructional quality, curriculum design, leadership capacity, teacher morale, student advising, and community engagement—that influence learning. Every low-performing school undergoes external evaluation with teams of experts who visit the school, monitor performance, and develop improvement plans based on actual needs identified in the evaluation. The approach has provided comprehensive and reliable data to meet federal and state requirements, make informed decisions, and guide and validate the state's ongoing work in achieving college and career readiness, according to state officials.

Maintain the distinction between regional accreditation and state accountability

A separation of these programs—and allowing accreditation to be voluntary—assures that the unique benefits of both systems persist and strengthen one another. Maintaining their distinctions requires policy makers to resist the urge to legislate accreditation policy beyond identifying preferred regional accreditors or providing incentives (not mandates) for schools to engage in the accreditation process. The peer review accreditation process is a powerful way of holding educators to their own standards and can inform state accountability systems about what is happening in a particular school. Some states are connecting such information through a data dashboard to give state and district officials a deep and timely look at the quality of their schools.

Strengthen Improvement Efforts

State accountability systems and the voluntary system of regional K–12 accreditation typically operate separately to achieve different purposes using different types of data. However, each activity offers information and insight that can work together to enhance school, district, and state improvement efforts—while maintaining their unique purposes and characteristics.

Through a review process that identifies specific areas for improvement and a process of self and peer reflection, accreditation can better impact performance and state accountability systems by empowering educators to continuously improve their performance. Accreditation can also evaluate improvement efforts as well as leadership capacity for sustaining those improvements and ensuring quality for all students across learning environments and in different types of school systems.

The nation has witnessed decreased performance since the pandemic. Every school has a unique set of challenges that must be addressed to improve learning over time. State accountability systems must continue to clearly define and identify performance expectations of schools but emphasize the value of examining evidence of progress toward meeting or exceeding expectations over time, rather than as a one-time "event."

With an understanding that meeting accountability expectations takes time, states should expect every school and district to commit to a process of continuous improvement. Schools and districts should have the responsibility and opportunity to engage in their preferred program of continuous improvement including regional accreditation. To encourage engagement in continuous improvement efforts, states could include incentives for schools and districts to engage in regional accreditation without making it compulsory.

Regional accrediting agencies can reinforce the expectations defined by state accountability systems by incorporating such expectations as evidence in meeting the professional standards for accreditation. The results in the state accountability system can reveal progress achieved through improvement efforts.

Additionally, it is upon all of us to use this moment in time to reexamine our accountability systems, this will require reshaping traditional notions of state accountability. We know that every student learns in a unique manner and our accountability systems have to integrate how student-centered learning impacts outcomes. The new system can ensure that student success is the focus of improvement and that teachers are teaching not only "what" students need to learn but "how" to learn, so that they can spend the rest of their lives learning on their own.

Education and government leaders can start now to apply the distinct and separate strengths of state accountability systems and voluntary regional K–12 accreditation to mutually reinforce improvements in schools and in student outcomes. Working together, state accountability systems and voluntary regional K–12 accreditation services provide the direction, support, and assistance necessary for schools to effectively employ strategies for ongoing improvement of student learning.

References

Anderson, J., (2005), *Accountability in Education*, jointly published by The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris, and The International Academy of Education (IAE), Brussels, Retrieved from http://www.iaoed.org/downloads/Edpol1.pdf

Chion-Kenny, L. (2020), An Evolution in K–12 School Accreditation: In a quest for relevance, regional accrediting bodies move away from counting library books to charting a path for continuous growth, August 2020, *School Administrator*, six pages, American Association for School Administrators, Arlington, VA. Retrieved from: https://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2020/Aug20/Kenney1.aspx

Elgart, M. (2017), *Meeting the Promise of Continuous Improvement: Insights from the AdvancED Continuous Improvement System and Observations from Effective Schools*, Alpharetta GA, Cognia White Paper, Retrieved from https://www.cognia.org/insights/meeting-the-promise-of-continuous-improvement/

Elgart, M. (2016) *Designing State Accountability Systems for Continuous Improvement: A Call to Action*, Alpharetta, Georgia, Cognia White Paper, Retrieved from https://www.advanc-ed.org/sites/default/files/ESSA%20Call%20to%20Action%20Whitepaper.pdf

Erwin, B., Cassidy, F., Pechota, D., McCann, M. (2020) Education Commission of the States, *50 State Comparison: States' School Accountability System*, Retrieved from https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-states-school-accountability-systems/

Murphy, S. and Ferrara, S. (2022), *The Future of Educational Assessment*, Alpharetta, GA, Cognia Whitepaper, Retrieved from https://www.cognia.org/insights/the-future-of-educational-assessment/

Patrick, S.(2021), Creating Innovations to Advance the Future of Learning, *Principal Leadership*, Nov. 2021, Accessed from https://www.nassp.org/publication/principal-leadership/volume-22-2021-2022/principle-leadership-november-2021/advocacy-agenda/

Patrick, S., Casey, K. (2020) *A Promise for Equitable Futures: Enabling Systems Change to Scale Educational and Economic Mobility Pathways*, Arlington, VA, Aurora Institute, https://aurora-institute.org/resource/a-promise-for-equitable-futures-enabling-systems-change-to-scale-educational-and-economic-mobility-pathways/

Riser-Kositsky, M. (2022, August 2) *Education Statistics: Facts About American Schools*, EducationWeek. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01

Von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General System Theory*: Foundations, Development, Applications. New York: George Braziller.

Weiss, J (2012), Data for Improvement, Data for Accountability, *Teachers College Record*, volume 114 110307, November 2012, seven pages, Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016146811211401102

MARK A. ELGART, Ed.D., serves as president and chief executive officer for Cognia, a non-profit organization serving nearly 36,000 public and private institutions in over 90 countries delivering a range of services including accreditation, student assessments, and professional services focused on improvement and professional learning. Elgart is responsible for executive leadership of the organization and has successfully facilitated seven non-profit mergers and acquisitions since 2003.

Elgart is an international leader dedicated to helping stakeholders make decisions and take actions to improve the quality of learning experiences for every learner. He works closely with government agencies and other leading education-focused organizations to help establish the policies, strategic vision, and actions to propel and transform the learning experience so that every learner is prepared for the rapidly and ever changing global world.

Elgart's professional experiences include several years as a mathematics and physics teacher as well as an administrator at the middle and high school levels including seven years as a middle school principal.

Elgart serves on the Board of Trustees for Learning Forward and the Board of Trustees at Springfield College. Elgart earned a bachelor's in mathematics from Springfield College, a master's in education from Westfield State College, and a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

About Cognia

Cognia is a global, nonprofit improvement organization dedicated to helping schools and other education providers grow learners, teachers, and leaders. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, and professional services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 36,000 public and private institutions from early learning through high school in more than 90 countries, Cognia brings a global perspective to advancing teaching and learning.

Find out more at cognia.org**.**

cognia®