

# SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY A BROADER, BOLDER APPROACH

Report of the Accountability Committee of the  
*Broader Bolder Approach to Education Campaign*



June 25, 2009

## Summary

A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA) should combine school improvement with improvements in the conditions with which children come to school, including their early childhood care and education, health, and out-of-school time.

Schools should be held accountable for spurring the broad range of knowledge and skills that students need to be successful. However, test scores alone cannot describe a school's contribution to the full range of student outcomes. BBA proposes new accountability systems that combine appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods.

BBA's recommendations for new accountability policies include the following:

## Federal policy

The federal government should:

- \* Collect state-level data – from an expanded National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) or from other national surveys - on a broad range of academic subjects, as well as on the arts, student work habits, physical health and fitness, and mental health, citizenship habits and other appropriate behaviors that will enable students to achieve success in a pluralistic society and complex global economy.
- \* Improve the disaggregation of NAEP and other survey data, where appropriate, to include immigrant generation, parent education, and national origin.
- \* Maintain NAEP's low-stakes character to preserve its validity as an indicator of relative state performance, barring its use as an individual-level test for accountability purposes.
- \* Require states to develop accountability systems that rely upon scores on states' own academic tests and other key educational, health, and behavioral indicators, along with approved inspection systems to evaluate school quality.

## State policy

States should:

- \* Improve the quality of state assessments, particularly in reading and math, so that assessment results can play an appropriate role in school evaluation.

- \* Provide for the inspection of districts and schools to ensure their contributions to satisfactory student performance in academic subject areas, as well as in the arts, citizenship, physical fitness and mental and physical health, work and other behavioral skills that will enable them to achieve success in a pluralistic society and complex global economy.
- \* Provide for the inspection of districts and schools to ensure that appropriate resources and practices, likely to produce satisfactory student achievement, are being followed and promoted, including:
  - » quality instruction and leadership that delivers a full curriculum, including math and reading but also in subjects not frequently tested, such as the arts, physical education, the sciences, history and social studies, and physical and mental health;
  - » professional development to improve teachers' ability to deliver this balanced curriculum;
- » a safe and supportive learning environment with a reasonable and fair disciplinary policy;
- » a teaching staff that is prepared to provide the services required to meet the needs of students in that school;
- » mechanisms and incentives for coordination at the school level with other community institutions that provide early childhood care and education, parent education and support, physical and mental health care, and high quality out-of-school time programs, or that are taking initiatives to provide such services where they do not exist; and
- » responsiveness to parent, community, and student concerns, and practices that engage parents, community members, and students in school education policy and affairs.
- \* Intervene for the purpose of improving school and district performance where it is unsatisfactory.

## Background

The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA), a call for a new national education policy issued in June, 2008 by a diverse and bi-partisan group of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, proposes to combine school improvement with the social, economic, family and community supports that prepare children to benefit from high-quality instruction in schools. In particular, BBA urges the nation and the states to narrow the achievement gap by implementing high-quality early childhood care and education for all disadvantaged children; by providing routine and preventive pediatric, dental, and optometric care for all disadvantaged children (in full service school-connected health centers, for example); and by ensuring that disadvantaged children have access to enriched academic content, as well as opportunities for social, and emotional skill building in cultural, organizational and athletic experiences during out-of-school time. This time includes after-school, weekend, school-year vacation, and summer hours.

BBA urges that national and state policy abandon its disproportionate focus on basic academic skills narrowly defined, and pay attention instead to the development of the whole person including, along with academic skills, physical health, character, civic and social development, from birth through the end of formal schooling. BBA assigns value to the new knowledge and skills that young people need to become effective participants in a global environment, including citizenship, creativity, and the ability to respect and work with persons in a pluralist society.

BBA insists that the public has a right to hold schools accountable for student achievement. However, test scores alone cannot describe a school's contribution to the full range of student outcomes. BBA proposes new accountability systems that combine appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods.

Early in 2009, BBA convened a committee of its endorsers to describe such a new accountability system in greater detail. The BBA committee on accountability was co-chaired by Christopher Cross, Susan B. Neuman, and Richard Rothstein. The committee deliberated initially by e-mail, concluding with a meeting and public presentation in Washington D.C. on February 26. This report results from that meeting. It has been reviewed by the full Advisory Council of the BBA campaign, by the initial sponsors of the BBA statement, and approved by BBA co-chairs Helen F. Ladd, Pedro A. Noguera, and Thomas W. Payzant. A list of committee members appears at the end of this report, along with lists of BBA Advisory Council members and initial sponsors.

## General principles

Consistent with the BBA principles, the committee agreed that accountability systems should be:

- a. **Accurate**, providing valid and consistent measures of student and school performance.
- b. **Transparent**, using statistics that are easily understood by policy makers and the public.
- c. **Comprehensive**, incorporating indicators of the many fields of knowledge and skills that young people need to be successful.
- d. **Goal-driven**, with a primary focus on whether youth have met reasonable expectations of performance in knowledge and skills, and with a secondary focus on whether educators employ appropriate strategies to achieve these goals.
- e. **Disaggregated**, providing information on student performance in racial, ethnic, gender, special education, second language, and economic sub-groups of students, so that policy makers can know where interventions are most needed.

## The federal role

The federal government should cease attempting to micro-manage accountability for the performance of all 100,000 schools nationwide. The experience of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has shown the federal government to be incapable of managing the wide variation in conditions under which education and youth development takes place in the United States. Federal policy is too remote and politicized to negotiate the necessary strategies for complex educational policy, and we understand too little about the processes of education and youth development to ignore the possibility that state experimentation and variation, unique to states' needs and free of excessive federal control, might suggest new and better ways of educating youth and of holding institutions accountable.

The federal government does, however, have the unique capacity to collect and report disaggregated data from the national, state, and local levels, showing policy makers in the various states how their youth perform relative to youth in other schools, districts, states and nations, and how their systems of education and youth development may be contributing to this performance. This information-gathering capacity is underdeveloped, and the highest priority for the creation of a new national accountability system should be the full development of this capacity (including the distribution of federal grants to states for this purpose).

At present, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), utilizing samples of students and a matrix design,<sup>1</sup> collects on an occasional basis data on the performance of students in various academic areas in grades 4, 8, and 12. In most subjects, only national data are reported. In reading and math, however, data are reported regularly (every two years) at the state level.<sup>2</sup>

Other federal agencies also collect data, some disaggregated at the state level, on the outcomes of education and youth development. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, for example, reports on a variety of youth health conditions and behaviors. The U.S. Department of Justice reports on youth involvement in crime and the criminal justice system. The Current Population Survey of the Census collects other important data on youth behavior and accomplishment. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) administers several longitudinal surveys that report on the performance of specific youth cohorts, but these data are rarely disaggregated at the state level.

These various federal surveys, however, are not integrated into a single comprehensive system that can provide state policy makers with easily-compared data on how their youth perform on the full range of public goals, how state policy may be striking appropriate or inappropriate balances among these goals, and how their education and youth development systems may be contributing to the outcomes we seek.

BBA proposes that federal data collection on youth performance be re-tooled in these ways:

- a. NAEP should collect more detailed background characteristics on its samples. More precise race and ethnic categories are needed, particularly in order to distinguish students whose parents were born in the United States from those who immigrated, and to distinguish students of different national origins. Disaggregation of data by parent educational attainment would also add much to the ability of state policy makers to interpret NAEP results.
- b. NCLB for the first time required NAEP math and reading samples to be large enough to generate data for each state and required states to cooperate in this data collection. A re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) should gradually extend this requirement to other academic subjects (the sciences, world and U.S. history, civics, the arts, health knowledge).
- c. NAEP should also collect state-level data on students' physical fitness, other health characteristics, and behaviors that are relevant to the public's goals for education (for example, volunteerism, cooperative abilities, conflict-resolution skills). If NAEP can incorporate such data from NCES' other national surveys and from those of other agencies, it should do so. The federal government should produce a comprehensive report on the broad range of youth outcomes; less important is whether data assembled in such a report come from an expanded NAEP or from other existing surveys.

Expansion of NAEP samples is critical, both for greater disaggregation and broader subject coverage; it will require additional funding. But we cannot develop an accountability system on the cheap that will hold schools and other institutions accountable for developing the broad range of knowledge and skills youth need to succeed. The investment we make in better data on how states compare in these areas will, in the long run, be cost-effective by providing the data to support elimination of wasteful and educationally inefficient practices that are not accomplishing the outcomes we seek.

The BBA Campaign considers student privacy and confidentiality to be paramount. Such values can be protected by surveys (including NAEP) that report state-level data, respecting respondents' and test-takers' anonymity. NAEP can collect data from samples of students on, for example, their attitudes towards civic engagement, their practices of good health, and their ambitions for future education and vocation. States need such data to determine if their schools are following practices likely to develop the broad range of knowledge and skills youth need to succeed.

The federal government should publicize widely a comprehensive account of state-by-state youth performance. Rather than a scatter-shot series of easily-ignored reports whenever a NAEP assessment is conducted, the "The Nation's Report Card" should provide an overall comparison of how youth in the various states perform on this broad set of measures.

The United States does not presently have national academic standards and is not likely to have them in the near future. For now, the NAEP frameworks are an implicit national standard, and as NAEP is expanded, its new frameworks must be constructed with great care. It is essential that as it incorporates these expansions, NAEP's sampling, low-stakes character, and role as an independent monitor of national and state educational progress should be preserved. We recognize that the more publicity the federal government gives to a comprehensive state-by-state report card, and the more effective this publicity becomes in spurring state policy makers to make improvements in areas where their states are lagging, the more NAEP's low-stakes character, and its ability to remain an accurate independent monitor will be threatened. There is no formulaic way to resolve the conflict between publicity and low stakes. We do know, however, that one way to minimize the conflict is to invest in the highest-quality tests, whose content varies sufficiently from one test administration to another so that the widespread score inflation characteristic of existing state standardized tests can be avoided.

Beyond requiring the collection of data in a vastly expanded NAEP, the next ESEA re-authorization should require states to develop accountability systems for schools and related institutions of youth development (for example, early childhood programs, full-service school-based health centers, after school and summer programs) that combine appropriate standardized testing with a system of school

inspections. Because the United States, as well as other nations that have been adopting such systems, still have limited experience in the most effective design of such inspectorates, ESEA should not be prescriptive about the precise design of state school inspection systems, but should instead encourage experimentation and require a gradual implementation and careful ongoing evaluation of these efforts. The accountability systems of each state, including testing and inspection systems, should be subject to review and approval by the U.S. Department of Education. The Department should utilize the guidelines described in the next section in considering whether a state's accountability system should receive approval.

## State accountability systems

States should evaluate school quality, using both quantitative indicators and human judgment, for example by causing each school to be inspected on a regular basis. BBA considers that once every three years would usually be appropriate, but as we have indicated, the federal government should encourage experimentation in state evaluation and inspection systems, recognizing that school inspection systems in other nations, as well as accreditation systems in U.S. regions, are undergoing constant revision as strengths and weaknesses of existing procedures are revealed. Some states, for example, may choose inspections that are more or less frequent, or whose frequency varies based on schools' previous performance.

We propose introducing an inspectorate system into the United States because test scores and other quantitative measures of a school's performance, however valuable, can only provide a partial window into the quality of a school. For example, if we want to know whether test score gains have been produced by an undue emphasis on test preparation and low-level instruction focused exclusively on factual recall, qualified evaluators have to visit classrooms, observe instruction, review teacher lesson plans and student assignments, and look at samples of student work. Only by visiting schools and classrooms can inspectors assess whether a school maintains a safe and orderly environment; practices that are respectful of and engage students, staff, and parents; programs to promote student health and other non-cognitive outcomes; and a collegial professional culture in which teachers and administrators use all available data in a collaborative fashion to continuously improve the work of the school.

Federal guidelines should require states to use highly trained inspectors to validate a school's quality performance and to require improvement in areas where a school is falling short. The guidelines should recommend that inspectors be full-time professionals, although some states may choose to experiment with highly trained volunteer peer educators, as are presently used by accreditation agencies. State inspection teams may include lay observers as well as inspectors, but professionally trained inspectors should form the core of any approved system. Inspections of schools for purposes of

accountability, including the interpretation of test scores, necessitate experienced human judgment. Without requiring that states use federally trained inspectors, the Department of Education could provide a service to states by establishing a training program for school inspectors. States could utilize this service, or use the federal training program as a model for their own.

Federal policy should recognize that it will take a serious research investment to develop and validate the additional indicators needed for a balanced accountability system. While the evaluation of a school's performance should include the interpretation of test scores, the federal government should encourage state experimentation with and variation in the design, frequency, and universality of tests used for purposes of accountability. Federal approval of a state accountability system should not needlessly require tests of every student, every year, in every subject. Federal rules should encourage states to distinguish assessment for accountability purposes with other assessments that states, districts, schools, or teachers may administer for the purposes of guiding instruction, certifying promotion or graduation, identifying individual students' strengths and weaknesses, or reporting to parents on the performance of their own children.

Federal regulation should encourage states to develop higher quality assessments when used for accountability purposes. Tests should assess critical thinking, reasoning, and advanced content, as well as basic skills; items should be rotated sufficiently to discourage teaching "to the test". States should be permitted to give greater weight in their inspection guidelines to results on such higher quality tests than to results on tests that primarily assess basic skills, and where test questions are easily predictable. Test results of performance in reading and math should have greater importance when such tests are of sufficiently high quality.

Accountability (assessments and observation in inspections) should focus on students' academic skills and cognitive growth, and on those aspects of the development of the whole person that are within the scope of a school's responsibilities, including physical health, character, social development, and citizenship skills – the knowledge and skills that young people need to become effective participants in a global environment.

School inspection reports should be easily understood by parents and the public and should include contextual (socio-demographic, economic, and community) information.

The format for reporting standardized test scores for purposes of state accountability and inspection systems should be determined by the states themselves. The federal government should encourage experimentation and variation, keeping in mind the sound goals of accountability. A default system, however, should provide data on student performance by demographic subgroups and by achievement quartiles, as proposed by the National Education Goals Panel in the early 1990s. Those national goals expected improvement in each quartile of the achievement distribution. Federal guidelines should encourage states to avoid the mechanistic conclusion

that each quartile should necessarily improve at a similar rate. And the federal government should discourage states from setting a single arbitrary score point (i.e., “percent proficient”) as the passing requirement for students at all points of the achievement distribution. That requirement of a single proficiency point has been one of the most destructive aspects of NCLB, creating incentives for educators to ignore advanced students as well as those far behind.

Inspections should be designed to improve schools, and inspection reports might categorize schools as “adequate,” “needing improvement,” or “failing.” The orientation of an accountability system should be the identification of specific needed improvements; inspection reports should identify the merits of districts and schools, and should trigger intervention by state education departments and school districts to guide reform in areas needing remediation. As a last resort, persistently failing schools should be closed.

Satisfactory coordination and/or provision of early childhood, out-of-school, summer, educational, health, and social services should be a practice for which districts and schools are accountable, and which inspections should consider.

School inspections as the core of state accountability systems have precedents. Other nations – England, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, for example – have confronted the inadequacy of using test scores as the primary means of school accountability, and have developed school inspection systems as alternatives. Voluntary school accreditation agencies in the United States have some characteristics that are similar to those that would be included in federally-approved state inspection and accountability systems. Some states may choose to build on these precedents, either in principle or in practice.

## In conclusion

The Broader, Bolder Approach campaign proposes a new accountability system whose chief elements are: 1) an expansion

and coordination of federal data collection, including expansion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, to provide comparative state-by-state information on the broad range of knowledge and skills that students need for success; and 2) federally approved and supported (but not designed) state systems of school inspection that ensure that schools are generating adequate outcomes on this range of knowledge and skills, and are following practices likely to generate these outcomes.

There are limited American institutions at present on which a new accountability system can be built. NAEP presently provides only a small portion of the data the states require to evaluate their performances. Existing state standardized test systems are mostly of poor quality, and require dramatic improvement to become part of a legitimate accountability system. Voluntary accreditation agencies presently inspect schools, but without the consistency or rigor required by a national accountability system.

Development of a rigorous and comprehensive accountability system such as that recommended in this report will take considerable time and additional resources. But continuing our present accountability policy only because it is cheap and available cannot be justified. The time to begin to develop a new accountability system is now.

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1. Several test booklets, including different items, are administered to different students in the sample, making it possible to cover a broader proportion of a subject area domain than would be possible in a single standardized test where the same set of items was administered to all test-takers.
  2. State NAEP is presently administered regularly for the 4th and 8th grades. There is a trial assessment for the 12th grade.

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