



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Better Together:

How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study

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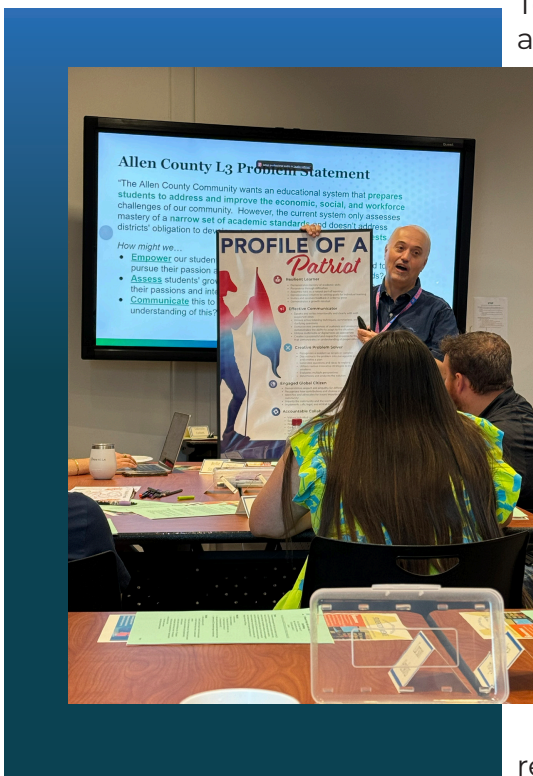
It is well documented that reforms designed behind closed doors and “rolled out” in a top-down manner risk being dismissed locally as “another fad that soon will pass,” resulting in minimum compliance rather than robust internal ownership that is a necessary component of transformation at scale (e.g., Coburn, 2003; Morel et al., 2019). In addition, equity is threatened when a privileged group of powerful actors can “influence education without democratic input or accountability (Hernandez 2020). Therefore, if innovations in local and state assessment and accountability systems are to have a positive and durable impact on outcomes for all students, greater attention must be given to *how* those reforms are designed and implemented.

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This report examines Kentucky’s current United We Learn initiative to “launch an accountability system that is meaningful and useful to all our learners” through the lens of one leading district, Allen County Schools (ACS) (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025). As an inaugural Local Laboratory of Learning (L3) district participating with United We Learn, **ACS presents a unique opportunity to study a different kind of system reform effort—one that is constructed hand-in hand with the people most impacted by it.**

ACS is a public school district in rural south-central Kentucky serving approximately 3,000 students across five schools. Since 2019, it has worked to reorient teaching, learning, assessment, and accountability systems to help students pursue their passions while addressing community challenges. The district adopted a Profile of a Patriot to define graduation competencies and has prioritized hands-on, real-world, project-based learning.

Teachers in every classroom use performance-based assessments, every school hosts student exhibitions, and high school seniors complete a portfolio defense before a panel of educators and community members.

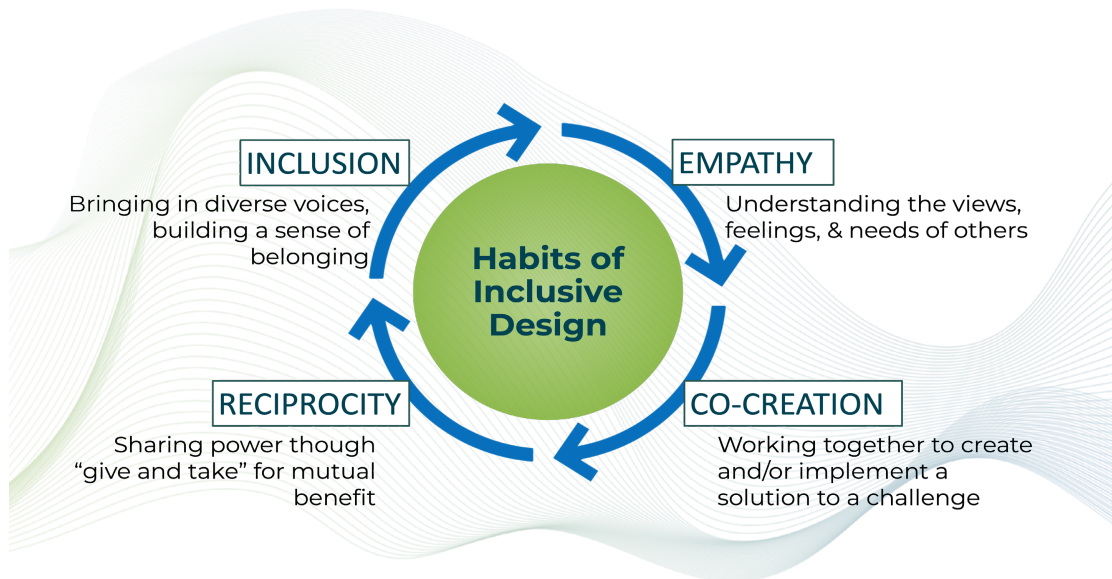


ACS is beginning to change the landscape of accountability by holding students accountable for mastering the competencies and creating a data dashboard to publicly report competency attainment and other metrics important to the community. These efforts are building toward the use of high-quality performance-based assessments of Profile of a Patriot competencies to redefine how the district and its schools are held accountable at the local level, in partnership with the broader community. Further, their local model is informing state assessment and accountability reform through the United We Learn Council, a broad stakeholder group convened to learn from the L3 districts and make recommendations to the Kentucky Department of Education and Kentucky Board of Education regarding a new state assessment and accountability system that prioritizes local relevance (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025).

What drew us to study ACS’ reform effort is not only the nature of the reform but also the way the district has pursued systems change. Rather than pushing for change in a top-

down manner driven by the Central Office, Superintendent Travis Hamby sought to engage diverse stakeholders from the earliest stages of designing the Profile of a Patriot all the way through the design and implementation of shifts in practice, assessment, and accountability. Integrating habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity through a process of Inclusive Design developed by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE), Hamby and his L3 coalition intentionally sought input from diverse stakeholders and created spaces in which students, teachers, administrators, families, and business and community members could co-create the reforms.

CIE Habits of Inclusive Design



Among other examples, ACS embedded the habits of Inclusive Design in the following ways:

- **Inclusion:** Hamby and his team identified diverse community voices that would be important to include in the reform effort. Through a mix of district appointments, an open application process, and cold-calls targeting groups that are historically underrepresented in policy conversations, ACS launched an L3 coalition to guide their reform effort. The L3 coalition consisted of roughly 30 members including teachers, families, community members, business leaders, and students.
- **Empathy:** L3 coalition members conducted “empathy interviews” (CIE, 2025) with more than 70 stakeholders in the community, targeting underrepresented groups, students, higher education faculty, and local government officials. They sought to understand how different individuals experienced testing and accountability in the district and their common pain points. The information directly shaped the design of reforms.
- **Co-Creation:** Through cycles of iteration and feedback, the L3 coalition, ACS leadership team, and teams of educators designed and began implementing the reforms.
- **Reciprocity:** ACS leadership continued to engage the L3 coalition and additional stakeholders in ongoing feedback loops and cycles, and is now building a public-facing dashboard to report on progress.

Our research sought to verify the extent to which ACS exhibited the habits of Inclusive Design in its reform effort; and further, to understand the impact of this unique approach on stakeholder engagement, reciprocity, local ownership and satisfaction.

Our central research question was:

How are Allen County's new assessment and accountability systems changing the relationship between the community and the district? Specifically:

- A. Whose values, perspectives, and priorities are shaping the new learning, assessment, and accountability systems, and how are these perspectives included? And, to what extent has the district included those historically held farthest from decision-making?**
- B. In what ways are community members becoming more active in contributing to vibrant student learning experiences (i.e. authentic, hands-on, deeper learning), and what can the district do to encourage greater engagement?**
- C. What is the impact of working collaboratively with stakeholders to design and steward these systems? Does it lead to better understanding, satisfaction, trust, and ownership?**

Adding texture to our central question, a team of six ACS high school students formed a Youth Research Team for this project and pursued two related questions most relevant to their lived experiences:

- 1. What is the quality (how good) and equality (how widespread) of hands-on learning in Allen Co.-Scottsville HS school?**
- 2. How does the quality of student-teacher relationships impact students' learning experiences in Allen Co.-Scottsville HS?**

To answer these questions, we used a mixed-methods approach including interviews, focus groups, surveys, participatory action research, and a novel method called distributed ethnography using an online tool to gather personal experiences or anecdotes tied to quantitative follow-up questions.

KEY FINDINGS

Through our study of ACS' reform effort, we learned that engaging diverse stakeholders as co-creators in assessment and accountability reform requires investment and ongoing support, but it yields benefits like increased trust, satisfaction, and local ownership—outcomes that bolster the long and complex process of systems change. We also found that making the reforms visible through learner-centered practices (such as project-based learning and public student exhibitions) helps build understanding and buy-in, supporting spread and scale of the reforms. Lastly, while not part of our initial research aims, we learned that engaging community in studying the relationship between the reform process and community-facing outcomes (like in this project) is, itself, a mechanism that supports local accountability and durable systems change.

Our Key Findings include:

1. Collaboratively designing new systems of assessment and accountability with impacted stakeholders increases trust, satisfaction, and local ownership of reform.

Our analysis revealed that using Inclusive Design and its corresponding habits (inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity) to engage broad and diverse stakeholders in the design and implementation of assessment and accountability reforms resulted in greater levels of trust, satisfaction, and local ownership of the reforms.

Specifically, we found evidence that:

- a. District leaders intentionally included the perspectives of diverse stakeholders (such as students, families, educators, and business and community leaders) at several points throughout the design and implementation of the reforms.
- b. Families, business leaders, and community members are becoming more aware of, and actively involved in, the education system.
- c. Among families, awareness and involvement were higher among some groups (such as families of younger children or with higher socioeconomic status) than others.
- d. Overwhelmingly, students, parents, teachers, and community members feel satisfied by the district's new direction and are committed to supporting it.
- e. Positive community-facing outcomes are directly tied to the district's inclusive design processes.

2. Systems change is long and complex, but it is bolstered by gaining buy-in and commitment from across stakeholder groups.

While evidencing widespread support for the district's assessment and accountability reforms, our research also surfaced challenges and complexities commonly associated with major systems change efforts. Even so, the district's attention to habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity appear to be gaining levels of buy-in and commitment that will be necessary for growth and continuous improvement.

Specifically, we found evidence that:

- a. Educator mindsets and classroom practices are changing to support the new assessment and accountability model, but change at scale requires time, considerable investment in capacity-building, and alignment of policies and system structures.
- b. The district's efforts at community engagement must continue reaching beyond the "usual suspects."
- c. Stakeholders who are included in the design and implementation of the new system



are more likely to become champions and guardians, ensuring durability.

3. The learner-centered nature of Allen County's reforms allowed community members to see and participate in the shifts in student learning, fostering buy-in.

The fact that ACS' reforms made learning visible through student exhibitions and demonstrations, and that they invited families and community members to participate, helped raise awareness and understanding among a variety of stakeholders. Seeing shifts in student learning first-hand increased buy-in among students, teachers, and families.

Specifically, we found evidence that:

- a. The district's early effort to define graduation competencies was foundational to helping stakeholders understand and support the assessment and accountability reforms.
- b. Project-based learning and performance assessments were key vehicles for parent and community inclusion and collaboration.
- c. The reforms scaled, in part, by making the shifts in teaching and learning visible and desirable.
- d. The district can improve stakeholder understanding and ownership of the reforms through more accessible and consistent communication.

4. Researching the extent of inclusion, co-creation, and reciprocity between the district and its community is a process that, in itself, supports local accountability and durable systems change.

While this effect was not part of the initial intent of our study, the research team quickly observed that, by engaging community members using habits of inclusive design in our research processes, and by calling attention to these habits in our research instruments, the research project was effectively serving as an intervention deepening ACS' practice of inclusion, co-creation, and reciprocity in its ongoing assessment and accountability reform. Rather than viewing this finding as a negative, we acknowledge the effect and frame it as an asset that deepens local accountability and supports durable systems change.

Specifically, we found evidence that:

- a. Collaboratively analyzing data at this project's Data Party inspired participants and created momentum for the reforms.
- b. District and school staff used the findings to plan next steps for continuous improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From these findings, we drew four policy implications and recommendations for those leading or funding major education reforms:

1. Education leaders should use inclusive processes during major system reforms, such as redesigning systems of assessment and accountability, to ensure alignment to community values, gain buy-in, and increase sustainability and scaling.

Inclusive processes may start with small steps, such as conducting empathy interviews with a broad range of stakeholders, especially those farthest from decision-making authority (CIE, 2025). Leaders can work their way toward more robust structures supporting co-creation and

reciprocity, such as a Design Team or Coalition comprised of diverse stakeholders, with clear mechanisms for accountability and progress monitoring.

2. Policymakers should support inclusive design in reform efforts by providing funding and time needed to effect deep levels of systems change.

It takes time to gather input from diverse stakeholders, and even more time to impact relationships and mental models in ways that build local ownership. But these deeper layers of systems change are prerequisite for durable systems change (Kania, 2018; Coburn, 2003). State policymakers can heed the U.S. Department of Education's encouragement to make use of federal flexibility and consolidate funding in ways that support and sustain community-engaged system reform. Meanwhile, federal policymakers should consider how existing policy flexibility (such as the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority) and grant programs (such as the Competitive Grants for State Assessments) supporting assessment and accountability reform can better incentivize community co-creation by:

- providing funding (or preferential scoring in application processes) for robust plans for stakeholder engagement and community co-creation,
- permitting sufficient time (as in multiple years) for community-co-creation, and
- attending to leading indicators of relational change, not just lagging indicators of student-level outcomes, in reporting requirements.

3. Federal, state, and local policy should prioritize assessment and accountability reforms that make learning visible, such as through project-based learning and performance-based assessments.

To achieve the level of community ownership and buy-in we observed in Allen County Schools, assessment and accountability reforms should make learning visible, such as through project-based learning and performance-based assessments or exhibitions of learning. In doing so, students, families, and community members are more likely to understand the reforms and find them meaningful and relevant to their daily lives. In the near term, performance assessments may be administered in combination with standardized assessments of content attainment (as currently happens in ACS), but they may also be designed to replace some aspects of the current state assessment and accountability paradigm (as is the aspiration of Kentucky's United We Learn statewide initiative).

4. Federal and philanthropic entities should incentivize and fund research (especially youth-led research and research-practice partnerships) studying how systems change processes impact the relationship between education systems and the communities they serve.

To our knowledge, there are no funding streams that explicitly incentivize research on how systems change processes impact the relationship between schools and the communities they serve—yet we found that conducting this kind of research in a community-engaged manner directly supported local accountability for the reform effort we studied. Therefore, despite looming cuts to federally-funded education research, if funders are serious about supporting systems change, they should prioritize support for research of this kind.

CLOSING

Our findings extend beyond Allen County. They offer guidance to education leaders and policymakers pursuing major systems change, especially in assessment and accountability. The inclusive practices used in ACS—using habits of inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity—are key to building high levels of stakeholder satisfaction and engagement that help sustain major change efforts.

From an equity standpoint, considering the changing landscape of federal accountability and oversight, lessons on how to bolster equity by co-creating policies with historically marginalized groups are paramount. And with the political and sociocultural divisiveness of modern times, policymakers need to understand what leadership actions can help reframe accountability away from a top-down compliance exercise that happens because of distrust; and toward a community-engaged process that builds trust.





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