

Essential Learning: *Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm* (“51st State Paper”)

Why This Topic

In the last decade, states across the country raised the rigor of their education standards in mathematics, English language, and other domains, while creating or adopting new assessments to measure student progress toward the new standards. This significant, resource-intensive work was undertaken in pursuit of both excellence and equity for all students; yet with only a few exceptions, it proceeded under old assumptions about locus of control, meaningful learning, assessment, and accountability that ultimately constrained progress.

As we worked with states to implement higher, clearer, and fewer standards and to transition to aligned state summative assessments such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced, we began to identify patterns in the challenges that inhibited greater progress.

- The new standards were more rigorous, but still did not account for the [knowledge, skills and dispositions](#) that learners needed to be successful in college, career, and in life.
- While summative state assessments were able to say more about the gaps that exist in math and language arts, their narrow focus and the punitive accountability actions tied to them resulted in systems letting go of efforts to help students build non-measured but equally important outcomes such as self-regulation, creativity, identity and agency.
- Efforts to make state summative assessments useful to drive instruction made them longer and more complex, which, ironically, made scoring time consuming, resulting in data reporting that was too slow to be useful instructionally.
- It is also now clear that states’ educator workforces were not fully prepared to make necessary changes in their practice and few states realigned their resource allocation in accordance with teacher capacity needs.
- Moreover, accountability systems were still premised on a label-and-sanction paradigm that ignored the role of local communities in determining what students should know and be able to do, what should constitute worthy evidence of that learning, and the ways in which that learning could be demonstrated. At the same time, the accountability systems placed disproportionate responsibility for success and failure on the local systems and individual educators as consequences were imposed by the state. This paradigm encouraged compliance with state and federal authority over local wisdom and communities’ ownership of continuous improvement.

Perceiving the need for a new path forward, C!E and its partners articulated a new paradigm for assessment and accountability that holds promise to better promote genuinely higher and deeper learning for all students. The resulting document, [Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm](#), represents a comprehensive vision intended to serve as a springboard for

states to grapple with in conversation with their own communities, in ways responsive to their unique contexts.

The Learning Process that Led to the 51st State Paper

Accountability for College and Career Readiness, nicknamed the “51st State Paper,” drew from CIE’s experiences working directly with state and local leaders to improve their systems so that all learners achieved a higher set of outcomes. Our thinking was further refined through a series of discussions convened by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation on new designs for accountability systems. Participants of these discussions included Gene Wilhoit and Linda Pittenger along with school and district leaders, researchers, and national thought partners.

From this backdrop, Gene, Linda, and Linda Darling-Hammond (then leading the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education) authored *Accountability for College and Career Readiness* to help make a complex, multi-dimensional concept more accessible, and to identify implications from various vantage points throughout the system including policy and practice. Importantly, the paper was not offered as a final say on the future of education; rather, it serves as “an intermediate step forward” to be further adapted and iterated by those leading the work on the ground.

Insights

Three key elements shape the new paradigm for accountability systems described in the paper, included:

- A focus on *meaningful learning* by involving communities in identifying which knowledge, skills, and dispositions matter for success as a member of the community and for a wide range of pathways to professional success. And then using assessments that help learners, educators and families see how each learner is progressing toward the full set of desired skills and dispositions
- A systematic rebalancing of assessment tools; reducing state summative assessments to make room for more useful classroom assessments administered by teachers as students are learning; and identifying key measures to illustrate how students, educators, schools, districts, and states are each performing;
- *Reciprocity* across the system, so that federal, state, and local education agencies are accountable for providing appropriate resources and facilitating systemic learning while educators, students, parents, and community members all take responsibility for meeting desired outcomes; and
- Investment in – and accountability for – *professional capacity-building*, so that educators, schools, and the larger system have the capability to perform at the level expected, as well as the tools needed to reflect on progress and continuously improve. In a new paradigm, a critical aspect of professional capacity building becomes a new and much more productive dialogue between educators and their communities, so that local wisdom is respected as an asset and community is an essential partner in continuous improvement.

The new paradigm for accountability thus represents a rebalancing of priorities, power and pressure points across the system. A historically narrow focus on content acquisition in two core subjects is rebalanced to include a broad array of skills and outcomes that matter. A heavy reliance on externally designed and delivered standardized assessments is rebalanced to include smaller versions of those

assessments – as they continue to play an important role in illuminating inequity across systems – but in less intrusive ways while building local capacity to design and administer quality assessments that are useful to daily learning. Finally, the weight of accountability is redistributed in reciprocal ways across the entire system, resting not solely on the shoulders of educators but holding all levels accountable for surfacing and sharing learning and equitably providing resources to support learning, and investments in the teacher capacity necessary for success.

Since the publication of *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*, we have worked with state and local leaders and other national partners to translate the new paradigm into real-life systems transformation. We have supported several noteworthy successes, such as New Hampshire’s transformation toward a competency-based model that invests in local capacity to design and administer authentic, performance-based assessments. While New Hampshire may have come closest to the vision embodied in the 51st state paper, we have also supported numerous states in taking initial forays into the new paradigm by broadening their definitions of student success; deepening their understanding of how to develop essential skills and dispositions in teaching and learning; designing balanced systems of assessment that prioritize assessment *for* learning; building local capacity through a deeper understanding of leadership for transformation; and rethinking models of school finance and resource allocation.

Future Provocations and Connections

In the midst of these successes, we have been learning about what kinds of state and local efforts seem to make more or less progress toward the vision articulated in *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*. We are confronted by the observation that, although the vision is generally met with widespread acceptance, states in large part are still holding on to legacy systems rooted in the old paradigm or are trying to adapt new ideas that would work toward equity but are still trying to fit them into the old structures.. System leaders struggle to imagine new balanced approaches to assessment that respond to the needs of their community, and feel obligated still to the single approach endorsed by previous federal policy. Extending from our work to date, we believe there are two primary reasons that states fail to take the leap:

- first, it is extremely laborious, risky and complex to bridge the great divide between current structures, policies and practices and the vision of a system that is working for all learners, calling for a framework to help states undertake such transformation; and
- second, to sustain and scale such equity-seeking transformation, educators from classrooms to state agencies need to build new skills and knowledge and shift their mindsets to align with the new paradigm

Even when state leaders identify with the concepts in *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*, state agencies can be so entrenched in top-down relationships with local agencies and schools that important, transformative steps – such as more broadly defining student success or building local capacity for performance-based assessments – can be ineffectively approached as an unwelcome mandate. Such efforts also often fail to hold student agency as a priority or recognize the value of local wisdom in shaping the system’s view of what students should know and be able to do. On the opposite end of the spectrum, state leaders who want to honor local control may overcompensate by removing their hand entirely. Doing so is also a misstep that fails to help local communities stay in touch with

state, national and international markers of readiness and competitiveness, build local capacity, or address the larger-scale system changes necessary to enable scaled implementation of better approaches or related necessary aspects of full system transformation to the new paradigm. By contrast, we have learned that effective systems transformation requires partnerships of local communities WITH state education agencies and other state-level actors or intermediaries, a new framework for system innovation, and new ways of thinking about scaling that are responsive to local context. These insights are further elaborated in our recent [CIE System Transforming Practice Framework](#).

One other key provocation has emerged from our work with states: that even if states partner with local communities to bring about the kinds of policies and practices described in *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*, we will fail to succeed for all students if we – CIE included – do not deepen our understanding of what it means for a system to *be designed to persistently seek equity*. When we envisioned a new accountability system for “51st State,” we were driven by a belief that some students have been underserved by the system and that this is a result of inequities built into the design of the system itself. We wrote the new paradigm believing, and reflecting the commonly held beliefs of the many contributors to that paradigm, that fundamental change is imperative if we are to close both achievement and opportunity gaps, and to truly help *all* students reach higher outcomes for success, especially those most historically underserved.

Since publishing the *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*, we have continued to learn from our partnerships with a wide range of local, state and intermediary actors and to observe patterns across states. We have observed systems as they operationalized the assumption that academic skills alone would ensure life success. It sometimes led to a view of learners as monolithic academic skill-building individuals and schools as institutions twisted to maximize academic skill achievement at the cost of other kinds of development. Some such systems did succeed in delivering a standard set of academic and essential skill competencies for all kids, and some made meaningful gains on achievement gaps, and *still* these systems did not achieve equity in terms of postsecondary degree attainment - which was the lever they were counting on to produce broader access to professional opportunity and economic success. And some of these implementations actually exacerbated inequity by ignoring essential skill and requiring identity conformity rather than fostering identity development - both of which have a powerful impact on one’s ability to learn independently, be happy and be employable. Few efforts resulted in learners developing greater self-awareness and agency which are key components of a happy, connected and successful adult life.

We have also continued to seek expert provocation from people willing to look closely at our work and challenge assumptions we had about learners, educators, communities, the purpose of schooling and the meaning of our public education system’s history. With that help, we are deepening our understanding of the pursuit of equity.

We now believe that talking about equity as a fixed goal of closing achievement gaps has, to some extent, gotten in the way of equitable inclusion of diverse people in educational opportunity. So, rather than seeking to find a single predictor of economic and societal opportunity, and orienting our system to maximize that predictor, we believe that actors in the education system, or others like us who seek to influence the education system, will have greater positive impact if we adopt an equity seeking disposition in work that acknowledges there is no single predictor, no single lever we can pull. Instead as we go about this complex work we must work with others to scrutinize each of our decisions,

assumptions, strategies, partnerships, and the meaning we make in data analysis such that we persistently raise up inequity and learn about what is positively impacting those farthest from privilege and success in our systems. Further, we believe such a pursuit begins with each local and state community articulating their shared and full view of learners and the civic and professional world they need to be prepared to enter as young adults.

We believe this work, like the work of designing graduate profiles, needs to be done locally and should reflect both what is common and distinct among American communities. At C!E, we hope that the way we see learners describes what is common among American communities as we seek to redesign our education system to become a persistent and effective lever in our pursuit of an ever more equitable union.

At C!E, we see learners as capable and curious people with multi-dimensional identities who belong to local and global communities, who learn in different ways, and who need to be prepared for a wide range of societal, civic and professional possibilities.

We have also observed how different it is when equity seeking system leaders go farther to explicitly recognize their system's own historical role in producing gaps and strive to help all actors see identity and agency development as important to the enterprise of public education as math and literacy skill attainment. We have seen local and state system actors humbly listen to one another, building relationships across lines of difference and generating new ways of partnering, learning from one another, and trying to define new approaches to measuring system performance. This work is different from the work of the reform era. Those leading this work see the goal of the enterprise differently, see students holistically, and do not imagine we have yet found, or that they alone will find, the answers for everyone's children or every community's context.

This more full view of equity has important implications for the manner in which all of us might now strive for the kinds of higher outcomes described in *Accountability for College and Career Readiness*. It changes the role of state leaders, whose authority is not unilateral but whose perspective should be buttressed by the perspectives of those from various vantage points across the system. Taking into account the full picture of each young person and committing to their full success, local and state system leaders cannot help but acknowledge that the work cannot be done within the bounds of their system alone. Seeing learners as whole people deserving of well rounded developmental support leads system leaders to think that partnership with community must shift not just from communicating to get buy-in to engaging the community in identifying the outcomes they seek for all learners, but even further to establishing new functional partnerships across silos so that K-12 works with many others to reimagine and then and provide coordinated supports to young people. State leaders then will also need to learn how to work with local coalitions that include the LEA, and also their partners.

All of this shifts dramatically, the essential functions of state and local system leaders. They need to be very good at listening and learning alongside leaders within their systems. They need to be able to sense what is happening, what encouraging work is emerging across the system. Then they need to become a hub of learning, able to document and share insights to help drive continuous, distributed, systematic improvement. This view of learners calls into question the cultural frame of reference behind decisions spanning curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and challenges our implementation of any program or reform that seeks to use assessment to decide which children need to be fixed and in what

ways. And if we imagine it is our responsibility to support students as agents in their own learning and identity development, the implications on the basic characteristics of the school day, the discipline system, the role of teacher and student in learning are all deserving of reconsideration and design scrutiny.

Through our future work with states, districts, and partners, it is our intention to tackle system transformation toward a new accountability paradigm through an equity-seeking lens. We believe that doing so will strengthen partnerships and enable collaborative learning in ways that more effectively achieve the intended aims of our vision for the future of education systems.