A FRAMEWORK FOR REIMAGINING SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

The model for school accountability in the United States has remained largely the same over the past 20 years. The state administers annual testing of student learning relative to statewide content standards, the test scores and other indicators are used to rank order schools according to a state-established formula, and the state identifies the lowest performing schools to provide resources and support for school improvement.
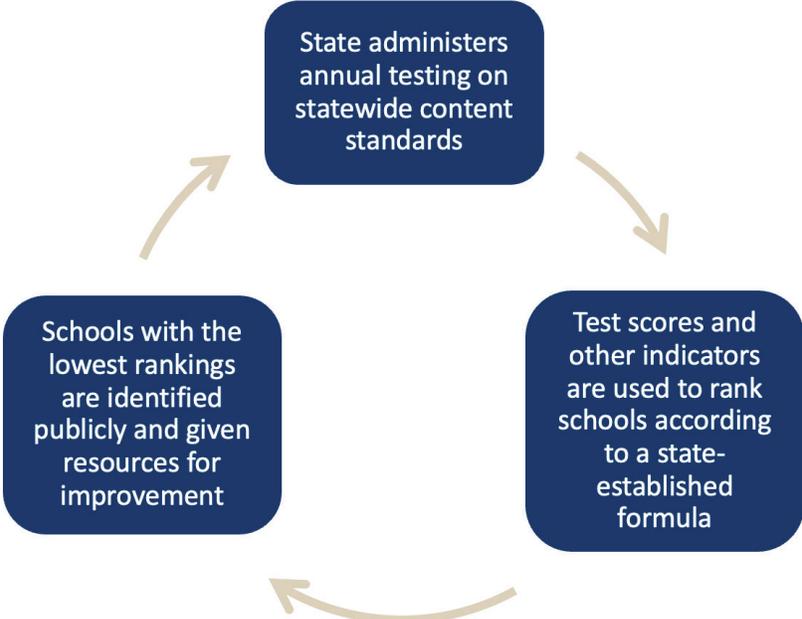

Figure 1. NCLB and ESSA School Accountability.

While there has been some evidence of modest success in improving student outcomes through this model of accountability, it is abundantly clear that the current systems of assessment and accountability in the United States have not delivered on meaningfully and sustainably closing opportunity gaps for marginalized students (McElroy, 2023; Wilburn et al., 2019).

We've been living under the same model for so long that it can be difficult to imagine what a different system might look like. Drawing inspiration from both local and international models for school accountability and program evaluation, we present a framework aimed at inspiring the next era of school accountability for the United States.

A FRAMEWORK FOR REIMAGINING SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The framework is designed to help us imagine how the different elements of a system of accountability may be manipulated to lead to a new way of doing things. We identify two levers that, when adjusted, present new models for accountability. These are:

1. determining who is responsible for setting the goals of an accountability system, and
2. determining who is responsible for making the evaluative judgment related to consequences or next steps.
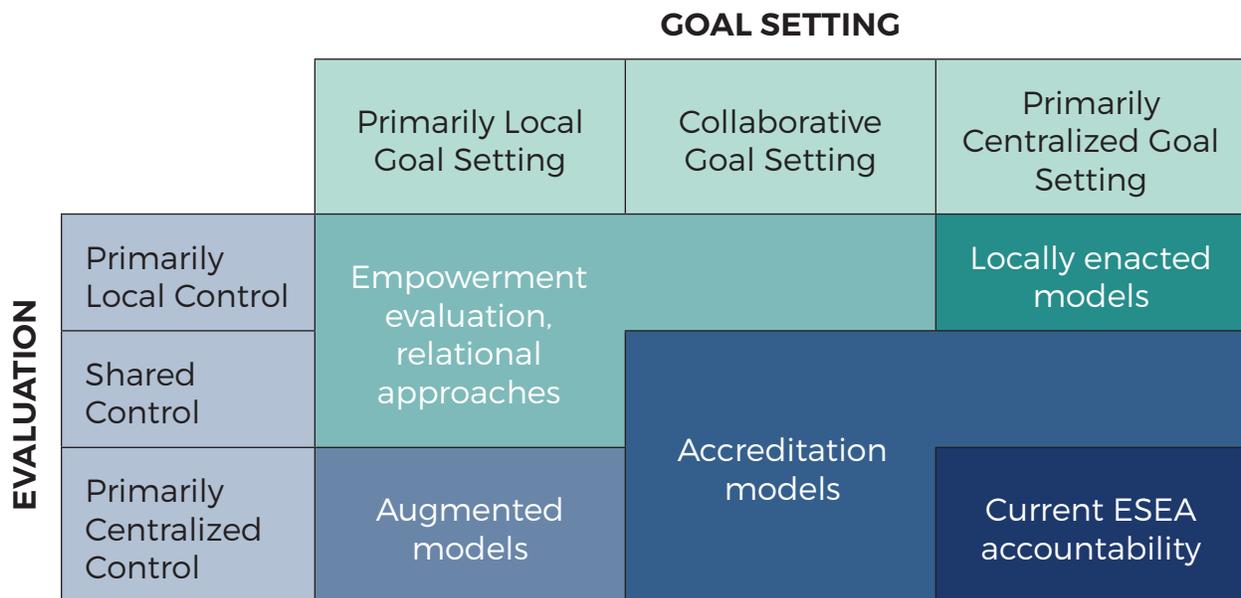
GOAL SETTING

EVALUATION	Primarily Local Goal Setting	Collaborative Goal Setting	Primarily Centralized Goal Setting
Primarily Local Control	Empowerment evaluation, relational approaches		Locally enacted models
Shared Control	Empowerment evaluation, relational approaches	Accreditation models	
Primarily Centralized Control	Augmented models	Accreditation models	Current ESEA accountability

Figure 2. A Framework for Reimagining School Accountability

Based on this framework, we offer five types of accountability models that land in different places in terms of local versus centralized goal setting and evaluation. First, in the bottom right-hand corner with both centralized goal setting and evaluation sits our current model for ESEA Title 1 school accountability. Moving diagonally up and to the left, we find accreditation models where goal setting and evaluation are a combination of collaborative and centralized elements. Then, in the bottom left we have what we've termed augmented models, where the evaluation and determination of success remains centralized, but there is an allowance for local flexibility in goal setting. In the top left, we have locally enacted models, where the state or federal government determines the minimum parameters for evaluation, but the evaluation process occurs locally. And lastly, we have empowerment evaluation and relational approaches which are characterized as primarily local and collaborative along both dimensions.

The following sections provide more detail related to each type of accountability model and an example of each. We close with a call to action to reimagine a future of school accountability that leverages the advancements in the science of systems improvement over the past two decades.

ACCREDITATION MODELS

In accreditation-type models, there is a shared responsibility for both the goal setting and the evaluation of quality. Often, schools are responsible for assembling and presenting their evidence of quality around co-developed indicators of success and benchmarks. In this way, there can be both common and customized indicators of quality, and the evaluation approach can be tailored to the purposes and needs of individual schools (e.g., schools serving special populations of students). While there is large variability in the operationalizations of accreditation-type models, a hallmark of these models is that the ratings are often rubric based, relying on multiple separate criteria for identifying targeted supports for program improvement, rather than producing single, summative scores.

One example of an accreditation-type accountability model is found in certain instances of charter school evaluation, such as in Massachusetts. Under this system, a charter school is evaluated using a combination of state- and locally-collected evidence relative to the school's implementation of three core goals (faithfulness to charter, academic program success, and organizational viability). Schools have flexibility in defining their charters, and therefore have flexibility in the kinds of evidence they present, while the state's department of education conducts evaluations and is responsible for deciding whether to renew a given contract. Other examples include the adoption of a Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework as was previously used by the Connecticut State Department of Education.

AUGMENTED MODELS

Many states have created what we call augmented models. These models go beyond federal policy frameworks to incorporate additional, and sometimes locally determined measures of school quality. Augmented models provide a mechanism to combine ratings from local accountability and state accountability for the purposes of public reporting. In many cases, districts develop their own local accountability plans according to a state-defined process including data review and goal setting. Local accountability plans typically include many indicators that aren't able to be included in federally-approved systems due to statutory and regulatory limitations (e.g., school- rather than student-level data, data that isn't comparable statewide).
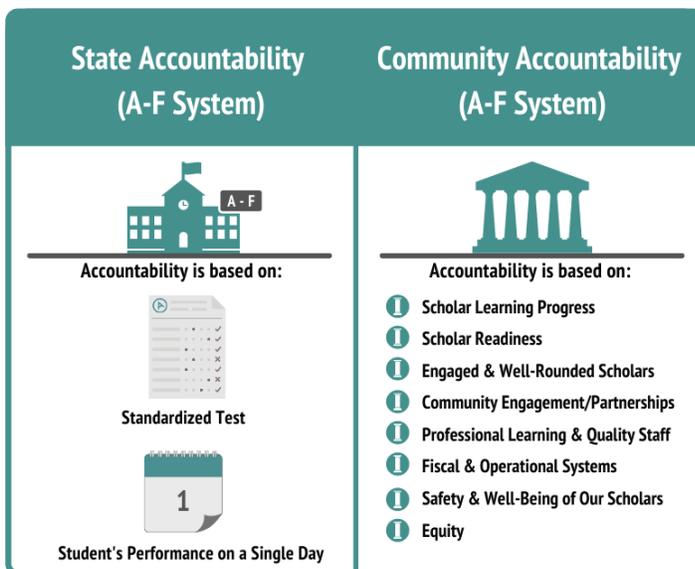

Figure 3. Example of Augmented Model from Cedar Hill ISD in Texas

Texas is an example of a state that supports an augmented model for its accountability. Under this system, if schools perform above a state-determined threshold, they have the option to combine their state accountability data with information from their locally-determined accountability systems. The image from Cedar Hill Independent School District in Texas illustrates how their school's state data is complemented by a fuller picture of school quality using locally-determined indicators.

LOCALLY ENACTED MODELS

The central idea behind locally enacted models is that the state or federal government determines the minimum parameters for school evaluation, but the implementation and determination of quality is enacted at the local level. An example of this model in practice is high school graduation. Often, states have regulatory requirements that schools must follow in making graduation determinations (e.g., minimum number of credits, composition of courses, etc.). These requirements are then enacted through local graduation policies and the local evaluation of individual student fulfillment of the expectations.

Despite local graduation policies and implementations varying in important and substantive ways, we have a longstanding precedent of valuing this kind of locally enacted model as legitimate (and even comparable) by using graduation as a key indicator in our current ESSA accountability systems.

A federal framework for school accountability reimagined as a locally enacted model could look a number of ways. As one example, the federal government could require that states administer a minimum number of standardized assessments (e.g., once per grade span in math, ELA, and science) and require that the school level, disaggregated results be publicly available. A truly locally enacted model would mean that schools and districts would use their test data as part of their local evaluation systems, and if it is determined through their local processes that schools are performing below target, the school could opt into or apply for available resources and supports from the state.

RELATIONAL AND EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES

Relational Evaluation Models

Relational evaluation (see Gergen and Gill, 2020) refers to a set of models that focus on collaborative investigation and the co-construction of meaning. In school evaluation, this takes the form of gathering evidence from a variety of sources that can be reviewed collaboratively by central and local evaluators to establish shared conclusions about school quality. In a relational approach, "there is no objective assessment of how well or poorly a school is working" (Gill & Gergen, 2020, p. 137). Rather, the evaluation is inextricably tied to local values and perspectives, and evidence is collected relative to those community-defined goals and standards. This approach encompasses a number of specific evaluation methodologies, one of which--empowerment evaluation--is described in the next section. Two additional methodologies with direct relevance to education are:

- *Dialogic evaluation:* Evaluations focusing on equality and justice; recognizing cultural funds of knowledge without prioritizing a dominant intelligence paradigm; and prioritizing qualitative analysis in relation to local values.
- *Appreciative evaluation:* Evaluation discussion is centered on that which participants value, and the successes of the school. Plans for improvement are centered on aspirations and build upon current successes, avoiding problem-based framings that often serve to reify biased and narrow perceptions of schools.

Beyond the Tyranny of Testing (Gergen & Gill, 2020) contains numerous examples of the application of relational evaluation across disciplines.

Empowerment Evaluation Models

Empowerment evaluation (see Fetterman et al., 2015) is a well-established model for program improvement that hinges on stakeholder involvement and providing those closest to the work with the tools and knowledge they need to monitor and evaluate their own performance towards accomplishing their goals. Because the program stakeholders are the ones driving the evaluation processes, they are more likely to find the evaluation results and recommendations credible and more likely to make programmatic changes as a result. Empowerment evaluation is focused on fostering self-determination for sustainable, community-driven success, with its 10 guiding principles shown below.

Improvement	Community Knowledge
Community Ownership	Evidence-Based Strategies
Inclusion	Capacity Building
Democratic Participation	Organizational Learning
Social Justice	Accountability

Figure 4. Principles for Empowerment Evaluation from Fetterman et al., 2015.

School accountability reimagined as an effort in empowerment evaluation would involve engaging with communities in defining their goals, priorities and values for schooling, and partnering to provide resources and tools to formatively evaluate progress toward those goals.

In this model, the state would be tasked with providing schools and districts with the tools and supports required for on-going self-evaluation and improvement. This is not the state washing its hands of the responsibility, but instead leaning into the task of understanding the contextual needs and values of each

community and ensuring that each has what it needs to thrive and meet their local goals. In this way, the state becomes an active partner with the community to provide the support and resources that are needed to create meaningful and lasting improvement at the local level.

An example of empowerment evaluation in action is in Rhode Island with the SCORE project. SCORE is a community-driven research initiative that brings together an intergenerational Community Research Team, comprising students and parents/caregivers and supported by higher education partners at Rhode Island College. This team conducts comprehensive community research, identifies key priorities for equity, and determines relevant indicators to gauge school district progress. One of the outcomes of their efforts is the development of the "SCOREcard," an innovative tool that effectively communicates community priority areas, selected indicators, and corresponding data. By focusing on what genuinely matters to students and families of color, those facing economic hardships, and other stakeholders disproportionately impacted by inequities, SCORE empowers school districts to understand, address, and be held accountable for meeting community-defined goals.

Let's explore models that engage stakeholders as partners – sharing control in systems evaluation and improvement.

Whatever the next iteration of ESEA accountability looks like, let's pay attention to what we've learned in the past 20 years about the science of systems improvement, and need for stakeholders to not only agree with the aims of system improvement, but to be active players in the improvement process through legitimate and sustained participation (Lewis, 2015). What we know about systems improvement—or what we might consider "systems learning"—is consistent with the important role that participation plays in learning for both students and adults (Lave & Wenger, 1991; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The failure of the current federal policy in creating meaningful and lasting system wide improvements may be a function of the general lack of attention to the science related to motivation and adult behavior change. Just like high quality assessment for learning processes are explicitly designed to leverage motivational and agentic factors for students, school evaluation approaches intended for improvement must attend to the human mechanisms by which we expect improvement to occur (Lyons, 2021).

Just like assessment *for learning* processes are designed to leverage motivational factors for students, school evaluation approaches intended *for improvement* must attend to the human mechanisms by which we expect improvement to occur.

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