

COMPREHENSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

The Idaho State Assessment Commission met with Dr. Stephanie Salzman and Dr. Gene Davis from the College of Education at Idaho State University on October 17, 2001 to review key points of the White Paper published by the Intermountain Center for Education Effectiveness entitled: Public School Accountability: What Can Idaho Learn? The Commission requested assistance from Dr. Davis with a review and possible recommendation refinement and/or clarification of DRAFT III. The following is an overview of that study.

Executive Summary

All 50 states in the past few years have been working on developing education initiatives related to standards, assessments, and accountability systems. Comparison of these methods and analysis of the results have produced an outcome showing as much variance in system design as there is diversity state to state. Research has found high performing states utilize professional development to:

- Implement state standards
- Develop assessments to determine student performance
- Frame accountability procedures

High performing states for purposes of this report are defined as:

- Having student performance showing a steady increase over a 3-5 year period
- Having students' rankings in top 5 on national tests (NAEP)¹
- Low-performing schools are "turned around" to become steadily growing schools
- Using state and national tests that measure student performance
- A state that finances on-going capacity building

- Uses resources to improve low-performing schools instead of imposition of heavy sanctions²

These high performing states, along with 26 others, use set performance goals for students, schools, and districts. Rewards have been established for meeting or exceeding the goals set, and are available for students, schools, and districts. A professional development model is central in turning around a struggling school and providing higher quality teaching with the end result being consistent, upward progress. Research indicates that states that focused on heavy sanctions initially now focus on identifying and fixing the problem with specific tools, with professional development being the central focus tool.

Based on the research, the following were determined to be the top high performing states. They are: Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin.

Findings

The following findings demonstrate the specific elements used by all states in general and the high performing states in particular.

National Overview:

- ❑ Teachers are involved in the framing of standards, assessments, and accountability models
- ❑ State standards define goals specific to students' achievement with the result of better quality teaching
- ❑ Financial assistance comes from the state for school improvement and/or a rewards system
- ❑ Disaggregation of student performance is a key component
- ❑ *A key recommendation is quality professional development*
- ❑ Identification of low-performing schools in order to focus resource allocation

- ❑ Heavy sanctions found ineffective

High Performing States:

- ❑ Smaller class sizes: Connecticut, Maine and Wisconsin saw success with this
- ❑ State financing of technical support, i.e., toolkits, instructional resources, etc., to implement research-based effective instructional practices
- ❑ Fiscal reward for schools, not individuals
- ❑ Grants and external resources used to help finance professional development
- ❑ Change in designation from low-performing to “priority” school: “Priority school”
 - Student performance below acceptable level
 - No performance growth demonstrated in 3 years
- ❑ Assistance given to priority school:
 - Uses content-specific workshops
 - External review to determine areas to strengthen
 - Discipline-specific toolkits
- ❑ Use of practicing teachers in framing education plans
- ❑ Utilization of contractors to implement professional development and provide on-going professional development

Quality professional development was demonstrated to be the key in affecting changes in student performance. Teachers and administrators had the skills and tools to teach the way a standards education environment requires, resulting in steady and positive student growth. Professional Development in high performing states focus on the following:

- ❑ Technical assistance in an ongoing manner from regional universities
- ❑ Content specific workshops
- ❑ Instructional units
- ❑ Principal development centers
- ❑ Time during the school day for professional development workshops
- ❑ Curriculum resources
- ❑ Toolkits specific to needs, i.e. interdisciplinary connections, subject areas

Funding proved to be the biggest obstacle that each state faced. Many states used grants and external resources to fund professional development.

Research Review

To achieve successful implementation of a practical policy of standards, assessments, and accountability measures, professional development for educators must be addressed along with the need to provide a high level of education for the youth of Idaho. Policymakers that have clearly delineated goals, responsibilities, and authority and then applied consequences fairly and evenly have seen success in their education systems. Many components make a successful education plan; it is not, however, a one-time event. The ongoing practice of refining educational programs results in continued growth and achievement. Many procedures and policies have been utilized successfully in high performing states, with each state refining and tailoring these to meet their individual needs.

State assessment is the cornerstone of an accountability plan. Forty-eight states use a state assessment as the primary indicator to determine student performance. The following points have been found to be significant in high student performance:

- ❑ Use of a national test as a benchmark
- ❑ Use of multiple-choice and short answer tests
- ❑ Kentucky uses portfolios with year-long classroom work to obtain a better measure of student knowledge
- ❑ Tie tests clearly to the curriculum and standards
- ❑ Connecticut and Maine have determined that indicators change and consequently assessments must be adjusted
- ❑ Each state uses at least one, and more often, a combination of these three methods³ to measure progress:
 - Meet an absolute target (the performance threshold all schools must achieve)

- Make relative growth (this is based on the annual growth target, based on the school's past performance)
- Narrow the achievement gap (reduce the number of students in the lowest performance levels)

Professional development is imperative to successful implementation of state standards.

Efficient use of time, funds, and technical support is essential to teachers being able to teach the way that is demanded because of the standards and assessment systems. Capacity building is funded by the state at the district, school, principal, and teacher level. This support is provided not only at the local and state level, but Kentucky, Michigan, and Wisconsin have found it to be highly effective with use on the regional level, utilizing their universities. This is important to understand in reference to application of accountability. If the teachers and principals aren't provided with the tools, the system fails.

Opportunities to access appropriate materials and training to implement changes in state requirements should be provided before schools, teachers, or students are held accountable for the new standards system. In all cases, it has been found that without professional development, the accountability plans did not work and were a waste of money and time.

A tiered training workshop found to be effective in Michigan utilized the University Instructors training a principal and two teachers from each district building. These three individuals would then go back to their buildings and train the other teachers. It proved to be an efficient method of professional development.

Identification of struggling schools is the first step on the road to improvement. Effective practices indicate that heavy sanctions for struggling schools have proved to be detrimental in the positive progress of these schools. Texas is one example of not closing a school because it was identified as low-performing. They chose instead to improve the school to turn it around.

The following steps have proven effective in turning around a priority school:

- Identifying not only the school, but the specific subject areas and/or grade levels where there is a weakness
- Careful examination of demographics to determine best methods of assistance
- Teams of educators that include active teachers as well as technical help from a regional university partner that works with schools in a hands-on, on-going manner
- North Carolina⁴ and Texas⁵ experienced performance growth as they identified struggling schools and helped to turn them around as opposed to heavy sanctions that were previously imposed.

Although all seven states utilized these steps specific to their needs, one step was a constant in all cases: the teachers within the school are part of the solution team. Another constant recognized was that the low-performing schools had high teacher, leadership and student turnover.⁶ This makes turning around a struggling school more difficult, but these states still met with success by using the attitude of correcting what was wrong, and supporting those changes.

On-going capacity building is essential to continual upward growth. States that did not invest in teaching did not experience improved achievement. The understanding that teachers will be learning more than ever before while still teaching is a concept that has resulted in the upward performance of students. Directly connected to this is that a school must have leadership in the new type of public instruction, or the result will be negative. In an effort to make the most of their education funds, successful states have come to the conclusion that by utilizing the very universities in their regions that are graduating the next generation of teachers, they can save substantially because the universities already have the tools, and the local levels of education need not unnecessarily duplicate the same support assistance. Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Michigan have been leaders in this concept of utilizing university contractors.

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