

CENTER  
FOR SCHOOL CHANGE

---

What Should We Do?

A Practical Guide to  
Assessment and Accountability  
in Schools

by

Joe Nathan and Nicola Johnson

December, 2000

Hubert H. Humphrey Institute  
of Public Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

This project was made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. We are grateful for their support and for the interest and encouragement of John Fiegel, Alex Medler and Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

This project has been enhanced by the assistance of five nationally recognized authorities on assessment and accountability: James Catterall, University of California – Los Angeles; Ed DeAvila of California, Al Ramirez, University of Colorado – Colorado Springs; Lauren Resnick, University of Pittsburgh; and Jim Ysseldyke, University of Minnesota. We deeply appreciate their thoughtful advice and suggestions.

Twenty-one public schools around the country are participants in this project: ten charters and eleven district-run schools. This report is based in part on information they have provided and on their feedback, particularly at a national conference held August 9, 2000 in Chicago. We also deeply appreciate the education organizations that have provided assistance in a variety of ways to this project. We especially thank those who were able to send representatives to our Chicago conference: American Federation of Teachers, American School Counselors Association, Chicago Public Schools, Colorado Department of Education's Charter School Commission Office, Council of the Great City Schools, Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center, Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, National Association of State Boards of Education, North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL), Small Schools Network, Charter Friends Network, Rural Trust and the University of Illinois.

We also thank the following people for their contributions to this manuscript: Scott Charlesworth-Seiler, Cosy Conyers, Martha Hardy, Jim Kielsmeier, Andrew Lachman, Margaret Lin, Alex Medler, Nancy Smith, Vicki Nelson and Betty Radcliffe.

This report would not have been possible without the expertise of all of these people. However, the report's contents are the responsibility of the authors. The ideas, recommendations and suggestions in this report are not necessarily those of the participating schools, the consultants, the U.S. Department of Education, or individuals or organizations participating in the August 2000 conference to review a draft of this report.

The authors welcome readers' reactions and comments. A reader response sheet is included at the end of the report. Please contact the authors at the Center for School Change, 234 Humphrey Center, 301 Nineteenth Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, (612) 626-1834. The report will be on the Center for School Change website, [www.centerforschoolchange.org](http://www.centerforschoolchange.org) Periodic updates may be made.

*The Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs is hospitable to a diversity of opinions and aspirations. The Institute itself does not take positions on issues of public policy. The contents of this report are the responsibility of the authors. The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status or sexual orientation.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Preface .....	1
An Overview of this Report .....	7
Chapter 1 – How this Project Was Carried Out .....	8
Chapter 2 – Features of Effective Student Academic Achievement Assessment	
Programs .....	10
Vital Features	
Clear, Measurable Academic Goals .....	13
Making Outcomes Understood .....	22
Multiple Assessment Measures .....	25
Assessment Informs School Improvement Efforts .....	28
Assessment Considers Language Proficiency .....	30
All Students are Assessed .....	32
Valuable Features	
Outside People Help Judge Student Work .....	36
Assessment Systems Include Program Graduates .....	39
Student Assessment Committee Includes a Variety of People .....	40
Chapter 3 – Issues to Consider .....	41
Variety of Goals .....	41
Level of Goals .....	43
Specificity of Goals .....	45
Training Needs .....	46
Chapter 4 – Success Indicators of Participating Schools .....	48
References Cited .....	52
Additional Resources with Specific Assessment Examples. ....	55
Appendices	
Appendix A: Participating Schools Contact Information	
Appendix B: Writing Assessment Task – Urban Academy	
Appendix C: Writing Assessment – Academy of the Pacific Rim	
Appendix D: Writing/Language Arts Tasks/Rubrics – South Brunswick	

- Appendix E: Math Goals – Lincoln Center of the Arts
- Appendix F: Math Assessment Tasks – Urban Academy
- Appendix G: Graduation Portfolio Process – St. Paul Open School
- Appendix H: Public Speaking Rubric – Palisades Middle School
- Appendix I: Junior and Senior Exit Exhibition Criteria – Monticello High School
- Appendix J: Socratic Seminar Rubric and General Public Speaking Rubric – South Brunswick
- Appendix K: Community Service Progress Report – School Without Walls
- Appendix L: Community Service Rubric – Urban Academy
- Appendix M: Hold a family/student/teacher conference before school starts
- Appendix N: Peacham Elementary School Report Card 2000 Table of Contents
- Appendix O: New Visions 1999 Annual Report Table of Contents
- Appendix P: Perspectives/Chicago Public School Accountability Agreement
- Appendix Q: Options for Youth Accountability Report Table of Contents
- Appendix R: Vermont New Standards Writing Rubric
- Appendix S: South Brunswick Freshman Project
- Appendix T: School Without Walls Senior Research Project Rubric
- Appendix U: Reader Feedback Sheet

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

This report shows how families and schools can have a more accurate picture of student achievement. The report also presents a model program of academic accountability for each of the nation's public schools. This two-year, federally funded project involved 21 schools from 12 states. It is one of the first national projects which convened charter public schools and district-run schools to learn from one another.

The authors recommend that each school have an explicit contract for improving student achievement between itself and either a local school board or other supervising organization (such as the state, a university or other entity). The project suggests six vital and three valuable features for each accountability contract. The report describes how schools have used these components to help produce clear, measurable improvements in student achievement.

**The vital components are:**

- Clear, measurable outcomes for each school;
- Goals that are understood and supported by families, students and educators;
- Multiple measures, including standardized tests and performance measures;
- Measurement of all students' academic work;
- Assessments which measure growth of students who don't speak English at home; and
- Use of assessment information to inform school improvement efforts.

**The valuable features are:**

- Using a person or persons outside the school to help assess student work;
- Measuring experiences and attitudes of school graduates; and
- Creating a parent/educator/community committee to supervise assessment efforts.

The report shows how families and schools can have a more complete, accurate view of what students are learning. The report offers practical, research-based approaches for holding all public schools accountable for results, and it shows how schools can do a better job of informing, involving and working with families.

Perhaps most important, this report describes some of the most successful accountability and assessment practices of successful schools. We can have higher

student achievement, higher graduation rates, and better student attitudes toward learning and active citizenship. We hope this report helps educators, parents and community members see how these goals can be achieved throughout the land.

*“See the challenge for greater accountability as an opportunity, not as a problem. Most of all, please do not lose sight of the fact that educators in other public schools can benefit from your experiences and can be your partners in moving forward public education across America.”*

*-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley*

---

## **PREFACE**

---

In a June 2000 speech, President Bill Clinton called for “more investment and more accountability” in public education. He also urged that every school “operate like a charter,” with significant site level authority and responsibility for improving achievement. (Clinton)

Groups as diverse as the U.S. Department of Education, Education Trust and the Heritage Foundation have documented that some schools are significantly increasing achievement of their students (US Department of Education, Education Trust, Carter). Improving achievement is possible, and most involved in education believe it is desirable.

But what does it mean for individual schools to be accountable? Every school board, charter school sponsor and state legislature which wants to hold individual schools accountable must answer this question. This is far more than a philosophical question for those working every day with young people and for those at local and state levels trying to hold schools accountable.

This report is designed to be useful, to help educators, parents, local and state school board members, along with state legislators who want to design thoughtful, constructive ways of holding schools accountable for improving student achievement. The authors hope the information in this report helps people working in schools, as well as people

supervising schools, to create reasonable, sound accountability plans. To assist that effort, the report:

- Proposes key features which should be part of any public school's program to assess, use and report information on academic achievement of its students;
- Offers specific examples of what schools have suggested they will achieve, in terms of improving student achievement in several key academic areas;
- Describes how some schools are assessing whether they accomplish these goals;
- Discusses some of the tradeoffs people will have to consider as they create and monitor a school's performance; and
- Shows how a number of schools which participated in this study are using the ideas suggested in this report to help improve student achievement.

The report also reflects a strong belief that different kinds of public schools have a lot to learn, as well as a great deal to share, with one another. It is based on material supplied by a wide variety of public schools – magnet, neighborhood, charter, and alternative – located in rural, urban, and suburban communities. With federal support, the authors identified, gathered information from, and convened 21 innovative public schools located throughout the country. We deliberately gathered information from charter public schools and district-run public schools. We felt, and officials at the U.S. Department of Education agreed, that it was important for schools to share successes, suggestions, failures and frustrations with each other.

These schools would not call themselves perfect. But a year's research, including a national search, suggests that these schools represent some of the country's most thoughtful, well-designed and innovative efforts to assess what students are learning. The schools are listed and described below.

School Name	Grades/Ages	Type	Setting	State	Enrollment
Academy of the Pacific Rim	Middle/High	Charter	Urban	Mass.	191
Aspen Community School	K to 8	Charter	Rural	Colo.	114
Branford High School	9 to 12	District-run	Suburban	Conn.	1026
Central Park East	7 to 12	District-run	Urban	N.Y.	485
Charter School of Excellence	K to 4	Charter	Urban	Fla.	275



School Name	Grades/Ages	Type	Setting	State	Enrollment
Greely Junior High School	6 to 8	District-run	Suburban	Maine	375
Integrated Day Charter School	K to 8	Charter	Suburban	Conn.	264
Liberty Common School	K to 9	Charter	Suburban	Colo.	514
Lincoln Center Middle School of the Arts	6 to 8	District-run	Urban	Wis.	758
Marblehead Community Charter Public School	5 to 8	Charter	Suburban	Mass.	176
Minnesota New Country School	7 to 12	Charter	Rural	Minn.	130
New Visions School	1 to 8	Charter	Urban	Minn.	200
North Dade Center for Modern Languages	K to 5	District-run	Suburban	Fla.	534
Options for Youth	Teen/Young Adult	Charter	Urban	Calif.	2,396 (six sites)
Palisades Middle School	6 to 8	District-run	Suburban	Pa.	560
Peacham School	K to 6	District-run	Rural	Vt.	72
School Without Walls	9 to 12	District-run	Urban	N.Y.	200
South Brunswick High School	9 to 12	District-run	Suburban	N.J.	2000
St. Paul Open School	K-12	District-run	Urban	Minn.	475
Summit Middle School	6 to 8	Charter	Suburban	Colo.	250
Urban Academy Laboratory High School	9 to 12	District-run	Urban	N.Y.	100

The authors also believe that the movement for more effective assessment will be stronger and smarter if it includes charter schools as well as district-run public schools. Indeed, one outgrowth of the conference was a request from educators to broaden a New York State Coalition on assessment reform. Ironically, New York has offered waivers from state mandated tests to innovative district-run public schools in which have developed intriguing alternatives, but has not, to date, offered charters a similar waiver.

As interest in accountability grows, the wisest educators will do what they've always done: Learn from each other, work together to propose constructive alternatives to what appear to be poorly thought out policies, and continue their efforts to do the best job they can with and for students. This report builds on the best impulses of pragmatic educators who recognize that they can help produce major improvements in student achievement and who seek the most constructive ways to measure and share what students are learning. Overall, the authors hope to encourage and assist those who have high expectations for students and schools.

Some people equate accountability with standardized tests. In fact, some states have created positive and negative consequences for schools based entirely on how well students in the schools do on standardized tests.

The authors of this report, the consultants with whom we've worked, and the 21 schools which helped inform this project **strongly urge states and school boards not to base accountability solely on test score results.** We urge that local and state school boards and state legislatures use **multiple measures** to assess whether schools are making progress.

Assessment using multiple approaches should be part of the accountability plan. Good assessment programs show what students know and can do as they enter a school, and as they continue to attend the school. Well developed and implemented, assessment of students provides information that can be used for accountability purposes.

One of the greatest contributions that the charter movement can make is to encourage educators, parents and policy-makers to think carefully about what academic expectations we should have of schools, along with how to assess and report student achievement. The report does not attempt to repeat nor resolve debates about the use of standardized tests, but the authors believe strongly that standardized tests are an incomplete measure.

Some people equate accountability with reporting. For these people, schools are accountable if they share results of standardized tests and (possibly) other measures of student achievement. This is a bit like saying students are accountable for their learning if the results of their work are reported.

But most states and schools say student accountability must include consequences. Students who turn in enough satisfactory work, or who attend school often enough, graduate. In many schools and states, students who don't complete enough work, achieve certain standards, or demonstrate certain skills, don't graduate. Thus, for students, accountability is not about reporting – it includes consequences.

A growing number of people – including President Clinton, Secretary Riley, and Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League – agree that accountability should be applied not only to students, but also to schools and the people who work in them.

*Random House Dictionary* includes, as part of the definition of *accountable*, the word *responsible* (Random House, p. 10). The authors agree: being accountable, for students and for schools, means being responsible.

Simply reporting the achievement of students at a school does not make the school accountable. True accountability should have consequences. Positive consequences could include giving schools additional money, giving schools additional responsibility, or giving schools the authority to continue operating. Negative consequences could include putting a school on probation, “reconstituting a school” so that a new principal is appointed and faculty positions are open to teachers in the district, or closing the school and laying off its faculty.

The charter school movement has helped change the debate in this country about what it means to be accountable for results. In most states, public schools continue to receive funds regardless of what happens to student achievement. In a few states schools are rewarded for improving achievement. A few states also threaten schools if student test scores fall below a certain point. And a few district-run schools have been reconstituted when academic achievement (as measured by standardized tests) was too low.

But the expectations are much higher for every charter school. Charter schools are expected to show improved student achievement or they can be closed. This is not the case for most other public schools in the nation. Indeed, one of the reasons the charter movement developed is that many parents and policy-makers wanted higher expectations not only for students, but also for the schools they attended.

The charter movement has helped focus attention on what it means to expect student achievement to improve. It is not enough to say schools are responsible for results. To make this meaningful, critical questions must be answered, including:

- For what, specifically, are schools responsible?
- How will student growth be measured?

In addition to improving student achievement, charter schools, must handle funds in a manner consistent with state and federal law. Charters also must follow laws about meeting in approved buildings and must follow federal law in areas such as special education.

But absolutely central to the charter idea is the notion that charters will have fewer rules and regulations about how to operate in exchange for being more responsible for results. Accountability and assessment are central issues for charter schools.

Measuring student achievement must be part of any accountability plan. A federally funded study of nine public elementary schools that significantly increased the achievement of their predominantly low-income student bodies included several key recommendations. One of them was that the federal government should encourage states to “create clear, measurable and rigorous school accountability provisions.” (Dana Center, 1999)

But when the discussion turns from general notions of improving achievement to specific standards of accountability, things get much more complicated. Accountability implies consequences. But what does it mean to improve student achievement? And how much improvement should be expected? What, beyond standardized tests, are effective ways to measure improvements?

George Madaus of Boston College and the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy says that there really are only three ways to test people:

- Select an answer from among several options – multiple choice;
- Ask students to produce an answer in essay form; or
- Ask students to do something – fix a carburetor, dive off of a diving board, make a presentation, etc – and rate the student. (Madaus, 2000)

This report, along with many leading assessment authorities, urges that schools use a mixture of these three approaches to measure what students are learning. This means that groups (such as school boards, state departments and state legislatures) to which schools report should work with educators to develop instruments and processes which use these approaches. The authors hope that this overall project, and the report produced as part of the project, will help individuals working in schools and those reviewing the impact of schools.

The project and this report have two main goals:

1. Provide useful, timely, high-quality information about valid, reliable methods of assessing students to educators, parents and community groups involved in various school reform efforts, as well as to policy-makers, who want to know some of the most effective ways to assess student achievement.
2. Increase contact, collaboration and cross-fertilization between charter public schools and other public school reform networks.

It is far easier to ask questions than to offer answers. This is a complex area full of trade-offs. The authors approach this task with more than a little humility, as well as hope that the suggestions that follow are useful. This project attempts to provide, if not definitive answers, options for people to consider.

## **An Overview of this Report**

This report is divided into several sections. The following section provides a brief summary.

- Chapter One explains how the project was carried out. The authors describe steps they used to gather information from others, to identify schools which appear to be using valuable approaches to assess and report student achievement, and to prepare information for this report.
- Chapter Two describes key components of a plan schools can develop to gather and share information about student achievement. On the basis of a year's worth of research and discussion with educators and evaluation authorities, we suggest six vital and three valuable components for a school's assessment and accountability program. This chapter and the appendices offer examples of academic goals and assessments schools and states have developed to measure students' progress, or lack of progress. This chapter probably will be of most interest to those who work in schools on a daily basis.
- Chapter Three discusses key issues that come up when school boards or state legislators are deciding what to expect in terms of student achievement gains from schools. We have to go beyond the concept of expecting all children to learn, to discuss exactly what we expect from schools, how much progress is sufficient, and how progress should be measured. This section will probably be of most interest to those responsible for developing such plans, either at the school level or at a local district or state level.
- Chapter Four briefly reviews the academic record of several schools, showing the kinds of progress their students have made over the last several years. Many readers will find these results encouraging. Accountability and assessment are, of