



THE NATURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IS READY FOR CHANGE

By Rebecca Holmes and Elliott Asp | January 31, 2018

Prime Opportunity at Hand

We begin 2018 with an invitation to join CEI in an ongoing dialogue about Colorado's school accountability system. We believe we have an exciting opportunity to revisit our priorities and examine the limitations of our current system with an innovator's mindset. Starting with this overview, we will publish a series of *EdPapers* that take a deeper look at the subject of school accountability. We invite you to be part of the dialogue and share your thoughts with us via email at accountability@coloradoedinitiative.org. We look forward to the conversation!

Here's what's coming in the series over the months ahead:

FEBRUARY *EdPaper*: S-CAP (Student-Centered Accountability Project) and its Implications for Local Measures

MARCH *EdPaper*: High School Accountability

APRIL *EdPaper*: Accountability in a Competency-Based World

MAY *EdPaper*: Diverse Voices, Current Voices: Elevating the experience of students of color and of recent graduates

JUNE *EdCast*: A podcast on School Accountability

CEI has spent more than a decade helping schools and districts across the state implement a number of pieces of Colorado's reform agenda. At the same time, we've been a leading voice on innovations intended to catalyze breakthrough approaches to how we "do school." The innovation in education we care about most isn't about a glamorous silver bullet or the latest tech-driven solution. It's about new approaches to our most longstanding and vexing problems—student engagement, rigor and relevance, teacher professional learning, and opportunity gaps to name just a few. For that reason, we see improvement and innovation as related processes that the system—and its leaders—must engage in with discipline and a commitment to learning. When iterations aren't getting us closer to what our schools, students, and communities need, different approaches must be considered, even, and maybe particularly, for topics as complex as school accountability.

Over the last few years, we've seen a narrative emerge about the fact that our education system was built for a long-passed era. And what we know from our combined six decades in this work is that the modernization of our system isn't—and won't be—a straight line. Whether you identify as an education "reformer," "transformer," or other kind of champion, the ideological positions that once may have divided us are now less stark. At the same time, widescale testing opt-out has called into question some of the underpinnings of our current accountability system and, for a variety of reasons, debates as to the accuracy and value of school, district, and state performance frameworks are taking place in communities across Colorado.

One strength of Colorado's local control system is the nature and amount of experimentation that takes place. Thanks to work by some pioneering local school districts, we have leaders who are attempting to reconcile inconsistencies and explore how our educational accountability system could be modified to:

- Provide timely, useful, and relevant information to districts, schools, and communities about the progress of every student in becoming college and career ready—including academic achievement and growth, non-academic skills and mindsets, and social and emotional development
- Provide schools, districts, and communities critical information about the availability and equity of opportunities to learn, and the existence of nurturing learning environments that support students in reaching their goals
- Encourage and support all districts and schools to engage in a systematic and meaningful process of continuous improvement that leads to increased student outcomes for all student groups and the elimination of discrepancies in performance by race, gender, special education status, and other student characteristics across a broad range of leading and lagging college and career readiness indicators
- Provide transparent and easily accessible information to stakeholders about the performance of their local schools in meeting/addressing local goals and priorities
- Reflect Colorado's constitutionally-mandated, local control approach to education and consider local context and priorities in order to build real and lasting community engagement

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What is an Accountability System Meant to Do?

What accountability systems most do is broadcast our shared priorities. Most of us can agree that a level of basic skill proficiency, and a system that removes predictability of that proficiency based on race, class, gender, or any other identity group, is a priority. However, we also want so much more for our kids. While some of the things we want are sufficiently difficult enough to measure that they likely don't belong in an accountability system, others of our aspirations are in direct conflict with the current system. At the most basic level, many of us have long lived with remarkable inconsistencies in what we want for kids and schools and what the system tells those schools and their leaders to prioritize. We have turned a blind eye to a mounting list of unintended consequences. We have arrived at a moment where many people are no longer willing to reconcile deep inconsistency. Without a forward-thinking approach to re-imagining accountability, we may end up back at a time when there was little to no transparency about school performance and improvement.

Current System Makes Us Risk-Averse and Halts Learning

A few years ago, at a statewide event designed to reflect on the future of accountability, we heard about the impact the current system has on students' experiences in school. Teachers, parents, and students discussed ways that the current system discouraged school leaders from taking actions they knew were right for kids. An example? At a time when a deep understanding of social studies, government, democracy, and world history has perhaps never been more important, educators shared that in middle schools, strong teachers had been moved out of these content areas to instead teach tested subjects. Another? Students who had shown outstanding aptitude and passion for in-demand skills like computer science and statistics were unable to continue in that type of coursework because the classes only counted as electives and received ever-decreasing funding in a district focused on a particular set of accountability metrics. Moreover, schools with great ideas hesitated to put them into practice for fear of an "implementation dip" in their scores and ratings. Innovation flourished in schools with high performing kids and our attempts to close narrowly-defined achievement gaps kept these breakthrough approaches out of the classrooms that most needed them. Together, teachers, parents, and students described a situation in which the K-12 accountability system makes schools and students risk-averse and discourages some of the most important kinds of learning at both the student and the system levels.

Measuring the effectiveness of our public education system is necessary, period. However, what we measure, how we measure, and then how we use, combine, share or respond to that information are all choices to be made. Our current choices have caused many users to be dissatisfied with the system, and we do not have data to support the idea that it has moved our state any closer to the first goal, ensuring quality school opportunities for all Colorado students.

It's Time to Explore New Approaches

At CEI, we believe there are several interesting and safe ways to continue to evolve the accountability system, and that we owe it to our kids, families, educators, and communities to build and examine new tools. CEI's intention over the next few months is to start an ongoing discussion about accountability—one that elevates the dialogue, raises questions, explores different approaches, and offers new perspectives and ideas. This is a system that communicates our most important shared values about the schools our communities and young people rely on, and we have an exciting opportunity to revisit our priorities. Doing so requires that we all embrace the chance to learn from what's working, lead with humility, and examine the limitations of our current system with an innovator's mindset. We are excited to have you embark on this with us over the next several months.

Rebecca Holmes is CEO and Elliott Asp is Senior Partner at the Colorado Education Initiative. Previously, Holmes was Associate Commissioner and Asp was Special Assistant and Interim Commissioner at the Colorado Department of Education. Together, they have worked in schools, districts, and charter management organizations and at a variety of foundations and education intermediaries. Both share a lifelong commitment to advancing education and practitioner and leadership experience in Colorado's schools.

For 10 years, Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) has been at the forefront of improvement, innovation, and change in Colorado's public education system. We are rooted in a vision of equitable outcomes for every kid that drives a strong bias for action focused on sustainable change to the system. Over the years, we've worked with educators as an inspired and supportive partner on the ground in over 150 urban, suburban, and rural school districts. We are known as a visionary organization that fuses best practices with innovation, that is tuned into today's school dynamic and always mindful of what the future demands.



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