

WHAT'S NEXT

Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

January 2025 · Bushcenter.org



**STRONG PUBLIC SCHOOLS NEED
STRONG ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY**



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STRONG PUBLIC SCHOOLS NEED STRONG ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY

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Our nation depends on a strong public education system that prepares future generations of students with the skills they need to contribute to our society and economy. Strong accountability systems are essential to meeting that vision.

Well-designed accountability policy has four essential elements: First, it's grounded in the belief that all students can learn and succeed. Second, it measures the academic progress of all students by campus and district over time. Third, it highlights gaps between different groups of students (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education, or English-language learners). And, fourth, it provides support and assigns consequences to campuses and districts for failing to meet goals around student progress.

School accountability provides crucial information for policymakers, parents, and educators about the performance of our public education system. Over the past 10 years, accountability systems have been watered down, put on pause, or swept up in political debates while many American students fall behind. Now is the time to recommit to outcomes-oriented accountability.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Federal policymakers should maintain these current requirements for states:
 - Have an accountability system in place
 - Administer annual summative assessments to public-school students and release the results of those tests disaggregated by student subgroup
 - Mandate school improvement interventions for the lowest-performing campuses and monitor progress
- State policymakers should prioritize these actions:
 - Focus accountability systems on measures of student learning, including annual state assessments
 - Include all students in accountability systems and disaggregate data by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, special education status, and English-language learner status
 - Use accountability ratings to identify the lowest-performing campuses and take action in the schools that need to improve
 - Publish easy-to-access accountability dashboards that are clear, timely, and actionable for parents, policymakers, and educators

American taxpayers invest billions of dollars in public K-12 education systems so that students are prepared to contribute to society and the economy. We need strong systems of school accountability to ensure that all our children can read, write, solve problems, and graduate ready for success in college, careers, or the military.

Every child in this country needs the opportunity to learn and succeed, yet, in too many schools across our country, this vision is an unattainable dream. Black and Hispanic students and students from low-income backgrounds consistently have lower achievement scores than those of their peers, and these gaps can have life-altering impacts for children. [Research shows that students who fall behind in elementary grades](#) will likely never catch up and are four times more likely to drop out.

The need for action is urgent, particularly following the pandemic, which left millions of students behind academically and many parents with a lack of trust in our education system. Simultaneously, almost impossibly fast advancements in technology make it more important than ever to ensure every student is ready for 21st century opportunities.

Strong accountability systems provide parents, educators, and policymakers with crucial information about how well schools and districts are serving students. Leaders should use this information to direct resources and support to schools struggling to educate all students and enforce consequences for campuses and districts that continue to fail students over time.

From the 1990s through the 2010s, as standards-based reforms and federal accountability requirements took hold, our nation saw dramatic improvements in education outcomes. Achievement gaps among Black and Hispanic students narrowed, and the high school graduation rate rose by an average of 15% across the country. However, about 15 years ago, the Department of Education allowed states to shift away from specific consequences for campuses and districts that are failing to educate students to instead offer a variety of intervention options and looser accountability for student outcomes.

Today, too many states have watered-down accountability systems thanks to waivers, ineffective interventions, and minimal oversight. Nationally, [more than half of district plans](#) for improving their lowest performing schools (those in the bottom 5% for performance or with graduation rates below 66%) do not meet the minimum federal requirements. This lack of oversight is unacceptable and has very real, life-altering consequences for students.

Effective, outcomes-oriented systems of accountability are a crucial part of a broad toolkit for ensuring every student has access to a quality education. They provide important information to parents, system leaders, policymakers and communities about how well schools and districts are delivering on this promise and how to target additional resources to support the students who need them most.

FEDERAL

Federal policymakers should continue to require states to have an accountability system in place

Federal accountability requirements are at the heart of providing every student with a quality education, regardless of where they live, their family income, their race or ethnicity, or other factors. States rightly control most of the decision-making for education policy, but the federal government provides an important backstop to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to learn and succeed.

Federal policymakers should continue to require states to administer annual summative assessments to public school students and release the results of those tests disaggregated by student subgroup

Federal assessment requirements are essential to ensuring that every state has a minimal accountability structure in place. States must administer annual summative assessments to students each year from third through eighth grade and once again in high school. These assessments measure student progress against the state standards for what students should know and be able to do. States must release the results of these tests by campus and district, broken apart by race, gender, ethnicity, special education status, and English-language learner status.

Federal policymakers should continue to mandate states to perform school improvement interventions for the lowest-performing campuses and monitor progress

Federal policymakers should also meet their responsibility in ensuring states comply with the basic requirements for improvement plans for the lowest performing 5% of schools, which are far more likely to have Black and low-income students. Currently, fewer than half of school improvement plans meet basic requirements.

STATE

State policymakers should focus accountability systems on measures of student learning, including annual state assessments

Our public education system does many things for students and their families, but its primary purpose is to help all students gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed after high school. Tests that measure progress toward this goal should anchor state accountability ratings. [Assessments should be comparable, valid, and reliable measures](#) of a student's current skill and knowledge level, and they should be linked to state standards. Cut scores, or the minimum requirement to pass the test or be rated proficient, should align to grade-level expectations.

States should avoid the temptation to use measures for accountability that distract from academic progress, particularly input measures (e.g., student-to-staff ratios or school climate survey results), and keep the focus on student learning. They should limit other measures to those that indicate college, career, and military readiness along with performance in subjects beyond math, science, and English language arts.

State policymakers should include all students in accountability systems and disaggregate data by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, special education status, and English-language learner status

Our nation's ability to thrive in the global economy depends on how well we educate all students, not just a select group. States should administer annual state tests in English language arts, math, and science to all students in third through eighth grades and once in high school.

Outcomes should be disaggregated by student subgroups and included in accountability calculations. Disaggregation is critical in identifying patterns and ensuring that the achievement levels of every student group in every school are understood and addressed. Without disaggregated comparable data, we are forced to rely on averages and anecdotes

to try to understand student performance, which inevitably hides and hurts groups of children.

State policymakers should use accountability ratings to identify the lowest-performing campuses and take action in the schools that need to improve

Effective accountability systems illuminate how well our public education system is serving all students by rating and differentiating schools and districts on clearly defined student outcome measures. State accountability systems provide critical insights to parents, policymakers, and the public.

States should require action in schools that need to improve performance by officially identifying them for support based on the current federal guidance and then strategically allocating and managing school improvement funds to those campuses. For schools that aren't sufficiently improving, states should require escalating, evidence-based interventions that lead to meaningful changes in school practices and decision-making. And there should be clear consequences for lack of action or improvement in student learning outcomes on those campuses.

State policymakers should publish easy-to-access accountability dashboards that are clear, timely, and actionable for parents, policymakers, and educators

Data is the cornerstone of informed decision-making. It provides crucial information about students' overall academic performance and illuminates any gaps that may exist between individual student subgroups at the school, district, and state levels. Because this information is typically available year on year, policymakers and education leaders can identify trends and respond with targeted policies and resource allocation to ensure that support is directed where it's needed most.

States should provide timely, transparent information to parents about their child's performance, including how to interpret test results, how the test was created, and questions to ask their child's teachers. Parent communication should also include information about how their child's district and school are rated in the state accountability system so that parents can make informed decisions about what's best for their children.

State tests and accountability ratings are important, summative, annual measures. State leaders should explicitly communicate that state tests and accountability systems are designed to measure how well our publicly funded system is delivering on its promise to educate all children each school year. They do not provide day-to-day insights that will change instructional practices from one week to the next. Formative and interim assessments should be adopted by states and districts to provide parents and teachers with more timely and frequent measures of student progress.

We must recommit to systems of outcomes-oriented accountability. School accountability policy is difficult but essential work. Students who linger in failing schools and get off track academically are far less likely to have prosperous, self-determined lives. Our economic freedom, our democratic freedom, and our global leadership in a quickly changing world all depend on young people with the skills and knowledge to contribute. Our public education system must be able to rise to this challenge, and accountability is an essential tool in making that vision a reality.



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