

# Assessment, Accountability, and the Adaptive Challenge of COVID-19

What does it look like for state and local education systems to ensure excellence and equity in the middle of a global pandemic – one in which unprecedented numbers of learners are disconnected and in which learning gaps will continue to proliferate?

In a phone conversation last week, Atlanta parent Tora Hines, who does hair for a living, described her up-close view of the “catastrophic” effect of COVID-19 on educational opportunity. “Some of the girls who come in, they don’t even have computers,” she says. “I ask them, ‘How’s school going?’ ‘Oh, I haven’t done school, I don’t have a computer.’” She adds, “Just imagine that your child hasn’t done any work since March.” What might it look like for states and districts to ensure educational excellence and equity for learners like Tora’s young clients?

At CIE, one thing the pandemic has not altered is our belief in the value of each child, their right to educational opportunity, and their innate ability to achieve lifelong success. As Gene Wilhoit says, “this is not a time to let up on a commitment to the kids. We can’t abandon the mission to ensure they achieve the knowledge and skills that are important for their success in life.” The pandemic cannot become an excuse for lowering expectations.

We also recognize that education leaders are now confronting this question in a dramatically altered reality that is changing our perceptions about equity and its implications for learning and instruction. As the Center for Assessment’s Scott Marion and Ajit Gopalakrishnan attest, “Attributing outcomes to school performance is uncertain in any year, but it is simply indefensible immediately following the pandemic.” Therefore the challenge before education leaders is to rethink how assessment and accountability models can uphold high expectations while also prompting critical investments that make achieving these expectations possible.

We believe these challenges cannot be confronted solely with technical fixes to previous systems of assessment and accountability. Technical adjustments like temporarily redefining accountability indicators, perfecting at-home proctoring of standardized tests, or performing “statistical gymnastics” to smooth over missing state assessment data may help refurbish pre-existing constructs around assessment and accountability, but they squander the opportunity for deeper, community-wide reflection that could bring assessment and accountability into greater coherence with the realities and complexities of teaching and learning in this COVID-19 era. In the words of Tony Monfiletto, who advocates for underserved students at Future Focused Education, an educational intermediary organization in New Mexico, and who spoke with me last week, “It’s a mis-reading of context. We’re in an adaptive moment, we’re not in a technical moment. What we need is for people to speak to the adaptive challenge. Not ‘how can we administer a standardized test’ but ‘what are the needs of kids.’”



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- Tony Monfiletto

On a recent Zoom call with CIE staff, I was talking with Linda Pittenger and Gene – both of whom previously helped to articulate a new vision for accountability in Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm – and Paul Leather and Gretchen Morgan, who have spent considerable time learning and leading in state education agencies, about the tensions states must reconcile in their assessment and accountability decisions next year. For the first time in decades, state standardized assessments are in question, and federal direction around future state testing is unknown. We have spoken with parents and teachers who perceive systems of assessment and accountability to be punitive and feel that testing next year would unfairly punish kids who have so much else to worry about. One teacher

quipped in a viral Facebook post, "I don't want to hear one word about testing, unless it involves a nasal or throat swab." At the same time, teachers will depend on better diagnostic and formative assessments to adjust instruction to meet children where they are, while district and state systems need robust information to address inequity at a systems level and to understand growth from this point forward. FutureEd senior fellow Lynn Olson reminds us that, "As the nation's struggle with the coronavirus has made clear, failing to gather information about a problem doesn't make it go away. It makes it worse."

On that C!E call we all sensed that tensions like these cannot be resolved in state houses alone. Rather, we feel that true partnership between stakeholders with varied lived experiences and perspectives is necessary, and that local communities already hold parts of the solutions that state leaders can listen and learn from. Take the issue of inequity for example: for the first time in decades, states are unable to use their accountability machinery to measure achievement gaps. "And yet," Gretchen notes, "inequity is more visible now than ever before." What can be learned from how local systems are already capturing need and responding to it? How can investing in local wisdom and more authentic input from educators and communities better inform state decisions, like resource allocation to address root causes, and result in more useful information to inform student learning?

To help state leaders approach these conversations with their communities by applying what we've been learning to the COVID-19 context, we offer some of our wonderings in three areas – originally described in Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm – in which education systems can innovate to meet the adaptive challenge:

1. Focusing on meaningful learning,
2. Developing reciprocity across the system, and
3. Investing in professional capacity-building.

We further describe each of these areas along with questions relevant to the COVID-19 context in the following briefs, which are intended as fodder for education leaders and their local communities to explore together in collaborative, inclusive conversations about how assessment and accountability policies can best place students and their needs at the center.

We believe that change is both imperative and already happening; we need only to ask the right questions, listen, and answer the call to action. C!E is excited to support and learn alongside education leaders and communities as we leap from a semester of crisis management into a future of hope. We invite you in as a learning partner to help inform our thinking on this and other topics as they play out. What are you noticing? What are you wrestling through? We invite you to tell us at [jenny@leadingwithlearning.org](mailto:jenny@leadingwithlearning.org) or take our survey on how COVID-19 is changing your perceptions of education.

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## Focus on Meaningful learning.

What does it look like for state and local education systems to ensure excellence and equity in the middle of a global pandemic? This brief, a companion to our piece on "Assessment, Accountability, and the Adaptive Challenge of COVID-19," offers some of our recent wonderings related to one of the three areas of the new vision of assessment and accountability originally described in Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm – focusing on meaningful learning.

*"Reprioritize. This is the time to see if something can be different. To reset the system, we have to take a loss, but we can recoup the loss if we actually get kids excited about education and create a more positive space for them to learn."*

- Michelle Ampong, Atlanta parent and school volunteer



This fall, every school system must determine how it will help individual students recover a semester of lost opportunity, in suboptimal conditions, while hurdling the yet-unknown challenges of an ongoing pandemic. To prevail, we believe every facet of the education system – from standards, assessment, and accountability to curricular design and professional development – must be tightly focused on meaningful learning. State leaders have an opportunity to reconsider how well these system components are aligned to what their communities now perceive is meaningful to learn.

For many like Paul Tritter, who supports teacher professional learning at Boston Teachers Union, "all of the other things that were in the background, like strength of communities, socio-emotional learning, executive functioning skills – all of these kinds of outcomes are now elevated." This means schools will need more authentic learning experiences that promote the development of these essential skills and dispositions in the context of academic disciplines, measures that better and more authentically represent these skills and abilities, and a range of accountability measures that encourage and reflect such outcomes.

System alignment especially matters if we are to elevate essential outcomes like skills and dispositions without overburdening educators already trying to make up a semester of lost learning. Strategies like just-in-time supports to on-grade-level instruction may help along with deeper investment in the abilities of teachers to integrate skills and dispositions in daily instruction and to collaborate across grade levels to ensure focus is maintained on keystone concepts. Some systems have made headway with competency-based designs that develop and assess learning based on high-leverage competencies that integrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Such examples might provide guidance for school systems sharpening their focus on meaningful learning.

Additionally, distance learning has evidenced how defining "meaningful learning" is not entirely up to education leaders and experts but must be shared with the end user: the student. While we understood the importance of student engagement before COVID-19, last semester's loss of in-person connection required teachers to innovate greater ways of engaging by meeting students where they are, making learning relevant, and inviting students to become active agents in their learning and progress. In our conversations with educators, we've learned that these efforts depend on building strong relationships between adults and students as well as careful attention to students' social-emotional well-being. How might these kinds of outcomes, that are broader than strictly academic learning, become part of our North Star?

Together, these issues raise important questions for education leaders and communities to consider as they center accountability decisions around **meaningful learning**:

- Has our community reached a comprehensive, consensus definition of the expectations we hold for student outcomes (i.e. what knowledge, skills, and dispositions do we want all students to attain)?
- In what ways might our systems – including assessment and accountability but also curriculum, instructional methodologies, and professional development — be better aligned to desired student outcomes?
- How might we hold tightly to high expectations without dismissing the real constraints under which teaching and learning will occur next year? In what ways can states support local leaders and communities to rethink the how of teaching and learning and to adopt curriculum and pedagogical models that more effectively support each child's mastery of meaningful learning?
- If the use of state standardized assessment data is inappropriate for high-stakes decisions next year, how might states work with districts and schools to capture other evidence of learning, such as portfolios or other demonstrations of skills and competencies, that local educators have developed to authentically gauge student progress?
- How can states leverage their relationships with assessment vendors to improve the “fit” between state assessment systems used for institutional accountability and the shifting reality of teaching and learning in a post-COVID-19 era? For example, how might externally-designed standardized assessments become less intrusive while greater weight is placed on building local capacity to assess meaningful learning in ways more useful to daily instruction?

We believe questions like these are best explored by education leaders and their local communities in collaborative, inclusive conversations about how assessment and accountability policies can best place students and their needs at the center. Change is both imperative and already happening; we need only to ask the right questions, listen, and answer the call to action.

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## Develop reciprocity across the system.

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*"We are asking schools to fix problems that run much deeper than the tools they have at their disposal to address. Rather than 'tsk tsk'-ing at them and barraging students with more frequent tests that just tell us what we already know, I think we ought to be pushing resources into those schools so they have the tools to overcome the obstacles."*

- Jeremy Wilhelm, Atlanta parent and Senior Study Director at Westat

Last semester, for the very first time, everyone in the entire American education system witnessed resource inadequacies that plainly interfered with students' attendance, engagement, and learning. Inequitable access to and distribution of resources persisted before the pandemic; it's just harder to ignore when "school" is at the full mercy of students' at-home ability (physical, technological, mental, and emotional) to connect. Even after school buildings begin reopening, the blurring of lines between home and school raises important questions about our collective responsibility for providing necessary resources for learning.

Along with louder calls for resource reciprocity, we are sensing a shift occurring in power and decision-making authority that represents a new kind of reciprocity: a rebalancing of who is accountable to whom, and for what. COVID-19 is accelerating a rebalancing of authority from states to districts as districts are charged with building plans for reopening schools. Paul Leather asks, "might these same district muscles be exercised reciprocally with state policies and practice, allowing districts to make recommendations for quality local assessment and accountability systems that aggregate data back up to the state for equity purposes?"

Additionally, by serving as the "adult in the room" supporting distance learning, parents and caregivers more visibly joined the "instructional core" with teachers and students. Now more than ever, strong, reciprocal relationships between families and schools are important and more clearly impact the ability of schools and districts to meet state level expectations. Districts and schools have thus become more accountable to families and communities and share with them the responsibility for student engagement and learning. As Tony describes, such reciprocity is especially critical in the face of a potentially dramatic increase in the number of disengaged youth caused by COVID-19 and its resulting blow to community well-being. On the flip side, the "pandemic pods" rapidly forming among families with means hints at the fragility of public education systems that are not perceived to adequately address community needs. This phenomenon heightens the imperative for targeted universalism, such as providing "pods" for all families in ways that support equity.



Together, these issues raise important questions for education leaders and communities to consider as they design accountability systems that recognize **growing reciprocity** emerging across the system, including:

- In what ways does the design of our accountability system signal a shared belief that every child can learn and a shared commitment across system levels to do whatever it takes for each child succeed? How can we design systems where all actors throughout the system are aware of and assume responsibility for their contributions to the success of all students?
- How might we hold a higher awareness of inequitable access to needed resources, and what information should we gather to better understand each student, family, and school's unique challenges? Additionally, how might we better recognize and partner with family and community strengths?
- What other data points are important to include in more comprehensive attempts to understand student and system needs and progress? For example, how will we address educator capacity development and access to quality educators in a newly defined system? And, if we know that the depth and quality of teacher relationships with students and parents matters, how can we ensure this information informs how we look at the quality of the system? Which of these data points might be generated at a local level, and what information would stakeholders need to be confident that local data is accurate and reliable?
- In what ways can funding formulas, resource allocations, and other state and district policies prioritize equity and adequacy given what we know (or need to learn) about each school and communities' unique circumstances?
- How might accountability systems center on the holistic needs of students and their communities?
- How might we develop greater reciprocity in decision-making related to accountability, providing greater opportunity for districts to report how they will hold themselves accountable to a learning agenda tied to state goals?

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## Invest in professional capacity-building.

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*"Systemically we haven't invested in the teacher capacity to authentically assess meaningful learning in a variety of ways, and now you need to build capacity in an environment where it's really hard to teach anybody anything anyway. You have to narrow down into your purposes for teaching. Decide in the direction you want to go, and invest in that."*

- Paul Tritter, Director of Professional Learning, Boston Teachers Union

Given the likelihood that some forms of distance learning will persist next year, it is clear that significant investments are needed to uplift and re-skill an entire educator workforce beyond the ad hoc efforts of this past semester. While considering the obvious need for new skills such as effective use of technology, education leaders and their communities might also consider what last semester has shown us about the educator mindsets, interpersonal skills, and pedagogical skills that will be critical for success both next year and beyond; and how teachers are engaged and activated as agents contributing to the discovery of new solutions. Questions might include:



- How do we unleash the power of teachers to come together in learning communities, to share successful research and practice and to design new pathways to support equity in outcomes for learners?
- What skills or mindsets should educators possess in order to better promote learning (distance or otherwise), such as formative assessment skills, developing and supporting student agency, teaching for deeper learning, developing students' metacognitive skills and other essential skills and dispositions in the context of academic learning, and building trusting relationships with students and their families?
- What skills or mindsets should be developed to better prepare educators to address issues of systemic racism and poverty that have been more glaringly apparent during the pandemic? For example, what learning around excavating personal bias and understanding systemic (not just individual) racism can provide important context for approaching equity? What strategies for addressing inequity – such as personalizing approaches based on student need or competency-based approaches that develop mastery by meeting students where they are – might be important subjects of a collective learning agenda?
- Given the potential for accountability systems that are more reliant on local measures of learning in the post-COVID-19 era, what investments might we make to strengthen educators' abilities to make professional judgments about student progress?
- What strategies, such as looping, can support the development of teacher-student and teacher-family relationships that have been shown to be essential to teaching and learning?
- How might we hold states and districts accountable for building educator capacity and providing ongoing supports in these areas?

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