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.

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 or take our survey on [how COVID-19 is changing your perceptions of education](#).