

Assessment and Accountability for Improving Schools and Learning: Principles and Recommendations for Federal Law and State and Local Systems

**Expert Panel on Assessment
Convened by the Forum on Educational Accountability**

June 2007

Executive Summary

Public education underlies much of what is great about America—our shared commitment to democratic ideals, our social inclusiveness, our economic prosperity, the opportunities available to those seeking a better life, and our highest ideals of “liberty and justice for all.” Today, there is no question that education at all levels must be improved if it is to fulfill these promises to the next generation of Americans.

The education and assessment experts who wrote this report represent a broad array of stakeholders concerned about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), of which the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the latest version. The panelists seek to ensure that the next version of the law supports the intended purpose of NCLB as outlined in Section 1001: “Ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.”

The panel concludes that significant changes must be made to NCLB in order to meet this goal. This report advances a set of recommendations grounded in six guiding principles and provides a vision for an inclusive, beneficial, and fair assessment and accountability system within a strong, equitable, and steadily improving educational system. The panel urges Congress and state policy makers, as well as educators and the public, to consider these recommendations as the law is reauthorized and implemented.

Principles and Primary Recommendations

Principle I: Equity and Capacity Building for Student Learning

Help states, districts, and schools fulfill their educational responsibilities to foster student learning and development by ensuring that all students have equitable access to the resources, tools, and information they need to succeed and by building capacity to improve teaching and learning.

1. Ensure all students have access and support to succeed in a rich curriculum.
2. Provide the equitable opportunities to learn needed to reach the ambitious goals for student achievement.

3. Focus on developing local capacity through incentives and support.
4. Match needed flexibility with increased local responsibility for implementing the law in ways that meet its goals and intents.

Principle II: Comprehensive State and Local Assessment Systems

Construct comprehensive and coherent systems of state and local assessments of student learning that work together to support instruction, educational improvement and accountability.

1. Provide incentives for states and districts to develop comprehensive and coherent assessment systems that inform instruction and decision-making in ways that state tests alone cannot and do not. Coherent and comprehensive assessment systems provide evidence of student and school performance in relation to rich and challenging educational goals, using multiple indicators of student learning from a variety of sources at multiple points in time.
2. Provide states incentives and supports to include high quality local assessment systems in meeting ESEA's accountability requirements, alone or by augmenting state assessments. Fund pilot projects in which interested states demonstrate how they can meet ESEA's accountability requirements through standards-based, locally-developed assessments of students' learning or by integrating local assessments with state assessments. Fund expansion of the number of supported projects as states indicate interest. Provide incentives for states to work together.
3. Provide tools for states and districts to self-evaluate and improve the coherence and effectiveness of their local comprehensive assessment systems. The assessment and instructional components should work together to support instructional improvement and educational accountability.
4. Design state and district reports that include all components of their comprehensive assessment system. State reporting should reflect the presence and weighting of the results from each measure that comprises its assessment system, including those unique for ELLs and SWDs. District level reporting should mirror the results of measures, both local and state, used in its accountability system.

Principle III: Assessment and Accountability for Diverse Populations

Shape the design, construction, and application of assessment systems so they are appropriate for an increasingly diverse student population.

1. Design assessments based on principles of universal design, but ensure that the unique factors that impact the performance of subgroups (e.g., English language learners (ELLs), students with disabilities (SWDs), students from major racial and ethnic groups, or economically disadvantaged students) are specifically addressed in the assessments that are used to measure the academic achievement of these students and reporting of results.
2. Require states to provide research-based recommendations for selecting and using appropriate accommodations for ELLs and SWDs to ensure that these students have access to valid assessments of their content knowledge.
3. Require states to validate assessment systems for each subgroup.

4. Support research to address major issues that complicate the design of appropriate assessment systems for subgroups.
5. Provide incentives for states to work together to shape the conceptual design and construction of local and state assessments of academic achievement according to the characteristics of each specified subgroup. Federally fund research to address the most pressing technical issues related to assessments and accountability decisions for English language learners and students with disabilities.

Principle IV: Fair Appraisal of Academic Performance

Use multiple sources of evidence to describe and interpret school and district performance fairly, based on a balance of progress toward and success in meeting student academic learning targets.

1. Encourage states and districts to use multiple sources of evidence drawn from their comprehensive and coherent systems of classroom-, school- and district-based assessments to summarize and appraise student performance.
2. Encourage states to describe school performance in terms of status, improvement, and growth, using the states' multiple sources of evidence.
3. As states evaluate their assessment systems, conduct ongoing studies of the validity of the descriptions and interpretations of student and school performance to ensure the quality of core data analysis and reporting.

Principle V: Fair Accountability Decisions

Improve the validity and reliability of criteria used to classify the performance of schools and districts to ensure fair evaluations and to minimize bias in accountability decisions.

1. Encourage states to include all subjects – not just reading, math and science – in their comprehensive assessment systems, but use compensatory processes to ensure that the inclusion of more subjects does not become another means for schools and districts to fail accountability requirements.
2. Encourage states and districts to use multiple sources of evidence drawn from their comprehensive and coherent assessment systems to make accountability decisions about the quality of school and district performance and determine which schools and districts need what forms of assistance.
3. Retain the ESEA requirement for gathering and reporting disaggregated information by subgroups based on the comprehensive assessment system.
4. Use collective research from the states to establish realistic and challenging federal guidelines for rates of growth or improvement towards the goal of reaching specified learning targets.
5. Replace the current rules for AYP classifications with reliability and validity criteria that each state must apply when designing its accountability classification system so that it is fair and minimizes bias.
6. Use accountability decisions to inform assistance to schools.

Principle VI: Use of Assessment and Accountability Information to Improve Schools and Student Learning

Provide effective, targeted assistance to schools correctly identified as needing assistance.

1. Encourage states and districts to use multiple sources of evidence from state and local assessments and other forms of evidence to inform actions such as interventions and technical assistance.
2. If a school (or district) is identified as not making sufficient progress towards improvements or in outcomes, the district (or state) would investigate causes and undertake a series of interventions tailored to address particular needs.
3. Assistance may include providing professional development, developing partnerships with parents and families, improving curriculum, and attracting and retaining high quality teachers and administrators.
4. NCLB mandates for governance changes should be removed or, at most, made an option for possible action only after implementation of recommendations 2 and 3 (above).
5. The accountability systems should ultimately be judged on their consequences for the quality of the educational system and the learning of its students.

Note: The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) convened the Expert Panel on Assessment to build on the *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NLCB) Act*. The panel's mission was to use the Statement as its starting point to develop recommendations for changes to ESEA/NCLB. This report therefore represents the views of the panelists. The full panel report is available at www.edaccountability.org, along with other FEA materials and the Joint Statement.

Members of the Expert Panel: Jamal Abedi, Pete Goldschmidt, Brian Gong, Margo Gottlieb, Alba A. Ortiz, Pedro Pedraza, James Pellegrino, Pat Roschewski, Jim Stack. Staff assistance provided by Monty Neill, Marcie Dianda and Beth Foley.