

COLORADO

Overview

With the passage of its Education Accountability Act in 2009, Colorado introduced a new accountability system designed to ensure that all students exit the K-12 system ready for postsecondary education and/or the workforce.⁴⁰ The system's theory of action centers on the transparency of its performance-data reporting: With transparent data, the state aims to engage all stakeholders and ensure that information is used purposefully. The 2009 legislation also revamped the state's support and intervention models to provide a more cohesive structure for school improvement efforts.

In 2010, the state took an additional step toward ensuring accountability at all levels by passing a groundbreaking teacher and principal accountability system that dismantled traditional tenure provisions. The state now bases employment on performance measures, which are primarily informed by student assessment data.

Transparent data and school improvement planning are key elements of strong accountability systems, and the Centennial State has placed great emphasis on both. Still, Colorado's schools and students would benefit from improved performance designations that better distinguish among high- and low-performing schools and from more robust interventions for those low performers.

Below, we map Colorado's progress against six key components of strong state accountability systems.

1) Adoption of demanding, clear, and specific standards in all core content areas, and rigorous assessment of those standards

The Common Core standards in reading and mathematics, combined with the Colorado Academic Standards in all other subjects, result in a motley group of academic expectations that vary dramatically in quality. While the Common Core reading and math standards are considered to be comprehensive and rigorous, Colorado's U.S. History and science standards are poor.⁴¹

Colorado annually assesses students in reading, math, and writing in third through tenth grades, as well as in science in fifth, eighth, and tenth grades. The state is

⁴⁰ The latter is typically defined as the ability to earn a living wage immediately upon graduation.

⁴¹ In a 2010 review by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Common Core standards for reading and math, which Colorado adopted in 2010, earned grades of B-plus and A-minus, respectively. In similar reviews, Colorado's U.S. History standards earned an F (2011), and the state's science standards earned a D (2012). See *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011*, and *The State of State Science Standards 2012*, at www.standards.educationgadfly.net/.

currently transitioning to a new system that will require annual assessments in reading, math, and writing in third through eleventh grades, as well as in science and social studies at least once in each grade span: elementary, middle, and high school. The new assessment system will also introduce mandatory quarterly assessments, pending available resources. Transitioning to a new assessment system gives Colorado a huge opportunity to improve the rigor of its tests: In a 2011 analysis, Colorado's proficiency cut scores for reading and math in both fourth and eighth grades equated to the *below basic* level of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁴²

2) Reporting of accessible and actionable data to all stakeholders, including summative outcome data and other formative data to drive continuous improvement

Colorado makes a concerted effort to provide transparent and timely data. The state reports data on student proficiency, growth, achievement gaps, and postsecondary readiness in reading, math, and writing through its "SchoolView" website. The online data can be broken out by districts, schools, grades, and subgroups within schools. Further, the Colorado Growth Model, deemed by some stakeholders as the most important feature of SchoolView, allows users to compare the performance of Colorado schools and districts with similar schools and districts to gauge progress.

But while SchoolView provides a wealth of information, it is also difficult to navigate, according to both district and community representatives. Though the state provides materials to aid interpretation, this "guidance" can be so complex as to confuse even the savviest user. At the same time, SchoolView data can be ambiguous. For example, one district representative noted that Asian students, who typically outperform other minority groups, are included in the tool's "minority students" subgroup, thereby skewing the results.

3) Annual determinations and designations for each school and district that meaningfully differentiate their performance

Colorado's accountability system measures districts and schools annually against four key performance indicators to inform its accreditation process (the state does

⁴² National Center for Education Statistics, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Variation and Change in State Standards for Reading and Mathematics, 2005–2009* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, August 2011), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011458>. While Colorado is a participating member in both Common Core assessment consortia, it is yet to be seen whether the state will replace its new reading and math assessments with the not-yet-released Common Core assessments (due out in 2014-15).

not include any federal accountability measures, such as AYP, in the accreditation process):

- **Achievement:** the percent of students who are proficient and advanced on state standardized assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, and science.
- **Growth:** normative and criterion-referenced (i.e., growth to a proficiency standard) measures of growth; growth is summarized for a school, district, or subgroup using the median of the student growth percentiles of that group, and then evaluated to determine whether that growth rate is sufficient for the median student in that group to achieve proficiency in three years or fewer.
- **Gaps:** normative and criterion-referenced measures of median student growth, disaggregated by subgroup.
- **Postsecondary and workforce readiness (high school only):** graduation rate, dropout rate, and average composite scores on the ACT.

The Centennial State uses the outcomes from these four broad performance indicators to arrive at overall determinations of school and district performance. At the **district level**, the indicators inform the annual accreditation process. Districts are rated on a five-level scale:

- Accredited with Distinction
- Accredited
- Accredited with Improvement Plan
- Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan
- Accredited with Turnaround Plan

At the **school-level**, ratings are a tad more complicated. The state recommends a preliminary designation of school accreditation on a separate, four-level performance scale. Then, districts—which officially accredit schools—make the final school-accreditation designation. Districts may concur with the preliminary state recommendations, or they can choose to be more stringent in their accreditation determinations. (To be more lenient, a district needs special approval from the state.)

This process gives both the state and districts the opportunity to have a voice in schools' performance designations, which helps balance local and state control. The state engages in light monitoring of districts throughout the school rating process (particularly failing districts), but most parties agree that the ratings are fair; plus, schools can challenge their ratings through an appeals process.

The four-level school-accreditation scale is as follows:

- Performance
- Improvement
- Priority Improvement
- Turnaround

Unfortunately, these levels fail to differentiate school performance adequately. The lowest-performing category, Turnaround, comprises about 5 percent of schools; the next category, Priority Improvement, includes about 10 percent; and the third category, Improvement, generally encompasses 20 percent. This leaves a full 60 percent of schools that fall into the highest category, Performance. In other words, the categories don't differentiate between a school at the 42nd percentile and a school at the 98th percentile. Worse, a local stakeholder reports that parents are confused by the meaning of the names—is Performance better than Improvement? What does Priority Improvement signify? Such ambiguity erodes the value of assigning performance designations in the first place.

4) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the school and district levels

Rewards

By allowing the top 60 percent of its schools to fall into the Performance category, Colorado offers little ability—much less concrete incentive—for schools to strive to achieve at high levels. District designations, which comprise five categories instead of four, provide slightly more accurate pictures of performance, but this difference is not significant: District representatives made clear that the state does not meaningfully distinguish among categories. The state does honor schools with low-performing students making significant gains with “Center of Excellence” status, but such recognition bestows no meaningful reward. Many district representatives expressed desire for more robust and tangible incentives from the state.

Sanctions

Colorado requires all schools and districts to engage in improvement planning, with the most intensive actions required of the lowest performers. District and school accreditation levels inform the type and depth of required improvement plans. These plans provide information on the district/school's data trends, set achievement targets, and identify strategies and resources the district/school will implement to achieve those goals.

Districts whose performance places them in the top three accreditation categories in a given year have their accreditation automatically renewed with the submission of a Performance or Improvement Plan. Accreditation for the bottom two categories is contingent upon state acceptance of a district Priority Improvement Plan or Turnaround Plan. All districts are expected to use the district-level Unified Improvement Plan (UIP) as a template for these improvement strategies. The template streamlines state and federal accountability requirements into a single, model improvement plan.⁴³

At the school level, the principal, superintendent, and/or local school board, in collaboration with a School Accountability Committee,⁴⁴ work together to develop the improvement plan. Districts are expected to review all school plans, while the state only reviews school Turnaround Plans (and *may* review school Priority Improvement Plans). School accountability committees are required to meet quarterly to review progress toward the goals outlined in the improvement plans.

The bottom two school accreditation categories—Priority Improvement and Turnaround—are considered schools “identified for improvement.” Once identified, a school has five years to improve its accreditation status and reach the goals set forth in its improvement plan. If it fails to do so, the school must restructure or close. (Since these requirements were established in 2009, no school has yet hit the five-year failing mark.)

The school improvement model has some flaws in practice. For one, it limits real sanctions—such as restructure or closure—to those schools that persist in the worst performance categories for five years. Other low-performing—but slightly better—schools go unnoticed. For these other schools, the system is intended to provide “more of a political sanction,” as one district representative put it. In other words, transparent data are meant to catalyze improvement—at least in theory—as parents, students, and community members can now identify which schools need improvement. But as mentioned earlier, the performance data provided by the state are often confusing to stakeholders and fail to distinguish among average and above average schools.

At the same time, state capacity for driving improvement in the lowest-performing schools is in question. Colorado received a \$40 million federal School

⁴³ While Colorado’s school and district performance framework does not incorporate any measures of the federal accountability system, the requirement that schools and districts must address both systems in their UIPs is a step toward easing the burden on schools and districts struggling to adhere to both systems at once. By incorporating both into improvement planning, schools and districts can implement strategies that address state and federal requirements at the same time, rather than operating dual, disjointed, and burdensome improvement programs in parallel.

⁴⁴ The state requires each school to convene a School Accountability Committee, which must comprise, but is not limited to: the principal (or the principal’s designee); a teacher; three parents; an adult member of an organization of parents, teachers, and students recognized by the school; and a community member.

Improvement Grant in 2010 to turn around nineteen of its schools. A year later, only one of the nineteen schools has shown improvement across the board in reading, math, writing, and science. While turnaround efforts often take more than one year to prove successful—and require more than one year to measure that success reliably—the minimal improvements raise flags about whether the state has an effective strategy in place for turning around its lowest performers. Under the accountability system established in 2009, the state must now restructure or close its lowest-performing schools, as described above. Again, the first schools have not yet hit the five-year failing mark; when they do, the state will no longer have the additional infusion of federal turnaround money.

Support

While real improvement under the new accountability structure is yet to be seen, district representatives cite as a positive step the transformation of the state department of education from a regulatory to supportive body. Colorado’s method of distributing and offering support to its districts, which are primarily tasked with providing direct assistance to schools, is based on school/district performance and need, as demonstrated through accreditation ratings and improvement plans, as well as AYP measures. The state operates a tiered system of support with three categories commensurate with the level of need, resources, and student performance of schools and districts. Most districts are in the “universal” tier, which provides a baseline level of state support. The state offers some additional support for the schools and districts in the second, “targeted” tier. The highest level of state support is reserved for those in the third, “intensive” tier. This most intensive support is aimed at turnaround schools and includes an on-site team to assist in analyzing data, identifying areas of weakness, and determining priorities, among other elements.

5) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual student level

Colorado’s accountability system includes virtually no measures related to individual student accountability. Students are not required to pass a cumulative high school exam in order to graduate, nor are they required to pass cumulative assessments in key grades in order to be promoted to the next grade.

The Centennial State is unique, however, in allowing its students to attend any school in any district, as long as space is available. So while the state doesn’t specifically *require* that schools allow students in low-performing schools the option of attending other schools, any student may choose to do so.⁴⁵ Of course,

⁴⁵ As long as that school is public, of course. Colorado does not have a statewide voucher program in place, though districts are free to introduce such options.

policies like these often look good on paper but are not exercised in practice. Moreover, they are often not supported—and may actually be spurned—by would-be receiving districts and schools.

In addition, the state also provides options for students through charters and virtual schools. In 2011-12, about 114,000 students enrolled in Colorado charter schools, comprising about 14 percent of all students. Further, Colorado runs a state virtual school and also permits district-level digital programs; in 2011-12 about 16,000 students registered for online education programs—about 1.9 percent of all students.

6) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual teacher and administrator level

In 2010, Colorado passed S.B. 10-191—the Great Teachers and Leaders bill—which completely revamped the state’s legislation on teacher and principal accountability. It was hailed as a huge victory for Colorado’s students, and by some, as a model for the rest of the country. While the new evaluation system will not be fully implemented until the 2014-15 school year, it will base at least 50 percent of annual teacher and principal evaluation on student achievement data.

Teachers and principals will be rated as highly effective, effective, partially effective, and ineffective. New, or probationary, teachers must earn three consecutive effective ratings to merit the equivalent of tenure; a teacher who earns two consecutive ineffective ratings is placed back into probationary status and is given a year to improve or face dismissal. Districts are given leeway in how to account for low-performing principals.

In addition, districts are required to develop systems for rewarding high-performing teachers who choose to teach in low-performing schools. They may also, but are not required to, introduce merit-based pay systems for teachers and principals.

What are the strengths and limitations of Colorado’s accountability system?

Strengths

Focus on transparent data reporting. Colorado’s SchoolView accountability system releases annual performance data in a timely manner. The database allows users to disaggregate proficiency and growth data by district, school, individual grade, and subgroup. Still, the system leaves much room for improvement, as the information can be misleading and/or confusing.

Comprehensive evaluation of student performance. Colorado's accountability system provides a comprehensive picture of academic performance through its measurement of achievement, growth, gaps, and postsecondary and workforce readiness.

Responsibilities distributed among stakeholders at all levels. Under Colorado's accountability system, both the state and districts have a say in school performance designations and required improvement strategies. This promotes shared ownership of the problem as well as shared victory in success. In addition, a variety of local stakeholders participate in school improvement planning.

Robust, annual evaluation of teacher and principal performance. Colorado requires that 50 percent of annual teacher and principal evaluations be based on student performance measures. For teachers, both tenure and dismissal are conditional, based on the annual evaluations.

Limitations

System lacks a strategy for identifying high achievement. While Colorado excels in tracking student performance, both in terms of proficiency and growth, the state offers no recognition or designation for achievement higher than "performance," which is already a blurry moniker. Colorado's performance designations could benefit from more clarity and the implementation of a performance rating that recognizes excellence.

Limited system of rewards and incentives for schools. Colorado officials believe that the state's transparent data-reporting system is an incentive and sanction in and of itself, meaning that specific and tangible rewards are not incorporated into the accountability system. At the same time, the state only requires intensive interventions in its lowest-performing schools after five years; even then, its capacity to undertake those interventions is dubious.

Absence of student-level accountability measures. Colorado maintains no student-level accountability measures, such as high school graduation requirements or grade-promotion conditions.

Final Word

Colorado's accountability misses the mark somewhat: While it aims to use transparent data and improvement planning to drive reform, its data can be confusing to stakeholders and its improvement planning requirements are relatively toothless. Colorado's system would benefit from recognizing high

achievement as well as low achievement, and by implementing more meaningful sanctions and incentives to drive school, district, and student performance.

Information on Colorado's education-accountability system was primarily drawn from interviews with state representatives, district representatives, and local stakeholders, as well as from the Colorado Department of Education website at www.cde.state.co.us, and the department's SchoolView website at www.schoolview.org. Additional information was drawn from the National Council on Teacher Quality's *2011 State Teacher Policy Yearbook*.