“Much educational change is akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” — Anonymous

Over the next few years, educators and policymakers have committed to implementing an array of challenging, but potentially transformative, reforms—reforms that could go beyond rearranging furniture to fundamentally restructuring and improving teaching and learning. States have worked together to adopt common academic standards in English language arts and math—standards that are based on expectations for students to be college and career ready. Two state consortia are developing high-quality, high-tech assessments to measure student performance and growth on the standards. Given the emphasis on postsecondary readiness, states are seeking flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education to create more refined accountability systems. States also are changing how they evaluate and support teacher and principal performance. And all of this is unfolding in a time of uncertainty: new technologies promise to transform how and where learning takes place, and resources and capacity to support implementation are limited and inconsistent. Stakes are particularly high for the 2014-15 school year, when new academic standards and assessments are set to be fully launched.

Facing this much simultaneous change would be difficult even without the possibility that some of these changes may be in conflict—a proverbial iceberg in the path of reform. Collisions are more likely to happen when policymakers and educators plow full steam ahead, failing to look across the spectrum of reform and consider how each change affects the others. Thus, those overseeing these efforts must consider how multiple changes look when implemented together at the same time. If they don’t, collisions could sink the opportunity to get school reform right. But if they do, they can anticipate challenges, make smart policy choices, and navigate the trade-offs that naturally follow.

In this collection of essays, our contributors discuss five of these dilemmas:

• How do we successfully implement new accountability systems and interventions during the transition to new standards and assessments?

• How do we maintain the rigor of college- and career-ready standards without pushing more students out of the system?

• How do we adopt fair teacher evaluation systems based on student assessments when those assessments are set to change?

• How do we move toward more standardization while also promoting innovation?

• How can we execute multiple, complex reforms in a time of limited resources?

These are true dilemmas, without right-or-wrong answers. Thus, we hope these essays provide a forum for provocative ideas: ideas that may not be particularly comfortable or comforting, but are nonetheless worthy of debate as policymakers, practitioners, and educators begin to tackle these challenges.

— Anne Hyslop, Policy Analyst, Education Sector
I. Getting Accountability and Implementation Right

By Michael Cohen

The idea of holding schools accountable for results has been a centerpiece of standards-based reform for more than 20 years, dating back at least to the 1986 National Governors Association report, *Time for Results*. This marked a departure from long-standing state practices which focused on prescribing educational inputs. While the idea of holding schools and districts accountable for the achievement of their students was championed by governors, it took the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to begin to transform gubernatorial rhetoric into state policy and action nationwide. Then, and now, federal requirements provide the basic framework – standards, assessments, requirements for adequate progress, and consequences – within which state accountability systems operate. However, that basic framework is in the process of being overhauled in significant ways.

First, states are exercising leadership in dramatic fashion. They are redefining the mission of the K-12 system to prepare all students for the postsecondary education and training necessary for 21st century careers in a competitive, global economy. They have worked together to develop common academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy that are internationally benchmarked and anchored in evidence regarding college and career readiness. Nearly all the states are now working together in two federally supported consortia to develop new assessments aligned to these Common Core State Standards. The result will be a system of common, rigorous standards and assessments that will be more challenging and more comparable nationally and internationally than the patchwork quilt of 50 different state standards and assessments that have been in place for two decades. Further, with federal funding, many states have created longitudinal data systems that enable them to track the performance and progress of students from the K-12 education system into postsecondary institutions and, ultimately, into careers.

Through Race to the Top, the U.S. Department of Education has pushed states to hold individual educators, as well as schools and school systems, accountable for growth in student achievement, and to use more focused and forceful interventions in the most persistently low-performing schools. Because the federal government has continuously failed to reauthorize No Child Left Behind (the latest iteration of ESEA), the Department of Education is giving states the opportunity to get flexibility from a number of NCLB’s requirements. In gaining flexibility to set new “adequate yearly progress” requirements, states must add new features to accountability and maintain the focus on closing achievement gaps. A whole new suite of rich, meaningful, and actionable data indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of the education system will result.

The elements necessary to transform the mission of the K-12 system to prepare all students for the postsecondary education and training necessary for 21st century careers in a competitive, global economy are in place. The focus in this paper is on the role of the accountability system for driving needed improvements. However, we understand more than ever that strong accountability must be complemented with equally strong efforts to build the capacity for continuous improvement systemwide, i.e., providing classroom teachers and school leaders with the tools and supports necessary to transform teaching and learning and help all students meet the Common Core.

**Getting the Accountability System Right**

This is the time for states to commit to reorienting their accountability systems toward college and career readiness. Currently, accountability systems are not based on what it means to be college and career ready and fail to establish expectations for performance that reflect where we need our schools and students to be. Equally troubling, accountability goals are perceived as something to meet to avoid state interference, rather than something...
meaningful to work toward. Whereas prior systems focused on ensuring that all students meet a minimal level of proficiency, new systems will center on the need to make **ambitious but achievable** progress in student performance at a **much higher level**—one tightly linked to readiness for college and career. This will change the components of the system, the indicators that it uses, and the student outcomes it drives toward.

**Components**

The components of the new accountability system must include statewide student performance goals; processes to differentiate, classify, and support districts and schools; and robust data reporting. Rather than goals that set the “floor” for districts and schools and that are lost within complex accountability formulas, states must develop a clear, broadly shared set of student performance goals linked to college and career readiness. These goals will be set at the state, district, and school levels and connect to a performance management process to drive continuous progress. These goals will also be used by state leaders, including governors, to build support for reform, bring stakeholders toward a common purpose, and communicate that what matters most is real, measurable improvement in student outcomes.

States must also incorporate into their accountability systems processes to differentiate and classify districts and schools based on student performance outcomes that are tied to college and career readiness. This process will identify those districts and schools that are the in greatest need of support and intervention to prepare students at this higher level. It also will link with the state’s overall system of instructional support for Common Core implementation to deliver the appropriate intensity and type of assistance. The process must also encourage districts and schools to move students toward and beyond readiness, and recognize and reward the districts and schools where students have done so. Finally, states must share timely, actionable, and meaningful college- and career-readiness data indicators with educators, policymakers, parents, and the public. There are few state levers as powerful in driving change as the act of making sure that good, clear data on current and predicted student outcomes is widely shared and used by those with the most impact on student learning.

**Indicators**

The foundation of each of these components will be college- and career-readiness indicators. These indicators will harness data from state P-20 longitudinal data systems to capture students’ course completion and success, as well as educational attainment through both K-12 and postsecondary education. They will also draw on new Common Core-aligned assessments, such as those that will be deployed through the two assessment consortia, to evaluate current student achievement and growth. These assessments will allow for measures that more clearly reflect student academic preparation in English language arts and mathematics compared to what is needed to enter postsecondary education without remediation, particularly in high schools where states’ current achievement indicators rarely capture standards past the ninth or tenth grade. These indicators will reflect a “continuum of readiness” that encourages schools and districts to move students toward and beyond readiness. They will begin in elementary school and reflect student progress toward college and career ready. And through high school, the indicators will be able to present a rich picture of how well students are meeting and exceeding readiness as measured through courses, attainment, and achievement. By creating a continuum of readiness, states can accomplish two things that most accountability systems today do not. First, they can ensure that students who are identified as off-track get the attention and resources they need to get back on-track before it’s too late. Second, they avoid a situation where the floor becomes the ceiling, and instead provide incentives for students who achieve the college- and career-readiness standard earlier in high school to continue to strive for more.

**Outcomes**

Finally, the new accountability systems will reflect the expectation that tremendous progress in student outcomes across the country could occur through the unprecedented efforts unleashed through Common
Core implementation. States now recognize the need for a stronger and different role for implementation, one that takes more significant support, such as equipping educators with guidance and curricular and instructional supports and tools. Simply developing high quality standards and assessments will not lead to improvement. States’ accountability systems should be built with the expectation that these efforts should lead to significant improvement in student outcomes overall and particularly for students who start out farthest behind. They also should be built with the goal to rally all toward this vision, to illuminate where implementation needs to get on-track, and to suggest ways to improve so that the promise is met.

**Getting the Implementation Right**

There are several key decisions for states as they move toward this vision and embrace a new approach to continuous school improvement. One of the most important is whether they want the path to rest on a more gradual gradient of change or one that is more abrupt. Many states likely will take the first approach, where several phases of transition across the coming years reorient the system along the way. This approach has the advantages of infusing college- and career-readiness components and indicators into the system as soon as they are ready, but also giving time for those who affect and those who are affected by the system to focus on a manageable set of changes at any given time.

This approach also reinforces a new expectation of accountability systems to continuously improve their ability to drive students toward college and career readiness. This means that even when the phases of transition are complete, everyone understands that the system will continue to adjust to better meet its aims. As state data systems mature, they will be able to add additional indicators to their accountability systems, such as high school credit accumulation, participation and success in core high school curriculum, postsecondary remediation and success rates, and workforce participation. Multiple indicators can provide a richer and better-informed picture of student and system performance. However, as indicators are added they should not dilute the importance of student learning and achievement measures.

Given what we know about the rigor of the Common Core in comparison to current standards, it is realistic that no matter how well states transition their systems over the coming years, most states will have a “cliff” point where proficiency declines — and in some states dramatically. States should begin preparing for this now. This could mirror the shift that Tennessee experienced between 2008-09 and 2009-10 when it raised not only its academic content standards, but also its performance expectations for proficiency. Tennessee saw proficiency on eighth-grade math drop from 90 percent to 26 percent between these two years. What it did not see was perhaps the most dramatic part of the story: because it had been preparing educators, policymakers, parents, and the public for this change through two years of intense public outreach, the state experienced little backlash. Most importantly, the following year educators, parents, and leaders could celebrate that Tennessee eighth-graders improved from 26 percent to 35 percent proficient. This support could not have happened without intense and sustained gubernatorial leadership and the partnership of a committed and courageous third-party organization.

**Time to Engage**

There is no way to overstate the importance of states beginning now to engage educators, policymakers, parents, and the public in its plans to transition to a college- and career-ready accountability system. It is vitally important first for the integrity of the system itself. Involving all critical actors in the development of the system will ensure it has the legitimacy to be seen as a positive force for improving student outcomes—one that everyone buys into, supports, and trusts to signal the right things. Stakeholders will realize that the results reflect “truth in advertising,” helping to build deep understanding of student performance. This involvement will also make the system better. Often states have developed these systems in isolation from those it impacts the most, and the result can be that they lack the coherence and
clarity to make any real impact. Finally, engagement and communication are the only ways to mitigate the very real risk that any dramatic shifts in the system will inspire a backlash. The reforms under way in states today, through Common Core implementation, accountability, and the other areas discussed in this collection, are too important to the nation’s economic future and moral foundation for us not to take every necessary step to ensure their success.

II. Doing It All: Raising Graduation Rates and Standards

By Robert Balfanz

Over the next decade, the nation must both raise educational standards through the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and increase its high school graduation rate. Simply put, there is very little work in the 21st century for young adults without high school diplomas, and little work that can support a family for individuals without some postsecondary schooling or training. In this context, neither increasing the college and career readiness of high school graduates, nor graduating more students alone will be sufficient. Yet there are both explicit and implicit tensions between these two goals that need to be acknowledged and resolved for the educational reform efforts of this decade to succeed.

The graduation and achievement challenges are both significant. Currently, only three out of four high school students are earning diplomas, and about 1 million students per ninth-grade class are not graduating from high school. On international comparisons of achievement, our nation’s 15-year-olds are decidedly in the middle of the pack. Some progress is being made. During the last decade, the nation’s high school graduation rate increased by a little more than 3 percentage points, and elementary and middle-grade achievement has shown modest improvement. High school achievement is more difficult to gauge. High school graduation requirements have increased considerably, and in several waves, since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1984. As a result, high school has become more academically focused. In a growing number of states, students now must pass either end-of-course or exit exams, as well as accumulate an increased number of academic credits to graduate. Through this, the achievement of 17-year-olds, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), has remained flat (perhaps because today’s 17-year-olds are no more motivated to take a test without significance for them than those of the past), but the number of students taking and succeeding in Advanced Placement (AP) courses has risen dramatically. Yet even with this progress, the gulf between secondary students’ current performance and that which is anticipated by the Common Core standards is large. One only has to compare outcomes on the eighth-grade NAEP test with the expectations of the eighth-grade Common Core standards to see this in glaring relief.

How then can we ensure students who graduate from high school are prepared to succeed in postsecondary schooling and/or training while substantially increasing the graduation rate? This dilemma is particularly acute for schools when the large majority of students who are not graduating are from low-income families and often live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or economic stagnation.

Some insight can be gleaned by examining the prior decade. A number of states have significantly raised standards and high school graduation requirements and improved their graduation rates. Massachusetts—often viewed as having exemplary state standards—added exit exams to its graduation requirements and saw its graduation rate climb from 77 percent in 2002 to 83 percent in 2009. Alabama became one of the first states to adopt a college-ready course of study, including four years of mathematics, as the default curriculum for its students, and saw its graduation rate increase from 62 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2009. Increasing graduation requirements, however, is not always associated with rising graduation rates. California added exit exams to its graduation requirements and has worked to link
them to the requirements and expectations of the state university system but saw its graduation rate decline from 73 percent to 71 percent. One reason for these different outcomes could be that Alabama and Massachusetts, in different ways, took activist roles in building student capacities in conjunction with raising standards, while California, disinvested in public education, resulting in some high-poverty high schools with class sizes of 40, making it a challenge for day-to-day instruction to occur let alone extra help.

Of course, there could be multiple reasons for these disparate state outcomes that have nothing to do with different approaches to managing the tensions between raising standards and increasing graduation rates. More analytic attempts to study the relationship between raising standards and the rigor of assessments and graduation rates have been inconclusive. Moreover, survey data of dropouts highlights that dropping out is an elongated process with multiple factors. In the main, three forces seem to be at work:

- students struggling to succeed at school;
- students impacted by conditions and events outside of school; and
- students who are bored, lose interest, and do not believe their lives will be different whether they graduate or not.

As a result, it is possible that states, where graduation rates and standards have increased, moved more of the third group to stay in school, and that the future challenge to raise graduation rates and standards will become more difficult, as the remaining dropouts become more composed of students who are struggling to succeed in school or are impacted by life events. Yet it is an important starting point to recognize that states have raised standards and graduation rates when they have actively sought to build student capacities through multiple avenues.

How might this approach play out on a broader national scale? First, state and national high school accountability systems need to give equal weight to student achievement and graduation rates. One outcome without the other is not sufficient. Thus, it is important that as states start to build performance index systems around college- and career-ready standards, they do not inadvertently lessen the weight given to increasing the graduation rate. If, for example, it is possible for schools to meet their improvement targets for multiple years by just raising the performance of the students who graduate, many will likely focus on this task, rather than what they may view as the more challenging task of both preventing students from dropping out and bringing their performance up to expected standards.

But it is quite possible to design a state accountability system that propels schools to both increase academic outcomes and raise graduation rates. A number of states—following Florida’s lead—are moving to A-F grading systems. This presents a good opportunity to send educators a signal that both the quality and quantity of high school diplomas matter. States could have an academic index that combines overall performance levels with measures of academic gap closing, as well as college and career readiness (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, ACT, and SAT scores; industry-certified career certificates; and college persistence rates and results) in an A-F ranking. High schools could then receive a second A-F grade based on their adjusted cohort graduation rate, with the grade being equal to the graduation rate. Graduation rates below 60 percent would be an F, 60-69 percent a D, 70-79 percent a C, and so on. In this way, schools that achieved one result at the expense of the other would be clearly identified and, as necessary, compelled to improve. Schools that achieved high performance marks, but failed to graduate large numbers of their students would have high academic grades but low graduation ones. Similarly, those that increased their graduation rates by lowering standards, might achieve high graduation marks but would have low achievement grades.

Second, we need to acknowledge that if we continue to concentrate the neediest students in a subset of schools that are not designed for success, we will neither be able to raise performance levels nor graduation rates for these students. In about 15 percent of high schools (through which about half of the nation’s dropouts enter ninth
grade), it is typical for the freshman class to be composed primarily of students who are multiple years behind grade level in math and English and have already begun to disengage from school. They may struggle with chronic absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure in the middle grades. Typically, there is also a higher than average number of students needing or receiving special education services, as well as increasing numbers of English language learner students. Entering ninth-graders are usually joined by a significant number of students repeating the grade at least once.

But this extreme educational challenge is then too often met with a dysfunctional response, including high levels of student suspensions—in an attempt to create order from the chaos—and high levels of teacher and administrator turnover. The adults who stay often adopt a making-it-through-the-day mentality, built upon lowered expectations and reduced adult effort. Current school turnaround efforts focused on a subset of the bottom 5 percent of schools receiving federal school improvement grants may prove effective at breaking up the dysfunctional response. But as states move to address all their lowest-performing schools through the Obama administration’s offer of ESEA waivers, they will need to develop the capacity to either lower the concentration of student need in these schools or enhance the level of student supports provided.

We need to recognize that the great American school system launched in the big cities in the early 20th century, and largely still in place today, was not created to educate all students—regardless of the skills and outlooks they bring to school—to a common, high standard that prepares them for postsecondary schooling and/or training. In retrofitting this system to its new purpose, there will be many bumps along the way, and many explicit and implicit assumptions will need to be jettisoned. Chief among these is the default remediation strategy of grade retention, based on the valid point that social promotion helps no one, but the flawed assumption that asking students simply to try again, without major changes in how they are taught and supported, works. While data can be marshaled to show that in some instances, for some students, in some circumstances, grade retention works, the data are also clear that students retained twice seldom graduate. Yet, students held back once, for whom the strategy does not work, are at great risk of being held back a second time. This can be seen in the growing number of over-age middle school students in states with tight promotion requirements for high school. No one is angrier than a 16-year-old eighth-grader. We have few effective interventions for these students. Thus, the costs of these policies across a number of states, like those that retain third-graders who are not reading at grade level, need to be more fully considered. An alternative would be to advance and bring to scale the response to intervention efforts.

If all students are to be educated to common, college- and career-ready standards, then we will need to increase the intensity of education and vary its modality until each student succeeds. This could be supported by building preK-12 early warning and intervention systems that monitor both off-track indicators for developing core cognitive skills and high school graduation, and on-track indicators for postsecondary success. But this will also require new thinking about ways to recruit a second shift of adults into schools and funding streams to provide the adult capacity needed to enable and propel all students to attend, behave, try, and believe.

The middle grades will also have to be re-invented. This is where low-income students, in particular, fall off the track to graduation. Here the Common Core provides an invaluable tool. Establishing exactly what middle schoolers need to be able to do enables greater freedom—and even experimentation—with how they learn it. One can imagine multiple ways to tap into middle-grade students’ desire for camaraderie, adventure, and performance by centering the acquisition of core academic skills in the context of engineering, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and the arts, and acknowledging their demonstration with intellectual merit badges.

Another avenue would be to use the Common Core to accelerate the rate at which students progress through school. A few states are moving toward awarding high school credit to eighth-graders who demonstrate mastery of high school material. If this became more the norm
and was combined with an even larger increase in dual enrollment and AP opportunities in high school, then the final grade of middle school and the final grades of high school could be refashioned as an accelerator to the next level of schooling. This could provide instant relevance to many students who now see these years as a time to coast. It would also position more students to complete college in three years, which helps address both rising costs and a potential shortage of college seats if we succeed in raising standards and graduation rates.

Lastly, what if instead of a fourth year of college, young adults—in return for enhanced financial aid—did a year of national service in high-needs schools, serving as tutors, mentors, and success coaches? This could both create the manpower needed to keep more students on track in more demanding middle and high school courses and serve as a final accelerator, by providing the national service corps members with the 21st century skills of teamwork, communication, and problem-solving that employers are seeking.

III. Taking the Long-Term View on Teacher Evaluation

By Bill Tucker

Our nation has embarked on two critical, but possibly conflicting endeavors.

The first, teacher evaluation, long considered a perfunctory exercise in many school districts, is in the midst of a momentous change. Across the country, in almost every state, from New York and Florida to Illinois and Washington, new evaluation systems are either under development or in the early throes of implementation. And while no state has the exact same approach, it’s clear that most will use a mix of indicators, including some form of classroom observation and a standardized measure of student performance, usually so-called value-added scores—a controversial measure of the growth in student test scores from year to year that attempts to control for demographic elements. Building a new evaluation system is immensely complicated, and in the end, the result must be seen as both fair and effective. It will take time to develop the right balance.

The second endeavor presents perhaps an even bigger challenge. Forty-five states, along with the District of Columbia, have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which will potentially reframe instruction, curricula, teacher professional development, and importantly, set new expectations for both teaching and learning. And directly connected with emerging new teacher evaluation systems is the work that states are doing together in several different consortia to develop new, shared assessments.1 These assessments will be aligned with the Common Core standards and are meant to replace the tests that each state currently administers separately as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In other words, states are not only figuring out how to build teacher evaluation systems based in part on student test scores, but at the same time, revamping both the tests and the standards they are based on.

Overall, the new standards and assessments are good news for both teachers and for those working to create fair and effective evaluation systems. In many states, the current standards expect teachers to cover so much content that they must race through the school year, trying to touch on everything but without the time or support to help students master anything. The new standards are meant to be “clearer, fewer, and higher,” allowing teachers to go deeper and ideally, spur the development of better tools and support for teachers’ practice. Related, the assessment consortia’s efforts to significantly improve testing—one of the weakest and most despised aspects of our nation’s current educational system—are also essential to teacher evaluation efforts. Long-term, says Douglas Harris, researcher and author of Value-Added Measures in Education: What Every Educator Needs to Know, “value-added will work better because the student assessments used to create value-added measures will be better.”2

But in the next few years, the timing and sequencing of implementation for both new standards and assessments
will impose significant challenges to teacher evaluation. “The new assessments will demand very different kinds of instruction than the current assessments have demanded,” says policy expert and former teacher Craig Jerald. For critics of current state tests, this too, is good news. If successful, these new assessments will better measure the full range of content and skills critical to student learning. But, for teachers, the implementation may be daunting. Jerald adds that the new assessments “will necessitate a massive, and massively difficult, change in instructional practices for many, if not most teachers.”\(^3\)

Of particular concern for teacher evaluation is the 2014-15 school year, when the new standards and assessments are meant to be fully implemented. Take, for example, value-added measures. Since these measures use test scores from both the prior year and the current year to determine student achievement, the value-added scores will cross a major transition to new tests, new standards, new question types, a new format (i.e., online testing), and more. As Rutgers professor and testing expert Drew Gitomer explains, we don’t have data to help us understand the patterns of growth from one test to a dramatically different test the next year. If the new standards and tests meet their expectations and really are measuring different learning outcomes, “then a whole lot more needs to be understood before we simply apply value-added models to these data.”\(^4\)

If today’s value-added measures are like calculating a sprinter’s improvement in the 100-meter dash across different tracks, then in spring 2015, we’ll be attempting the equivalent of calculating value-added across not only different tracks, but also racing events. And while we may be able to infer a number of things about a 100-meter sprinter’s improvement by her performance the following year in the half-mile, calculating a precise measure will be extremely difficult, at best. Scott Marion, associate director of the Center for Assessment adds that we can’t determine the validity of value-added models across the new assessments until we have the necessary data from the assessment field trials, slated for the 2013-14 school year. He cautions, though, that we “may have to wait until 2015.”\(^5\)

But policymakers don’t have to wait. Instead of crossing their fingers and hoping that the testing experts and statisticians will somehow figure it all out, they could make a bold statement that the quality of implementation, of both the Common Core standards and the new assessments, is the most important short-term goal. Teacher evaluation systems would continue their important development and remain in effect, but for the 2014-15 school year, the use of value-added would be put on a one-year hiatus.

With this move, districts and states would dampen the inevitable and even more fractious battles around value-added, which is already under fire as a measurement instrument and will face even more questions in the 2014-15 school year. They will allow everybody to focus on implementing the new standards, enable states to make the right decisions when building the new assessments, and hopefully, lower the discord level around evaluation just a little.

This solution, of course, is not without drawbacks. Changing an evaluation framework, especially one that requires negotiation among policymakers or between unions and management, will not be easy. Some, such as Jerald, would go further, arguing that during such a dramatic shift in expectations for teachers and their work, high-stakes evaluations are a distraction from the focus on helping teachers make this transition. Conversely, there’s also the real danger that those opposed to any evaluation of teachers at all will use a one-time exception to halt or delay progress on teacher evaluations in general. Value-added measures work better with multiple years of data, so even after a year, they will not be perfect. That’s why states and districts should continue to build on observational and additional, still developing measures, all the while focusing both evaluation and professional development to enable the instructional changes envisioned by the new Common Core standards.

The country has recognized that teacher evaluation systems must significantly improve. So, too, must our assessment systems. Evaluation proponents should have enough faith in their work and progress to avoid over-reaching. Rather than pressing the fight for value-added
IV. Leaping Forward Without Holding Schools Back

By Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel

1962. Now that would have been a perfect year for states to implement a set of standards like the Common Core and enact robust teacher evaluation systems. In 1962, the nation was on the verge of a major expansion of the federal role in schools. Our financial investment in education was about to increase substantially. We'd soon be opening the doors of all public schools to waves of previously excluded students.

And all of this would take place within a model of school organization that, we now can see, would remain pretty much the same for 50 years. First, schools would divide students into grade levels and, in the secondary years, subject-based classes. Students would progress by logging “seat time”—after a year in second grade, becoming a third-grader. After completing a year of English I, on to English II, and so forth.

Second, as a general rule, a single teacher would be assigned responsibility for each class of students. In elementary schools, each teacher would take a group of students under her wing and teach them all the core subjects. At the secondary level, each teacher would teach courses within a discipline to several classes of students each day.

With schools organized in this fashion, Common Core standards and assessments would have been advantageous. As students put in seat time to move through grade levels and courses, we could see how they were progressing toward expectations, wherever they resided.

And since students would be divided among the teaching pool, with each teacher the master of her classroom, the effectiveness of a student’s particular teachers would exert an immense influence on performance. Looking back with the help of recent research, we now can see that students with teachers in the top quartile would make, by some estimates, an average of 1.5 years of growth, compared to a year of growth with the middle group of solid teachers, and just 0.5 years with the least effective quartile. Teachers would appear similarly different in their success imparting higher-order thinking skills.

With student results tied so closely to individual teacher effectiveness, meaningful teacher evaluation would have been enormously valuable to teachers (to help them improve their craft) and to administrators (to help them make decisions about promotion, tenure, dismissal, and the like).

Fast-forward to 2012, when most states are just now putting these reforms in place. Ironically, states are finally making these moves at a moment when the basics of school organization—seat-time-based progression through grade-levels and courses and the one-teacher-one-classroom model—may be set to change dramatically.

First, the explosion of digital learning is making it increasingly possible to personalize a student’s educational experience. Smart software is becoming better at guiding onto its most treacherous terrain, supporters should step back, firm up the measure, and lock to the long term. And by doing so, we will also preserve the integrity of our evaluation systems – making them stronger, not weaker.

Notes

1. See the Center for K–12 Assessment & Performance Management (http://k12center.org/) for descriptions of the five federally funded assessment consortia: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, Dynamic Learning Maps, National Center and State Collaborative, and Assessment Services Supporting English Learners Through Technology Systems.


5. Scott Marion, in discussion with author, March 2012.
students through a sequence of lessons at their own pace, adapting to each student’s learning strengths and challenges. This software is reaching students in full-time virtual schools, but also through “blended learning”: brick-and-mortar schools that blend digital learning with instruction by teachers. While challenges abound, many commentators are enthusiastic about the potential of these new models to replace seat-time-based progression with mastery- or competency-based advancement.

Second, the one-teacher-one-classroom model appears set to change. The current set-up guarantees that only a quarter of classes—and the students within them—will be taught each year by excellent teachers, those that achieve the kind of learning growth needed to close achievement gaps and help students leap ahead. It also offers few opportunities for teachers to learn on the job in the way most professionals do—by working in teams under the leadership of excellent performers.

In contrast, a new set of models has the potential to “extend the reach” of excellent teachers, vastly expanding the number of students with access to top teaching and providing much greater opportunities for all teachers to develop and advance. Using job redesign and technology, these models all break from the one-teacher-one-classroom approach in various ways:

- **Multi-classroom leadership:** Instructional teams report to excellent teachers with leadership skills. The teacher-leaders are fully accountable for multiple classrooms, and they both teach and lead other team members—developing their skills while achieving immediate excellence.

- **Specialization:** Excellent teachers specialize in high-priority subjects and the most crucial, challenging roles, focusing on the subjects and instructional roles in which they excel. Teammates take care of other teaching and non-instructional tasks while developing their skills.

- **Remote teaching:** Schools without enough excellent teachers enlist accountable, remote teachers, who use technology to provide live, but not in-person, instruction. Remotely located teachers collaborate with other teachers and on-site learning coaches, who develop the whole child.

- **Time-technology swaps:** Digital instruction replaces enough excellent teacher time that the best teachers can teach more students and focus their time on higher-order learning. Teammates take care of students during digital learning and provide tutoring as assigned by lead teachers.

It’s the combination of other new staffing models with time-technology swaps that holds the most promise. Because excellent learning requires so much more than accurate instruction, just giving students digital tools within the current staffing model—or with no accountable teacher at all—isn’t likely to change outcomes dramatically. And job redesign alone, without using technology, limits teachers’ reach, recouped planning time, and economic benefits to teachers and schools. But if schools use technology to extend the reach of excellent teachers, students will gain the double benefit of personalized digital learning and the motivating, life-changing value of having excellent teachers. Schools can pay these teachers more and in many cases give them more planning time, too.

But here’s the challenge. As states move to implement the Common Core and new teacher evaluation models, they are quite naturally building these new systems for the world of schools we all know. Common Core standards mirror today’s grade-by-grade and course-by-course progressions. Many commentators worry that Common Core assessments will thus maintain the status quo: focusing on a year of seat time and missing the chance to create new, mastery-based measures.

New teacher evaluation systems also seem designed for today’s one-teacher-one-classroom set-up. The qualitative side of the new systems—the part based on observing teachers at work—generally rests on rubrics of teacher practice in which a teacher has sole responsibility for a class of students. Quite naturally, they don’t rate teachers on the competencies they would need to take on the leadership and team roles made possible by new staffing arrangements. And they arguably make it difficult for schools to organize responsibility for students differently, such as placing proven, excellent teachers in charge.
of multiple classrooms or making a remotely located teacher the “teacher of record” in a subject.

There’s a real danger here that promising new approaches will be strangled by systems rooted in the status quo. But, it doesn’t have to go that way. For one thing, the Common Core and rigorous teacher evaluation could be powerful enabling tools for new models. Investors and entrepreneurs are much more likely to be attracted to a market where standards and assessments are multi-state, rather than state-by-state. Common Core assessments should make it much easier for educators, parents, policymakers, and students to assess digital learning offerings over time and make judgments based on how well they work. And a common framework lays the foundation for use of “big data” to understand patterns, test approaches rapidly, and harness information to transform the delivery of education.

Similarly, rigorous teacher evaluation systems are a necessary, if not sufficient, underpinning of promising new staffing models. To extend the reach of excellent teachers to vastly more students, we need to know who our excellent teachers are. If we want to give all teachers the opportunity to aspire and contribute to excellence, we need strong systems of assessing practice and results. But to avoid the potentially stifling effects of systems rooted in today’s school organization, policymakers and educators need to do more. Three guideposts can help sidestep this dilemma:

• **Iterate.** If we make one big move to new student and teacher evaluation systems and then stay there for 50 years, we’re doomed. If we commit to iteration and results, we have a much better chance of taking advantage of new models. For student testing, that means finding ways to enable on-demand assessment—a way students can show their mastery of standards at any time, rather than just at year end. And it means pushing forward efforts to assess higher-order student capabilities. A central example is the work Tom Vander Ark and the Hewlett Foundation are doing to spur a new generation of technology-enabled systems to grade essays and other higher-order performance tasks. For teacher evaluation, iteration means continually refining measures of practice based on what correlates with student learning. It also means developing new measures that place teachers not just on a single dimension of effectiveness, but on multiple dimensions of competence that are important for the kinds of roles and career paths made possible by new staffing models.

• **Avoid squelching innovation.** Big state and district systems can iterate, but we shouldn’t count on them as the only source of innovation. Whether through charter schools or other forms of schooling, policymakers need to leave open a space for the development of school models that are radically different—and for the growth of those that are radically better. Ensuring that policies do not inhibit the kinds of models described above, in district and charter schools, is a start.

• **Create the will for excellence.** The best hedge against locking the status quo in place is giving leaders powerful incentives to pursue whatever strategies achieve the best results for students. Today, those incentives aren’t nearly powerful enough. Elsewhere, we’ve proposed boosting them by declaring a “new civil right” to an excellent teacher, and by substantially increasing the financial rewards of success for schools and teachers.

One additional risk of the Common Core and teacher evaluation work, in fact, is ironically a diminishment of will. If these developments lead to complacency—a sense that we’ve made the big moves we need to make—the nation won’t take the next critical steps of using these tools to give every student access to an education that only a fraction now receive.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, Eric Hanushek, “The Trade-off between child quantity and quality,” *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (1), 84-117, one of many studies in the last two decades demonstrating the wide range in teacher effectiveness.


3. Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson,
V. Getting Results With Limited Resources

By Allan Odden

For over 30 years, the United States has been engaged in education reform efforts designed to dramatically boost student performance and close achievement gaps linked to poverty and ethnicity, as a way to provide individuals with better opportunities to compete in the knowledge-based global economy and have satisfying social and family lives. Today’s version of these efforts is not something brand new but merely a more explicit evolution of expectations dating from the 1984 A Nation at Risk report. Current education reforms, e.g., Common Core State Standards, Race to the Top, ESEA waivers, educator effectiveness, turnaround schools, seek to provide a college- and career-ready curriculum to all students, ensure there is an effective teacher in every classroom and effective principal in every school, and hold educators accountable for producing these results—or at least significant growth toward them.

To be sure, today’s education reform expectations, along with the new federal and state initiatives to help schools meet them, are unfolding in an era when money for schools is in short supply. Education systems with greater resources—many in the Northeast, as well as in states like North Dakota and Wyoming that continue to benefit from oil, gas, and coal extraction fees—are better positioned to meet these challenges. But systems like California and Texas that have cut school funding by billions even with rising student enrollments, as well as districts in other states—e.g., Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, Washington—that were underfunded before the new education expectations emerged, are more challenged and will need to strategically redeploy the education dollars they have in order to move the student achievement needle. If they do not and mindlessly cut budgets, education program quality as well as student
learning will decline, children will be less prepared for the knowledge economy, and economic growth will be blunted.

Meeting today’s goals, however, is fiscally possible, even in the face of budget cuts and absence of any huge resource increases. Generally, educators will need to use current resources in much more impactful ways by reallocating existing resources to more effective programs, redesigning talent management systems, and engaging in real school restructuring and strategic budgeting. More specifically, it will require recruiting better talent into education, adopting effective curriculum, organizing schools in new ways, and targeting current and any new resources only to programs that work, as well as more aggressively adopting online learning systems that are half as expensive as traditional schools.²

**Talent Matters**

To begin, the education system needs to shift recruiting the bulk of its talent from the bottom to the top half of the talent pool. Several urban districts—Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Charlotte Mecklenburg—have adopted this strategy and as a result boosted student performance and reduced achievement gaps. These districts partnered with such national talent recruiting organizations as Teach For America, TNTP, and New Leaders for New Schools, which have crafted ways to recruit the best and brightest young adults into some of the most challenged school systems. Generally, this is a no-cost strategy as it uses existing recruitment and compensation budgets to acquire more talented educators who as a group are more effective in producing student learning.

**Adopting Effective Curriculum Programs**

A second strategy is for schools and districts to adopt effective curriculum programs. Russ Whitehurst, the former director of the Institute for Educational Sciences, authored a 2009 article showing that some reading and math programs (e.g., Open Court Reading and Saxon Math) are much more effective than others, with the effective programs being powerful “no cost” strategies.³ By contrast, “balanced literacy,” a reading approach popular across the country and within many state departments of education, is at odds with Whitehurst’s recommendations, as well as the characteristics of effective reading programs that emerged from National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-sponsored research and supported by the National Reading Panel. Many students, particularly low-income students and students whose parents are less-educated, need a structured reading program that systematically teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling as well as writing, reading comprehension, and reading fluency. Since each reading and math program costs about the same, picking programs that match personal philosophy or ideology should give way to selecting reading and math programs backed by evidence on their effectiveness in boosting student learning. This strategy is particularly relevant as education systems seek to implement Common Core standards in reading and math, which expect students to learn to higher standards, become fluent readers in all core content areas, and use knowledge to think, problem solve, and analyze.

**Reorganizing Teaching Work**

A third no-cost strategy is restructuring teacher work. Researchers, such as Stephen Raudenbush, and practitioners, such as Richard and Rebecca DuFour, have found that teaching in isolation is the prime reason for disparities in effective teaching within and across schools.⁴ They further argue that organizing teachers into collaborative groups—grade level teams in elementary schools and content or course teams in secondary schools—and having those teams use student data to improve instruction is a powerful way to change school culture, improve instructional practice, spread effective instructional strategies to more classrooms, and more uniformly boost student learning. When such teams use common assessments to compare teacher impacts across classrooms and judge the effectiveness of teacher work by student performance results, the results can be stunning: large increases in student achievement and significant reductions in achievement gaps. Sanger Unified School
District in California, which enrolls high percentages of students from poverty and minority backgrounds, is one of many districts that has used this strategy to dramatically boost student performance results.

Providing time for collaborative groups to work together during the school day is a major goal for the use of limited salary dollars and school time. It requires that schools have both core teachers—reading/English/language arts, math, science, history, and world language—and elective teachers in such areas as art, music, physical education, and career technical education. This staffing mix, evident in many but not all schools, allows all teachers to have some pupil-free time during the school day. It requires schools to be quite flexible about class sizes because schools with fewer resources will need larger class sizes in order to provide this staff mix. And to work, it requires principals to organize school schedules so that all teachers on each team have common pupil-free time and use the time for collaborative work. But in this fiscal trade-off, collaborative time trumps class size in terms of effectiveness and positive impact on student learning.

**Tapping the Power of Online Learning**

Though educators have resisted the idea that technology could “replace” educators in schools, evidence is rapidly accumulating that today’s online technologies can do just that, at least for many students. Some states, e.g., Idaho and Florida, have begun to require high school students to take at least one online course to graduate. Some state virtual schools, e.g., Georgia and Florida, offer the full range of programs, from elementary through high school, allowing students to take a full year of schooling at half the public cost of traditional schools. Virtual charter schools, like K12 Inc. and Connections Academy, also provide the full range of education programs at half the cost of public schools. For high achievers, nearly all Advanced Placement courses are available in an online format, usually at a low cost—$500-$700 per pupil—about half the costs of courses provided in brick-and-mortar schools. And Renzulli Learning, from the University of Connecticut’s Gifted and Talented Center, provides an online option for gifted and talented students at a cost to districts of just $25-$35 a pupil. Blended instruction, which merges computer-based instruction with regular teachers, requires fewer teachers and thus saves resources that can be used to pay the remaining teachers a higher salary and address budget constraints.

Though online programs might not work for all students or all programs, tapping online learning opportunities is a must in this era of increased school demands and tight budgets. If schools use online learning possibilities to cut costs in some areas by 50 percent, they will be better able to face other budget constraints; not doing so will simply require them to make unnecessarily larger budget cuts.

**More Effective Use of Resources**

If we are to reach current education reform goals—a more effective teacher in every classroom, principal in every school, college- and career-ready curriculum, higher levels of student learning and reductions in achievement gaps—then strategic budgeting—targeting dollars to programs that provide the largest effect—is a must.

The first step is to recognize and resist the common cost-increase pressures buffeting school budgets, including demands for lower class size, more electives, and annual automatic salary increases. When resources are limited—which is the case in nearly all education systems today and in the near future—these pressures “eat up” education budgets, have limited if any impact on student learning, and restrict schools from targeting resources where they matter. Schools need help from governors, legislators, and mayors to resist these public pressures to consume education dollars. The broader political community must set clear achievement goals in core subjects, signal that funds should first be used to maximize performance toward those goals, and publicly back school boards that “buck” public pressure to use funds in the above popular, but ineffective, ways.

The second step for districts is to have ambitious, specific student achievement goals; a plan of action to attain them; an understanding of the effectiveness and costs of each element of the plan; and a strategy for sequencing revenue use when the budget cannot fund all elements of the plan. Simulation tools can help by showing the
cost trade-offs of one strategy over another, and helping school leaders view equal-cost resource use alternatives as the precursor to selecting the more effective strategy. Simulations can help show how well-funded schools can trim back budgets while boosting student learning, as well as how underfunded schools can target resources to get the biggest student achievement bangs for the bucks they have.

Strategic budgeting requires districts and schools to be flexible about class size, reasonable in the number of periods scheduled and elective classes offered, and prudent in providing salary increases only when the budget increases. Strategic budgeting provides both core and elective teachers so that all schools can provide a full liberal arts curriculum program, but then organizes schedules in ways that allow all teachers to engage in collaborative work during the school day. Strategic budgeting provides collaborative teams with short cycle (every three to four weeks) student performance data, most of which are online adaptive systems that can be purchased from many vendors (and augmented if desired) for less than $20 a pupil, as the focus of their collaborative work. Strategic budgeting requires using some resources for tutoring and other extra-help strategies to ensure that students struggling to meet standards have the additional instruction they need to attain those goals. And when budgets become more generous, resources for such extra help should rise before class sizes are reduced because the former has a much larger impact on student learning gains.

Finally, over the medium to long term, strategic budgeting requires changing teacher compensation. Now that new evaluation systems score teachers to four to five effectiveness levels, salary schedules can be designed to link salary levels to effectiveness rather than years of experience levels. Redesigned schedules can require teachers to improve their effectiveness in teaching to earn salary increases, rather than just logging an additional year of experience or getting another degree. With such redesigned salary schedules, districts could attain a goal sought for many years—having the highest paid teachers be the most effective in producing student learning.

Teacher pensions should change from the current defined benefit programs, which provide too many teachers with high-cost early retirement (often funded with pension contributions from younger teachers who move before their pension vests), to “cash balance” programs that have states manage pension funds but align pension payouts to pension contributions and investment gains. Such pension approaches allow early or late retirement but the pension is determined by the annuity the cash balance can purchase at retirement time, which would be lower for early retirees and higher for later retirees and fully funded by contributions and investment gains.

In sum, educators can improve student learning even when budgets are tight. It will require leadership, tenacity, better talent, school reorganization, and strategic budgeting. It will be harder in places with less funding, but progress can be made in every district in the country. And without smarter use of the education dollar, school systems will decline in quality and the goals of current education reforms will not be met, with students from poverty and minority backgrounds suffering the most.

Notes


2. For a complete discussion, see Allan Odden, Improving Student Learning When Budgets Are Tight (Corwin, 2012).


ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

Education Sector commissioned this collection of essays in conjunction with the event “Getting to 2014: The Choices and Challenges Ahead.” The aim of these essays is to present ideas, elicit feedback, and encourage productive dialogue among policymakers, educators, and practitioners engaged in school reform.

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