

Building greater accountability through shared responsibility



Lester W. Young, Jr.
Chancellor, Board of Regents

The dictionary defines “accountability” as an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions. In the context of public education, accountability generally refers to the policies and systems that hold teachers, schools and districts responsible for students’ academic achievement. The stated goal is to inform the public and drive success.

For too long, school accountability systems have served to label and shame. We have all seen headlines announcing the latest lists of schools and districts that need improvement or some other dramatic intervention; in newspaper shorthand, they are often simply called “failing schools.” These terms can be demoralizing to educators, students and their families. Too often, the labels further stigmatize people and communities already facing significant challenges.

The overarching goal of New York’s federally-approved Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan is to create a set of interlocking strategies that promote educational equity by providing support to districts and schools as they work to ensure that every student succeeds. Our accountability system must advance that

work. We have an opportunity right now to improve the system in ways that will better position us to achieve the goals of our ESSA plan.

The work to reframe the system is already well underway. The State Education Department has just concluded a public comment period for New York’s proposed plan to “restart” the state’s accountability system for the 2022-23 school year, as required by the U.S. Department of Education. As always, NYSSBA and our educational partners around the state have provided thoughtful input.

The proposed one-year plan addresses disruptions caused by the pandemic and changes existing accountability indicators and processes to better support New York’s students and schools. It fosters the values we believe are most important to a successful accountability system; specifically, the system must be reliable, transparent and easily explainable. That means the public must always have confidence in, understand and trust the decisions we are making.

The proposed restart plan recognizes that words and phrases matter. For example, rather than identifying schools as comprehensive support and improvement schools, the plan instead refers to how the State Education Department will partner with schools and districts to provide the necessary support for improvement. It is a subtle shift, but we believe a critical one that will improve the message sent to school communities and the public’s perception of those school communities.

Our proposed 2022-23 accountability restart plan is just the beginning. It sets the groundwork for systemic

changes that the Board of Regents, the commissioner of education and I envision that are more responsive to the expectations of our parents and communities and the needs of all students. These changes comport with and promote overarching goals of improving academic achievement for all students, providing equitable systems of support and enhancing customer service to New York’s schools and districts. The move is part of efforts to continually and continuously improve our systems to support the work you do every day at the district level.

Accountability is a two-way street. For the process to be effective, the system must focus on continuous improvement through a sustainable partnership between the State Education Department and districts. Our work to reimagine New York’s accountability system in the long-term is not simply about schools “doing better” to get off a list of “failing” schools. Rather, we envision a system where schools, districts, BOCES and local communities work together with the State Education Department to ensure that all students receive the support, services and opportunities they need.

We are all responsible for our students’ success; our goal, therefore, is to create an accountability system that strengthens our collective responsibility to deliver on that shared obligation to our children.

I know that, as always, the Board of Regents and the Education Department can count on NYSSBA and its members to share their knowledge and expertise as we continue to develop and improve how we serve all of New York’s students.

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