Center for Assessment

Brief 4: Accountability Design Principles

What are the tensions and tradeoffs among competing design principles or priorities that are most salient during accountability system design?

Structures, such as bridges and buildings, are intentionally designed to meet certain specifications and design principles (or priorities). For example, a structural engineer might be tasked with designing a bridge that is both structurally safe and aesthetically pleasing, while also minimizing its environmental impact. However, these design priorities or principles don't always play nicely with one another — they can clash, creating tension in the design process. An engineer's primary concern is safety, so this design principle will help them make informed decisions when aesthetics or environmental impact conflict with safety.

Accountability system design is similar. When we identify the most crucial design principles from the outset, we can use them to make informed (and principled) decisions when competing priorities or tensions arise among design options later in the process.

Below are eight design principles commonly found in accountability system design, framed as continua. Each is described in detail starting on the next page. We recommend you read the descriptions of each design principle from left to right and then use the italicized question to note your perspective with respect to the trade-offs presented. Think of each of these tensions along a continuum and note if you'd fall solidly on one side or the other, if you'd be right in the center, center-left, or center-right.

1. Simplicity vs. Comprehensiveness
2. Change vs. Comparing Over Time
3. Flexibility vs. Standardization
4. Reporting New Information vs. Minimizing Burden
5. Treating All Schools the Same vs. Designing for Exceptionality
6. Mostly Outcomes vs. Balance of Outcomes & Opportunities
7. Implementation – Longer-term vs. Near-term
8. Single System vs. Multiple Systems (vs. Hybrid System)

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1	**Simplicity vs. Comprehensiveness**	**Simplicity**: The accountability system should be straightforward and uncomplicated. For example, the number of indicators should be minimized, and each measure should be easy to understand and compute locally.	**Comprehensiveness**: The accountability system should be comprehensive and use the most technically defensible set of indicators and measures, even if there are many indicators or some measures are difficult to understand or compute locally.
	*What is more important: a **simple and streamlined** model that might be easier to communicate or a **comprehensive** model that might be more technically defensible, but difficult to explain?* <---------->		
2	**Change vs. Comparability Over Time**	**Change**: If the current system does not serve its intended purposes well, then modifications are needed. This may involve adding or removing indicators, modifying indicators, and/or changing the 'rules' for how indicators are combined, and school ratings are produced (if at all).	**Comparability Over Time**: There is a common expression, "If you want to measure change, don't change the measure." Making substantive changes to the system will inhibit our ability to meaningfully compare accountability results in future years with those from previous years.
	*What is more important: **changing the model** to reflect needed improvements or minimizing changes to the existing model to **preserve the ability to measure year-to-year change**?* <---------->		
3	**Flexibility vs. Standardization**	**Flexibility**: Flexibility could include the (1) use of local measures in accountability, (2) choice over which indicators are relevant for a school, or (3) choice over what data or evidence can be used for an indicator.	**Standardization**: All schools are measured using the same indicators and methods.
	*What is more important: **allowing flexibility** in how schools earn points to support local control or being able to produce meaningful comparisons between and among schools through **standardization**?* <---------->		

4	**Reporting New Information vs. Minimizing Burden**	**Reporting New Information**: Collecting new types of data or qualitative information that is not currently collected, but can provide new or local context.	**Minimizing New Data Collection Burden**: Using only existing data collected by the state in the accountability system, even if there are improvements made to how the data is collected.
	*How important do you feel it is to **collect new information** to support the design priorities of the system, or use **existing data collections to minimize new data collection burdens**?* <---------->		
5	**Treating All Schools the Same vs. Designing for Exceptionality**	**Treating All Schools the Same:** Every school is held accountable to the same set of indicators or expectations regardless of its unique student populations, missions, or grade configurations.	**Designing for Exceptionality:** There could be either (1) separate accountability systems for exceptional schools (e.g., charter schools, alternative high schools, K-2 schools) or (2) the same accountability system, but it is designed broadly and flexibly enough to apply to all schools regardless of their unique student populations, missions, or grade configurations.
	*What is more important: **Treating all schools the same** or **specifically designing for exceptional schools** or **exceptional (or unique) schools**?* <---------->		
6	**Mostly Outcomes vs. Balance of Outcomes & Opportunities**	**Mostly Outcomes**: Most federal accountability systems focus on outcomes because the required indicators are mostly outcomes-based (e.g., academic achievement, growth, graduation rate, chronic absenteeism). Outcomes-based indicators/ measures are typically lagging indicators of school quality.	**Balance of Outcomes & Opportunities**: Accountability systems can also include a broad set of indicators that measure both student educational opportunities and outcomes. Opportunities can be thought of as inputs into the system, such as school climate, curriculum quality, opportunities for advanced coursework, etc. These inputs lead to the desired outcomes (leading indicators).
	*How important do you feel it is to focus mostly on **outcomes-based** indicators/measures or a **balance of outcomes and opportunities**?* <---------->		

7	**Implementation – Longer-Term vs. Near-Term**	**Longer-term Implementation**: A more deliberate implementation approach allows time to study the impact of potential changes and can lead to greater confidence that the new system is working as intended.	**Near-term Implementation**: A quicker implementation can potentially accelerate the realization of the goals, purposes, and uses of the changes. However, it may require changes in subsequent years if the model is found not to be working as intended.	
	*Should the state **take the time** to study or pilot some components more fully before determining if/how they should be included or **move quickly** to implement recommendations?* <---------->			
8	**Single System vs. Multiple Systems (vs. Hybrid System)**	**Single System:** A single system is one in which the federal and state accountability systems are identical.	**Hybrid System:** A hybrid system means some, but not all, elements in the state system satisfy federal requirements. Such a system requires some decision-making about how tightly to couple the state and federal parts. For example, academic achievement could be an indicator in both state and federal systems and measured in the same way (percent proficient). Or, academic achievement could be an indicator in both systems, but measured differently (mean scaled score vs. percent proficient). This can also apply beyond the indicator level to the aggregation methods or performance levels applied.	**Multiple Systems:** A multiple system is one in which there is no overlap between the federal and state accountability systems.
	*How important do you feel it is to have a **single state/federal system**, two completely **separate systems**, or **a hybrid system** where there are some shared elements?* <---------->			