**A Consumer-Focused Accountability System**

**By Michael R. Ford**

It is unrealistic to expect that the quality of a school, no matter its purpose, location, or clientele, can be accurately summed up by a single universal metric. As such, the goal of this proposed approach to state accountability in K-12 education is parental information and empowerment. The design is based on the belief that an effective accountability system is one that provides the consumers of public education, i.e. parents, the information they need to make an informed schooling decision for their children. In other words, an accountability system should answer the key parental question: What should I expect for my child if they enroll in this school? A successfully implemented consumer-focused approach to accountability will lend credibility to a state’s public education system in the eyes of those who actually use it. Hence, a secondary goal of this system is to serve as a contrast to one-best way approaches that serve the needs of bureaucrats and policy-makers rather than children and parents.

**Design objective**

The proposed accountability system has one main key design objective: Provide parents with actionable intelligence on which to choose the appropriate school for their child. The objective is grounded in the reality that the direct stakeholders in K-12 education have no universal preference or set of preferences in their schooling choices. Simply, not all parents want or need the same things out of their child’s school. While a rigid grading system may be desirable for policy-makers seeing a simple form of bureaucratic and legal accountability, such a system does not give individual parents a clear indication of what they should expect for their unique child’s learning experience.

**Design**

The consumer-focused accountability system utilizes a combination of performance measures and school transparency requirements.

*Indicators of Academic Achievement*

Standardized test score results in reading, math, science, and social studies are used as indicators of academic achievement. The academic achievement indicator is calculated via a two-step process. First, the percentage of students scoring proficient in each subject will be added to the percentage of students scoring advanced divided by two. For example, if a school has 50 percent of its students scoring at least proficient in a subject, and 10 percent of those students are deemed advanced, their subject score will be 55 (50+ (10/2)). Second the, four subject scores will be averaged (with all grades given equal weight) to produce an overall academic achievement score. This approach speaks to the importance of student achievement in social studies and science in addition to reading and math, and also rewards schools for getting students up to an advanced level on standardized test scores. Admittedly, this approach is imperfect; academic achievement is more than standardized test scores in four subjects, however it does provide the parent with an easy to understand metric of where a school’s students are scoring on standardized exams. Importantly, results will be released for all students, as well as for low-income and racial minority groups.

*Student Growth*

The student growth component of the consumer-focused accountability system is designed to inform parents on what effect they can expect an individual school to have on their child’s achievement over time. Student growth will be measured by the average increase in students’ scale scores (converted to a 0-100 scale) on the state standardized test in each of the four subject areas (math, reading, science and social studies) after one year, three years, and five years enrolled in a school. Of course, three- and five-year growth scores will be fazed into the accountability system over time. Average growth scores will be reported for all students, as well as for low-income and racial minority groups. The strength of this approach is simplicity for parents, who will be able to look at an accountability report and see how much growth they should expect in a given school on a simple 0-100 scale. Using actual numbers as opposed to the language of basic, advanced and proficient allows schools to receive credit for increasing test scores even if a categorical threshold is not crossed.

*English Language Learners (ELL)*

The consumer-focused accountability system takes a simple approach to measuring progress for ELL students. It reports the percentage of a school’s identified ELL students who reach proficiency after one, three, and five years enrolled in a school. This approach, while unsophisticated, will give ELL parents an indication of how long they should expect it to take for their child to become proficient if enrolled in any given school.

*Other Indicators of School Quality*

The consumer-focused accountability system will require all schools to report various other data pieces in total, and by low-income and racial groups. The first piece of data is annual retention rate, i.e. the percentage of students who remain in the school from one year to the next. The second data piece is percentage completion, i.e. the percentage of students who enroll at the school at any time that actually make it to graduation. Both of these pieces of information are crucial for parents to make use of student growth scores. For example, if a school reports high growth scores but very low retention percentages, a parent can weigh the pro of high growth versus the con of a reduced possibility that their child will be able to reap the benefits of high growth. The third indicators, which will take many years to manifest, is the percentage of a school’s graduates who take a college entrance exam, and the average score on that exam. Obtaining this indicator will require tracking of students over time, and will result in some attrition for students who move out of state. However, it is an important indicator of the overall impact a school is having on a child’s academic trajectory.

The last and most important “other” indicator for the consumer-focused school accountability is parental satisfaction surveys. The purpose of this indicator is to determine what exactly parents think of a school. To be successful, parental satisfaction surveys must have several components. First, surveys must be standardized across the state so that all schools use a common survey. Second, schools must obtain a high participation rate so as not to have their validity undermined by response bias. To accomplish this, schools should administer surveys to parents at the school and online, and make their completion a condition of student promotion. Third, states must develop a system to distill parental satisfaction down to a single number from 0-100, and report that number for all students, as well as low-income and racial minority groups. While the number metric will be imperfect, it is necessary for parental satisfaction to be incorporated into a summative school grade.

*Summative Grades*

As required, the consumer-focused accountability system includes a summative grade component, however a unique feature of the system is school flexibility. Schools have the option of being graded as a “Growth School,” or an “Achievement School.”

Growth schools will have a summative grade comprised of the following components by percentage:

* Student growth (one-year): 60%
* Parental satisfaction: 20%
* Student achievement: 10%
* ELL progress (one-year): 10%

Achievement schools will have a summative grade comprised of the following components by percentage:

* Student achievement: 60%
* Parental satisfaction: 20%
* Student growth (one-year): 10%
* ELL progress (one-year): 10%

Schools will, every five years, declare themselves either a growth or achievement school. Allowing schools to choose will encourage them to determine their strengths, and exercise economy of effort in recognizing their potential. More important, the flexibility allows parents to find schools whose specialties align with their child’s needs. Implicit in this system is the belief that schools should specialize, because a school with a singular organizational goal is more likely to be successful than a school with dual, perhaps competing missions. In both school types, parental satisfaction is emphasized in recognition of the importance of satisfied customers in any schooling situation. In both school types ELL progress is given a comparatively low-degree of emphasis. The rationale is that schools with high-growth, high-achievement, and high levels of parental satisfaction are also likely meeting needs of ELL students. As such, schools with insufficient numbers of ELL students (less than 20), will have a higher percentage of their summative score based on parental satisfaction (30%).

Once calculated, each school will be given 1-5 stars based on their performance relative to all other schools in their chosen category. The choice of relative rankings is based on the belief that in a consumer-focused system, parents will want to know a school’s performance relative to their other potential school choices. The top 20% of schools will receive five stars, the next 20% four stars, the next 20% three stars, the next 20% two stars, and the lowest 20% one star. Schools will also be given star grades for their performance by low-income and racial groups for every group with at least 20 students. The 20-student number is somewhat arbitrary, but based on the need for a sizable number of students in order for a star ranking to have any validity.

**Conclusion**

The presented consumer-focused accountability system is designed to turn accountability from a punitive concept from policy-makers, to an actionable concept for parents. The system accomplishes this by giving schools the ability to be judged on their strengths, giving parents the ability to determine their child’s likely progress if they enroll in any given school, and incorporating parental satisfaction into school ratings. Of course this system, like any accountability system, is imperfect. However, this author believes the incorporation of flexibility and parental satisfaction can make it an effective and informative state-level approach to accountability.