Meeting the Accountability Challenge

A Handbook for Michigan Educators
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

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Public expectations for the performance of schools and students have never been higher, and educators are being held accountable for results. Recent initiatives, including the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Michigan’s new school accreditation framework, reflect the belief that strengthening accountability is the key to improvement in the education system. The pressures on school districts, schools and teachers to increase student achievement are increasing by the day. How should educators respond? The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University has put together this handbook to help school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers answer this question.

Accountability is nothing new in education. Schools have always been accountable to their communities, and teachers have always been accountable to their students. What is new is the determined effort to hold schools and students accountable for meeting achievement standards established by the state. The importance assigned to results on standardized tests like MEAP has grown, and policies designed to hold educators accountable for meeting state standards have proliferated.

Too often, policy debates about accountability have focused on the question of who is to blame for the poor performance of schools and students. Teachers? Principals? Superintendents? School boards? This is not helpful. No single group can be held responsible for the success or failure of Michigan’s schools, and no single group can improve their performance without the support of others. All actors—from the Governor to the student in the classroom—are accountable for improving the performance of Michigan’s education system. Politicians, business leaders, local communities, parents, administrators, teachers, and students must work together to help teachers help students learn.

The question that must be answered in thinking about accountability is not “Who is to blame?” but “Who is accountable for what, and to whom?” This is a question that educators must answer for themselves, in dialogue with their colleagues and communities. This handbook provides resources to support a constructive conversation about accountability in Michigan’s schools and school districts.

In each of the chapters that follow, we emphasize that an effective accountability system must have three key features. First, it must be focused on teaching and learning. Second, it must include both pressure and support. Finally, it must elicit the understanding and acceptance of those who work within it. An accountability system that does not incorporate these critical elements is destined to fail.

The first chapter of the handbook reviews the evolution of Michigan’s present accountability system. Educational leaders and citizens in our state have been wrestling with the problem of holding schools...
accountable for more than three decades. We have made some progress, but the continued lack of shared vision and consistent direction means that we still have far to go.

Subsequent chapters discuss the accountability of school board members, superintendents, principals and teachers. The goal of these chapters is not to assign or prescribe responsibilities. Instead, these chapters provide the basis for discussion within these groups about what they can do to improve the performance of schools and students in Michigan, and for what they are prepared to be held accountable. Each chapter includes a series of questions that may help to guide this discussion, along with a list of additional resources for those who wish to learn more.

The handbook grows out of the work of Michigan’s Accountability Task Force, which brought together leaders from all parts of Michigan’s education system to develop a framework for accountability in our state. In the two reports published by the Accountability Task Force the members committed themselves and the organizations and constituencies they represent to work together, and to hold themselves and one another accountable for improving the performance of schools and students in Michigan.

For the work of the Accountability Task Force to result in lasting improvements in Michigan’s education system, the conversations that produced these two reports must now be repeated in every school and school district in Michigan. School board members, superintendents, principals and teachers have to work toward common understanding of Michigan’s accountability system, and of their own responsibilities and expectations within that system. We hope that this handbook will encourage and support these conversations, and contribute to the development of an effective accountability system for schools and students throughout our state.

The handbook was produced by the staff of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, under the general direction of Jeannie Patrick. Contributors included Courtney Bell, Joe Flynn, Bettie Landauer-Menchik, Kwanghyun Lee, David Lustick, Andy Pass, Lisa Ray, Chris Reimann, Andrew Shouse, and Debbi Weimer. The handbook is a resource for local educators, and can be duplicated and distributed freely. Additional copies are available at cost from the Education Policy Center. The handbook is also available on the Center’s website, at www.epc.msu.edu.

David N. Plank
Director
A History of Accountability in Michigan

Accountability and accountability systems are not new to Michigan’s system of public education. For more than 30 years, education leaders and elected officials have attempted to organize, manage and operate public schools more effectively, while at the same time demanding improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in school systems and in teacher preparation institutions across the state. Michigan’s education accountability movement has evolved through a series of legislative initiatives, promulgated rules and regulations, attorney general opinions, and State Board of Education policies. Leadership and advocacy from state officials and educators at all levels have helped shape accountability in schools.

Most of the recent history of public education in Michigan concerns the accountability movement. The idea of improving accountability runs through a series of state initiatives involving student assessment, school improvement plans, the development of common education goals and professional development planning. Understanding the roots of this movement can help educators put current accountability efforts into a meaningful context.

Michigan’s Traditional Accountability System

In Michigan, public schools have traditionally been, and still are, held accountable in three major ways. Schools are **democratically accountable** to local voters. If the residents of a school district are dissatisfied with the performance of their local schools, they can replace the members of the elected school board. Public schools are also **legally accountable** for compliance with state and federal laws, ranging from state statutes governing the management of public funds to federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In addition, educators who work in public schools are **professionally accountable** to their colleagues and to the norms and standards of their profession.

These three types of accountability have largely focused on issues of school management, not student academic performance. Performance expectations for public schools were traditionally decided at the local level. Some school boards set high standards for local schools and students, while others did not. The state did not directly intervene in these decisions. Instead, the state held schools and school districts accountable for compliance with laws and regulations that ensured minimum learning conditions for all students – for example, districts are required to employ licensed teachers, and to provide at least 186 days of instruction each year. However, a growing awareness of the importance of education to Michigan’s economic future prompted business leaders
to call for improved levels of performance. This led to efforts by state education leaders and policy makers to articulate specific outcomes and expectations for public schools and students.

**Developing a Statewide Accountability Model**

In 1970, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education held a series of meetings throughout the state to “elicit the opinions and concerns of local educators and lay citizens” regarding a proposed set of common goals for Michigan education. Twenty-two goals were ultimately adopted in 1971 “as statements of broad direction and general purpose for Michigan’s educational system.” Using these Common Goals of Michigan Education as a foundation, the State Board of Education next initiated a process of public engagement to develop performance objectives and methods for assessing the state’s progress in meeting these goals.

Throughout the 1970s, this policy framework evolved and became known as Michigan’s Six Step Accountability Model. The State Board of Education adopted this model as a guide for improving Michigan education. The Six Step Model was designed to provide policymakers with more information with which to craft sound educational policy. One of the key components of the Six Step Accountability Model was the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). Initiated in 1970 as a statewide diagnostic tool for classroom teachers, the MEAP was originally referred to as “an educational health check for basic skills.” Over time, the MEAP evolved to a higher-level assessment that began to look at specific learning outcomes.

**The Shift in Performance Accountability**

Michigan’s Six Step Accountability Model was highly controversial. It produced heated debate at the state and local levels among education officials, district administrators, board members, classroom teachers and teacher unions. The new accountability model represented a sea change in education policy in Michigan because it challenged the sovereignty of local district control. At the same time, new sources of state and federal funds targeting specific education issues at the district and building level became available. This shift in funding was an important step away from the local funding for schools that had been the basis for local autonomy.

In the late 1970s the State Board of Education revisited The Common Goals of Michigan Education and, following extensive public input, adopted a new set of goals in 1979. This new framework reorganized the Common Goals into two areas: Student Learning and System Responsibilities. The revised Common Goals incorporated statements “which describe characteristics of a quality education system.” Local boards of education were “encouraged to utilize this document in developing their educational goals and policies, and in implementing instructional programs.”

In the broader social context, this time is remembered as a period of political activism, public debate, economic change, rapidly growing school enrollments, intensive collective bargaining relationships and changing expectations for all public institutions. Advocacy groups pushed for greater educational equity and special education and bilingual education initiatives were introduced. The accountability movement matured in Michigan throughout the late 1970’s and 1980’s as educational leaders engaged the public in discussions about the future of education in the state and nation. In the early 1980’s the US Secretary of Education published a
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report titled *A Nation at Risk*, which received wide national attention. The State Board of Education responded with its report, *Better Education for Michigan Citizens: A Blueprint for Action*. The Michigan report contained recommendations for local and intermediate school districts, the Governor and the Legislature, and institutions of higher education. The Blueprint for Action reinforced the concept of systemic education reform, discussed the components of a quality education, and continued to raise expectations for school improvement.

**Accountability in the 1990s: PA 25 and Schools of Choice**

The shift toward statewide performance accountability continued during the 1990s. The approval of *Public Act 25* in 1990 marked the first critical step toward a comprehensive framework for standards based accountability in Michigan’s public schools. Then, in 1996, the Michigan Legislature introduced market accountability into the public school system through the establishment of charter schools and an expansion of school choice policies. Choice policies are intended to make schools more directly accountable to the consumers of education, the parents and students. Rather than waiting for the next school board election to express their dissatisfaction, students in many parts of Michigan can now move from one public school to another, taking their state funds with them. Schools that do not meet the expectations of parents lose students and revenues.

The key elements of the original *Public Act 25* framework included:

- **School Improvement.** Schools are required to develop school improvement plans, create school improvement teams including parents and teachers to implement their plans, and to measure progress toward achievement of plan objectives.

- **Core Curriculum.** The state established a model core curriculum, and proposed learning outcomes for all students. Local school districts are encouraged to align their curricula with the state’s core curriculum, and to notify district residents if the curriculum is not aligned.

- **Accreditation.** Schools are regularly evaluated on the basis of their curricula, staffing, and facilities, and on their compliance with the requirements of the school improvement process.

- **Annual Education Report.** All schools are required to publish an annual report providing information to parents and community members on student achievement, parent participation, accreditation status, and other factors related to the implementation of the school improvement plan. They are also required to hold a public meeting to review the report.

With its emphasis on school improvement and parent participation, PA 25 marked a decisive move by state policymakers beyond simple compliance with minimum standards of time, staffing, and facilities as a basis for holding public schools accountable. PA 25 held schools accountable for developing and participating in a continuous process of school improvement that included opportunities for parent and community involvement.

**Linking Accountability to Accreditation**

The main problem with the accountability framework originally defined by PA 25 was the absence of any mechanism for assessing whether the school improvement process defined by the law was effective. Did
schools that participated in mandated school improvement activities actually improve? Answering this question required a mechanism for assessing the performance of students, schools, and school districts.

A first move to fill the gap in the PA 25 accountability framework came in 1995 when the Legislature amended the law to require that decisions about accreditation of schools take pupil performance on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests into account. For purposes of accreditation, the MEAP tests are intended to measure the extent to which students have mastered state-defined standards of knowledge and skill. Aggregated results of the tests also provide a measure of schools’ and school districts’ success in delivering the core curriculum and raising student performance to state-defined standards. The MEAP lies at the heart of standards-based accountability in Michigan today.

### Accountability Today and Tomorrow

As Michigan moves from an economy based on farming and manufacturing to one increasingly based on information, success depends on the knowledge and skills of the state’s workers. Public expectations about what students should know and be able to do are rising. We now expect our public school system to ensure that all students have the high-level reading, math, and critical thinking skills that they will need to perform effectively in the new economy. As expectations for public schools have increased, key stakeholders including employers have argued that traditional accountability mechanisms (democratic, legal, professional) do not hold Michigan’s public schools to a sufficiently high standard of performance. In December 2001 the Michigan Department of Education announced the Education Yes! A Yardstick for Excellent Schools initiative. Incorporating public and professional organization input and the 2002 federal “No Child Left Behind” reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Education Yes! initiative clearly brings accountability to the center stage of state education policy. As its “yardstick” metaphor suggests, Education Yes! focuses on establishing common standards for measuring student and school performance and reporting results to parents and policymakers. It calls for continuous improvement in all schools, especially in schools where current performance is unsatisfactory.

The Education Yes! accountability initiative reflects the history of accountability in Michigan and points toward its future. Traditional measures of accountability based on minimum thresholds of institutional behavior – number of days in instruction and employment of certified teachers – have been superseded by ambitious goals for student and school achievement. The future of public education in Michigan includes a new seriousness about measuring and reporting outcomes, supporting schools and districts that need help and sanctioning those that fail to respond. It will be essential for teachers, administrators and school board members to understand what our state’s accountability policies require of them, and how they can best meet their responsibilities.

### Sources


Implications for School Boards

Part I: An Overview

Any discussion about increasing the accountability of public school districts might seem odd, ironic or simply frustrating to veteran school board members. School boards are already accountable to state and federal agencies in many ways. They are responsible for maintaining balanced budgets, providing special and compensatory education services, complying with gender, race and disability anti-discrimination statutes, and insuring that their facilities meet state and local fire, health and safety codes.

Nevertheless, it is true that a new type of accountability is now being required of school boards and the districts they govern. School boards must now be accountable for student performance, to be measured in very specific ways – most significantly the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). Other chapters in this handbook discuss the impact of accountability on teachers, principals and superintendents. Each chapter presents three ways of looking at accountability – as an opportunity for teaching and learning, as a source of pressure and support, and as a growing reality requiring understanding and acceptance on the parts of educators. These ideas can help the people in those jobs make accountability work for them, not against them.

The purpose of this chapter is to help school board members apply these same perspectives on accountability to their own situations and responsibilities. The chapter includes questions to prompt discussion among board members, and a list of references for more information on the issues raised.
Using Teaching and Learning to Improve District Accountability

School boards have always been accountable for student academic performance; what has changed is the type of accountability required of school boards. In the past, a school board responded primarily to its district’s internal accountability systems – that is, to the people within the local community, whether parents, district personnel or local citizens. Now school boards must respond to an additional, external accountability system that includes the entire state. With a state economy increasingly dependent upon skilled and knowledgeable workers, and with a school funding system based on state revenues rather than on local property taxes, all citizens in Michigan now have a stake in the preparation of every student in every district.

Even with this external accountability system in place, the local school board is still responsible for ensuring that the district has an educational vision and mission in place, and for overseeing the enactment of that vision and the achievement of its mission. Issues of enrollment, staffing, facilities and many others confront school boards in as many variations as there are districts. Adding student performance to this mix might seem like adding an additional challenge to an already crowded agenda.

The ideas presented in this handbook, however, encourage board members to look upon accountability as a solution, not a problem. Specifically, improved student performance can serve as a board member’s moral and strategic compass in navigating other issues facing the board by focusing attention on the question, “How does this issue relate to improved teaching and learning?” This approach may not make board decisions on difficult issues any easier, but making teaching and learning the central question on any issue can lead to better board decisions in terms of what matters most.

Using Pressure and Support to Meet Accountability Goals

The virtue of accountability as a concept is its reasonableness: few would argue that school districts should be less accountable for student achievement. The hard part, of course, is translating the concept of accountability into practice. The state has identified particular accountability goals and a strategy for measuring progress toward them – the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). The Education YES! process for school accreditation recently adopted by the State Board of Education includes many other measures of school performance and student success; still, two-thirds of a school’s accreditation rating is directly linked to the MEAP.
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The goals outlined in the Education YES! Process give districts and their employees direction and create pressure for everyone to work towards them. Pressure is good when it prompts progress toward district and state goals; to be effective, however, pressure must be combined with support that provides district personnel with the capacity to reach accountability goals. They need the proper curricular materials as well as sufficient training in the kinds of practices that lead to improved outcomes. They need parents and community members to support district accountability goals and the changes prompted by them. School boards need to prepare all parties for the unavoidable “bumps in the road” that accompany shifts in policies and practices. Without these kinds of support, pressure produces stress instead of progress.

Using Understanding and Acceptance to Improve District Accountability

Achieving any policy goal depends upon widespread understanding and acceptance of the policy by those responsible for implementing it. Simply put, people (such as school personnel) are unlikely to do something well if they do not understand it or if they disagree with it. At the same time, policymakers (such as legislators) need to understand something of the perspectives of those “in the trenches” whose job it is to carry out policy. They need to accept the fact that other people necessarily interpret even the clearest of policies through the lenses of their own experiences. This means that an important function of a district school board is to provide the continuous, two-way communication necessary for district personnel to understand what is expected of them and for policymakers to understand the impact of their decisions on the people who are expected to carry them out.

Part II: The Specifics of School Board Accountability

Only in the context of actual school district operations does accountability have any real meaning or value. Still, all school boards share some common responsibilities, and the three concepts introduced in Part I can help school board members meet them. To be successful – and to successfully meet state accountability goals – school board members must provide their districts with three types of leadership: instructional leadership, organizational leadership, and public leadership. The rest of this chapter will suggest ways that school board members can improve their leadership in these areas.

Instructional Leadership

Asking school board members to provide instructional leadership may seem counter-intuitive. After all, they are not professional educators, but community representatives elected to oversee the operation of the school district. Still, the most important responsibility a school board has is to hire and hold accountable the district’s top educator, the superintendent. School
boards demonstrate instructional leadership by clearly defining the role and responsibilities of superintendents and then holding them accountable for their performance. Board members demonstrate leadership by making teaching and learning the constant concern of all their policy discussions and decisions. At the school board level, instructional leadership means withstanding pressure from district personnel or the community to take up or decide issues in ways that distract the board and the district from their primary mission: student academic achievement.

In effective districts, students are not the only learners. The concept of learning communities extends beyond classrooms to include central office staff and board members as well. Professional development is as important for a school board member as it is for a principal or teacher. Crafting sound district policy requires extensive knowledge on a range of issues not usually familiar to the general public.

Organizational Leadership

Instructional leadership provides clear, meaningful goals to pursue. Organizational leadership establishes an effective environment that allows district personnel to reach those goals. A critical component of effective organizational environments is autonomy. Having established clearly the role and responsibilities of the superintendent, the school board should provide the autonomy and support he or she needs to fulfill those duties. By resisting the temptation to micro-manage, school boards can model this important leadership trait for superintendents, principals and parents. By leaving the daily operations of the district to the superintendent, a school board can concentrate on meeting its responsibility to provide thoughtful policy and long-term planning. Working with the superintendent, board members should examine how district resources are allocated, and whether or how they should be re-oriented to promote greater student achievement. The new federal “No Child Left Behind” act will hold districts accountable for achievement gains in all student subgroups, not just district averages.

Public Leadership

School board members not only represent the community to the schools – they must also represent the schools to the community. While many things about schools have endured since today’s adults were students, many other things have changed. Both the stakes and the challenges of providing quality education to all students in a community have risen sharply over the course of a generation. Communities cannot afford to
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Think about schools “in the same old ways” – and neither can school board members. In their role as public leaders, board members have the opportunity and the obligation to increase community awareness of and involvement in important school issues, including accountability.

**Summary**

Responsibility for student achievement is not a new obligation for school boards, but the commitment on the part of the state to hold school districts accountable for student performance on state accountability assessments is something school board members must take seriously. By virtue of their positions, board members have the opportunity to show the kind of instructional, organizational and public leadership that can bring significant improvement to the schools in their charge. School boards should clearly identify the role and responsibilities of superintendents, supply the support necessary for them to fulfill these roles, then evaluate their performances based on agreed-upon measurements. By leaving daily operations to the superintendent, school board members can focus on their responsibilities: to set district policy, provide thoughtful long-range planning, and represent both community and district with equal passion.

How often do board members, individually or as a group, go out into the community to speak about important district issues and to listen to community concerns?
Resources for School Board Members

Effective School Boards: Strategies for Improving Board Performance, by Eugene R. Smoley, Jr
Everyone who cares about how effectively boards perform, whether currently serving on a board or not, will find something useful here, ranging from analysis of why boards fail to presentation of a model for success - the Model for School Board Effectiveness - that is based on real-life experience. To purchase the full text of the book, contact Jossey-Bass at: http://www.josseybass.com or call (888) 378-2537. A useful compendium to this book can be found at the National School Board Association’s website: http://www.nsba.org/smoley/

Improving School Board Decision Making: The Data Connection
From the National School Board Association
http://www.schoolboarddata.org/
Includes PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, hands-on training tools and other helpful materials you won’t see in the book for school board members who want to know more about how to use data to make good decisions for children in public schools. This site is intended to accompany, the National School Board Association’s Improving School Board Decision-Making: The Data Connection. The text can be ordered on-line at http://www.nsba.org/pubs/pubs_list.cfm, or from National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314 703-838-6722 703.838.7590 Fax

Making Good Choices: Districts Take the Lead
From North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
http://www.ncrel.org/csri/mgcdist/intro.htm
Across the country, public schools are aiming to improve student performance dramatically by engaging in comprehensive school reform (CSR). CSR is different than other reform efforts. Its goal is not to revise certain components of a school’s operations, but to redirect all the programs, structures, processes, and policies of the school toward the ultimate objective—improving student achievement. The simple fact that schools are the organizations most directly serving students has kept much of the attention centered at that level. However, as external model providers have discovered, without the effective support of the district, CSR is difficult to implement. This resource considers the role that school districts, led by their boards, play in school improvement efforts.

Designing and Implementing Standards-based Accountability Systems
From the Education Commission of the States
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/33/44/3344.htm
This guide is designed to heighten policymakers’ understanding of accountability choices and challenges. It describes the various ways standards-based accountability systems can be designed and used, and how they can contribute to state and local education improvement.
Implications for Superintendents

Part I: An Overview

As public school superintendents are well aware, public schools in Michigan now operate in an environment of heightened accountability. The opening sections in this handbook provide a history and overview of this movement. The overview suggests three perspectives on how to approach accountability – as an opportunity for teaching and learning, as an environment of pressure and support, and as a situation calling for understanding and acceptance. These perspectives can help everyone involved in our schools cope with the demands of increased accountability. Other sections focus on school board members, principals and teachers and how these three perspectives can help people in these roles deal with accountability issues.

The purpose of this chapter is to help superintendents think positively about how they can make accountability policies work to their advantage to improve student and staff performance. The state’s focus on accountability creates opportunities for superintendents to devise strategies that will improve learning environments for their students and solidify community support for their schools. These strategies can only work if superintendents hold themselves accountable for having a thorough understanding of the issues they face and how state accountability goals affect the way those issues play out.

Superintendents know that, at the district level, accountability rests upon them. More than at any time in the past, the role of the superintendent has become that of district instructional leader with primary responsibility for student academic performance. Superintendents are responsible for organizing – or reorganizing – the district so that high levels of teaching and learning can take place. It is up to the superintendent to put accountability into action, to create the meaning of accountability for the staff and community in his or her district.
Using Accountability to Support Teaching and Learning

The goal of accountability is to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. But it can help to view accountability as being about teaching and learning in other ways as well. For example, to hold accountable is to tell (teach) others what is expected of them; determine (learn) whether they have the capacity to complete the tasks set for them; then assess (learn) whether they have met expectations. True accountability requires all three steps: people cannot be held accountable if they have not been told what is expected of them; they cannot be held accountable for tasks beyond their capabilities; they cannot be held accountable if the results of their efforts are not measured against the goals set for them.

As the state expands its accountability system to include student academic achievement, superintendents have the opportunity – and the obligation – to lead their districts in a re-examination of district accountability systems. The goal of such a process will be to clarify – in some cases to confirm, in others to revise – who is responsible for which aspect of student achievement, whether at the student, classroom, building or district level. The results of this re-examination should be specific, comprehensive and public. They should be specific, in that each person involved should clearly understand what is expected of him or her, and how their performance will be evaluated. The results should be comprehensive, to acknowledge that teachers bear only partial responsibility for student success. Parents, principals, school board members and students themselves also have specific responsibilities for student academic achievement. Each must understand and accept his or her share of responsibility. For some, the news that they too are responsible for student achievement will be readily apparent; for others it may be a revelation. Finally, the results of any re-examination of district accountability systems must be public. School districts are ultimately responsible to the communities they serve. Openness and public dialogue builds community awareness and support for the changes identified and allows for public comment.

How much of the accountability system at work in my district is formalized and understood by all involved, and how much of it is informal? To what extent is the formal part of the accountability system focused on student achievement? The informal?

Chances are good that the vision of education represented by the state’s accountability system, on the one hand, and that of the district, on the other, will not be perfectly aligned. In such cases it is important for superintendents to educate school board members, district staff and the community at large about the similarities and differences between these two visions. Even more important, superintendents must make sure everyone is aware of the consequences that may result from the differences. Superintendents have the essential if unenviable responsibility of making sense of community beliefs about schooling in light of the new standards established by state policymakers.
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Using Pressure and Support to Meet Accountability Goals

The accountability measures established by the state can be seen as obstacles to be overcome – or as opportunities to be welcomed. Superintendents can use the pressure to meet state standards to influence school board policy and budget decisions in ways that improve student performance.

Superintendents can use the pressure of accountability to work constructively with teacher and staff unions on issues such as performance evaluation, professional development and merit pay. Pressure alone, however, is insufficient. Superintendents need to be open to and ready to support initiatives proposed by principals and teachers to improve practice at the school and classroom levels.

Building Understanding and Acceptance of Accountability

As district leaders, it is critical for superintendents to help teachers, principals, specialists and central office staff understand their roles and responsibilities in improving student performance. These roles and responsibilities are not new, but explicit acknowledgment, understanding and acceptance of them may be. This goes for all stakeholders in the district, including parents and board members, and community and business leaders, too.

Q Which roles and responsibilities in my district are clearly assigned and accepted, and which need to be better defined and acknowledged?

Over the years, schools have come to mean almost everything to almost everybody. Schools have been handed an array of responsibilities that can distract staff from their core mission. Now, in an era of heightened accountability, the job of the superintendent is to sharpen and redefine the district’s mission, and build shared understanding about what schools are and what they do.

Part II: The Specifics of Accountability and Practice

The three approaches that can help others in the system manage increased demands for accountability can benefit superintendents as well. Superintendents can use accountability to refocus efforts and resources on teaching and learning. They can allow the pressure accountability brings to support initiatives that can raise student academic performance. Superintendents should also take into account the important part that staff and community understanding and acceptance play in determining the success of a district’s accountability system. Below we apply these ideas to three key leadership roles that superintendents play.
Visionary Leadership

Superintendents know that a strong vision of what schools should be is a prerequisite for leading a school district. They also know that situations change, the composition of school boards changes – even a superintendent’s vision of what is right for the district can change. Change means that shaping the vision of the district is an ongoing process. As an educational leader, part of a superintendent’s job is continually to teach that vision to others in the system – from board members to staff, parents and the community. Superintendents need to educate these stakeholders constantly in how the educational vision plays out in their school, at their grade level, and in their areas of special concern.

Unless a superintendent’s vision is to keep the district exactly as it is – its policies and practices, and its results – fulfilling a vision means convincing people to change, and change can be a threatening and frustrating prospect. Superintendents have to work hard to learn what ideas, practices or lack of resources keep people from making changes so that these obstacles can be overcome.

The most important change most districts need to make is to improve the technical knowledge base of instruction in the district. Low achieving students don’t need more of the same instruction – they need different instruction that draws upon deeper subject matter understanding and the latest research on best practice.

As they communicate their vision to district stakeholders, superintendents can use the pressure accountability brings to motivate staff to work toward the vision. A well-designed accountability system will include both sanctions and incentives. Some players may need an abrupt wake up call in order to recognize the need for improvement. Sanctions can help to sound the alarm in those cases. In other cases, incentives can provide more positive pressure for improvement. The hardest part will be creating a culture in schools and classrooms that expects every student to succeed and every teacher to help make that happen.

Motivation is important, but by itself it is insufficient; superintendents must also be ready to provide the support people need to make the necessary changes. This can mean significant revisions in district budgets or policies. As they help people understand and accept the realities of accountability, superintendents themselves need to understand and accept the idea that change does not take place overnight. They also need to make sure that the parents, school board members and state policymakers holding them accountable understand this as well.
Organizational Leadership

Visionary leadership provides goals for the district; organizational leadership provides the means to reach those goals. Superintendents must work to improve their district’s organizational structures so that they more fully support teaching and learning. To do this, superintendents must learn as much as they can about effective organizations and how to build and maintain them. What they learn at the district level superintendents must then teach to their principals at the school level and to teachers at the classroom level.

The most valuable resource of every district is people. Superintendents know that principals are the key to the success of any accountability plan. Principals provide the instructional leadership for teachers and students on a daily basis. Superintendents also know that meaningful professional development is critical to reaching accountability goals. No accountability model can be implemented successfully unless time and resources are available for staff development. Once instructional strategies have been decided in a school, superintendents need to allocate resources to help principals and teachers make them work. In designing a district accountability structure, for example, superintendents need to work with principals to make sure curriculum is aligned with state standards and plan professional development programs for teachers that help them understand how the standards should be implemented. Principals should be encouraged to write instructional leadership plans for their schools every year. These, in turn, can provide the basis for regular review of the district’s plan.

Do the agendas of school board and staff meetings reflect a commitment to student achievement as the district’s highest priority?

In my district, is professional development sustained and closely linked to improved teaching and learning? Is professional development supported throughout the school year in an ongoing, cohesive manner?

Working with principals, superintendents can see that support programs are put into place in each building. Providing resources at all levels of the system is critical if accountability systems are to serve as a catalyst for positive change in students’ learning.

Another aspect of organizational leadership is leadership training. Districts need to develop internal leadership in order to improve teaching and learning. Superintendents can help themselves by developing programs to identify and cultivate leaders early in their careers. Incentives can be offered to veteran principals to encourage them to identify and mentor teachers with leadership potential. District-wide leadership academies can be created where new and experienced leaders and other professionals can work on accountability issues.
Effective communication is an essential component of every successful organization. Superintendents must keep the school board and the community at large involved and apprised of district progress through regular reports.

First, expectations for job performance that are based on assessment results must be well publicized so that teachers and administrators know in advance how they will be evaluated. Teachers and principals should have input in establishing reasonable goals and objectives for the students in their classrooms and schools.

Second, accountability systems should be centered on student performance and student outcomes. As the new accreditation standards suggest, test scores are more reliable when averaged over three years. Stakeholders need the best possible information about how their schools are doing. For this reason, a number of states and school districts have instituted value-added testing to measure how individual students progress over time. Value-added tests that are linked to curriculum standards demonstrate what children have learned and in what areas they need to improve.

Third, accountability systems should place student achievement in a broad context. The district should include in its accountability reports information on teachers, buildings and budgets – in other words, what resources the district has and how they are used. This information could, for example, include how many teachers have a major or minor in the fields that they teach, the average length of time that teachers have been in the district, and the number of teachers attending professional development programs in new technology or new curriculum materials. Some of this is included in the Education YES!

Assessment and Accountability Leadership

After they make explicit their expectations for staff and students and provide the resources necessary for them to fulfill those expectations, superintendents need to measure their progress toward accountability goals. The new Education YES! accreditation standards approved by the State Board of Education include multiple measures of school performance and student achievement. With two-thirds of a school’s accreditation rating tied to results on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), though, the state has made clear its intent to use the MEAP as its primary measure of accountability. Even with the Education YES! standards in place, superintendents need to determine if or which additional assessments will allow them to portray more completely and accurately the efforts and outcomes that occur in their district.

The specifics of district accountability assessments may vary as widely as districts do. Still, all assessment strategies should share some common features.
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

ratings, but superintendents may wish to supplement data collected by the state with other information that provides the community and policymakers with a deeper understanding of their districts.

Summary

If teachers and principals are the front line of accountability when it comes to student achievement, superintendents are the bottom line. There are several ways that superintendents can turn the challenge of accountability into opportunity for real change in their districts. Creating a district accountability system that defines roles and responsibilities in terms of student academic achievement allows superintendents at once to pressure and support principals in their role as educational leaders in their buildings. Superintendents might benefit from thinking of their district not as a “school system” but as a “system of schools.” This shift of emphasis is meant to remind superintendents that holding principals to accountability goals will require providing them with the autonomy to decide how best to reach those goals. As their title implies, the primary role of superintendents is to provide and to keep everyone else clearly focused on the big picture, the main goal of all schools: helping to prepare the students in their charge to become productive and responsible members of our society.

Resources for Superintendents

http://www.aasa.org/cas/index.htm
AASA has created the Center for Accountability Solutions (CAS) to help school leaders gather, use and report meaningful data on student, school and district performance.

http://www.iel.org/programs/21st.html
The homepage for The Institute for Educational Leadership’s School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative. This initiative’s mission is to spark and assist multi-sector efforts to develop policies and practices and create a new generation of education leaders. To achieve its mission, the School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative fosters inter-sector relationships, bring greater coherence to these complicated issues and engage the public in addressing the leadership crisis.

The Education Commission of the State’s home address for issues of accountability.

A page from SERVE entitled, “District strategies to ensure quality.” SERVE is an education organization with the mission to promote and support the continuous improvement of educational opportunities for all learners in the Southeast. At the core of SERVE’s business is the operation of the Regional Educational Laboratory.
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

Implications for Principals

Part I: An Overview

The opening chapter introduced three ways of thinking about accountability – as teaching and learning, as pressure and support, and with understanding and acceptance – that can help all educators make sense of accountability in productive ways.

The purpose of this chapter is to help principals deal with new accountability reforms in ways that enhance their effectiveness. The ideas presented in this chapter are based on two strongly held beliefs. The first is that school leadership, in the person of the principal, is a determining factor in school and student success. Good schools require strong principals. The second belief is that principals are already doing many of the things required by accountability reforms. Seen this way, accountability reforms are not really additional responsibilities – instead, they are a new way of looking at practices that are already familiar. Increased focus on accountability creates opportunities for principals to craft new approaches that will invigorate teaching and increase student achievement.

Using Teaching and Learning to Support Accountability Goals

As leaders for student learning, principals know the critical role that good teaching plays in student achievement. They also know that developing good teaching practice is a prolonged learning experience that requires experimentation, nurturing, collaboration, and support.

As they work to improve teaching practices in their schools, principals can begin by modeling the kind of attitude toward teaching and learning they want teachers to have. This means, among other things, that principals need to make a regular habit of identifying for themselves professional learning opportunities directly related to student achievement, participating in them and sharing the fruits of these experiences with building personnel. It also means drawing upon the expertise of fellow principals in other schools to formulate new strategies. Perhaps colleagues can suggest changes in environment, training or practice that have resulted in improved student learning in their schools. They may be able to recommend ways to introduce these changes to teachers, staff, and parents, and advise how to obtain the support from the superintendent or school board that these changes will require.
Principals should take every possible opportunity to inform parents and community members about what the accountability policies are in their district and how these policies affect instruction in their school. Principals should also find new ways to recognize and reward high levels of achievement for both students and staff.

Using Pressure and Support to Achieve Accountability Goals

The Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) is designed to measure student learning on state standards. The pressure exerted by MEAP and other accountability measures is meant to encourage all educators to improve instructional and managerial practices. State and parental concerns over test scores can provide principals with leverage in motivating teachers to revise their practice when needed.

But pressure alone is not enough. The MEAP can also create an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding assessment outcomes and potential consequences should student performance fall short of expectations. The difference between feeling excited about innovation and feeling unprepared to change is support. Teachers need that support, and so do principals.

Using Understanding and Acceptance to Reach Accountability Goals

As the instructional leaders of their schools, principals need to understand and accept accountability. Specifically, principals need to understand the intent of policies put in place by state and district officials in order to effectively support measures that will help students achieve state educational goals.

In what ways do I demonstrate my commitment to improving student academic achievement? Do I accompany pressure to change with the support people need to make changes?

Do I make clear to my teachers that accountability counts with me – then support them as they work to improve their practice?

Having the support of other principals, the superintendent, and the school board helps to make the increased pressure of accountability manageable. In order to be effective, principals and teachers must have access to the right resources, professional development and collaborative opportunities. Principals can use accountability measures to their advantage by channeling the pressure these measures create toward gaining the support they need.
Principals should share their understanding of accountability policies with teachers and parents to build mutual understanding and acceptance of state and local educational goals. It is important that all participants understand the accountability system – both the good and bad aspects. Principals also need to continue to work collaboratively with teachers to find additional ways to involve parents in their children’s education whenever possible. Parental understanding and support of educational goals are critical factors that improve student readiness and willingness to learn.

**Part II: The Specifics of Accountability and Practice**

The concepts of teaching and learning, support and pressure, and acceptance and understanding can help principals create strategies for successfully implementing accountability policies.

Principals are accountable for the leadership they provide. If teachers are accountable for the results in their classrooms, principals are accountable for the results in their buildings. The rest of this chapter focuses on three aspects of leadership that define a principal’s effectiveness: **visionary instructional**, and **community leadership**. Questions in each section are intended to prompt both personal reflection and group discussion. At the end of this chapter is a list of resources on these topics.

**Visionary Leadership**

The most important asset that principals can provide for their schools is visionary leadership. Just as teachers must step back from their daily activities to reflect on their practice, principals must reflect on their own vision of what an effective school looks like. Principals must be guided by the belief that all children have the capacity to learn at high levels. To make these beliefs real, students need an environment that supports and celebrates learning. They need committed teachers who understand content and possess a rich array of pedagogical strategies. They need principals who see the whole picture and understand how each participant contributes to, and bears responsibility for, the learning environment. If principals are to convey these values to the rest of the educational community, they must work hard to communicate as widely as possible their school’s vision and goals. Principals need to meet regularly with teachers and staff to make sure school resources and efforts directly support student academic achievement.

They need to establish multiple lines of communication with parents so that parents not only understand the school’s goals but are also comfortable enough to ask questions and to make suggestions about ways to improve the educational process.

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**Q** Have central office staff and building principals discussed state and district accountability policies and their effect on schools and classrooms? If not, how could such discussions be initiated?
Instructional Leadership

As instructional leaders, it is crucial that principals learn as much as they can about the state standards that are in place for the subjects and grade levels in their building. They need to make sure that teachers know what those standards require of them at their grade levels. Working together with the teaching and support staff, principals can determine if the school’s curriculum and textbooks are in line with the standards. Principals can learn from teachers what tools and training are needed in order to implement an aligned curriculum. Understanding that this is a continuous process, principals should be ready to make further changes in allocation of time and resources to provide the support teachers need.

A principal’s instructional leadership extends beyond assuring curricular alignment. Principals also need to assess student performance data to determine if they and their teachers are meeting state achievement standards. To work effectively with teachers and support staff, principals need to bring themselves up to speed on proven instructional strategies that can be implemented in their teachers’ classrooms. Principals should also learn about alternative teaching strategies that may be useful in their school. There are many ways to teach specific topics; finding the ones that best help a school’s particular students takes time, patience, and perseverance. Understanding why teachers use particular strategies is critical for assessment and improvement.

Assessing the effectiveness of particular instructional strategies is the first step principals must take to improve teaching and learning. Principals must accept the fact that it will take some time before they can determine if changes in strategies have improved student learning. Teachers make incremental changes as they teach, attempting to improve each day. Meanwhile, principals will need to support teachers as they work with new strategies. If teachers agree that a particular method is not working, principals must be willing to discard it in favor of a more promising one.

Principals know that the lack of adequate data is a major challenge in creating environments that enhance student learning. Principals must take the lead in developing and using data sources that tell them what

Q Can I state clearly my school’s educational vision and explain persuasively each person’s role in fulfilling this vision?

Q Do I have a process for meeting collaboratively with teachers and support staff to review state standards and determine how best they can be attained? Have I communicated to parents the importance of the standards and our efforts to meet these educational goals?

Q Do I talk with my teachers on a regular basis about the pedagogical strategies they are using and why? Do I understand what objectives the particular strategies used in my school aim to accomplish?
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

they need to know about student achievement and equity issues, curricular alignment, program priorities and teaching strategies, and how each of these affects the students in their school.

Whether principals are able to analyze the data themselves to determine answers to questions about teaching effectiveness or draw upon outside resources for analysis, accuracy and timeliness are the most important factors in using data to decide instructional strategies.

Finally, as instructional leaders principals need to find ways to help parents help their children reach achievement goals. Parents and students need to understand that schoolwork done at home is an essential part of the learning experience, and that students need an environment at home that supports their academic achievement.

Community Leadership

The third type of leadership for which principals are accountable is community leadership. Part of the principal’s role is to foster in the community an understanding of the school’s educational goals. This means that principals need to know how to communicate effectively with parents, business people and the general public. Principals must enlist parents if they are to maximize student achievement. Parents want to be involved with their children’s education, but many are unable to visit classrooms and help at school because of work schedules. Principals need to make sure parents know the school’s educational goals and have opportunities to discuss them with school personnel. This will mean working with teachers to schedule some conference and meeting times during evening hours to accommodate parents who work during regular school hours. Involved parents are a principal’s strongest allies in creating better learning environments.

Summary

The importance of strong principal leadership to successful student achievement cannot be overstated. Principals are at the center of school improvement efforts because strong principals are at the center of effective schools. Their instructional leadership determines the effectiveness of teaching and learning in classrooms; their community leadership determines the level of support schools receive from parents and other local citizens; their leadership in creating and maintaining a coherent vision of student achievement keeps everyone pulling in the same direction. By making accountability work for them, principals can enhance their efforts to improve student and school performance.

Q

Do the kinds of data I have available help me determine the effectiveness of the teaching strategies being used in my school?

Q

What kind of scheduling changes would improve parental participation and allow better communication concerning student progress? Do I encourage parents to visit my school when their schedule allows and make time to meet with them to discuss concerns? How can I get more members of the community involved in the educational life of my school?
**Resources for Principals**


**Communities in Schools**

“Communities in Schools” champions the connection of needed community resources with schools to help young people successfully learn, stay in school and prepare for life.

[wcisnet.org](http://www.cisnet.org)

**Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)**

The IEL’s mission is to improve education through positive and visionary change. This institute brings together diverse constituencies and empowering leaders with knowledge and applicable ideas.

[wwww.iel.org](http://www.iel.org)

**Leadership and Learning Network at Ohio State University**

The network supports principals in their efforts to raise standards by providing principals with convenient and fast access to relevant information and resources.

[wwww.osu.edu/urbanschools/principi/welcome.htm](http://www.osu.edu/urbanschools/principi/welcome.htm)

**Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals**

[wwww.michiganprincipals.org](http://www.michiganprincipals.org)

**Michigan Elementary and Middle Schools Principals Association**

[wwww.memsca.org](http://www.memsca.org)

**National Association of Elementary School Principals**

Great resources on a wide array of topics including:

- Educational Leadership
- Professional Development
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Technology

[wwww.naesp.org/hot.html](http://www.naesp.org/hot.html)

**National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)**

[wwww.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org)

**NASSP Professional Development**

Take a look at the variety of educational offerings available. You can find opportunities for yourself and your staff from school reform to leadership development and from international opportunities to taking on the principal’s role.

**NCREL Pathways to School Improvement**

Find the latest in education research, synthesized and arranged in varying levels of depth to meet your needs.

[wwww.ncrel.org/sdrs](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs)

**Principal Leadership Magazine**

This magazine focuses on school leaders’ real needs, offering them practical, hands-on strategies for improving their schools in a constantly evolving environment.

[wwww.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org)
This chapter looks at accountability from the perspective of the teacher. The approach is based upon several strongly held beliefs about teachers and teaching. One is that quality teaching is as demanding as it is important. Simply put, good teaching is hard work. Another is that, because good teaching is so central to student achievement, teachers will receive the most attention and pressure from policymakers and the public alike as Michigan raises its expectations for accountability. A third belief is that teachers are already doing many of the things demanded by accountability reforms.

Quality instruction is essential to improving student achievement. There are many things teachers can do to influence student achievement. However, teachers by themselves cannot raise student performance to the levels necessary for the economic and social health of the community, state and nation. As many teachers are quick to point out, parents, schools administrators, school board members and others also play an important role in determining student achievement levels. In this chapter we first explore teacher accountability for student achievement as a matter of teaching and learning that is mediated by support for change and that is based in understanding and acceptance. Next, we examine three central contexts in which teachers work — in the classroom, in collegial relationships, and with families— and suggest how teachers can use heightened attention on accountability to influence student learning by acting in these contexts.

PART I: Understanding Accountability

Regardless of grade level or subject area, there are several things teachers can do to make accountability and the accountability system in their school and district work to improve student achievement. These suggestions expand upon the three ideas introduced earlier in this handbook.

Accountability is about teaching and learning.

The best news about the current accountability movement is that it puts teaching and learning back in the spotlight where they belong. Teachers now have the opportunity – and the obligation – to do what they do best: establish rigorous, realistic goals for their students and devise strategies to help students reach them. By supporting accountability measures
designed to boost student achievement, administrators, parents and community members implicitly acknowledge their own obligation to contribute to that effort. Savvy teachers will find ways to make those acknowledgements explicit, so that everybody winds up working toward the same goals.

One of the most challenging aspects of working successfully within the new accountability systems will be for teachers to break down barriers that prevent them from working together. For far too long, teachers have designed curricula and activities, faced classroom difficulties and sought solutions to pedagogical problems in isolation. To meet new accountability goals, teachers will need to work more closely with each other and with school administration. Working collaboratively will allow teachers to benefit from the knowledge and experience of colleagues and provide them with opportunities to give and receive feedback on instructional strategies. Working together enables faculty to recognize larger, grade-level or subject area patterns in student achievement that can help improve the curriculum and student learning.

**Accountability provides pressure and support.**
Teachers are correct in believing that changes in the external accountability system increase the pressure on them. This pressure, however, can be very useful to teachers who take advantage of it. For example, teachers can benchmark their instructional goals and strategies against a clearly defined set of responsibilities for the academic achievement of their students, demonstrating to themselves and to others exactly how they are meeting their obligations.

At the same time, changes in accountability systems give teachers an opportunity to take advantage of the pressure for student achievement to encourage others to accept their responsibilities. The key to directing this pressure is communication. Make clear to students and parents what you expect of them. Make clear to your principal and district administrators what your academic goals are for your students and what you need from them to reach these goals.

Pressure is important for change to occur, but pressure must be linked to adequate support that makes achieving academic goals possible. Such support might be better curriculum guides and materials, targeted professional development, or redistribution of district resources. Both pressure and support should send clear messages to the staff and the community that teachers are serious about helping students meet academic goals, and that the district is serious about supporting teachers in that effort.

**Accountability requires understanding and acceptance.**
Accountability is about clarifying responsibilities – and then holding teachers, schools and districts accountable for meeting them. Teachers need to accept the fact that they are a part of this larger accountability system. It is important that teachers align their own internal sense of accountability – what they expect of themselves, and what they believe their students, students’ parents and fellow teachers expect of them – with the larger, external accountability systems in which they teach.
It may seem obvious to say that teachers need to understand how and for what they will be held accountable. Until now, however, most accountability systems have failed to identify clearly who is responsible for what when it comes to student achievement. Even with a state curricular framework, key concepts in core subjects are at risk of “falling through the cracks” because teachers, schools and districts can have different understandings about who is responsible for covering particular material at certain grade levels.

Part II: The Specifics of Accountability and Teaching Practice

Advising teachers to think about accountability in terms of teaching and learning, support and pressure, and acceptance and understanding can seem vague and empty when discussed outside of the dynamic and highly varied setting of classroom teaching. In this section we offer concrete, specific strategies teachers can draw on to influence student learning in three important contexts: in the classroom, in their work with colleagues, and in communicating with parents. While no single strategy will apply across the diverse classrooms and schools in our state, teachers or groups of teachers can make use of these strategies to think creatively and flexibly about how they might be applied or revised in their schools and classrooms and to devise new strategies for influencing the learning of their students.

Instruction and Accountability for Student Learning

In the classroom, accountability for student learning can be thought of as a process of continuously improving teaching in the service of student learning. To enact this process, teachers answer two questions. First, what do my students know and what can they do in the subject I teach? This question is central to the practice of teaching. Its answer provides the starting point for instruction as well as the bottom line for assessing the success or failure of a particular lesson, unit or instructional strategy. Getting clear in one’s own mind what students know and can do also provides a solid starting point for the second central question: How can I help my students know more and do better in the subject I teach? This question guides teachers in selecting instructional strategies and materials in the short term. Teachers can also use this question to reflect on their teaching in order to revise curriculum and instructional strategies for the future. To illustrate how teachers can use the accountability system to improve their classroom instruction, consider the case of Jane, a fourth year seventh grade science teacher in an urban Michigan district:

Among students in her school Jane is reputed to be an engaging teacher. She is particularly well known for the unit on electricity and magnetism, which she has developed and adapted with special care over the last two summers. Entering students eagerly anticipate activities like “build a compass” and “make a magnet-driven motor” as does Jane who enjoys seeing her students respond positively to the electricity and magnetism unit.

Last year, the science department collectively reviewed school-wide student results on the MEAP. Jane was surprised and a bit disappointed to learn that a good number of her students did poorly on the extended response test item. Though it asked students to apply knowledge of electricity and magnetism, something Jane was confident she had helped them do in class,
many students did poorly on this test item. In fact, Jane had given them opportunities to interact with several electrical phenomena, but these experiences themselves did not translate into measurable student learning gains—a key piece of accountability for student learning.

Analyzing student MEAP data helped Jane answer the first of the framing questions introduced above: What do my students know and what can they do in the subject I teach? She knew they could do certain things, as she had seen them build electrical apparatus and wire circuits in class. But, the MEAP test revealed that students lacked some basic knowledge about electricity. For example, they could not diagnose faulty circuit designs or characterize the functional difference between serial and parallel circuits—core pieces of the Michigan science curriculum standards.

Jane and her colleague set out to find the particular objectives, vocabulary and real-world contexts the Michigan Educational Goals for Science Education (MEGOSE) called for. They used the MEGOSE standards as a template to analyze the content in their electricity and magnetism curriculum. In the process they found that the lessons and assessments emphasized vocabulary words (e.g. circuit, electrical current) and electrical applications in real-world contexts (light switches, lightning), but under-emphasized a key conceptual objective—having students describe how electrons flow in a simple circuit.

In the process of analyzing her unit in the context of MEGOSE standards, Jane formulated two answers to the second framing question: How can I help my students know better and do more in the subject I teach? Jane used the standards and student test scores to determine where her curricula might be improved.

Jane and her colleague decided they would work together to “beef up” the electricity and magnetism unit. In years past Jane had worked over the summer on this unit adding activities and researching additional demonstrations. In order to help students know more in addition to providing them an interesting and enjoyable curriculum, this year she would take a different approach. With the assistance of her colleague she would choose lessons and activities that were directly related to the state standards.

Upon reviewing the unit in light of the state standards, they found that while the unit’s activities pertained to electricity and magnetism, they did not all align with the subject matter standards. In addition, while students had plenty of opportunities to engage with electrical phenomena, they had not been asked to formally articulate their understanding of how electricity was operating in the various contexts of the lessons. Students had had copious opportunities to learn scientific definitions, but these were infrequently linked to description and explanation of scientific phenomena.

Jane and her colleague decided to eliminate the loosely related activities, in order to provide richer and more focused opportunities for students to learn the content in the standards. In addition, they revised the core activities in the unit to make sure students had several opportunities to talk, read and write about the flow of electricity in several contexts.

In the process of analyzing her unit in the context of MEGOSE standards, Jane formulated two answers to the second framing question: How can I help my students know better and do more in the subject I teach?
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

teach? She aligned the lessons in her unit more closely with MEGOSE standards. In addition, she was able to develop focused opportunities for students to use scientific knowledge—to describe and explain a few electrical phenomena.

Working with Colleagues
Most teachers work in isolation from their professional peers. Teachers spend the great majority of their formal, contracted time physically isolated from their colleagues and in direct contact with groups of students. As a result, they find few opportunities to collaborate with peers during the workday and rarely experience potentially powerful peer collaboration. Accountability for student learning asks educators to be explicit about their goals, to take action to improve instruction and, ultimately, to influence student learning. Through collaboration teachers can move toward these goals of accountability by working together on difficult tasks; pooling their knowledge about students, subject matter, and instruction; and divvying up responsibilities to reduce duplication of efforts.

Clearly, organizational restructuring can facilitate teacher collaboration. Some schools provide shared planning times, co-teaching assignments and shared decision-making processes. Though these structures do not exist in most schools, there are ways that small groups of teachers working together can organize their efforts to improve their practice and influence student learning. Accountability for student learning asks educators to be explicit about their goals, to take action to improve instruction and, ultimately, to influence student learning. Through collaboration teachers can move toward these goals of accountability by working together on difficult tasks; pooling their knowledge about students, subject matter, and instruction; and divvying up responsibilities to reduce duplication of efforts.

Sharing Students in Elementary Grades.
Generally, elementary teachers are responsible for planning instruction across the four main subjects—mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies—and teaching these subject to one class of students. To do this well is labor intensive and intellectually demanding. Knowing the subject, how to teach it, and how to recognize and assess student learning in any one subject is no mean feat. What’s more, individual teachers usually have particular strengths and weaknesses across these subjects. By “sharing students” elementary teachers can share the intellectual and labor demands of their work and focus their professional development efforts on fewer subjects.

“Sharing students” means that elementary teachers partner with colleagues. Each takes primary responsibility for a particular subject, while entrusting their partner with primary responsibility for another subject. Under this arrangement each teacher teaches a particular subject more than once per day to their own students and to a colleagues’ students. For example, in a large elementary school with three sections at each grade level, each classroom teacher could take primary responsibility for one subject—mathematics, science, or social studies, respectively. Each teaches her respective subject three times—one to each of the three classes at the given grade level. Under this structure
each teacher takes primary responsibility for two subjects—each teaches language arts to her own class while specializing in an additional subject and teaching it across all three sections.

This arrangement can help teachers make progress in at least three ways. First, it can facilitate teacher learning by providing individual teachers with opportunities to teach the same lesson several times within a short period of time. This allows teachers to teach once, make adjustments to the lesson based on the first lesson, and teach again. If conducted thoughtfully, this can help elementary teachers analyze their own practice and improve their chances of influencing student learning on a regular basis.

Second, under this arrangement the elementary teacher can also devote more time to planning a given lesson, making planning more efficient. Teachers work under significant time constraints. By planning one subject for multiple sections and eliminating day-to-day planning duties for another subject, elementary teachers can specialize and invest more time in carefully planning and assessing the lessons they teach. Over time a group of teachers can specialize in different subjects every three or four years. By rotating through specializations, they can build on their subject matter strengths, fortify their weaknesses and share lessons learned with their colleagues.

Third, sharing students creates a forum for elementary teachers to discuss the learning of individual students. Because all teachers at the grade level have direct contact with all students, the teacher who suspects a particular child is experiencing difficulty in class will have a knowledgeable colleague with whom to consult. As a result, teachers will be better able to pinpoint particular learning challenges and design intervention strategies confidently with support from informed peers.

Matching Knowledge and Experience with Teaching Assignments in Upper Grades. By adjusting the ways in which their departments make teaching assignments, middle schools and high schools can achieve ends similar to those seen in elementary grades. Often, teaching assignments are based on seniority—more experienced teachers select the courses they’ll teach and junior teachers are assigned to the courses that are left over. Logically, in the seniority system, senior teachers seek the easiest, most enjoyable classes. A consequence of the seniority system is that junior teachers are commonly assigned to the least desirable and, consequently, most difficult courses. Often this means that junior teachers are assigned to the lower level classes, which disproportionately serve special education and second language students and senior teachers are assigned to honors and college preparatory courses. If teachers hope to continuously improve instructional practice and influence student learning, they must also consider the effect of the seniority system on students.

Subject matter departments can work together to build schedules that reflect the instructional skills of particular teachers. Under a system that matches experience and expertise with teaching assignment, students who need the strongest teachers in their particular subjects will benefit from the knowledge and experience of senior teachers. In addition, junior teachers will have a better chance at developing strong instructional skills early in their careers. Over time, junior teachers can take on the more difficult courses and learn to work with the most challenging groups of students.
Meet the Accountability Challenge

Senior teachers can assist junior teachers in their development and gradual assumption of greater responsibilities and instructional challenges. While senior teachers may feel entitled to a smoother, less challenging load having “paid their dues” early in their careers, a commitment to improving instruction and serving the learning needs of students asks that we put students’ learning first in our professional endeavors. Departmental functions can support student learning and instructional improvement by matching teacher knowledge and experience with teaching assignments.

The collaborative structures suggested above will not magically lead to better, smarter teaching and leaps in student learning. As experienced educators know, any plan can fail to produce the desired outcomes however faithfully it is implemented. And no generic strategy will cozily “fit” into all classrooms, schools or departments equally well. These strategies are just two of many that professional colleagues can pursue with few additional resources and without wholesale organizational restructuring.

Working with parents
Parents can play an important role in supporting student learning. Yet even well-intentioned parents will not necessarily act in ways that support teachers’ particular goals for student learning. While teachers do not have infinite time and resources to work with parents and, ultimately, cannot control what parents do, they can profitably work with parents in efforts to improve student learning. Below are two strategies teachers use to enlist active parental support.

Communicating Instructional Goals. Teachers can take the first step towards engaging parents in their goals for student learning by making their goals explicit. Curriculum has changed significantly since the previous generation was in school and many years separate most parents from their own educational experience. In some cases parents are hesitant to encroach on what they see as the “teachers’ turf.” For these and other reasons, parents may not seem like the best partners in education. At times they may even seem ill informed, skeptical or unconcerned with what happens in their child’s classroom. Yet, most parents do care about their children’s educational experience, and they can play an instrumental role in promoting student learning. Being explicit about what teachers are trying to accomplish is central to enlisting parents’ active support. This can be done in several ways.

Some teachers communicate their goals for student learning by hosting regular curricular meetings with groups of parents. Others send bi-weekly or monthly letters to parents. In some situations teachers can use email and web pages to communicate their instructional goals. Some teachers even share examples of student work from previous years with parents to illustrate the type of assignments they will use over the course of the year.

How any teacher communicates her instructional goals will depend on many factors, including the educational and social background of parents. Have they achieved high levels of formal education? Have they had mostly positive experiences in school or have they felt isolated and marginalized? Do they speak English? The answers to these and other questions should shape the particular strategy teachers choose to employ. In some communities it is sufficient to send home a letter with students on a regular basis. In others, teachers may need to employ an array of strategies in order to provide all parents a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve.
Creating A Clear Role for Parents. After communicating instructional goals, teachers can describe clear, attainable roles for parents. There are many ways in which parents can support teachers’ instructional goals. What can a parent be expected to do to support their child’s learning? The answer to this question, of course, depends on the resources available to the parent. Some parents have time; others have material resources and personal expertise to invest in their child’s education. Some parents may feel alienated, confused and unwelcome in schools, particularly if they were not successful students themselves. These factors in part determine what teachers can ask of parents. While some parents are more prepared or interested in their child’s education, no parent is without something valuable to contribute. Consider the following practices some teachers use to engage parents.

**A Chair and 30 Minutes.** Whatever their educational background, socio-economic level and linguistic heritage, almost any parent can support instructional goals using this strategy. Teachers can enlist parental support by setting the expectation that all students spend thirty minutes studying in a comfortable, quiet place. Communicating curricular goals to parents can facilitate this process by helping parents see what in particular students should do while studying.

**A Weekly Trip to the Library.** While many homes are not equipped with appropriate reading materials, parents can bolster their child’s access to texts and support their reading habits by taking them to the public library. Teachers can also support students’ reading habits by encouraging parents and their children to visit the library frequently.

**Reviewing Assignments.** Some parents can support instructional goals by reviewing student assignments. This might mean signing an assignment to indicate that the parent knows it was completed. It might mean communicating with parents especially when students show improvement. Or, it may mean reading over an assignment and providing feedback to the student before the assignment is turned in.

To successfully enlist parental support requires clear expectations and attainable goals. The mere suggestion that parents follow any of these supportive strategies will not suffice. However, a consistent message to parents and students that home study is essential and frequent reminders that it is expected can yield results.
Meeting the Accountability Challenge

Summary
Among the roles discussed in this handbook, the teacher’s—through proximate and regular contact with students—is potentially the most powerful. For this reason, the current discussion of accountability for student learning foregrounds the domains of the teacher: teaching and learning. Though teaching and learning have been kept private by tradition and the isolating structure of the work, we believe they must be opened up and examined. Instructional practice, professional learning and collegial interactions can potentially have a great impact on student learning. If we hope to improve student learning, we must learn to make these matters explicit and public. We urge teachers to accept their role in accountability system and ask that they do their part to make others do the same.

Resources for Teachers
The Michigan Curricular Framework: This web site includes the curricular standards for each subject area.
http://cdp.mde.state.mi.us/MCF/

Classroom Implementation of Michigan Curricular Framework: This website explains how a classroom teacher might go about aligning her classroom curricula to the state’s standards.
http://cdp.mde.state.mi.us/MCF/Planning/classroom.html

Teaching and Learning for Michigan Alignment: Here you can find a description of the main strategies the state considers crucial to successful teaching. To demonstrate how those strategies might be use in a classroom, there are five vignettes for teachers to talk about in groups. The vignettes cover all grades. There is a set of questions teachers can use to analyze the vignettes.
http://cdp.mde.state.mi.us/MCF/TeachingAndLearning/default.html

Michigan Teacher Network-links to best practices, professional development opportunities, and a very rich section on lessons and units for all subjects already aligned with Michigan content standards.
http://mtn.merit.edu/

The Assessment Training Institute website provides professional development and support materials designed to guide users through the various steps in training, development and implementation of school, district, or statewide classroom assessment systems.
http://www.assessmentinst.com