

True Accountability for Georgia Schools: A Better Way Forward



Craig Harper

Imagine evaluating the effectiveness of a company based on the single measure of its stock price on one day in April this year. Compare that measure against its value in February. Anyone would inherently understand the flaws in that metric. To make it more real, let's use Delta Airlines — a Georgia company — as our example. Do you believe Delta is ineffective and has failed in its mission to serve the flying public now compared to a few months ago? You know and understand that there are serious, critical issues in the moment and in the near future that affect Delta's operations and revenue, most of which are outside its control. And, even in normal times, a single metric on any given set of limited data,

would be inappropriate. Yet, for too long, educators and schools have been held to such a standard — a standard that ignores the many important missions of schools

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beyond high-stakes tests and that fails to consider in real ways the factors outside the control of schools.

Educators demonstrate accountability to their students and communities every day. That's never been more evident than during this spring's effort to meet student needs under difficult circumstances. The actions for student benefit won't ever show up in a typical accountability system. And the fact that a lack of spring testing resulted in the waiver of state and federal test-based accountability indicates the narrow focus, scope and usefulness of these systems. For some, the lack of standardized testing data and test-based accountability is disconcerting because they worry it will give educators a sense of complacency and result in a lack of

The Time Is Now for True Accountability A Challenge and Opportunity Amid the Greatest Crisis of our Life

By John Tanner, executive director, bravEd

“We'll get back to accountability once this crisis has passed” is a sentiment that has been voiced repeatedly since state testing programs were cancelled for the year. But know this: If it can be put on hold, it is not accountability. In its simplest form, accountability

is a truth-telling system that communicates what matters most to stakeholders at the moment it most matters. You cannot put it aside and then one day “get back to it.” If you can, it is something other than a meaningful accountability.

What is now more obvious than ever

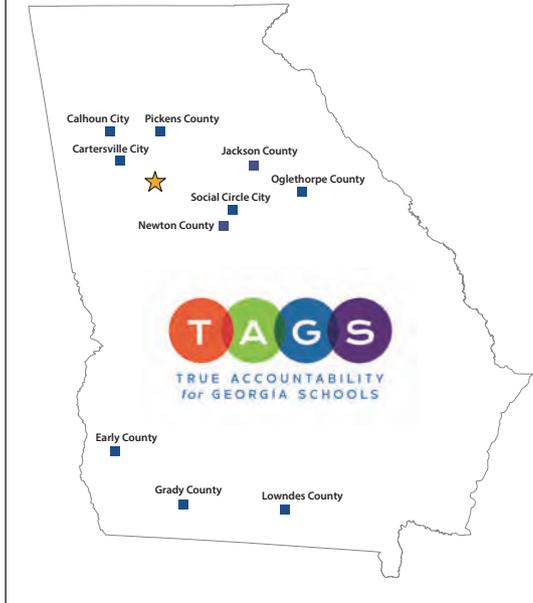
is that accountability should never have been placed on a test score.

Strong evidence of how critically and positively connected our public schools are to their stakeholders has existed for years — something the entire country has begun to realize. An educational leader I

effort on behalf of students. I reject that assumption. I know that educators will be working even harder this fall and beyond to make sure their students learn what they need to know to be successful. The task will take much effort, and districts and the state must be equally committed to innovative instructional practices.

A better system for accountability exists — a system that provides a more thorough and complete picture of where a school and district are being effective and where challenges must be addressed. It's called True Accountability for Georgia Schools (TAGS). This accountability framework is being designed and implemented by 10 pilot districts (see map). TAGS communicates in understandable ways for all stakeholders to know what each district commits to accomplish, how well they're meeting those expectations and where and why they are not. Student achievement and preparation for what's next is a major part of the system, and can be determined and communicated without relying solely on standardized assessments. Additionally, the framework shows how the district meets its other critical missions that the state model cannot communicate, such as safety and security;

The 10 Georgia School Districts Participating in a True Accountability Pilot



operations; success in non-tested subjects and activities; staff readiness; and community involvement. TAGS addresses more holistically all that schools do for student benefit; academic success to be sure, but also nutrition, well-being, cooperation and extracurricular pursuits.

In the article below, read much more about TAGS and how this accountability framework can better serve students, educators and communities.

PAGE Professional Learning Goes Virtual

PAGE's professional learning team began thinking about virtual opportunities for participants about a year ago. Stay-at-home orders and routine involvement in online conferencing this spring pushed thinking to reality. As Engage Academy cohorts continue (see article on page 24) and new groups form this fall, virtual learning sessions, coaching and follow-up will be part of the experience. If you missed out on an invitation to learn more about PAGE professional learning, look for information on the website or email Angela Garrett at agarrett@pageinc.org.

PAGE Ready to Serve

We can expect the coming months will be filled with challenges for educators as state and local budgets experience significant shortfalls, as we worry about safety issues with returning to school, and as we confront the effects of lost instruction time for students. PAGE stands ready to support you through advocacy, support and guidance. You can access resources at www.pageinc.org and by contacting PAGE staff.

Thank you for all you do for Georgia's students, families and communities. ■

know likes to point out that churches and schools are the only two community structures that traditionally include steeples to signify their importance. The immense value of schools and educators to students, parents and their communities — something long understood by those of us in education — is now being shown to the world. A true accountability system would have revealed this truth long ago, rather than ignoring the value and complexity of schooling by trying to reduce everything to a number or a grade.

The best evidence that an organization is truly accountable is its readiness for whatever comes next in the face of uncertainty. The readiness of schools and their leaders for what no one could

Accountability is the means for telling the truth about an organization.

have imagined was strikingly evident this spring as they demonstrated their ability to accomplish what seemed impossible. They are addressing this crisis with a level of moral and intellectual leadership that those of us in education witness every day. Watching school leaders competently navigate through unprecedented levels of uncertainty should cause critics who view schools through a lens of failure to reconsider the validity of that lens.

Georgia educators treated the abrupt

move from the schoolhouse to their own houses as simply what needed to be done. Educators adapted and adopted new methods of distance learning; made innovative use of their transportation systems for packet distribution using the same buses that were also delivering food; and found ways to make Wi-Fi hotspots available where none existed. It may not always have been pretty, and more remains to be

Continued on next page

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learned, but the speed of that transition does not happen without some sort of prior readiness for the unknown.

A true accountability system focuses on its most important stakeholders. For schools, that means students, their parents and their communities. A meaningful accountability system would share knowledge in a form and format those stakeholders can easily understand. Given the evidence of the past few months, the truths that system would tell would be far different than the old narrative that generally begins by presuming that schooling is a failed institution. It wouldn't sugarcoat anything, but rather, tell the whole truth. That truth would include where a school is or is not yet effective, what it is doing to become more effective, and its readiness for the unexpected. A school (or any organization) is never a perfect place and can always improve, but without the truth, it will be difficult to do so.

To be meaningful, an accountability system must include all critical missions of a school and district, such as caring for students and staff in addition to learning and instruction. The degree to which the entire system is working for student benefit depends upon understanding that all pieces are critical. And, let me be clear — that system does not stop working — ever. An accountability system that must pause itself during a crisis needs to stop calling itself an accountability system. That

is the moment when stakeholders are most desperate for a truthful accounting — both the good and the bad — and a system that cannot provide that fails the test of what accountability is and does in effective organizations.

For those districts that live and die by testing and CCRPI scores, and that have built lots of infrastructure to lead from “the data” (since that is where they have been told accountability lies), I hope it's become clear that directing resources, adjusting to immediate needs, facing enormous challenges, and determining the effectiveness of instruction and the needs of leaders didn't stop in the absence of test scores. In fact, I would argue that student benefit has taken over as the adjudicating force for decisions because it is all that remains — which is what should have always been.

Georgia and Texas Take the Lead

Even prior to the pandemic, a consortia of school districts in Georgia and Texas had been building true accountability systems. More and more districts across the country were preparing to join the work and will resume as soon as possible.

Some critics of public education — and even some educators — have worried out loud that in the absence of test scores, teachers won't know what to do, or more offensively, they will suddenly stop caring.

Although that thinking reflects a gross misunderstanding of what test scores

can and cannot demonstrate, the void created by a lack of state testing is very real. And, that void, in turn, creates a vacuum that will insist on being filled. The goal of those who think that what previously passed for accountability is actual accountability will be to virus-proof the old way of doing things¹ so that testing is never put on hold again. That would be a mistake.

Instead, we must fill the vacuum with how accountability functions within highly effective organizations. In those organizations, accountability is a communications framework both inside and outside the organization that signals to all who need to know where the organization is or is not effective, its readiness for whatever comes next, and what is necessary to get better. This is not a narrowly designed report card filled with metrics that ignore the totality of what the organization is trying to accomplish. True accountability communicates the effectiveness of an organization in meeting its clear missions and lays out the resources and methods required to get there. Our current “accountability” system was never designed to do that.

The challenge we now face is the vacuum. A pandemic-proof test, as noted above, is already being imagined. And if history is any guide — from disasters such as Katrina in New Orleans and major political shake-ups, such as the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, — another likely candidate is a renewed push towards privatization and vouchers. They will be justified as necessary for bringing the enterprise of education back online as quickly as possible once this is over. If we sit back and do nothing, the likelihood of both occurring — or even something we cannot yet imagine — is high.

We can fill the vacuum with something that matters.

An accountability system that must pause itself during a crisis needs to stop calling itself an accountability system. That is the moment when stakeholders are most desperate for a truthful accounting — both the good and the bad — and a system that cannot provide that fails the test of what accountability is and does in effective organizations.

The very real challenge for educators is that doing anything at the moment other than treading water is virtually impossible. No school leader has an ounce of bandwidth to spare, state budgets — and thus school budgets — will take a huge hit going forward. And, likely, we won't be done with COVID-19 in the fall. Schools will face the uncertainty of more closures if students or faculty get sick, given that the eradication of the virus or production of a vaccine will likely still be many months off. For the foreseeable future, even treading water may be difficult.

And yet the choice before educational leaders is this:

1. Watch the vacuum of test-based accountability get filled by others who do have the attention and resources to take advantage of this opportunity; or,
2. Find a way to get involved in the design, development and implementation of a true accountability system that supports all the missions of schools and communicates the effectiveness of their work to all stakeholders.

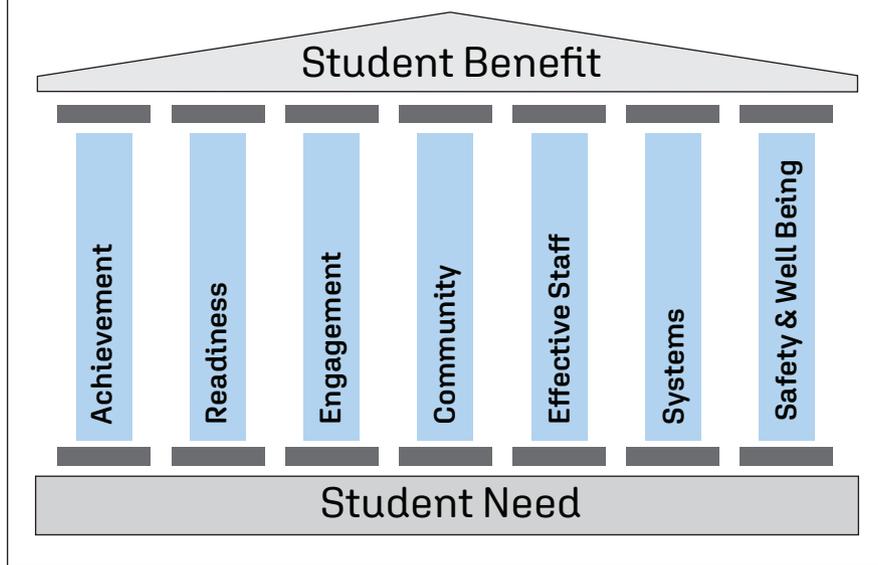
Simply understanding what accountability is offers us a path forward to grasp the second choice and do it well. In its most basic form, accountability is a knowledge development and transmission system regarding effectiveness and readiness for what comes next. It does not control or steer the work to be done, but rather, develops and transmits knowledge regarding the work performed and the work to be done to those who need to understand.

There's No Accountability Template

Simply calling an accountability system a communications system would be misleading. Each educational institution must develop its own knowledge base for its specific stakeholders and audiences. The development of the right kinds of knowledge is critical. It is the difference between telling someone what you think they should hear (or simply offering comparisons to other entities) versus addressing specific audiences so that they can hear and understand the actual truth and act accordingly. Only then can the kind of communication that leads to real understanding occur.

In other words, accountability is the means for telling the truth about an organization. The truth will certainly influence direction, but direction

Pillars represent the functional missions of schooling. Accountability is required in each.



is part of an organization's strategy. Accountability is about execution and the readiness to execute going forward.

In an ideal world, we would go through a learning process regarding the underlying foundations of true educational accountability, what it means to think of a school as a learning organization, and how to thoroughly apply the various frameworks that make up this better accountability. We would then apply the frameworks and build each school and district's true accountability system. That process would take about two years.

It is precisely because we have each of the necessary frameworks and a pressing need that a shorter-term effort is both reasonable and possible. That effort should do the following:

1. It should fill the vacuum left by the absence of state testing and show a better way is possible.
2. It should require minimal effort by schools or districts.
3. It must communicate a real understanding of the efforts being undertaken in real time during this crisis and in the future to a wide variety of stakeholders.
4. It should contribute to a bigger picture of what educational accountability should be going forward in Georgia and across the country.

As a step towards additional dialogue, the goal should be to demonstrate in part what a true accountability system can communicate to stakeholders. During the pandemic, I have seen

school leader after school leader operate within the frameworks and tools of true accountability, even though they aren't using the vocabulary or formally using the tools. True accountability is a deeply common-sense function. When common sense is applied, the alignment isn't a surprise. What remains to be done is to reformat those efforts into the language and frameworks of true accountability, which is an exciting prospect given its potential to contribute to a much-improved school accountability environment. What is also exciting will be the relative ease with which it can be done.

This effort will allow a school's stakeholders to understand where their schools are effective, where they need to be more effective, and their readiness for what comes next. The fact is that the missions of student well-being, student learning, effective staff and operational excellence have actually accelerated during this crisis, and that needs to be seen, as does where more work is needed. No one expects 100 percent effectiveness in any accountability; they do expect and deserve the truth, which together we can give them. The True Accountability for Georgia Schools (TAGS) districts believe in this work and these frameworks for communicating effectiveness. You are invited to learn more and to join this movement. ■

¹ "The False and Damaging Premise of School Accountability" at www.pageinc.org/true-accountability.