

# Opinion: Education panel's report questioned

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THE RECORD

A RECENT education task force report provides a detailed critique of New Jersey's current educational accountability system.

The Governor's Education Transformation Task Force proposes that QSAC (the Quality Single Accountability Continuum) be replaced by a new system that its report outlines broadly.

But some task force proposals raise concerns. Indeed, they threaten to return us to the problems that led to QSAC in the first place.

As co-authors of studies commissioned by the state Department of Education about accountability and QSAC in 2002 and 2006, this is a matter of special interest to us.



In our 2006 study of the Department's piloting of QSAC, we expressed concern about key elements of that accountability law and its implementation, and recommended a number of changes.

Therefore, we can identify with the task force report's recommendation that QSAC be replaced.

However, the report's initial proposals for a new accountability system are too general to permit a meaningful evaluation, and some of the broad principles the report espouses raise serious concerns.

At the core of our 2002 report on reestablishing local control in the state-operated districts were several recommendations that we continue to believe are essential for an effective state

accountability system.

### **Student performance**

First, the system should focus on building local fiscal, educational and governance capacity as a means of improving student performance.

Any sensible system of state intervention and reestablishment of local control has to focus on both capacity to deliver effective education to students — the input and process side — and on evidence that students actually are learning — the output or outcomes side.

Any system that focuses on only one side is destined to fail.

Second, an effective system should evaluate student performance based on demonstrated and measurable progress toward proficiency.

But such progress should not be measured by a single state test. To rely on a one-time state-test snapshot, given the overwhelming evidence that the strongest predictor of standardized test scores is socioeconomic status, would relegate districts, such as the three state-operated districts, with huge concentrations of low-income students to permanent state operation.

Third, an effective system has to be clear, coherent and unified, replacing the crazy quilt of state accountability laws and regulations.

A primary goal should be to return state-operated districts to local control at the earliest reasonable time.

But the same single, uniform, clear and objective set of standards should be used to assess the performance of all school districts in the state.

The task force criticizes QSAC for its undue focus on school and district capacity rather than student performance, its flawed process, and its failure to meaningfully distinguish between effective and ineffective districts.

The task force proposes instead a new accountability system based on 10 broad principles.

Central to them is a single, simpler system, the assessment of outcomes rather than inputs, the evaluation of growth not just one-time benchmarks, and a focus on schools rather than districts.

It also recommends merging the new system with No Child Left Behind's successful aspects and applying for a waiver from NCLB's other components.

### **Principles supported**

We applaud two of these principles — the ones proposing that growth be evaluated in addition

to status, and that the system provide diagnostic information as well as a basis for making judgments about districts and schools.

However, other aspects of the proposal, which, if not clarified or corrected in the more detailed accountability proposal the task force promises, may return the state to the problems that brought us QSAC.

- The retreat from capacity and other school inputs. Although student achievement is the ultimate objective of a state education system and, therefore, must be a key component of an accountability system, the state's responsibility and role is to ensure that all districts and schools have the capacity to enable their students to perform well.

To treat capacity and resources as irrelevant is to destroy a meaningful accountability system.

Surely, we know from 40 years of school funding litigation that, constitutionally, money matters.

- The continuing emphasis on standardized testing as the primary measure of growth and status. Although the report makes passing reference to using other measures, it never really develops the idea.

The report also doesn't consider the curricular and other impacts of increasing use of standardized tests and the ever-higher stakes we are attaching to the results of those tests for districts, schools, students and teachers.

- Overemphasis on student achievement. Given what we know about the linkage between socioeconomic status and test scores, the more a new system emphasizes such scores as a primary if not exclusive measure of student achievement, the more it is likely to rank school districts and schools based on the socioeconomic status of their students.

High socioeconomic status districts and schools will be granted what the report labels "earned autonomy." The truth is that the earning is more likely to reflect family income than school performance.

Most schools with large concentrations of students from entrenched poverty will rank much lower without regard to how effectively they function.

Poverty shouldn't be an excuse, but it is a fact to be reckoned with.

- The unresolved tension between the state as compliance and enforcement agent and as supportive collaborator. The report seems to prefer the latter role until it announces that there must be "concrete state-enforced consequences for failing to meet...output-oriented performance objectives for every school and district."

We suspect the state-enforced consequences will involve inputs and processes in the school and district, the very things the report says the state should not look into as part of the initial

accountability review.

Is the theory to give schools and districts enough rope to hang themselves with before the state engages them on the level and use of educational inputs and processes?

### **Shift of focus to schools**

- The largely unexplained shift of focus to schools, not districts. Unless the role of local school districts, indeed the entire structure of public education in New Jersey, is radically altered, it is not clear how and why the focus of accountability should be shifted to schools rather than districts.

At the very least, this seems to underestimate the important link between district and school capacity.

- The apparent failure to base recommended principles on best practices models. Other states and countries have accountability and state intervention systems and a body of experience with them.

Yet, the report seems to largely ignore or be oblivious to them. This is too important an issue to be left to ideology, common sense or individual experience.

There is a body of evidence on which the task force can draw to inform its further reports. We profoundly hope it will.

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