The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government

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EDUCATION POLICY BRIEF

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Accountability in K-12 Education

With the No Child Left Behind Act in limbo, it's time for big thinking on intergovernmental collaboration in the ways we measure and report results in our schools.

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One great thing about the American system is the potential for synergy between states and the federal government.

Sometimes federal leadership spurs states to innovate, as when "A Nation at Risk" led to a flurry of developments in standards-based reform. Sometimes states will come up with successful policies that the federal government will replicate on a national scale. Indeed, this is how Texas's test-based K-12 accountability system morphed into the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

But unfortunately, the national accountability system established by NCLB did not capitalize on the federal-state synergies that spawned it in the first place. The law's unrealistic goal of 100 percent proficiency, combined with its top-down testing mandates, tight timelines, and sanctions, have proven an unreliable recipe for educational innovations. States' responses have tended towards bare-bones compliance, and have also included a fair bit of strategizing to get out from under the law's requirements, exploitation of loopholes in the law, outright gaming — and even litigation.

Besides compliance and evasion, states have a third option: take the lead in figuring out how to do accountability right.

While educational testing has a long history, educational accountability per se is a relatively new endeavor, and there are lots of unanswered questions and kinks to be worked out before we can routinely base high-stakes decisions on

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these systems with a high degree of confidence. In theory, attaching consequences to performance will drive improvements in educational processes. But accountability systems may be less effective (or even counterproductive) if, for example, they rely on assessments that test lower-order thinking, are weakly aligned to state standards, or lack a capacity building component to help underperforming schools improve.

So the question becomes: Can we envision post-NCLB institutional mechanisms that harness the laboratory and leadership capability of states to the important purpose of strengthening educational accountability systems?

Individual states have the potential to be leaders, but we can't leave each state to go it alone. For one thing, many states lack the staff to design and implement a technically sound test-based accountability system in-house. And few are equipped to develop internationally benchmarked curriculum standards or to conduct the research needed to determine the effectiveness of various accountability models. For these reasons, it makes sense for states and the federal government to work together on research and development (R&D) and technical assistance.

States are already working together to develop standards and tests, through consortia like Achieve's American Diploma Project and the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). Collaborating states can make faster progress than they would individually. They share the cost of retaining experts and achieve economies of scale. A commitment to working with a group can also give state education leaders political cover for tough decisions, like holding the line on demanding standards. To cite one prominent example, Rhode Island's education commissioner, Peter McWalters, has said that his state's participation in NECAP enabled him to maintain rigor and avoid capitulating to public pressure to set a politically acceptable cut score.

In contrast to NECAP, which includes just three small states, broad-based efforts like Achieve and the Council of Chief State School Officers' State Collaboratives on Assessment and Student Standards provide R&D and technical assistance on specific accountability issues for large numbers of states. But state education departments, hard hit by a national shortage of testing experts, frequently lack the capacity to participate fully in such collaborative efforts — in other words, staff may not even know what assistance they ought to be seeking out.

Existing intergovernmental collaboratives fall short when it comes to research. They generally do not conduct longitudinal studies evaluating the effects of accountability programs or the validity of test-based inferences. (Such scrutiny is crucial so long as policymakers continue to look to assessment results to inform their decision-making.) There is no adequate institutional mechanism for setting research priorities, gaining access to state test data, or disseminating accountability research to states.

In sum, there is lots of room for further intergovernmental collaboration to extend R&D and technical assistance on the full spectrum of accountability issues to all states and even to large districts.

The Rockefeller Institute, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York, is actively exploring institutional models for state-federal collaboration on educational accountability. Last fall, the

Institute convened a group of 40 state and federal education officials, testing experts, educational researchers, and policy advocates for a symposium on the subject. Participants included Michael Cohen of Achieve, Eva Baker and Robert Linn of UCLA, Education Sector's Thomas Toch, Massachusetts' new education commissioner Mitchell Chester, and Chester E. Finn, Jr. of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, to name a few. A second phase of the project is being planned.

The next 12-18 months offer a golden opportunity for states and their partners to get their ducks in a row—to develop institutional mechanisms that reflect a long-range perspective, with great capacity, comprehensive scope, and broad participation. When the new president takes office in January 2009, he'll have to deal with international affairs, the economy, and health care reform before turning to education. The time is right for some creative, big thinking about educational accountability—not just what to do, but how to do it.

> *A summary of the Rockefeller Institute symposium by Lynn Olson, and an edited transcript of the proceedings, are available www.rockinst.org/research/education/default.aspx?id=134.*