Accountability

City Schools believes that increased autonomy is inextricably linked to increased accountability. Specifically, schools are judged on student performance, as well as the progress of principals and the school community in meeting expectations set by City Schools. This holistic accountability model is referred to as the School Accountability Framework (SAF). The strategic implementation of the SAF is heavily influenced by state and federal accountability policies, allocation of resources (e.g., data infrastructures, central office staff, etc.), and refinement of performance tools to hold schools accountable to appropriate and transparent metrics.

Central Office Data and Support Infrastructure:

City Schools strives toward “intimate knowledge of the schools.” This goal is supported by an expanding array of real-time and longitudinal data culled from a variety of sources. Currently, much student performance data is derived from high-stakes tests occurring once a year and formative assessments implemented quarterly. Attendance and comportment data move as a continuum through the year. Much of what existed until now is housed at central office by the Office of Achievement and Accountability (AnA) or by the Information and Technology Department (ITD). Recognizing our challenges with the variety of portals necessary to collect and disseminate information, City Schools is in the critical stages of procuring a data warehouse and state-of-the art student performance system. The aspiration for the student performance system is to put real-time actionable data before practitioners and empower them to configure and mine these data at will.

Multiple central office departments rely on data to disseminate and target supports to schools. Within the Chief Academic Office organization, the offices of Safety and Student Support Services, Teaching and Learning, and Special Education work with the School Support Network to distribute information and resources to schools. Under the network model, City Schools has uncoupled support from accountability. However, schools are held accountable on many fronts, from test security to student performance and accuracy of compliance, in addition to different domains that fall under the purview of other offices.

Accountability Tools:

SAF is comprised of three performance tools that integrate quantitative and qualitative information into school accountability: School Progress Report, Principal Evaluation Tool and School Quality Review. Now in its second year of implementation, the School Progress Report summarizes a school’s results using a number of key performance measures and presents them in a comparative frame. The Principal Evaluation Tool measures a principal’s effectiveness through multiple school-level performance measures, including Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data; climate survey data; student attendance, re-enrollment and discipline; staff attendance; and student proficiency growth as reported in the School Progress Report. The School Quality Review (about to be launched) is a site-based observation visit using trained reviewers. This tool is meant to measure school quality against the City Schools’ Essentials - a set of research-based criteria aligned to district-level expectations and guidance for schools.
To ensure that school leadership and staff are highly equipped to support the diverse needs of students, principal and teacher evaluation tools have been refined to meet evolving evaluative needs. The principals’ union-endorsed evaluation form is largely observational and anecdotal; AnA augmented the form with the Principal Evaluation Tool, which allows the schools’ executive directors (who are solely responsible for principal evaluations) to focus discussion on objective data.

The current teacher evaluation tool is being updated to measure teachers’ effectiveness using a blend of qualitative (observational) and quantitative (objective) data. The link from teacher to individual student outcomes is fraught with difficulty. City Schools has experience, through our formative assessment reporting platform, in getting teachers to take an active role in creating and vetting the roster of students for whom they claim accountability. A new student performance system holds the potential to expand this model beyond staff teaching core subjects. An alternate model views the school as a construct of its faculty and student body. Thus, if all staff owns the collective achievement of the school, the evaluative linkages are sound and can span many measures. These philosophical and technical concerns are being seriously considered by City Schools prior to implementing a new teacher evaluation tool that links student progress to decisions about a teacher’s employment.

**Impact of Federal and State Accountability Practices:**

City School’s theory of action is that increased autonomy (especially over budget) at the school level is tied to strict accountability metrics. Everything we design includes implicit and explicit incentives and disincentives.

All accountability systems are nested: classroom within school, school within system, system within state, state within the nation. There are other vertical accountability paths: schools as part of an agency, the agency as one of many such agencies within the city, the local jurisdiction as part of the state. Unless there is a transparent alignment among these many layers, any national accountability system becomes redundant and chaotic. Baltimore’s reforms, no matter how thoughtful, are limited by the appropriateness and coherence of state and federal accountability systems.

In order for districts to provide appropriate monitoring and support to schools, the accountability systems guiding national, state and local policies should be aligned, consistent and transparent. Currently, the tools used to hold schools locally accountable incorporate data required by federal policies (i.e., No Child Left Behind). Data collected for City Schools’ accountability tools follows a calendar established by the state. Much of the data we receive from state-mandated assessments (Maryland School Assessment and High School Assessment) is “autopsy data.” As a result, it is a challenge for central office and school leaders to make data-informed decisions about resources during the spring of each year, using datasets that are already obsolete. In addition, a concern with the existing school improvement process (a fixed structure of mandated sanctions) is that it triggers an onerous planning system which is largely ritualistic, consumes vast resources and is compliance-oriented. This mandated school improvement process does not return a strategic action plan easily understood by school practitioners or even by central office
specialists. The intention of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was to target resources in areas of greatest need; under the existing school improvement process, acquiring these resources is perceived as a hindrance.

Better and faster assessment and (ideally) vertically scaled data would improve central office guidance and evaluation of schools and programs. With the reauthorization of ESEA and adoption of common standards and national or consortia assessments, we welcome the development of tools that provide fall and spring measures to inform strategic decisions at the school and system level. Short of this, the maturing formative assessments (benchmarks) within AnA can be expanded. There has been a major psychometric contribution to this effort in the past year, adding rigor to locally-developed items.

City Schools favors one nationally recognized accountability system, rather than the current, extremely expensive multi-state accountability model. Development of regional assessments, forged by a consortium of states piloting core standards, is an interim step to developing a national assessment. State, regional, or national assessments must be vertically scaled; without this component, it is impossible to say anything useful about cohorts.

The federal government should develop academic goals and standards that are broad and encompass key indicators leading to a student’s preparation for college or a career upon completing high school. Standards should focus on value-added growth, not rigid absolute outcomes, because we cannot ignore the social and economic inputs different communities face. The federal government provides tools and supports to state and local school districts. As part of this process, data used for accountability purposes should be timely in order to support a school’s continued improvement. As much effort should go into front-end diagnostics as into summative performance assessments; however, the two forms of testing should stay separate to prevent misuse of the diagnostics.

We need ESEA to incentivize states to work collaboratively to create benchmark assessments to support the sharing of best practices within school districts and across states. ESEA should also accelerate development of web-based tools for states to generate comprehensive data across school systems.

While state and local systems develop means for meeting federal accountability requirements, there is an important place for qualitative review, broadening the accountability focus from student performance to the effectiveness of school leadership and teacher quality. Evaluating teacher effectiveness demands that there be a federal push to evaluate teacher preparation. In addition, much more rigorous criteria should be placed at the entry to teaching.

In conclusion, City Schools favors the following federal mandates:

- Creation of consortiums across states to work together towards common goals, standards and curriculum.
- Vertically aligned assessments.
- Powerful diagnostics.
- Movement from K-12 to K-16 models
• Development of a freshman on-track tool that identifies students who are likely not to complete high school, so that more intense support systems can be provided to students who are not on track.
• Accountability for local agencies to ensure they contribute supports and resources to schools, students and their families.
• Explore alternative public-private partnership resources to meet goals.