



COLORADO PUBLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

By Josh Abram

This issue brief provides an overview of the governance structure for public K-12 schools and discusses the main provisions of school accountability in Colorado.

School governance. General supervision of public schools is vested in an elected seven-member State Board of Education (SBE), whose duties include accrediting schools and districts, administering statewide assessments, and publishing information on school performance. The board appoints a Commissioner of Education who oversees the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). The commissioner and department support the board in the conduct of its duties, and provide schools and districts with leadership, technical assistance, and administrative services.

The state constitution requires the legislature to establish and maintain a thorough and uniform system of free public schools, where any person between the ages of 6 and 21 may be educated. Additionally, the constitution vests control of public school instruction in locally elected boards of education. Under this system, the legislature provides financial support and establishes statutory guidelines applicable to all school districts, and local school boards determine curricula and instruction.

School accountability. The Education Accountability Act of 2009 outlines the state's system to hold the state, schools, and districts accountable for academic performance. The law aims to maximize academic achievement, and to track over time each student's progress toward postsecondary and workforce readiness. The state collects and reports student performance data, and holds districts and schools accountable for performance on a common set of indicators:

- achievement levels on state tests;
- student longitudinal growth;
- progress made to close achievement gaps; and
- post-secondary and career readiness.

The law provides consequences for schools that fail to meet state performance standards, but the department supports efforts by schools and districts to improve.

Standards and assessments. The school accountability process begins with the adoption of academic standards by the SBE. Standards are statements of the academic content knowledge and intellectual skills students need to be successful at each grade level. State academic standards, or an equally rigorous set of standards, must be adopted by each local school district.

Every spring, the state evaluates all students in grades three through ten using a common grade-level assessment, known as the CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program). Students are also assessed once in high school, using a college aptitude assessment. The CSAP is a criterion referenced test, aligned to the state academic standards. School and district performance on the CSAP is typically expressed as the percentage of students who are proficient at meeting the standards.

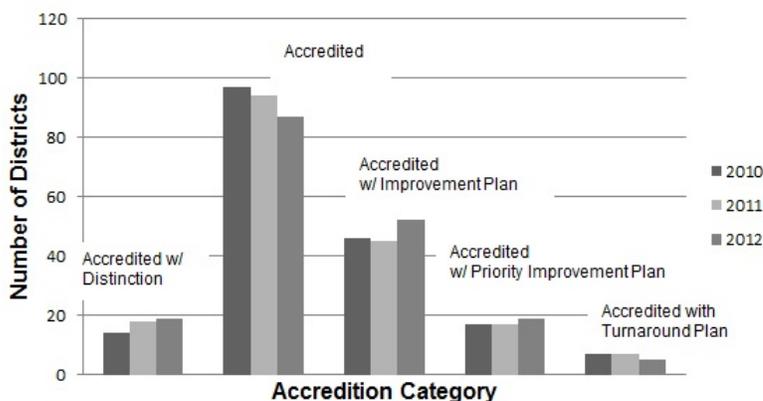
Longitudinal growth. Data from CSAP and other test results are analyzed using a statistical model capable of determining the rate of growth necessary for individual students to reach proficiency on the standards. Known as the Colorado Growth Model, schools must use assessment data to help students who are not proficient achieve proficiency within three years, or by grade ten, whichever is first. The model is also used to evaluate the progress necessary to close achievement gaps between historically disadvantaged student groups and other students needing to catch up academically with their peers, and to evaluate teacher effectiveness.

Accreditation categories. The school accountability process results in accreditation, or certification by the SBE that a district meets the requirements established in the Education Accountability Act, and all related rules adopted by the SBE. Accreditation also indicates that a district is complying with all requirements for improvement planning, and is following required policies concerning financial operations, reporting, truancy, and school safety. The SBE annually reviews the performance of schools and districts in the state and, based on the level of attainment on the four performance indicators, enters into accreditation contracts with the districts based on one of five categories:

- **Accredited with Distinction** means the district met or exceeded state expectations;
- **Accredited** means the district met expectations and is required to implement a *performance plan*;
- **Accredited with Improvement Plan** means the district has not met expectations and is required to implement an *improvement plan*;
- **Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan** means the district has not met expectations and is required to implement a *priority improvement plan*; and
- **Accredited with Turnaround Plan** means the district has not met expectations and is required to implement a *turnaround plan*.

Districts may not remain accredited in the lowest two categories for longer than five years before the SBE removes accreditation altogether. As of FY 2010-11, 18 school districts were accredited with distinction. Figure 1 shows the number of districts in each accreditation category for school years 2010 through 2012.

**Figure 1
Number of Districts, by Type of Accreditation
School Years 2010-2012**



If the CDE recommends removing accreditation, the commissioner assigns the state review panel to critically evaluate the district's performance. The state review panel, comprised of education experts, advises the commissioner on accreditation decisions. Districts that lose accreditation may be required to reorganize or consolidate, accept management by a third-party private or public entity, have one or more schools converted to charter or innovation schools, or have one or more schools be permanently closed. Since the enactment of the Education Accountability Act of 2009, no school districts have been unaccredited by the CDE.

Federal public school accountability. The state also holds districts and schools accountable through various program requirements under federal law, principally the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

ESEA was reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB contains many provisions, chief among them a requirement that states administer annual standardized tests, collect and report test scores by school, separate data by subgroups of students, and impose corrective actions for schools that fail to make yearly progress toward proficiency on state tests. By 2014, the law requires that all students achieve proficiency in their grade level for language arts and math.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education invited states to request waivers from the law's approaching deadline, and to seek flexibility in order to better focus on student achievement. Roughly half of the states, including Colorado, have received waivers for key provisions of the act. Generally, the waiver allows Colorado to measure individual student performance over time, and to evaluate if students graduate from high school career- or college-ready, rather than meeting the 2014 deadline for achieving 100 percent proficiency in reading and math. As a result of the federal waiver, Colorado uses only the state's accountability system in place of preexisting NCLB accountability requirements.