



**Public Education &
Business Coalition**

From Surviving to Thriving

Strategies for Success in a High-Stakes Accountability System



**Including frontline recommendations
for challenging and improving the
high-stakes accountability system**

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WHO WE ARE...

The Public Education & Business Coalition is a partnership of education, business, and community leaders working together to support and encourage excellence in Colorado's public schools.

OUR MISSION...

...is to cultivate excellence in public schools so all students succeed in learning and in life.

WHAT WE DO...

We accomplish our mission through

- frontline initiatives in Colorado schools that promote teacher quality, school leadership, and school reform*
- policy initiatives promoting support for system-wide excellence in public schools*
- collaborative partnerships between business and education.*

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Executive Summary

In today's schools, we ask our teachers to engage in a daily balancing act. In addition to holding high expectations for all of their students and preparing students for proficient scores on standardized tests, we also ask our teachers to meet the individual emotional and developmental needs of each child. We ask teachers to infuse children with intellectual curiosity and a love of learning, but our high-stakes tests do not measure creativity and effort.

We must help teachers meet both sets of demands well. Many teachers feel that they cannot possibly meet the expectations of high-stakes accountability systems and still serve the needs of individual children. Some leave the profession entirely, while others default to either teaching to the test or ignoring accountability completely. Children and schools suffer as a result of teacher turnover and demoralization.

This does not need to be the case. Research shows that when well-designed accountability systems are combined with professional support for teachers, everyone – students, teachers, schools – can benefit. Content standards, assessments, and accountability measures can be used as valuable tools to raise expectations, monitor individual progress, and engage in continuous improvement.

Our task as educators is to ensure that our children thrive, and that we use this new accountability infrastructure as a tool to help them reach their full potential. To make this happen, teachers must be able to employ new types of knowledge and skills. For example:

- Helping children think deeply and critically using essential content knowledge
- Integrating reading and writing across content areas
- Using informal and formal assessment data to improve instruction and reach individual students
- Collaborating with other teachers to set goals, problem-solve, and continuously improve
- Serving as instructional leaders within their buildings

At the Public Education & Business Coalition, we work with teachers and schools to build these skills and many others essential to student learning in this new era. Our dual emphasis on student thinking strategies and teacher collaboration builds mutually supporting paths to success. It is hard work, but we have seen amazing results when dedicated and passionate educators come together to improve student learning in a meaningful way.

At the same time, our policy makers must understand that poorly-designed high-stakes accountability systems can present obstacles that cannot be overcome by even the most committed teacher. For example, vague standards, assessments that are not aligned to learning goals, and accountability consequences that fail to reward improvements will only lead to a sense of confusion and helplessness.

Policy makers must support the hard work that happens in our classrooms by making sure that our accountability systems make sense. This is particularly important as we look for ways to help our most challenged schools, where educators often have less access to the knowledge and skills that allow schools to thrive under accountability systems. Ironically, if our policy makers are not careful with system design and professional support, they may harm the very schools that they seek most to improve.

In this document, we have included:

- A review of the current research about high-stakes accountability systems including definitions, possible effects and actual impacts
- Specific ways PEBC professional development efforts are designed to support students, teachers and school communities, and help them understand and succeed in high-stakes accountability systems
- Recommendations of how to challenge and strengthen high-stakes accountability systems
- Narratives written by teachers in the field reflecting on how they, with the support of PEBC, grapple with standardized tests while maintaining rich, thinking-centered classrooms

From Surviving to Thriving

Strategies for Success in a High-Stakes Accountability System

Introduction

At the Public Education & Business Coalition, we're educators. We know the complexities involved in teaching and learning, the difficulties teachers face in reaching every child in their classrooms, and the joys of seeing individual students succeed. We know that no student is typical, that every child brings to us a unique mind capable of great creativity, imagination, and depth of thinking, and that it is our job as educators to nurture the individual potential of each student.

The world of education has changed dramatically over the past ten years. High-stakes accountability systems are focusing students, teachers, schools and districts on outcomes measured by test scores. Schools that fail to improve test scores according to predetermined schedules face drastic consequences. The effectiveness of individual teachers is beginning to be measured by the value they add to their students' learning – as measured by test scores.

We believe in the benefits of setting learning targets, and of ensuring that each and every child is making progress according to objective standards. We believe that content standards are not only valuable but essential, and that assessments and accountability can be powerful learning tools for teachers, students, parents, schools, districts, and entire communities.

However, it is too easy for a high-stakes accountability system to lead to perverse incentives and outcomes that are not in anyone's interest. If a high-stakes accountability system is not designed or implemented well, it creates an educational environment in which teachers are demoralized and see their job solely as "teaching to the test"; in which students are deprived of the joys of creativity and learning about subjects outside the few that are tested; and in which schools that have added tremendous value to their students' learning are perceived as inadequate based on measures having little to do with real progress or those reflecting a narrow conception of progress.

In this publication, we describe the context of current U. S. high-stakes accountability systems in K-12 public education and the ways in which PEBC staff development can help teachers, schools, and districts maximize the benefits of the system. Our emphasis on thinking strategies for students and collaborative adult learning can help transform a stressful environment defined by test-taking into one in which both adults and students thrive. We also address the design factors outside the control of the typical school and district, which must be tackled by the larger education system if accountability ultimately is to benefit our students.



The Context

What is a high-stakes accountability system?

Expectations of our K-12 public education system have changed profoundly in the past few decades. From the 1950s through the 1970s, public policy in education focused on equalizing access to quality education, as exemplified by school desegregation efforts and laws requiring the provision of special education services. In the past decade, policy makers have turned their attention to America's ability to compete in a newly globalized marketplace.

Many believe our competitive ability depends upon a uniformly well-trained and skilled workforce relative to other countries. As a result, recent policy efforts have focused on equalizing educational outcomes. In other words, we now expect our educational system to make sure that all children learn to equally high levels. This trend towards equalizing outcomes has been reinforced and raised to a moral imperative by the growing awareness of the size and persistence of the achievement gap among students in different demographic groups.

The primary policy tool that emerged to effect this change is known as a high-stakes accountability system. A high-stakes accountability system has three components:

- **Academic standards:** Descriptions of the academic knowledge and performance expected of students at different levels in their education
- **Assessments:** Tests administered to evaluate whether students are meeting the standards
- **Accountability:** Substantial consequences to adults and/or students depending upon the results of assessments

The federal No Child Left Behind Act, a high-stakes accountability system in its own right, also requires the states to establish their own high-stakes accountability systems. In Colorado, the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) measures student performance against state Model Content Standards. Results are made publicly available through annual School Accountability Reports. Colorado also requires school districts to meet accreditation requirements, which use CSAP scores among other performance indicators. Under both the federal and state accountability systems, schools and districts that do not meet performance standards as measured by test scores are subject to consequences such as conversion to charter schools and other restructuring measures.

A Road Less Traveled

*By Patrick Allen, Teacher, Douglas County Schools
PEBC Lab Classroom Host*

Alfie Kohn states, "Educational researchers have discovered that there is a significant difference between getting students to think about their performance (that is, how well they are doing) and getting them to think about the learning itself (what they are doing). These orientations often pull in opposite directions, which means that too much emphasis on performance can reduce students' interest in

learning – and cause them to avoid challenging tasks. When the point is to prove how smart you are, to get a good grade or a high test score, there is less inclination to engage deeply with ideas, to explore and discover."

This quote made me think about my students and their learning and myself and my learning. Since I first began teaching over twenty years ago, I've traveled an interesting road. Some call education a road to becoming "world class." Some call education a road to "discovery." Some

call education a road to “the future.” I’m hoping that along this road some of the 500 plus children I’ve taught have discovered that while it’s important to be successful “doers,” they’ve also discovered their innate love of learning for learning’s sake. How lucky learners are who are able to take a road “less traveled.”

Twenty plus years have brought about many changes in classrooms across America – especially with the implementation of standards. High standards have, unfortunately, taken on strange and eerie monikers. Now the meaning of standards (levels of attainment toward excellence) has to be moved into “standardized” (manipulation to fit into a standard). And my fear is that our education system is focusing more on how well students are doing on yearly tests than on “the what” they are doing to become successful, independent thinkers and learners in our classrooms.

I’ve seen many tests that measure the “how well” come and go . . . the MEAP, the Terra Nova, the CTBS . . . and now the CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program). Wise consumers of the testing data can find some useful information about teaching and learning in these measures. But typically the results are used strictly as a measurement of “how well” students are doing.

Although it varies from class to class, student to student, year to year, my students tend to perform well on these tests. Why is that?

I’ve come to realize that without the time to think deeply, develop ownership over the process and product, and respond to successes and attempts, students can’t realize their full potential as learners. Without exposure to the strategies that “thinkers” use, taught explicitly and over time, students can’t realize their full potential as learners. Without an environment that nudges students to develop stamina and endurance to “stick with concepts of deep import,” students can’t realize

their full potential as learners. I think one reason the majority of my students have found success as “test takers” is that they first found success as “thinkers and learners.” You can’t have one without the other. My work with the PEBC has helped shape my thinking and provided the research base and collaborative efforts I’ve needed to discuss learning on a regular basis and provide instruction that is grounded in solid research.

Do I feel the pressure for my students to perform well? Of course. Am I willing to succumb to creating “mindless activities” as readers? Am I willing to see strips of color-coded paper strewn about in an attempt to “teach” children how to be better organized writers? Am I providing page after page of computation problems to “get” students to be more skilled mathematicians? Am I generating a plethora of “test prep” activities and inundating my students with a stack of bubble sheets? Nope. I don’t see the need. It’s a decision to create students who are mindful, not mindless.

In order for students to perform well on standardized measures, I have to nudge them to employ the same strategies they use daily in all types of text – poetry, narrative, nonfiction, and released test items. I’ve had to blend authentic experiences and testing materials into our established classroom rituals and routines. I familiarize students with testing formats and expectations without totally compromising instructional beliefs, practices, and underpinnings in the name of “getting ready for the test.”

It’s been an interesting road to travel—in this high-stakes world of accountability. It’s my grounding in wise instructional content and continued professional development that’s provided a place to sit and contemplate . . . on this fast-paced road to proficiency on standardized tests.

What are the possible effects of a high-stakes accountability system?

The requirements of high-stakes accountability systems were imposed because policy makers believed they would lead to positive changes in education. Supporters of high-stakes accountability

systems describe a variety of ways in which these systems could lead to school change, including:

- Providing teachers with information to make instructional changes
- Applying public pressure for improvement of low-performing schools

Critics of high-stakes accountability systems describe a number of ways in which these systems might have negative effects on educational improvement, including:

- The narrowing of the curriculum to those subjects that are tested
- The lowering of morale and motivation among teachers and students

A chart created by researchers at the RAND Corporation summarizing these potential positive and negative effects can be found in Appendix A on page 17.

What does the research say about the actual impact of high-stakes accountability?

High-stakes accountability systems are relatively new to education, and as a result so is the research documenting their impact. However, available research has reached the following conclusions on the effects of high-stakes accountability systems on K-12 teaching and learning:

- Standards and related high-stakes assessments serve to focus instruction. This may be helpful or harmful, depending upon the needs of students and how well the system is designed (Herman 2003)
 - o More teachers and schools are aligning curriculum with standards (ibid)
 - o Teachers report more emphasis on “higher-order thinking” and writing skills (Taylor 2003)
 - o Instructional time tends to be reallocated based on what is tested and when it is tested (Pedulla 2003; Hamilton 2002)
- “Test preparation” increases with high-stakes accountability systems. This may be helpful or harmful depending on the circumstances
 - o Teachers model the pedagogical approach used on tests, whether multiple-choice or extended writing or rubrics (Herman 2005; Pedulla 2003; Hamilton 2002)
 - o High-needs schools tend to spend more time on superficial test-taking skills (Jones 2004)
- High-stakes accountability systems can focus more attention on low-performing students and achievement gaps between subsets of students (Yeh 2005; Taylor 2003)

- High-stakes accountability systems can lead to large-scale gains in student achievement, although it is not clear if improvements continue steadily over time (Braun 2004; Jacobs 2004; NYSDE 2004; Carnoy 2002)
- Teachers report mixed impacts of high-stakes testing on curriculum and instructional practice (Jones 2004; Taylor 2003; Cimbricz 2002) and question tests’ usefulness in terms of improving instruction (Yeh, 2005)
- Teachers report increased pressure and decreased morale as a result of high-stakes testing (Jones 2004; Taylor 2003)
- The ability of teachers to respond effectively within accountability systems is dependent upon attitudes, training, experience, school capacity, and district leadership, leading to concerns about equity (Elmore 2005; Mintrop 2005)

In short, accountability systems can raise student achievement by focusing attention on learning targets and outcomes. However, they can also be designed and implemented in such a way that they become counterproductive to real learning.

Ironically, high-stakes testing may be harming some of the schools it was most intended to help – those serving large numbers of children in poverty or from minority backgrounds (e.g., Goertz 2005; Mintrop 2005; Diamond and Spillane 2002). These high-needs schools tend to have less qualified teachers, less effective leadership, and less internal capacity within their school building to support instructional change.

Researchers find that in schools without the capacity to adapt and respond to high-stakes testing, instruction can quickly devolve into test preparation, where students are trained primarily in test-taking methods and rote memorization. Teachers are deluged with data, without understanding how to use it to improve instruction. They can panic, feeling isolated and hopeless in their efforts to respond to the mounting call for test scores. Even the most veteran teacher can feel demoralized, and new teachers may be most likely to question their decision to enter the teaching profession.

Beyond the Test

*By Cheryl Zimmerman, Teacher, Cherry Creek Schools
PEBC Lab Classroom Host*

Before 2004, I sat on the CSAP sidelines – a benchwarmer of sorts. In my role as a staff developer and primary teacher, I occasionally spouted my beliefs about test prep, and I occasionally tested my theories, but I never anticipated the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat associated with the release of class-by-class scores.

In August of 2004 reality hit. Teaching fifth grade threw me headlong into the CSAP game. How would I prepare my fifth graders to be successful on the test and beyond the test? How would my strongly held beliefs about teaching and learning translate to good test scores? How would I avoid the test traps I'd seen other thoughtful teachers fall into?

Teaching kids to think tops my professional priority list each year. My work with the PEBC and teaching kids the thinking strategies used by proficient learners deepens the teaching and learning in my classroom for both the kids and myself. My hope for kids is that they become thoughtful readers, writers, mathematicians, researchers, and community members. I decided that if I approach nearly every other aspect of school through the lens of teaching the thinking strategies, then my approach to CSAP should be no different.

So, the fifth graders and I didn't hit the glossy test prep materials every Wednesday, and we didn't fill in the blanks on countless worksheets every time we read a text. We didn't disband cooperative table groupings in order to arrange desks in quiet rows. Instead, we continued to read, write and solve problems in authentic ways, and we continued to explore the ways in which thinking strategies deepened our understandings and enhanced our abilities to retain and apply our learning.

We also added a new dimension to our work: looking closely at tests.

For better or for worse, tests are a fact of life. There are karate belt tests, driver's license tests, and college entrance tests. I realized that if I hoped for student engagement in the area of test-taking, acknowledging a wide variety of test types may be an entry point. I shared stories about tests I'd taken in my life – the challenge of parallel parking in order to earn my driver's license, and the challenge of advancing from a white belt to a yellow belt in karate. Fifth graders began to see how thinking strategies played a role in the tests they took outside of school: tests indicating swim team levels, competitive soccer team positions, or babysitting preparedness.

After looking at the tests that held daily significance in the lives of ten and eleven year olds, we turned our attention to CSAP. We uncovered ways in which thinking strategies such as activating schema, inferring, creating images, and determining importance could lead us to success. Examining test language led us to discover that when a test-maker asked us to tell what would "probably happen" to a story character, we needed to infer. When a test-maker asked us to choose the main idea of a text passage, we needed to determine importance. And when a test-maker asked us to write a paragraph describing a favorite place, we needed to choose words that created strong images in the test-grader's mind. Building schema for test format lead us to notice the difference in our thought processes when tackling multiple-choice items as opposed to constructed response items. What if a test item required a three-part answer? What if a test item required completion of a graphic organizer? What types of thinking would lead to success?

Underlying our work with testing was explicit talk about purpose and audience. We made no bones about the fact that our purpose was to prove proficiency to a large audience, most of whom we would never meet. Unlike the case in class, at home, or on the soccer field, we

wouldn't have the opportunity to defend our thinking in person. We wouldn't have the chance to sit side by side with a test-grader to explain our sound reasons for choosing what turned out to be the "wrong" answer. We wouldn't have the chance to explain how a study of whales in third grade influenced our understanding of a test passage about whales. We practiced climbing into the minds of test-makers in order to craft answers in the way they would judge as proficient. The power of talk and collaboration enhanced our work. We worked to answer test items in large groups, small groups and pairs. We thought out loud for one another,

explaining how we arrived at particular answers and naming the kinds of thinking that helped us along the way.

CSAP season came and went, and months later test scores were released. My fifth graders did well. Our thinking strategy approach led to as much or more success as the skill and drill approach and I didn't abandon what I'd learned over twenty years about meaningful teaching and learning. I could sleep at night knowing that decent CSAP scores weren't all the fifth graders would carry onto sixth grade. Learning to think deeply in a variety of situations would carry them far beyond the test.

Recommendations

In response to these findings, researchers recommend that high-stakes assessments must be aligned with standards in meaningful ways. Because performance objectives will drive behavior, they must represent a balance of content coverage and content depth, be comprehensive, and be sufficient to support inferences about whether and how well students attained standards (Herman 2003; CCSSO 2004). In turn, performance measures should be broad enough to encompass all of "what counts" in a system (Hamilton, 2002).

Researchers also recommend that policy makers and educators recognize the limitations of state assessments and use them appropriately (Herman 2003). To fulfill the "continuous improvement" purposes of state accountability systems, districts and schools must supplement state tests with ongoing, real-time classroom measures. The most useful measures will be derived from multiple sources and provide immediate information about improving instruction. The alignment of standards, assessment, curriculum and instruction can be a very powerful feedback loop for improving instruction. While large-scale assessments

provide valuable information about system-wide weaknesses and strengths from year to year, school- and classroom-based formative assessments fill in the details about the current needs of individual students. For example, many schools are beginning to employ progress-monitoring systems to provide "early warnings" regarding students who are struggling. Teachers then can adjust instruction or provide appropriate interventions for individual students. These two types of assessment systems can thus work hand in hand to fulfill different but equally important needs.

Not surprisingly, researchers also recommend that the implementation of high-stakes testing must occur in partnership with extensive professional development (Elmore 2005). When this happens, schools are able to use standards, assessment, and accountability as valuable tools to improve instruction and student learning outcomes. According to the Education Trust, schools that are successful under these circumstances display common characteristics. These characteristics include:



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Strategies for Success in a High-Stakes Accountability System

- Extensive use of local and state standards to design effective curricula and instruction, to evaluate student work, and to evaluate teachers
- Increased instructional time targeted to reading and math
- Investment in professional development for teachers and leaders that is focused on instructional practice
- A comprehensive system to monitor the performance of individual students and to intervene before at-risk students fall behind
- Use of formative assessments as a frequent part of teaching and learning
- Holding all adults accountable for student learning

How can PEBC help students and teachers thrive?

At PEBC, we believe that if we want our students to thrive and to graduate with the critical thinking skills, imagination, confidence in their own abilities, and subject knowledge to be happy and productive adults, then our schools cannot allow test-taking to be the cornerstone of our education system.

Luckily, it is entirely possible to wed deep, authentic, joyful learning with the objective measurements of a standards-based system. Schools can have the best of both worlds. It is possible ... but not easy.

Instructional Practices

Classrooms are small communities with their own rituals and routines. PEBC professional development makes it possible for teachers to increase their use of effective instructional best practices including workshop structures, student ownership and choice, extensive use of a wide variety of texts, teacher 'think alouds', and individual conferring. These practices specifically target the kinds of flexible, indepth, reflective thinking students use when taking standardized tests and as they maneuver their daily work in schools.

Instructional Content

Our professional development helps teachers develop deep thinking in their students, encouraging students to question, analyze and determine importance, compare, make connections, infer and synthesize as they read and think in all subject areas, from the elementary to the secondary level.

These comprehension strategies, or thinking strategies, which are applicable across subject areas, tend to be the weakest points for most schools in their formal test results. By significantly strengthening these skills, PEBC can help schools see direct improvement not only in state-level test scores but also in everyday student learning.

School Culture and Capacity

Success in a standards-based accountability system requires significant and ongoing adult learning. Research has shown that a critical factor in a school's ability to thrive in a high-stakes environment is its capacity. In other words, whether a school improves or buckles under the added pressure depends in large part on the ability of the adults in the building to align their goals and curricula and to effectively respond to the information provided by assessments.

PEBC helps with this essential capacity-building as well. We help teachers and schools build permanent in-house structures for dialogue and professional learning. We also provide coaching for administrators and teachers in how to set and attain their goals.

These processes not only help schools meet the demands of accountability, but also help schools build the kind of working environment and school culture most likely to help recruit and retain the best teachers (Hirsch 2005).

The matrix on pages 14-16 provides more information about each of these elements, including related research, and, in many cases, links to specific Colorado Model Content Standards addressed by the practice and/or content we recommend.

Since the Dawn of CSAP

By Gari Meacham, Teacher, Littleton Public Schools
PEBC Lab Classroom Host

Ten years ago I gave a test with no warning. It was called a CSAP, and I honestly didn't even know what the letters stood for. I handed it out to my students, and promptly sat at my desk grading papers for the next two days. When my class results were released, I was mortified to find out that some of my highest readers scored partially proficient, and my class combined for an average of 67% proficiency. What happened?

Certainly it wasn't me; it was those lazy kids. This was what I thought as I shoved the test results into a folder and assumed the test would eventually go away.

But looking back, I now see that that initial test, over ten years ago, was the catalyst in a seismic change in my teaching practices . . . a change that has left my instruction, and my students' learning, steeped in rigor, insight and understanding.

Ten years ago, I had grouped my students in the same way the teacher I replaced had done. I had high, medium and low reading groups. I met with each group for 20 minutes every day. My teaching in these groups rarely involved much more than having students read aloud "round robin" style and peppered with the occasional packet of comprehension questions at the end of a story. Only the high group read actual novels. The rest of the kids read anthologies and simple texts. No students got to choose what they read. When I met with one group, students in the other groups completed worksheets at their desks, or filled time reading books unrelated to any classroom accountability. I truly believed this was an excellent instructional model. It was what I had seen duplicated throughout our building and district.

My staff and I had been reading the book *Mosaic of Thought*, written by Ellin Keene from PEBC. I didn't understand it! I would read and reread, trying to capture the essence of the text, but was left with the distinct feeling that I

knew very little about the reading process, let alone how to teach it! When our staff had the opportunity to caravan to Slavins Elementary with our PEBC staff developer to watch Debbie Miller teach, I was pumped. A day out of the classroom is always great!

Nothing could have prepared me for what I witnessed that day. Her room was filled with real books, not anthologies. She gathered the kids to her on the floor and taught a mini-lesson on a comprehension strategy that I had only seen on silly worksheets. What really frazzled me was listening to the way she interacted with her class of first graders. They held meaningful conversations with her about inferring, determining importance and connections, and I wasn't even sure I knew what they meant! Needless to say, I knew I needed to change. I had a feeling that if I could just get a hold of what I witnessed in her classroom that day, my test scores would improve.

After that visit, I entered what I affectionately call my "mini-crisis," which lasted for about a year. I let go of my rigid grouping, and taught the comprehension strategies as my year-long plan in reading and writing. I began explicitly teaching the comprehension strategies, thinking aloud using great nonfiction, fiction and poetry, and using comprehension journals where students kept track of their own thinking as the cornerstones of my instruction.

In my first year implementing the type of literacy instruction PEBC advocates, the CSAP scores in my class rose to 100% proficient. My scores have remained between 98-100% proficient each year since. Even the special education students repeatedly score well on the CSAP exam.

Why the dramatic improvement in test scores? I am certain it is because of the change in my practice. Explicit instruction focused on the strategies of comprehension, with respect for the children's thinking and brilliance, caused the rise in test scores.

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Improving the System

Our Recommendations

The predictions of both proponents of and opponents to high-stakes accountability may be said to have materialized. Two key factors in these outcomes are 1) the design and alignment of the accountability system, and 2) the attitudes, capabilities, and capacity of teachers and schools.

PEBC staff development can help maximize teacher and school capacity to meet the new challenges of high-stakes accountability. But the design and alignment of the accountability system is outside the control of an individual teacher, school, and/or district, and all the capacity-building in the world cannot overcome the perverse incentives and obstacles to improvement posed by a poorly designed system.

For this reason, we urge state and federal policy makers to engage in the same continuous improvement process they are requiring of educators. Policy makers must periodically evaluate the design, implementation, and outcomes of the accountability system as a whole, and make improvements to the system as indicated. It is essential to the credibility of the entire system that educators are involved in these evaluations and the ensuing recommended changes.

Standards must be regularly evaluated to ensure that they reflect current best thinking on what students should know and be able to do. Rapid-fire changes in the external world, such as changes in workplace expectations and technological advances, must be incorporated into standards to ensure that students are prepared for life.

Assessments must be aligned to standards in a way that prioritizes the most essential standards,

is comprehensive, and leads to valid and reliable conclusions about whether students are meeting standards (Herman 2003; CCSSO 2004; Yeh 2005). Because research shows that the range of assessments will drive teacher decisions about curriculum, we must make sure that what we are testing is what we believe to be most important (Hamilton 2002). This means we must consider ways in which we can assess those higher-order thinking skills that are so important to students' futures.

Policy makers also must ensure they recognize the differences in utility among different types of assessments. Annual large-scale assessments such as the CSAP are limited in their ability to inform real-time improvements in the classroom. Policy makers should encourage the use of other types of assessments that are more appropriate for continuous improvement in the classroom, in combination with measures such as

CSAP (Herman 2003). Assessments should measure students' absolute performance against a specified target, as well as students' improvement over time. Both of these information sets are essential to provide a complete picture not only of a student's performance, but of the performance of the education system as a whole (Barton 2004).

Finally, accountability measures must be used to drive improvement, not deliver punishment. The incentives contained within them must motivate the adults in the system to higher performance. This is not to say that teachers, schools, and/or districts should not be held accountable for a sustained failure to improve student performance. However, an accountability system should be flexible enough to adjust to individual



Photo Courtesy of Denver Public Schools

circumstances, be based on research about what truly motivates people, provide rewards for meeting short-term benchmarks, and incorporate accountability for both growth over time and absolute performance.

We encourage policy makers to contemplate additional, reasonable accountability measures for students. Student motivation repeatedly has been shown to be a key factor in student achievement. As a result, accountability measures that directly affect students may be very powerful. However, like other accountability measures, they must be well thought-out and realistic, providing for support and encouragement as well as consequences.

State and federal policy makers also must recognize the absolute transformation of our education system that is required by the goal of proficiency for all students. System transformation requires system leadership that

simultaneously inspires, challenges, and provides opportunity for success. As Mintrop (2005) notes, pressure without the ability to improve is counterproductive.

Some capacity-building initiatives can be undertaken only at the state or federal level, including providing funding for extensive professional development, extended instructional time, and quality early childhood education to help overcome disadvantages in student background. In Colorado, with a number of small, rural districts, the state government can play a key role in providing important information about model curricula, formative assessments, and data analysis for those districts that do not have an infrastructure to support this work. The state also can recognize the particular difficulties that most schools serving challenging populations will face in using high-stakes accountability systems for improvement, and provide extra assistance for those schools.

Improvement in the Face of Adversity

*Jennifer Swinehart, Teacher, Denver Public Schools
PEBC Lab Classroom Host*

Bruce Randolph Middle School is in the Northeast quadrant of the Denver Public School District in Denver, Colorado. Our school's student population is approximately 83% Hispanic, 16% African-American, and 1% various other ethnicities. Over 93% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and most of the families in our school neighborhood live in an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

As part of a community movement to have a middle school for this community, our school opened its doors in the fall of 2002. And we have been fighting to keep it open ever since.

For the past three years, test scores have been unsatisfactory, according to the state accountability system, with significant decline from year to year. Eleven percent of our students in any grade level were proficient in reading, and only 7% were proficient in writing and math last year. Despite all this,

my students' scores in reading and writing have improved (53% and 67% respectively) in this past testing cycle. I believe that specific instructional tools I've implemented with the support of PEBC have made it possible for my students to defy the odds and raise their test scores.

Tool 1— Emphasizing the Known

For the past three years, the bulk of my work has centered on teaching students to be metacognitive while they read and write. It is essential for all students to use what they know and understand as the starting point for their reading. This is especially true for students who struggle to comprehend text. Before experiencing this instructional focus, the majority of my students began reading a book or an article seeing only the unfamiliar words or phrases. Accessing schema, asking thoughtful, specific, text-based questions, and connecting what they read to their own lives helped my students make meaning from text.

Without this reassurance that they do know something about everything they read, most of the students at my school simply shrug their shoulders and dismiss the possibility that they actually can understand a challenging piece of text.

Tool 2—Meaningful Practice, Practice, Practice

Work in the classroom has to be meaningful. Period. Students can see right through assignments that don't pertain to their lives and often rebel against tasks that appear artificial. They want assignments that are authentic and practical. Tasks need to be predictable and the products of these tasks need to be tools for further learning — individually and classroom-wide. Student examples, followed by additional practice based on those peer models, can immediately lift the level of work within the classroom. Predictability helps students become more independent as they take more ownership over their own work. As young men and women become more responsible and are better able to critically assess their own performances, they are successful at transferring skills to their work in other classrooms and on standardized assessments.

Tool 3—Authentic Collaboration

By the time children reach middle school, classrooms are often places where teachers spend a great deal of the time telling them what and how to think. However, I've observed that the most important and lasting student learning happens when children are the ones doing the teaching. When students teach each other, thinking together and puzzling through difficult tasks, they see in one another the processes happening inside of themselves. Collaboration is a variation of metacognition, reiterating what thinking looks like in the mind of a middle school student. With ample opportunities to talk about and analyze both the process and the end result of a task, students get a sense of what it looks like to think hard and get smarter. When they see hard work and smart thinking in each other, the power of this moment is stunning.

Tool 4—Value Internal Rewards

Being rewarded for achievement is crucial for student success. It builds self-confidence and a positive desire to continue. But I think these rewards need to come from within. If I give kids candy for answering questions or turning in assignments then I'm in some way limiting their ability to motivate themselves. I've heard colleagues in the past say that the only way to motivate middle school kids is to give them something. To the contrary, I've seen students thrive in an environment that expects hard work and deep thinking from every child every day. Positive reinforcement, examples of a productive and appropriate work ethic, and specific verbal praise targeting discreet student achievement can provide more incentive for growth in most middle schoolers than a popcorn party or candy bar. Not only that, they learn that the feeling inside of their hearts and minds lingers and reappears at moments when they most need a reminder of the great thinking they're capable of demonstrating.

Tool 5—Belief in Self

I once had two students ask me why our school was “unsatisfactory” on the state School Accountability Report when every school in the Cherry Creek School District was ranked at “average” or above. Knowing that in good conscience I could not speak for the work occurring in their other classes, I asked these two young men if they thought the work we did in our classroom was “unsatisfactory.” They both said no, and nodded with knowing looks in their eyes when I went on to tell them that they could only worry about what they knew in their hearts to be true — that they worked hard in our class and that they proved their brilliance to me everyday. To a roomful of inner-city kids who have always been told that they are not performing the way they should be, words of encouragement are like magic. Attitudes change and productivity becomes standard in a classroom where kids believe in themselves and their ability to succeed academically.

Performance-based accountability is not a new concept. In a recent publication, RAND researchers looked at research on the effectiveness of accountability systems in other sectors – manufacturing, government, the legal sector, and health care (Stecher 2004). Although they acknowledge the unique characteristics of education, they argue that education can learn lessons from the experience of other sectors. For state education departments, in collaboration with school districts and professional education organizations, these lessons include the following:

- Performance measures should be broad enough to encompass all of “what counts” in a system because performance objectives will drive behavior.
- Accountability systems should establish reasonable improvement targets that are sensitive to initial inputs, and should not reward or penalize schools or districts for factors beyond their control. This goal of fair comparisons also must be balanced against

the absolute goal of closing the achievement gap.

- More detailed standards of practice to allow teachers to be more deliberate about monitoring their own professional competence should be created.
- An integrated, comprehensive strategy to help schools and districts improve their performance should be developed, which research suggests should consist of the following:
 - o Undertaking a focused institutional self-assessment
 - o Understanding the school system as a linked process
 - o Developing and applying an expanded knowledge base about effective practice in varying situations
 - o Empowering participants in the process (notably teachers) to contribute to improvement efforts

Conclusion

At PEBC, we believe that a standards-based accountability system provides great challenges and great opportunities for school improvement. We can help your students, teachers, and leaders realize the improvement opportunities without compromising the joy of learning for either students or adults. We call upon policy makers to recognize the dramatic transformation expected of our schools, and to provide a well-designed and continuously evaluated accountability system and sufficient resources and assistance to ensure that we can realize the promise of standards-based accountability.



How PEBC Professional Development Supports

Instructional Practices

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES SUPPORTED BY PEBC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	WHAT STUDENT BEHAVIOR DOES THIS INSPIRE?	HOW STUDENTS MUST APPLY THIS SKILL OR BEHAVIOR IN STANDARDIZED TESTS	ALIGNMENT WITH COLORADO MODEL CONTENT STANDARDS	FOR READING AND WRITING SUPPORTING RESEARCH
literacy blocks (workshops) that give students extended periods of time every day to read and write	stamina for independent work as engaged readers, writers, etc.	students must spend long chunks of time working in testing settings with little adult direction/ interaction	Standards 1, 4	<i>Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999</i> <i>Ivey & Broaddus, 2001</i> <i>Shanahan, 2004</i> <i>Daniels & Bizar, 2004</i>
teacher think-alouds that show students the cognitive processes used by proficient learners – the use of comprehension strategies, surface structure skills, and writer’s tools	the capacity to examine, expand, and revise thinking, which relates to students’ capacity to self-regulate and be metacognitive	students must notice when they are making sense and when they are confused, and then take action to regain meaning	Standards 1, 2, 3, 4	<i>Wilhelm, 2001 Pressley, 2002</i>
student selection of texts and topics that are appropriately challenging and accurately match the purpose and audience of the literacy task	an engaged, flexible and confident reading stance (high ‘buy-in’) across many text types (genres, formats, etc.)	students must move from one text type to another rapidly and fluidly	Standards 1, 2	<i>Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1998</i>
a wide variety of accessible texts (in terms of genres and levels) available to all students across content areas coupled with explicit instruction concerning genre-specific features (narrative, expository and poetic texts)	the ability to recognize and understand text genres, and to know the text structures, elements and features when working to comprehend different types of text; increased time with text at students’ instructional level and interest area	students need to be able to read flexibly when encountering various types of text. They need to be able to enter into any text presented regardless of its difficulty, structure or genre	Standards 1, 2	<i>Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1998</i> <i>Campbell, Kapinus, & Beatty, 1995</i> <i>Tovani, 2004</i> <i>Beers, 2003</i> <i>Allington, Bincarosa & Snow, 2004</i> <i>Allington, 2002</i>
ongoing student reflection and setting of ambitious reading and writing goals	the capacity to be metacognitive about their strengths and own learning successes and learning needs	students must know when they’re making sense, when they’re confused, and what they can do to re-engage in the task and/or rebuild meaning	Standards 2, 3, 4	<i>Anderson, 2005</i> <i>McCann, et al, 2005</i> <i>Guthrie, 2003</i>
conferring daily with students to assess their use of strategies, skills and writers’ tools and to challenge them to move to the next step in their learning	the awareness and ownership of developing reading/writing skills	see above	Standards 2, 3, 4	<i>William, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004</i> <i>Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1989</i>
curricular planning that begins with student outcomes and works backwards to include materials, classroom activities, etc.	an inquiry-based perspective toward learning; an increased awareness of their own strengths and needs	students must understand and, in many cases have mastery of, curriculum standards	Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6	<i>Wiggins & Mctighe, 2001</i> <i>Plaut, et al, 2006</i>
using ongoing, formative student assessment data to inform instructional next steps	an understanding of what they know, what they do not know, and what they might know next	students need an internal sense of their own developing capacity as measured by high-stakes tests	Standards 1, 2, 3 and 4	<i>Allington & Cunningham, 2002</i> <i>Hyde, Zemelman, Daniels, 2005</i>
instruction that differentiates to meet the needs of all students (including those who are learning English as a second language)	scaffolded experience with and opportunities to employ academic language	all students need to be able to read, understand, and succeed on standardized tests	Standards 1 and 4	<i>Delpit, 1995</i> <i>Peregoy & Boyle, 1992</i> <i>Echevarria, Vogt, et al, 2004</i> <i>Cummins, 1981</i>
an atmosphere of rigor, inquiry and intimacy	the capacity to ask big questions and ‘tackle’ challenging texts and learning activities – especially when ‘abandoning’ is not an option	students must fully engage with standardized tests that may appear dense and more challenging than texts they typically read on their own	Standards 1 and 4	<i>Purcell-Gates</i>

How PEBC Professional Development Supports

Instructional Content

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT SUPPORTED BY PEBC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	WHAT STUDENT BEHAVIOR DOES THIS INSPIRE?	HOW STUDENTS MUST APPLY THIS SKILL OR BEHAVIOR IN STANDARDIZED TESTS	ALIGNMENT WITH COLORADO MODEL CONTENT STANDARDS FOR READING AND WRITING	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
comprehension/ thinking strategy instruction (cognitive strategy instruction including surface structure systems and deep structure systems)	the capacity to specifically name the cognitive shifts successful readers make when making sense of complex texts	students must use comprehension strategies in order to understand the difficult and varied text on standardized tests	Standards 1, 4	<i>Pearson, et al, 1984</i> <i>Duke & Pearson, 2002</i> <i>Duffy, 2002</i>
thinking strategy instruction using released items from standardized tests	a metacognitive and engaged approach to 'taking' standardized tests	students need to notice and name the thinking required by a specific test item or passage, making the test more predictable and manageable	Standards 1, 4	<i>Guthrie, 2002</i>
reading and writing as process and product	the capacity to name and make use of what proficient readers/ writers know and are able to do	students need to move fluidly between creating meaning as a reader/writer and sharing finished thinking as a result of that reading/writing	Standards 1, 2, 3, 4	<i>NCTE, 2004</i>
clarity of purpose	an awareness of the 'why' and the 'for whom' of the learning event, and an understanding of how this awareness influences thinking and behaviors	students need to understand the purpose(s) of a specific standardized test, why it matters, to whom it matters, and what kind of thinking will lead to success	Standards 1, 2	<i>NCTE, 2004</i> <i>National Reading Panel, 2000</i> <i>Tovani, 2005</i>
linking of reading, writing and thinking across curricular areas	understanding the direct correlation between and the overlapping of strategies/ skills of composing as a reader and composing as a writer	students must effectively reflect/ respond to their reading in writing students must write with a reader's needs and expectations in mind	Standard 4	<i>Daniels & Bizar, 2004</i> <i>Robb, 2003</i>
a range of tactics to identify and pronounce unknown words and to read fluently, both orally and silently	the capacity to figure out unknown words as one way of increasing reading flexibly	students need to feel competent when faced with unknown vocabulary on tests	Standard 1	<i>Rasinski, 2001</i> <i>Samuels & Farstrup, 2006</i>
a range of strategies for developing an increasingly sophisticated and complex sentence structure and vocabulary, in both oral and written language	the ability to present thinking in clear and complex ways	students need to make sense of complex test material, and use sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure while composing test answers	Standard 1	<i>Nagy, 1988</i> <i>Nagy & Scott, 2000</i> <i>Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2002</i>

How PEBC Professional Development Supports

School Culture and Capacity

SCHOOL CULTURE AND CAPACITY SUPPORTED BY PEBC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	WHAT SCHOOL FACULTY BEHAVIOR DOES THIS INSPIRE?	HOW SCHOOL FACULTIES NEED TO USE THIS INFORMATION TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' SUCCESS ON STANDARDIZED TESTS	CORRELATION WITH NSDC STANDARDS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
ongoing adult learning, including regular opportunities to reflect on strengths and to create realistic and ambitious goals for each faculty member	opportunities to engage in rigorous learning and an increased likelihood of transferring new understandings to classroom instruction (e.g., better informed teachers bringing new ideas/understandings to their work with students)	teachers need knowledge of current research around curriculum and instruction	<p><u>Context Standards:</u> Learning Communities, Leadership</p> <p><u>Process Standards:</u> Data-Driven, Collaboration</p>	<i>Darling-Hammond and Berry, 1998</i> <i>Schmoker, 1999</i>
<p>collaboration shared leadership among faculty members and school administrators</p> <p>regular, intellectually interesting discourse among faculty members including discussion about student work</p> <p>shared learning about ways to analyze and make use of disaggregated data</p>	the ability to communicate student needs and a plan to meet those needs; to develop a shared ownership and understanding of the external pressures regarding AYP, NCLB, CBLA; to share best practices and collectively understand data from ongoing/ formative as well as summative sources; and a willingness to think deeply about the implications of a range of student data	schools need to be more strategic with student data, develop learning opportunities for teachers that align with student needs, better understand accountability policy, and develop shared ownership, understanding and willingness to address student achievement data	<u>Process Standards:</u> Data-Driven	<i>Elmore, 2000</i> <i>Bincarosa & Snow, 2004</i> <i>DuFour & Eaker, 1998</i> <i>Lampert, 2003</i> <i>Love, 2004</i> <i>Schmoker, 2003</i> <i>Boudett, 2005</i>
collaborative teaching environments	the capacity of colleagues to work together to create rigorous, inquiry-based learning experiences for students	teachers need to maximize the experience and strengths of their colleagues	<p><u>Context Standards:</u> Learning Communities</p> <p><u>Process Standards:</u> Collaboration</p>	<i>Hourcade & Bauwens, 2003</i> <i>Bincarosa & Snow, 2003</i>
dialogue and consensus about essential content in literacy learning for all grades	a shared knowledge of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their learning experiences	curriculum must be aligned with essential learning outcomes measured by accountability tools	<p><u>Context Standards:</u> Learning Communities</p> <p><u>Process Standards:</u> Collaboration</p>	<i>Wiggins & McTighe, 1999</i>
commitment to gather assessment data from various settings	the capacity to create instruction based on specific information about individual students as well as groups of students	teachers need to use a full range of complimentary and corroborating evidence to determine students' successes and needs	<p><u>Context Standards:</u> Learning Communities</p> <p><u>Process Standards:</u> Data-Driven, Evaluation, Collaboration</p>	<i>Sharkey & Murnane, 2003</i>
coaching for classroom teachers and school leaders	an openness to ongoing collaboration and professional development	school faculties need to make use of the expertise and support of colleagues to continue to explore and refine student instruction	<p><u>Context Standards:</u> Learning Communities</p> <p><u>Content Standards:</u> Quality Teaching</p>	<i>Ellison & Hayes, 2006</i> <i>West & Staub, 2003</i>

Effects of High-Stakes Accountability Up and Down the System

POTENTIAL POSITIVE EFFECTS	POTENTIAL NEGATIVE EFFECTS
EFFECTS ON STUDENTS	
Provide students with better information about their own knowledge and skills	Frustrate students and discourage them from trying
Motivate students to work harder in school	Make students more competitive
Send clearer signals to students about what to study	Cause students to devalue grades and school assessments
Help students associate personal effort with rewards	
EFFECTS ON TEACHERS	
Support better diagnosis of individual students needs	Encourage teachers to focus more on specific test content than on curriculum standards
Help teachers identify areas of strengths and weaknesses in their curriculum	Lead teachers to engage in inappropriate test preparation
Help teachers identify content not mastered by students and redirect instruction	Devalue teachers' sense of professional worth
Motivate teachers to work harder and smarter	Entice teachers to cheat when preparing or administering tests
Lead teachers to align instruction with standards	
Encourage teachers to participate in professional development to improve instruction	
EFFECTS ON ADMINISTRATORS	
Cause administrators to examine school policies related to curriculum and instruction	Lead administrators to enact policies to increase test scores but not necessarily increase learning
Help administrators judge the quality of their programs	Cause administrators to reallocate resources to tested subjects at the expense of other subjects
Lead administrators to change school policies to improve curriculum or instruction	Lead administrators to waste resources on test preparation
Help administrators make better resource allocation decisions, e.g., provide professional development	Distract administrators from other school needs and problems
EFFECTS ON POLICYMAKERS	
Help policy makers judge the effectiveness of educational policies	Provide misleading information that leads policy makers to suboptimal decisions
Improve policy makers ability to monitor school system performance	Foster a "blame the victims" spirit among policy makers
Foster better allocation of state educational resources	Encourage a simplistic view of education and its goals

From Surviving to Thriving

Strategies for Success in a High-Stakes Accountability System

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