

Create A Master Plan for Accountability

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The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.

John F. Kennedy

Having been involved with schools for a number of years, I've learned that having a set of goals without a set of plans can result in a new set of goals by a new set of people in a few years. Consequently, I've grown fond of master plans to help set not just a vision, but a process for achieving those goals, whether the program is student achievement or food service. In this article, I draw from assessment research conducted over the past 15 years at our center to suggest a ten-point master plan for accountability, specifically with elementary schools in mind.

The following suggestions are a starting point. You will need to fill in the details that are appropriate for your school, your teachers and staff, and especially, your students.

1) **Administrator Accountability IQ**--Although you may already know a great deal about standards and testing, state and federal laws, rules, and guidance change almost every year. Increase your own accountability IQ by reading articles and attending conferences that increase what you know about accountability. The more you know as a school administrator, the more likely you are to pass that knowledge along to teachers and your staff. Your master plan should include attending at least one conference every year with a very strong focus on accountability.

2) **Teacher Knowledge**--how much do your teachers know about state and classroom assessment? Many pre-service and post-service teacher educational programs do not do an adequate job of insuring that teachers have the assessment knowledge they need to help students succeed. Make sure that your school professional development program has a strong focus on helping teachers create high quality classroom assessments and helping them use those assessment results together with their TAKS test results to increase student learning.

3) Set high expectations, provide learning opportunities, use multiple assessments. While some children seem to succeed against all odds due to innate ability, most succeed only when schools, administrators, teachers, and parents, set high expectations and provide the necessary opportunities to support student success. "High standards for all students" has become a national mantra and deserves a prominent place in your master plan. Multiple assessments, especially when the consequences are high for students, i.e., retention, will help produce a more accurate result.

4) Assess early and especially in reading. Research shows that students who are not fluent readers by age nine have a high probability of struggling in school. Many state assessments including TAKS, don't begin until nearly the end of third grade, which means that identification may not begin until the start of 4th grade. Your master accountability plan should have a method, or ideally multiple methods, for early identification of students with learning needs as early as second grade. Equally important is an intervention plan in early grades to help students who need extra help in both reading and mathematics.

5) Become data experts. In today's rapidly changing world, it isn't enough to depend on a district test director for guidance on how to understand and use test scores. To effectively apply test results to student learning, schools today need to have their own capability to collect and use data. CRESST offers free data software to schools called the Quality School Portfolio and other software is available at reasonable cost. Research is increasingly suggesting that the best data-use training model is one where teachers are knowledgeable and comfortable with data collection and use.

6) Improve classroom assignments and tests. Research by Pam Aschbacher and Lindsay Clare Matsumura has shown that most classroom assignments and tests are of low-level quality, oftentimes testing students on rote memory and formulaic processes. Your master plan should include regular sharing of classroom assignments and assessments between teachers, with a key goal of assignments and assessments that are rigorous and aligned to state standards. While content knowledge is important, applying that knowledge to worthwhile and different types of assignments and tests can engage children and increase their ability to do many types of tasks.

"Assessments should always be clearly related to a specific standard or objective," recommends Deputy Superintendent Jim Stratton, who leads La Canada Unified School District's curriculum program. He suggests the backwards-mapping model of

identifying the standard or standards, creating the assessment, and developing lessons to practice skills that will be measured on the assessment.

7) **Feedback is crucial.** Again, research has shown that when students are provided high quality feedback on assignments and tests, learning improves. But most teacher feedback on assignments and tests is superficial. While high quality feedback is time-consuming, it produces results. Consider doing fewer or shorter assignments, but provide comprehensive feedback and many opportunities for revision and improvement.

8) **Ensure learning has occurred.** For years, a standard practice has been to administer a classroom test, score the test, review the test in class, then move on to the next chapter or unit. But after the review, how do you know that students, especially those students who did not perform well on the test, truly understand the material? Large gaps may remain in their knowledge and if those gaps are important building blocks, they may eventually cause the student's knowledge structure to fail. Consider having students retake the same test a week or so after the first one. Or make sure that the next test on the next unit covers some of the knowledge from the previous unit. Establish a school-wide guarantee to help students who need it, not just those who ask for it.

9) **Score assessments as a group.** For over 20 years, CRESST has developed performance assessments scored by groups of teachers. After virtually every scoring session, teachers have said that the experience was invaluable. Scoring gave them an opportunity to look at a wide range of student performances and to discuss their ratings with fellow teachers. Most of the teachers have said that not only did the scoring perform a useful task, but the scoring process itself was an excellent professional development experience. Many said that they would change their own classroom assessment practices as a result. The CRESST web site has sample assessments, rubrics, and scoring papers.

10) **Involve Parents.** It is no mystery that parent factors outweigh school factors in a child's learning. The number of books in the home, the amount of reading a child does at home, the educational background of a child's parents, all trump school factors such as the average number of years of a teacher's classroom experience. Consequently, parents need to be a key component in your accountability master plan. My own school district has a program where parents of second grade students help their children in math every week, then fill out a feedback form returned to the teacher saying what they covered and how it went. Did their child

understand the material, what was the average time spent on homework? Parents value being included in their child's education and part of the evaluation process.

Encourage parents to bring their children to parent teacher conferences. As veteran teacher Charlotte Higuchi said: the conference is after all, about the child!" Including students in conferences also shows to the child that they are all part of a team, working to help them succeed in school. UCLA's Corinne Seeds Elementary School values conferences so much that they have them three times each year. My children are in 7th and 8th grade, and although conferences are not mandatory at this age in our district, I still request a conference every year. My wife and I both attend, and usually our children as well. Conferences have been incredibly helpful to us with the added benefit of getting to know our children's teachers better.

Finally. Once you develop your master accountability plan, review it each year together with your school goals. Discuss components of the plan regularly at staff meetings and evaluate its effectiveness. You don't need to wait until a specific time of the school year though to make changes. A master plan should serve your needs and especially, your students. Keep it flexible but keep it going.

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