**Alternative School Accountability Reimagined**

**Recovery, Assessment, and Accountability in the Post-COVID World**

**Overview**

Whether through research or everyday experience, the limitations of large-scale public-school accountability systems have become more apparent in recent years. At the same time, schools have learned more about how assessment and evaluation can be used to strengthen learning and broaden opportunities for students. In 2020, as with so many things, our K12 accountability systems were disrupted and largely put on hold across the nation. That pause and eventual reset provide an opportunity to show how the right measures can improve accountability and expand opportunities for students.

For the last decade, Momentum Strategy & Research has worked with alternative education campuses (AECs) across the country to ensure that all students have access to quality education. A central tenet of this work is seeing that schools are measured and evaluated using the assessments, data, and processes best suited for their specific missions, student populations, and curricular designs – what we call *student-centered accountability*.

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Description automatically generatedIn October 2021, Momentum held the first in a series of *Accountability Reimagined* convenings to address AECs and post-COVID accountability. This initial meeting was organized as a forum for thought leaders to learn and share while building a roadmap to strengthen systems and policies for AEC students. The group’s discussions explored ways to assess progress, track growth, and support the students who are most disengaged and difficult to measure.

As a foundation of these discussions, Momentum put forth this theory of change: AEC students are served best by *student-centered accountability – where measures are aligned to specific student population needs, providing schools with the best information to support and educate their students.* This theory of change is based on the following principles and assumptions:

By design, AECs provide highly individualized education and student support. Therefore,

1. Evaluation systems should also be highly customizable to allow for a focus on individual student needs.
2. Measures aligned to central program elements and the needs of specific student populations provide more actionable information about individual student progress than those focused solely on state standardized tests and cohort graduation rates.
3. Measures of student progress can and should be both diagnostic and evaluative.
4. Performance measures do not need be uniformly applied across all students and schools.
5. Accountability systems can strike a balance between broadly applied measures and those specific to individual schools.
6. Next generation assessments and data systems already exist in schools and programs across the country -- but they must be administered at the district and/or state levels for student-centered accountability to be fully realized.

The remainder of this document highlights practices and policies that would be evident in each level of the educational system (schools, charter school authorizers, school districts and state departments of education, and student advocacy and school support organizations) where a ‘next generation’ system of accountability has been put into place. In addition, this document provides a “roadmap” for what might be needed to successfully implement Next Generation Accountability at each level.

As this document is an early draft, these goals and strategies are outlined in brief. As this document is further developed, links to resources, examples, and tools will be added to provide concrete methods for moving forward.

**Vision for Next Generation Accountability**

In our vision for Next Generation Accountability, we see areas for growth and change across all layers of the public education system, including schools, charter school authorizers, school districts, state education departments, and state and national education policy. A brief summary of this vision is described below.

In Next Generation Accountability, **AECs** are granted the latitude and resources needed to select measures and assessments aligned with their students’ needs, and to develop and utilize measures and assessments to evaluate progress at the individual student level. Using this data and information, AECs diagnose need, provide support, and monitor students’ progress, while also reporting aggregated results to facilitate external evaluation of school success.

In Next Generation Accountability, **authorizing policies and practice** maximize school-level flexibility in selecting measures and assessments for use in high-stakes decisions, including an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative measurement. Authorizers support the development of measurement options for all schools serving students with complex educational, social-emotional, and basic life needs. In addition, authorizers are proactively involved in advocacy efforts on behalf of AECs and their students, including advocating for improved data systems and policies at the state or district level, and ensuring that all students have access to high quality options.

In Next Generation Accountability, **policy** directs state and district accountability systems to allow schools to select measures aligned with their unique programs, including:

* Measures that focus on student progress and growth across multiple domains – academics, engagement, social-emotional development, college and career preparation and readiness – and include both quantitative and qualitative sources of data.
* Targets of success that are based on the best available data, may be differentiated – both within and across schools – and are based on student need.
* Data systems that support real-time tracking of student data across schools and districts, can integrate local data from disparate sources (i.e. locally administered assessment data and school counselor data), and provide appropriate security levels to school staff, students, and parents.

In Next Generation Accountability, **data and information management systems** are developed to allow for the identification of students most at-risk of academic failure, including treating those students as a defined group meriting targeted programming. Within these systems, students with complex needs are prioritized to ensure that all students have access to schools that are set up to support them, and that schools have the appropriate amount of funding, support, and autonomy to provide the needed support(s).

In Next Generation Accountability, **accountability systems** are student-centered in that they allow for:

* Customization of school measures, assessments, and overall performance expectations based on student needs and school mission,
* Appropriate comparison groups and data focused on similar schools and student populations, beyond federal demographic categories, and
* Balanced school evaluations that utilize a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures.

The Roadmap below outlines audience-specific action steps that need to take place in order for Next Generation Accountability systems and practices to be developed and implemented in each state.

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| **Accountability Reimagined Roadmap** |
| **ACTION STEPS FOR SCHOOLS** |
| 1. Form coalitions to work together on a student-centered accountability implementation plan and approach policy makers with the vision for Next Generation Accountability Systems, including examples of solutions being implemented elsewhere. |
| **ACTION STEPS FOR CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS** |
| 1. Develop internal policies and practices that recognize AECs’ contributions to their communities and that celebrate early successes with students by using appropriate measures and metrics. 2. Commit the necessary time and effort to work with individual AECs to identify the measures that appropriately assess student progress and school success. 3. Seek out training, collaborative opportunities, and resources to support accountability innovation and flexibility. |
| **ACTION STEPS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND LEAS** |
| 1. Develop internal policies and practices that recognize AECs’ contributions to their communities and celebrate early successes with students by using appropriate measures and metrics– regardless of an AEC’s organizational structure (i.e., charter, contract, or district run). 2. Support AECs in identifying measures, metrics, and assessments that are aligned to their students’ needs and the programing and supports offered. 3. Where possible, ensure AEC students are being educated and supported where performance outcomes can be evaluated (i.e., those identified as separate schools subject to accountability rather than programs that roll AEC students’ outcomes in larger entities’ accountability systems, such as large comprehensive high schools or school districts). |
| **ACTION STEPS FOR ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS** |
| 1. Provide schools with the technical assistance and support to identify and utilize the measures and assessments best suited to their student needs and:    1. Ensure schools (and oversight authorities) have access to the widest possible range/ repository of measure and assessment resources, and    2. Provide AECs with opportunities to collaborate with peers. 2. Work to strengthen the AEC policy environment through:    1. Active dissemination of the policy goals identified herein to national audiences, and    2. Stronger connections between the variety of partners interested in collaborating to reimagine accountability and strengthen opportunities for AEC students and schools. 3. Document and disseminate the experiences of states, school districts, and authorizers modeling student-centered accountability practices, including (where possible), but not limited to:    1. Illustrations of different methods of incorporating student-centered measures (e.g., as replacement measures or as supplemental measures),    2. Developing a repository of data and information regarding the types of measures, metrics, and assessments being used and in which contexts, and    3. Research and analysis of AEC outcomes on a variety of measures. |
| **ACTION STEPS FOR PHILANTHROPY** |
| 1. Intentionally address the unique funding needs of many AECs by directing attention and resources to the AEC community. |
| **ACTION STEP FOR THE US AND STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION** |
| 1. Prioritize AECs and their students as a distinct group and provide comparably distinct systems, supports, and resources to address their needs. |