

April 2023

More Than a Test Score: Toward a More Balanced School Accountability System

Joel A. Leader
University of Texas at Arlington, joel.leader@uta.edu

Barbara L. Pazey
University of North Texas, barbara.pazey@unt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Leader, Joel A. and Pazey, Barbara L. (2023) "More Than a Test Score: Toward a More Balanced School Accountability System," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol17/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School Leadership Review by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

More Than a Test Score: Toward a More Balanced School Accountability System

Introduction

Nearly 60 years of attempts at education reform have resulted in an accountability environment that uses high-stakes test scores as the predominant measure of school and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Egalite et al., 2017). Successive federal and state mandates have sought to hold schools accountable for producing evidence of their positive impacts on student learning and academic outcomes. To fulfill such mandates, districts administer high-stakes tests to students at various stages, then publicly report the results. In many cases, the results of these tests are the primary determinant of a school's annual performance rating, with various rewards or sanctions attached. The intended purpose has been to improve educational access and achievement for all students, specifically those historically underserved student populations. However, the outcomes resulting from such a rigid accountability structure have yielded little to no significant effect on decreasing the achievement gap between and among certain student subpopulations (Jones, 2004; Owens & Velesky, 2015; Pazey et al., 2015). In fact, it has perpetuated inequities and failed to achieve the goal of leaving no child behind.

Schools are responsible for providing adequate nutrition, attending to physical and mental health needs, imparting the principles of good citizenship, identifying and fostering talent while simultaneously ensuring all students receive equal treatment, and providing an individualized experience tailored to a student's strengths and needs while using a standardized instrument to measure learning. As a result, "...schools have become multipurpose institutions, which is why they are so easy to criticize" (Reese, 2007, p. 217). Because of the "unexamined assumption that schools should cure whatever ails the nation" (p. 220), schools' shortcomings are viewed widely as signaling the decline of American society and prosperity.

Top-down accountability systems run counter to the democratic foundation of public education. Rather than communities banding together to educate their youth in an environment based on unique community needs and goals, these types of accountability structures are imposed on schools and communities by state and federal entities (Ellison, 2012; Jones, 2004; Kearns, 2011). As a result, an increasing number of communities are exploring an alternative, locally developed accountability system that reflects what is unique and important among local stakeholders. Such a system uses multiple measures of success, not just test scores, allowing for a more robust demonstration of what students know and can do. It empowers educators to utilize their professional judgment and training to identify and meet students' needs while there is still time to make a positive impact. The continuous flow of student achievement data reduces incidences of teaching to the test or waiting on annual test scores to inform their instructional practices and decision-making. Perhaps more importantly, this type of accountability is more sustainable and equitable than one based primarily on test scores.

Federal policies such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, Race to the Top (RTTT) in 2009, and the most recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 have produced an accountability climate that overemphasizes standardized test scores when evaluating success at the organizational, institutional, and individual levels. Power-coercive policies such as these exert top-down pressure from the state or federal government and have had little positive impact on improving student achievement (Au & Gourd, 2013; Jones, 2004; Owens & Valesky, 2015). This traditional accountability structure further marginalizes underserved communities by narrowing the curriculum, sacrificing meaningful instructional time for test preparation, and perpetuating stigmas of failure that disproportionately impact students with disabilities and those from nondominant backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Author et al., 2015).

On the other hand, a community-based accountability system (CBAS) is an alternative way of determining, measuring, and reporting accountability and can serve as a counternarrative to a system that relies on high-stakes tests to pass a summative judgment on each district and school. A CBAS represents a type of true accountability that is bottom-up. In a CBAS, local school districts work with and within their communities to determine the goals, measures, and acceptable outcomes for students and schools (Tanner, 2016b). The intent is not to supplant state-level accountability systems, but a CBAS can supplement one by providing additional insights into school and student performance. Districts across the country are working to develop and implement such systems. Few studies, however, have examined how educational leaders design and implement a CBAS and the local, state, and national factors that influence those decisions.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how one school district designed and implemented a CBAS that reflected the needs, values, priorities, and goals of its community stakeholders. The research questions guiding the study were as follows:

- 1) What key factors/components are present in the studied district's CBAS, and how and by whom were those determined?
- 2) How does the zone of mediation within the community impact the scope and pace of the studied district's CBAS implementation?

Review of Related Literature

There is agreement among scholars and practitioners alike that traditional top-down school accountability systems are not accomplishing their stated goals of improving student outcomes (Tanner, 2020). Placing inordinate value on test scores rather than the student achievement they are meant to represent creates philosophical and ethical conflicts for educators. It limits the ability of schools to serve their students in meaningful and authentic ways (Gunzenhauser, 2003). But perhaps the most harmful consequence of such an accountability system is that it perpetuates systemic inequities and does little to “enhance resources or supports necessary [for students] to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, or self-sufficiency for school and for life” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 59).

The Next Generation of School Accountability Systems

A meaningful accountability system should be bottom-up, where local communities determine the goals and acceptable outcomes for their students and schools (Langberg et al., 2013; Tanner, 2016b; Vasquez Heilig, 2015; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2018). Some researchers have dubbed this system the next generation of school accountability (Adams et al., 2017; Evans & Lyons, 2017; Tanner, 2016a). A true next-generation system is one in which school accountability goals align with the needs of students and the community's values, priorities, and educational goals (Evans & Lyons, 2017; Tanner, 2016a). Here the focal point of school accountability shifts away from mere compliance with state and federal mandates and toward using meaningful and timely data to strengthen schools and empower excellence among stakeholders (Adams et al., 2017; Tanner, 2016b; Tanner, 2021).

Adams et al. (2017) proposed three principles of next-generation school accountability. First, responsibility for the overall success is distributed among superintendents, school boards, principals, and teachers to create instructional environments that meet students' needs. Students, parents, and community members collaborate with educators to establish and pursue realistic yet ambitious goals for all areas of student growth and achievement, not just those related to academic success. Next-generation accountability systems value students' accomplishments in

the arts, service, citizenship, leadership, and athletics. This reimagined accountability is more responsive to local needs, goals, and values. A next-generation system incorporates measures of academic, social, and emotional development and demonstrates the quality of the institution beyond test scores (Adams et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Vasquez Heilig, 2015).

Because communities are unique environments and schools have diverse needs, the second principle Adams et al. (2017) described is that one-size-fits-all accountability structures are unsuitable for measuring capacity, explaining performance, or identifying areas for improvement. Instead, next-generation accountability empowers schools and their community stakeholders to self-identify areas for improvement and determine targets and tools to measure growth in those areas. School leaders can begin this process by asking the community to describe the hopes and dreams they have for their students, then engaging stakeholders to explain where they feel schools are being effective in achieving those hopes and dreams and where improvements are needed (Tanner, 2021).

The final principle is that there are different information needs at different levels of the accountability structure. Relevant and meaningful data must be provided to stakeholders in a way that allows them to identify and address areas for improvement in a timely manner. Standardized tests are typically administered at or near the end of the academic year and represent “a summative judgment of school performance rendered as a single indicator” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 15). Thus, the scores do not provide teachers and school leaders with timely or meaningful information that could help identify and address student learning needs. That is not to say that test scores do not matter; the results of these year-end assessments can provide valuable information to educators, especially when looking at year-over-year performance and patterns of achievement to be replicated or disrupted. However, these test scores should be one of many data points used to determine a school's effectiveness. Further, an accountability system based primarily on these annual assessments disengages parents from becoming active participants in their child's success. Data regarding their child's progress must be in an easily understandable and accessible format and provided in a timely manner to promote the parent-school partnership (Clark, 2014).

Examples of Next-Generation Assessment and Accountability

A review of the research literature has yielded examples of successful next-generation assessment and accountability. Clark (2014) conducted a study on formative learning environments (FoLEs) specifically designed to mitigate the negative impacts of economic disadvantage in learning. FoLEs are premised on partnership-building among students, parents, and teachers and between students. Rather than approaching learning from a zero-sum mindset in which students compete for the highest grades, test scores, or class rank, FoLEs are structured as physically and psychologically safe environments in which students view success as a collective, not individual, effort. Clark (2014) found FoLEs to improve equitable outcomes and close achievement gaps among more affluent White students and students of color and/or less privileged backgrounds. FoLEs shift the focus away from test scores and toward the learning that those scores are intended to reflect. This learning environment promoted academic and social success, increased student self-efficacy, and mitigated achievement disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Barlowe and Cook (2015) documented a consortium of public school students in New York City who were assessed using a schoolwide performance-based system. Consortium students engaged in a discussion-rich, inquiry-based curriculum and were evaluated in each core area with oral presentations or a defense. Students were required to demonstrate deep levels of

learning and were challenged to examine real-life and complex questions. This approach allowed a great deal of freedom to explore topics that interested them personally. Teachers still met the state-mandated curriculum requirements that grounded students in the canon of traditional learning. At the same time, they guided students in formulating new questions designed to take their thinking in a direction that sparked intellectual curiosity, creativity, and personal fulfillment. Consortium students were still required to take the annual state assessment, and the data showed that these students achieved at or significantly above the level of their traditional counterparts.

ESSA (2015) significantly relaxed the federal government's requirement that standardized test results be used to determine school and district success. The law allowed states to include other relevant factors when assigning school ratings. As such, some states began to permit districts to develop alternative and innovative ways to assess and report on student learning. Evans and Lyons (2017) described how New Hampshire created the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) system shortly after the law's passage. Rather than an annual summative assessment; under PACE, local assessments are administered throughout the school year and contribute to a student's overall competency score. These balanced assessments are more than just tests; they include multiple performance-based measures across 17 subject areas and grade levels to help teachers formatively assess student learning and adjust their instruction accordingly.

One of the arguments used by advocates of test-based accountability is that it is relatively inexpensive to develop, administer, and score a standardized test. Evans and Lyons (2017) agreed that a system such as PACE is expensive and time-consuming and that “the practicality and feasibility of scaling up the proposed methods in a large-scale performance assessment program is a real concern, particularly within a state that has many more districts” (p. 31). They stated, however, that technology can play a key role in the wide-scale implementation of a similar assessment and accountability system on a larger scale.

Another argument against PACE was the difficulty in comparing students' mastery of learning standards with school quality. The ability to use a standardized measure from one student to another, one school to another, and one district to another help rank and sort. However, such measures might be detrimental to supporting meaningful learning and continuous improvement (Tanner, 2016s). ESSA (2015) required that all students be given high-quality instruction, have the same learning opportunities and be held to the same performance standards. Therefore, to achieve a balanced accountability system, school leaders should establish minimum standards of learning, delineate the components of effective performance-based assessments, and develop support and monitoring structures to ensure the data from one school or district are comparable to others (Evans & Lyons, 2017).

To Whom and For What?

ESSA (2015) allowed for alternatives to high-stakes testing and returned greater control of public education to state agencies and local districts. States were empowered to design local, teacher-created performance assessments that can be factored into accountability ratings. Additionally, states were no longer required to have a one-size-fits-all sanctions structure (Neill, 2016). As a result, many communities and states have started to turn away from structures that use standardized test scores as the primary determinant of school accountability.

As this paradigm shift has become more popular among scholars and practitioners, an examination of the role and purposes of accountability is warranted. According to Tanner (2016b), all accountability systems must answer two fundamental questions: *To whom* are

schools accountable, and *for what*? In traditional accountability systems, schools are accountable to the state for producing high or improving test scores. This type of top-down approach has resulted in an over-reliance on test scores to determine the depth of student learning and the effectiveness of schools (Au & Gourd, 2013; Kearns, 2011). When accountability shifts to the community level, schools become more accountable to students and their parents (Tanner, 2021) for producing graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed after high school.

A CBAS uses multiple forms of quantitative and qualitative data to develop a comprehensive picture of student and school performance and provides a design for an: ...educational policy where communities can democratically set the achievement and outcome goals that they desire. For some communities, maybe high-stakes test scores...is the goal, or maybe a community might choose to focus on a new and more valuable set of outcomes. (Vasquez Heilig, 2015, para. 5)

Because, by definition, a meaningful CBAS is dependent on the context of the local community, it is difficult to say what factors, components, or principles should be contained within one. Vasquez Heilig et al. (2017) noted that "governments can't mandate what matters, because what matters is *local* [emphasis in the original] motivation, skill, know-how and commitment" (p. 4). Therefore, district leaders must engage with their community of stakeholders to determine the essential needs, priorities, and educational goals within their local context and develop meaningful ways to measure progress toward meeting them. For example, while students from marginalized backgrounds and students of color attend college at higher rates than in the past, their post-secondary completion rates are still below the national average (Jimenez & Sargrad, 2017). A CBAS rooted in such a community might place a higher value on preparation for success as a first-generation college student. In contrast, communities with high college completion rates might elect to pursue different goals entirely.

This bottom-up approach to accountability requires the development of strategic plans and goals at the local level and an intentional focus on high-quality and equitable outcomes that are important to that community (Langberg et al., 2013). Equity-minded school leaders who embark on this work must consider how their CBAS can improve learning outcomes for a diverse population of students while simultaneously pursuing a sustainable commitment to the diverse communities that produce such learners. Because these goals and strategies are developed in collaboration with community stakeholders, they are better able to address persistent systemic and structural inequities and disrupt the cycle of marginalization in ways that a traditional accountability system simply cannot (Langberg et al., 2013; Tanner, 2016a; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

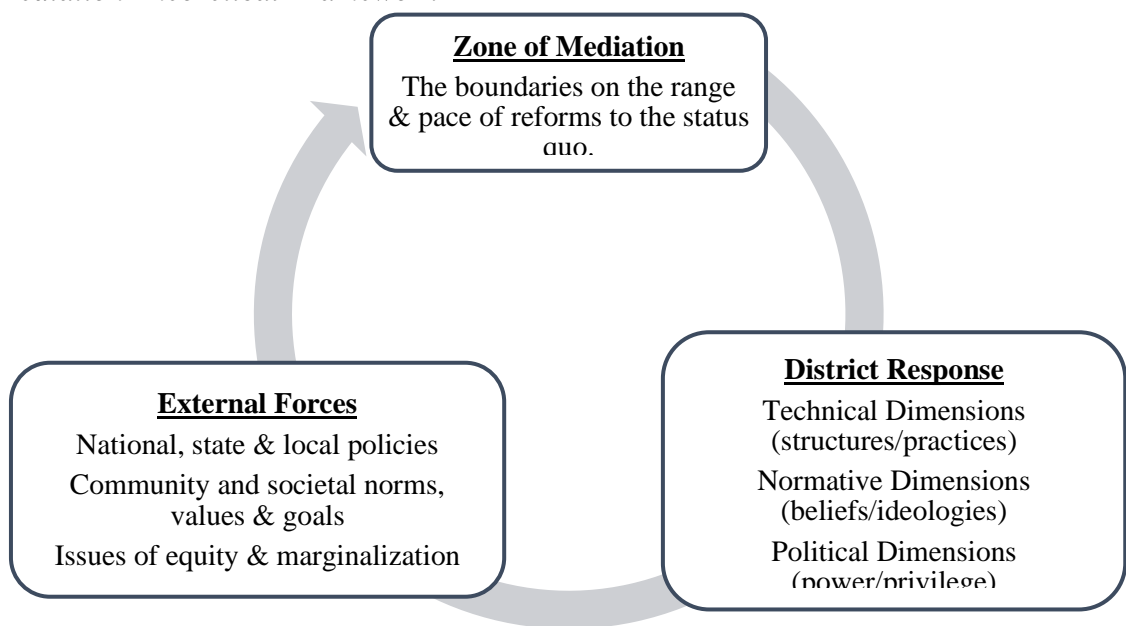
The Zone of Mediation Theoretical Framework

School reform efforts do not occur in a vacuum but are instead strongly influenced by the context in which they occur (Oakes et al., 2005). As mediating institutions, schools "are situated in local enactments of larger cultural norms, rules, values, and power relations, and these cultural forces promote either stability or change" (Oakes et al., 2005, p. 288). These forces work together to create boundaries or limitations on the range and pace of possible policy reforms that district leaders can successfully enact. This range is known as the zone of mediation (Holme et al., 2014; Oakes et al., 2005). The zone of mediation framework posits that successful and sustainable reforms, especially those aimed at addressing inequity and disrupting patterns of marginalization, must address these political and normative forces. Proposals that do not fall outside this zone will likely face significant, even fatal, resistance from the local community because they do not reflect the community's norms, values, goals, and educational priorities

(Holme et al., 2014; Oakes et al., 2005). As previously noted, research has documented test-based accountability's disproportionately negative impact on traditionally underserved student populations (Brown et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010). School leaders seeking to counter the harm perpetuated by such a system should consider how their community's unique zone of mediation might impact the development and implementation of a CBAS by first assessing the community's hopes and dreams for its students. This assessment will impact the CBAS development process and demonstrate an understanding of the zone of mediation factors. Then, they should design an accountability system that establishes clear goals and how to best measure progress toward meeting them. Figure 1 shows the cyclical process through which district leaders assess the external forces related to a reform effort and how those forces help to shape the zone of mediation. The zone of mediation, in turn, influences the technical, normative, and political dimensions of the district's response and future steps toward enacting a policy reform.

Figure 1

Zone of Mediation Theoretical Framework



Note. Adapted from Holme et al. (2014) and Oakes et al. (2005).

At the local level, issues of power and equity are often overlooked or discounted by those with political influence. Political and social power dynamics can impact the implementation of reforms to improve outcomes for traditionally marginalized communities (Holme et al., 2014). The normative and political dimensions present within the community tend to cause constituencies with power and privilege to block equity-minded reforms they view as grounded in values, perspectives, or backgrounds that differ from their own. If the current system benefits the privileged and powerful, there is little incentive to pursue change. That is unless adept school and community leaders can persuasively make the case that reform will benefit all students and thus shift the zone of mediation in such a way as to promote reforms aimed at generating greater accessibility, equity, and success for all.

The key is to ensure all stakeholders have a voice. Leaders seeking to implement reforms to current practices must strategically engage with their communities. First, they must assess the current state of the zone of mediation through dialogue, community events and outreach, surveys, and other forms of input gathering. Then, informed by the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in the community, educational leaders should skillfully propose and manage change efforts. Failure to do so could result in the alienation of key stakeholders before the change efforts have a chance to take root, dooming the reform to short- or long-term failure. By utilizing public relations and strategic communication techniques, building a coalition of respected stakeholders, and taking careful risks, school leaders can effectively shift the zone of mediation to a degree more favorable to sustainable change (Oakes et al., 2005). For example, district leaders who wish to enact policies to address systemic racism might do so in a way that either falls within the current zone of mediation in their community or work strategically with stakeholders in a meaningful and sustained way to begin to shift the zone before beginning the change process itself.

Methods

Research Design

For this study, we utilized an exploratory case study approach, which generated rich sets of qualitative data and allowed us to gain insight into the participants' lived experiences with the goal of generating ideas or theories that can then be applied to similar cases. Hesse-Biber (2017) asserted there is a need for exemplars in all fields of study and noted that the resulting benefit of case study research lies in “the ongoing production of exemplars” which “is vital toward making a discipline effective” (p. 22). The results of this study can provide a blueprint as districts around the country begin to consider how to develop their own CBAS. Further, this approach investigated a real-world phenomenon in which contextual conditions, such as the zone of mediation, are essential to shaping understanding (Yin, 2018).

Description of the Research Site

Artin Independent School District ([AISD]; pseudonym) is in a suburban community in Texas and serves approximately 14,000 students in grades PK-12. Since 2018, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has assigned a letter grade of A to F to each district and campus in the state annually. The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) is administered to students in grades three through eight and at the end of five high school core subject courses. The results of these annual high-stakes assessments are the primary determinant of the performance rating. AISD earned a grade of A for the school years ending in 2018, 2019, and 2022. TEA gave no ratings during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school years due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this record of excellence, AISD district leaders have advocated for alternative accountability systems at the state level as a member of the Texas Public Accountability Consortium (TPAC). TPAC, established in 2017, is a group of 51 Texas school districts that share the common goal of “working to build on the success of community-based accountability systems already in use in districts across the state by developing next-generation measures and assessments that would enable wider use of such systems” (Texas Association of School Administrators [TASA], n.d., para. 1). TPAC’s ongoing work focuses on the development of tools, methodologies, and collaboration capable of producing resources for districts to use in rethinking their accountability approaches and systems. AISD is also a member of a smaller regional cohort of school districts, all developing and implementing their own CBAS. We discuss the importance of collaborating with like-minded districts in detail later.

Data Sources

We gathered data using document analysis, a parent and community member focus group, and five semi-structured individual interviews with district leaders. The documents we analyzed were publicly available on the AISD website and pertained to statements or policies related to accountability and the CBAS. Our document analysis helped to uncover the "socially-constructed and value-laden narratives" (Chu, 2019, p. 7) associated with designing a CBAS in a community with unique norms, values, and educational goals. Documents were analyzed using three a priori codes that emerged from the literature review to better inform us of the state and scope of CBAS development and implementation in AISD. These a priori codes were: (a) key factors, components, principles, and definitions; (b) evidence of the CBAS development process; and (c) evidence of zone of mediation factors.

The focus group interview included four participants and was intended to ascertain the community's attitudes toward accountability, perceptions on how well AISD meets the community's goals for public education, and the degree to which they believe AISD seeks and acts upon community input. We purposively selected the four participants from a population of parents of high school students and AISD community members. Participation was limited to parents of high-school-aged students. We narrowed involvement in the focus group to these parents because they were likely more familiar with the pressures associated with high-stakes testing, as Texas requires high school students to take and pass a series of five end-of-course STAAR tests to graduate.

Participants for the individual interviews were selected based on their professional roles pertaining to the study's purpose. They included the AISD superintendent, school board president, director of teaching and learning, director of communication and community engagement, and a high school administrator. Each provided input on the importance of this work, how the CBAS design has evolved, and how the scope and pace of implementation were determined.

Data Analysis Procedures

Saldaña (2016) advised qualitative researchers to engage in multiple rounds of coding because the "reverberate nature of coding...suggests that the qualitative analytic process is cyclical rather than linear" (p. 68). With each coding round, the potential arises for new perspectives to emerge. Further, Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that researchers use a mix of predetermined and "surprising codes" (p. 195) to analyze qualitative data. As such, we used a combination of deductive a priori coding procedures and inductive in vivo coding, as well as multiple rounds of such coding.

During our analysis, we looked for a convergence of ideas, attitudes, and feelings among the participants and between the participants and the documents. We found that many of the same words and phrases spoken by the participants also appeared in the documents. Next, we engaged in multiple rounds of in vivo coding of the interview transcripts. Each round allowed the participants' voices to emerge more clearly, and many of the feelings and ideas they expressed reflected those from the a priori coding. Patterns began to emerge that indicated cohesive attitudes toward A-F accountability, the belief that a better accountability system was necessary and possible, and perceptions related to how AISD gathers and acts upon stakeholder feedback. Analysis of the individual interview transcripts yielded data on the importance of collaborating with like-mind leaders and districts. We grouped the in vivo codes into categories based on their similarities which yielded three emergent themes, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Development of Emergent Themes

Sample In Vivo Codes	Emergent Themes
not a full measure of success, "a formality we have to do," incomplete picture, summative judgment, intense pressure, snapshot, does not drive improvement, vanity data	Dissatisfaction with A-F Accountability
flexibility, focus on growth, "very kid-centric," holistic, qualitative and quantitative data components, "not just the grade," celebrating a diverse array of achievements, future-ready, core values, "prepare kids to be future members of our community," redefining success	Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Alternate Accountabilities
District TPAC Committee, regional and state TPAC cohort, board support, Visioning Document, "enough leadership and a little bit of bravery"	Collaboration with Like-Minded Districts and Leaders

Note. Codes without quotation marks represent a broad theme expressed in the documents or by multiple participants. In contrast, those appearing in quotation marks are the document's direct words or the participant's use. We chose to include a combination of each type of code to allow the actual words of documents and participants to be expressed in the findings.

Findings

The vision for public education shared by the participants in this study was often at odds with TEA’s statewide A-F accountability system. AISD district leaders explored an alternative accountability structure because they believed that an accountability system based on high-stakes testing does not measure the full scope of teaching and learning in the district. To begin, they engaged with their community stakeholders to establish common educational goals and priorities, then developed the framework for their CBAS accordingly. The use of stakeholder feedback became evident as we compared our findings from the document analysis to the data gleaned from the individual and focus group interviews.

From A-F to CBAS

Themes emerged from our data analysis suggesting that the district should be held accountable for more than producing high or improving test scores. Instead, as one focus group participant put it: “It’s hard for me, personally, to give credibility to [the district’s A] rating...I personally do not put a lot of weight towards it.” Another participant said: “Our community values so much more than test scores and things like that...A-F [accountability] is like a formality that we have to do.”

Our analysis suggested a widespread dissatisfaction with the state’s accountability system. The pressures to perform well on tests, improve one’s GPA, and be in the top 10% of the graduating class discouraged some students from taking courses that interested them and helped them to explore their passions. Instead, as one focus group participant said, “[Students are] in a pressure cooker” to compete for top rankings and test scores. Another focus group participant expressed this stance by saying:

I think the weight on the STAAR test is abysmal. I don’t think that you can accurately take a snapshot of how well someone is doing on one high-stakes test...The pressure a child feels from that, that’s unfair, in my opinion.

The district superintendent also conveyed this dissatisfaction by saying:

...we share where we are as a district with the state accountability. And then that’s when we really kind of realized that our kids were more than just one test on one day. And so

even though we have typically received A or B ratings on our campuses and as a district, we believe we're so much more than that...that's kind of how we started to get into the CBAS work.

What emerged from the parent and community member focus group were values, priorities, and goals for public education that go beyond a test score and a need for an accountability system that honors more than just a student's academic performance. These themes focused on measuring growth at the organizational and student levels over time. One focus group participant said:

I would look for growth at the individual level, not necessarily at some state-dictated level. Not every kid is in the same place across the board...and people grow at different rates. What's important is that there's growth, in my opinion.

Interestingly, the value of using multiple measures of success surfaced when the participants were asked to describe what they believed was their community's vision for public education. No one noted that the purpose of education was to produce high test scores. In fact, no participants mentioned quantitative measures at all. One opined that the goal was:

Prepare our children to be active members in any community and life. To teach them, encourage them, teach them the core basic foundations of what going from a child to an adult means. It's all about raising productive, effective, and kind adults.

Desire for an Alternative System

The desire for accountability alternatives was prevalent among the study participants. In this case, they believed that the state's A-F accountability system does not include data on the development of well-rounded students, their safety and well-being, or their overall growth toward becoming vibrant and productive citizens. Instead, the participants felt it reduces students and their experiences to a test score. A better system would place at least equal value on the qualitative measures of student success. This alternative accountability system would be one that, as a document posted on the district's CBAS webpage stated, "... honors our community's hopes and dreams for our children."

Our analysis suggests that the political and normative conditions in the community were conducive to the development and implementation of a CBAS. These conditions existed because district leaders worked to include the community in shared decision-making and utilized the input they received to construct an accountability system that reflected the community's priorities. The documents we analyzed reflected the needs, values, priorities, and goals of the AISD community, as presented by the focus group participants. For example, the 2021-2022 district improvement plan stated, "We will implement a Community-Based Accountability System that ensures all students are future-ready and allows our stakeholders to see a more holistic view of learning."

AISD leaders believe a CBAS is needed because A-F accountability does not adequately measure success at the individual level, does not sufficiently value the growth of every learner, and does not satisfactorily reflect the district's overall quality. According to the district's website, the CBAS "is based on our community values and what we believe success looks like as a district." It includes "...learning experiences that defy the ability of a standardized test to measure the growth." The statements presented in these documents suggested that district leaders were well-attuned to the community's needs, priorities, and goals. Further, the documents

indicated that AISD leaders accurately assessed the zone of mediation boundaries when they designed and began implementing the CBAS.

Focus group participants expressed two primary views when asked about school accountability in AISD. First, focus group participants believed that some in their community valued quantitative achievement measures, such as GPA, class rank, and the results of standardized tests, as key indicators of success. Many of the participants mentioned the term *vanity data* to describe this outlook. Vanity data are easily reported and widely viewed as a measure of quality, especially by those outside the field of education. This type of data has traditionally been used as a measure of success in the statewide accountability system and, to some extent, the college admissions process. An example of vanity data is AISD's A rating from TEA. Stakeholders unfamiliar with alternative accountability systems will likely interpret such a performance rating as a standard of excellence and a reason to maintain the status quo.

Still, district leaders believed that an A rating does not fully capture a comprehensive picture of teaching and learning in the district. On vanity data, the AISD director of teaching and learning said that the CBAS would report other significant student, school, and district success factors. She said the initial discussions held among district leaders asked:

"...if we had to choose today, what are the most important pillars [for our CBAS]?" We didn't talk a whole lot about vanity data. Again, we can speak to academic readiness all day long in the school district because we have a tradition of high achievement. Is that still important? Of course, it is, but it isn't the only metric.

The second view that emerged from the focus group interview was a belief that the true quality of education cannot be determined using strictly quantitative measures. Other metrics the participants mentioned included engaged and well-rounded learners, quality staff and professional development, and safety and well-being, all of which are difficult, perhaps even impossible, to quantify. One focus group participant believed accountability should be determined by more than test scores or other numerical measures. She said in the interview: "A though F is a limited snapshot...It's part of our identity, but it's not our whole identity."

Development of the CBAS

These two views on measuring teaching and learning led AISD leaders to develop a CBAS that utilizes qualitative and quantitative measures. Seven pillars form the organizational structure of the district's CBAS. They are (a) student learning and progress, (b) student readiness, (c) well-rounded students, (d) community partnerships, (e) quality professional staff, (f) finance and operations, and (g) safety and well-being. Using these pillars to assess the quality of teaching and learning, rather than only test scores, was a priority for most participants. Many noted that the CBAS should mix quantitative and qualitative data to be valuable and relevant for the community and district.

The quantitative data, in the form of test scores, school and district ratings, graduation rates, et cetera, can be used to report overall district quality quickly. This use of numerical data is comparable to how a student's report card presents their overall performance in a course in the form of a number or letter grade. It reflects the sum of efforts exerted over time rather than developing the skills and knowledge required to produce such a figure. The student learning and progress, student readiness, and finance and operations pillars are examples of how to report accountability quantitatively.

An October 2020 statement from the superintendent posted on the district's website asserted that STAAR "shouldn't be the only assessment that matters in measuring the accountability of a district or school or the success of a student or a teacher." This statement

highlights that test scores are a valuable data point but should not be the primary element when assessing quality learning and teaching. Therefore, the CBAS utilizes qualitative measures of achievement as well. While harder to package as a single data point, creating positive and authentic relationships, engaging students in their learning, and fostering student leadership in their school and community, were important when designing the CBAS. The pillars of well-rounded students, community partnerships, quality professional staff, and safety and well-being reflect these priorities. Further, these qualitative components are echoed in AISD's four core values: collective engagement, high-quality teaching, authentic and meaningful relationships, and redefining success. The Director of Teaching and Learning referred to these core values, emphasizing the importance of non-testable measures of student and school success. In the interview, she said:

...these are the values that guide every decision that we make in the district. And community-based accountability happens to be a great way to report out on how we are doing in those values, because how do you quantify authentic relationships? Well, it's difficult to do. But when you talk about engaged and well-rounded learners and all the opportunities that you're providing, kids don't do those things without an adult that they trust to help guide the process. We needed to be clear that these values aren't going anywhere, and they are not servants to any other decision-making process. Instead, they guide every process, and that's why they're here.

Because these core values guide district-level decision-making, it seems logical that they are also reflected in the pillars of the CBAS.

The Value of Collaboration

Another theme that emerged from our data analysis pertained to the value of collaboration with like-minded districts and leaders. As an original signatory to *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* (TASA, 2008), AISD district leaders have worked with others from across the state to highlight the inequities and harms posed by a test-based accountability system. This early groundwork helped to establish AISD as a leader in statewide and regional advocacy work aimed at reimagining school accountability.

AISD leaders are active in the state-level TPAC consortium. While that participation has helped to frame the CBAS work, a smaller and more focused cohort was a driving force in the CBAS development process. One AISD high school administrator stated:

The TPAC across the state is huge, and we only meet as a whole state twice a year. So, in order to really get into the work and make sure that we are accountability for doing the work, we joined a cohort of just [regional] districts.

In addition to providing accountability for moving forward in this work, participation in the smaller cohort had other benefits. The superintendent explained these benefits by saying:

We meet on a regular basis to share ideas, commiserate, and plan. It's been helpful to have them as a resource, too...some of the districts are a little bit farther along than we are in the work, and then we're a little bit farther than some of the other districts. So that helps, too, with the accountability piece, but also the mentoring piece where we can help and support each other. That's been a critical piece to help with this work.

This regional collaboration has helped to create a shared vision of the benefits of CBAS to schools, students, and communities and how to meaningfully advocate for accountability

reform. Further, the professional relationships created through such a network of like-minded leaders have provided a sounding board and support structure for others pursuing this work.

Lastly, AISD created multiple district-level committees and working groups to explore how to implement the principles of a CBAS in the district and on individual campuses. One of these groups, the district TPAC committee, includes AISD internal stakeholders. One member said that the mission of the TPAC committee is to "ensure that the documents and the procedures and policies that we have in place align with other [cohort] districts." This statement reinforces the value of collaboration with other state, regional, and local leaders to discuss values and principles guiding this work and how those efforts aid in developing the district's CBAS.

Discussion

School leaders have long expressed dissatisfaction with accountability systems that place inordinate value on standardized test scores (Gunzenhauser, 2003). A desire for a new approach has led to the expansion of alternate systems of locally developed accountability that reflect their community's unique values, needs, priorities, and goals. A CBAS uses multiple means for measuring student success, allowing students a greater opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. It treats educators as professionals with the capacity to use relevant and timely data to identify and meet the needs of their students in real-time. Further, it reflects the community's needs, goals, and priorities and more closely aligns with the stakeholders' goals for their local public schools (Langberg et al., 2013; Tanner, 2016b; TASA, 2008; Vasquez Heilig, 2015). The next section connects the relevant research literature to the research questions and our findings.

Key CBAS Factors and Components

In *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* (TASA, 2008), the authors explained that a meaningful accountability system should include four characteristics: (a) draw upon multiple measures to assess student performance, (b) be designed locally, and use internal assessments of learning; (c) address low-performing schools in a non-punitive way, and (d) collaborate with state education agencies to address performance gaps among school and student sub-populations. This early work of advocating for next-generation accountability systems helped to shape the direction of groups such as TPAC and, ultimately, the work of AISD and its cohort districts.

These characteristics align with Adams et al.'s (2017) principles of next-generation accountability. Our findings suggest that AISD district leaders heeded these researchers' advice as they developed the pillars of their CBAS. By gathering feedback from internal and external stakeholders, AISD leaders engaged these groups in ways that promoted a shared responsibility for education. This shared responsibility, in turn, led to discussions about the district's strengths and set goals for improvement where needed. Through the CBAS, the district developed instruments to measure progress toward these goals and publicly report that progress to stakeholders in a more meaningful and relevant way than a simple letter grade.

The district leaders who participated in this study believed that the state's A-F rating system fails to address these principles sufficiently. These failures helped guide collaboration and decisions about what to include in the district's CBAS. For example, the state's accountability system does not include measures of a student's social-emotional development or well-being. On the other hand, the district's CBAS devotes one of its seven pillars to creating an environment conducive to learning, including physical safety and students' social-emotional needs. The recognition that the results of standardized tests cannot always determine student and school success is reflected in the mantra expressed by several participants: "you can't test that."

The research literature supports the beliefs held by these leaders about the limitations of the statewide accountability system. Accountability systems that use test scores as the primary determinant of student and school achievement limit the ability of educators to serve their students effectively (Gunzenhauser, 2003). When the results of a high-stakes test can determine if the school is subject to sanctions or if an educator remains employed, the focus shifts from providing meaningful learning experiences for students to preparing students to perform on a standardized test (Klein et al., 2006). This philosophical conflict was represented by the feelings, attitudes, and values expressed by AISD leaders and inspired them to work toward creating an alternative accountability system.

What a CBAS contains should be determined through a collaborative effort between the school district and the community it serves (Tanner, 2021; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2017) and should include quantitative and qualitative measures of student and school achievement. The findings from this study suggest that the district leaders designed a CBAS that makes schools accountable to their students and community stakeholders. The seven pillars of the CBAS reflect this commitment. Three of the seven pillars (student learning and growth, student readiness, and finance and operations) utilize mostly quantitative measures to report the degree of student and district success. AISD uses standard achievement data such as average SAT, ACT, and state assessment scores but also reports on other quantitative measures. The district includes attendance data, enrollment in advanced placement courses, and extracurricular participation rates in its reporting because the community has deemed them valuable and relevant data points.

However, the qualitative measures of success set alternative accountability systems like CBAS apart from traditional accountability. The four remaining pillars (quality, professional staff, community partnerships, well-rounded students, and safety and well-being) reflect the district's commitment to providing an education that honors the community's hopes and dreams for its children. In AISD, the community believes schools should be held accountable for developing students' ability to effectively collaborate, communicate, adapt to change, and persevere in the face of obstacles so they can become vibrant, contributing members of society. These beliefs represent the hopes and dreams parents and community members stated for their students, none of which can be measured through an accountability system based predominantly on standardized test results.

The Zone of Mediation and the Scope and Pace of Implementation

The zone of mediation framework advises school leaders to assess and address their community's normative and political factors when engaging in reform efforts. Failure to do so could significantly hamper the leaders' ability to sustain change or doom reform efforts to fail altogether. As was the case in this study, adept school leaders committed to promoting fairness and equity for their students will commit to engaging their communities to understand their educational priorities, norms, and goals. This study reinforces how effective leadership, stakeholder involvement, and meaningful school accountability converge to promote equity-focused outcomes and how the impact of participatory and collaborative approaches can be measured and progress monitored.

AISD leaders were determined to gather and act upon as much community feedback as possible. They engaged in multiple events with diverse stakeholders to solicit input, not only about the CBAS but about more general public education and accountability topics. Notably, district leaders did not limit their engagement to parents in AISD. They recognized that, for the CBAS to be meaningful to the entire community, they must also gather input from parents without school-aged children, civic groups, and business and community leaders. District leaders

sought to better understand the community's hopes and dreams for students, what data types were necessary, and the most effective ways to communicate their efforts to as broad an audience as possible.

Oakes et al. (2005) pointed to the notion that the zone of mediation within a community is rarely ever static but is in a perpetual state of shifting. School leaders should continue engaging the community regarding their hopes and dreams for students. Doing so could create conditions more favorable for sustainable long-term change. In AISD, these community engagement efforts were evident during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this uncertain time, district leaders heard from the community that the district needed to reallocate focus and energy away from the CBAS pillars related to students' academic growth and move toward prioritizing students' social and emotional well-being. This feedback caused district leaders to emphasize the goals under their safety and security pillar more strongly than they had initially planned. The ability to shift focus in response to community concerns and priorities makes a CBAS a more meaningful and sustainable accountability system than a test-based structure (Oakes et al., 2005; Tanner, 2016a).

Implications and Conclusions

The results of this study have significant implications for educational leaders. Leaders dissatisfied with test-based accountability systems can better understand how one district developed an alternative. By engaging with and within their community, AISD was able to design and implement a CBAS that reports on how the district was actively working to meet its students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Further, this accountability system promotes fairness, equity, and access by utilizing a broader set of achievement data. Students and schools are no longer judged solely on their test scores. With a CBAS, schools are assessed based on how well they meet their students' varied needs.

For this to be successful, reform-minded school leaders should develop systems that promote ongoing engagement with stakeholders in the CBAS development phases and during implementation (Oakes et al., 2005; Tanner, 2021). As was the case in AISD, the initial drafts of the CBAS will likely need to be revisited and revised. This need could result from unforeseen circumstances in a macro-level society, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or shifting beliefs and attitudes about education priorities in the local community. Meaningful and sustainable change requires time and intentionality from district leaders. By building partnerships with its community, leaders will better understand how the zone of mediation might impact future work related to accountability or other equity-minded reforms.

As each community is different, so too should be the CBAS and the ways in which districts leaders solicit and utilize stakeholder input. In this case, district leaders were able to move forward because AISD had a history of academic success. How might a record of low achievement, as measured by standardized tests, impact how a CBAS is conceived and implemented? Future research should explore how contextual considerations such as geographic location, demographics, or achievement history, might impact the scope and pace of this type of equity-minded accountability reforms.

The final implication is the value of partnering with other school districts and organizations. AISD's work with TPAC and the regional consortium was instrumental in the CBAS development and implementation. District leaders interested in pursuing a similar accountability system would be well served to seek opportunities to engage in discussions with like-minded colleagues for advice, support, and innovative thinking. The findings of this study can provide an exemplar to other school districts considering using a CBAS as an alternative

means of accountability that is more valuable and meaningful to address the community's hopes and dreams for its students.

References

- Adams, C. M., Ford, T. G., Forsyth, P. B., Ware, J. K., Olsen, J. J., Lepine, J. A., Sr., Barnes, L. B., Khojasteh, J., & Mwavita, M. (2017). *Next generation accountability: A vision for improvement under ESSA*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Au, W., & Gourd, K. (2013). Asinine assessment: Why high-stakes testing is bad for everyone, including English teachers. *The English Journal*, 103(1), 14-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484054>
- Barlowe, A. & Cook, A. (2015). Empowering students and teachers through performance-based assessments. In *Excellence Through Equity* (pp. 97-121). Corwin.
- Brown, K. M., Benkovitz, J., Muttillio, A. J., & Urban, T. (2011). Leading schools of excellence and equity: Documenting effective strategies for closing achievement gaps. *Teachers College Record*, 113(1), 57-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811111300102>.
- Chu, Y. (2019). What are they talking about when they talk about equity? A content analysis of equity principles and provisions in state Every Student Succeeds Act plans. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(158). www.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4558
- Clark, I. (2014). Equitable learning outcomes: Supporting economically and culturally disadvantaged students in 'formative learning environments.' *Improving Schools*, 17(1), 116-126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480213519182>
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. Teachers College Press.
- Egalite, A.J., Fusarelli, L. D., & Fusarelli, B. C. (2017). Will decentralization affect educational policy? The Every Student Succeeds Act. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 53(5), 757-781. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X177358>
- Ellison, S. (2012). Intelligent accountability: Rethinking the concept of "accountability" in the popular discourse of education policy. *Journal of Thought*, 47(2), 19-41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jthought.47.2.19>.
- Evans, C. & Lyons, S. (2017). Comparability in balanced assessment systems for state accountability. *Education Measurement: Issues and Practices*, 36(4), 24-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emip.12152>
- Gunzenhauser, M. G. (2003). High-stakes testing and the default philosophy of education. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(1), 51-58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477318>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2017). *The practice of qualitative research: Engaging students in the research process*. (3rd ed.). SAGE.

- Holme, J. J., Diem, S., & Welton, A. (2014). Suburban school districts and demographic change: The technical, normative, and political dimensions of response. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(1), 34-66. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13484038>
- Jimenez, L. & Sargrad, S. (2017). *A new vision for school accountability*. Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2017/03/03/427156/a-new-vision-for-school-accountability/>
- Jones, K. (2004). A balanced school accountability model: An alternative to high-stakes testing. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(8), 584-590. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170408500805>
- Kearns, L. (2011). High-stakes standardized testing and marginalized youth: An examination of the impact on those who fail. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(2), 112-130. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/canajeducrevucan.34.2.112>
- Klein, A. M., Zevenbergen, A. A., & Brown, N. (2006). Managing standardized testing in today's schools. *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 40(2), 145-157. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23767165>
- Langberg, J., Qureshi, T., & Deas, E. (2013). Community-based accountability: Best practices for school officials. *Poverty & Race*, 22(2), 9-11. www.proquest.com/reports/community-based-accountability-best-practices/docview/1322771514/se-2
- McGuinn, P.J. (2006). *No Child Left Behind and the transformation of federal education policy, 1965-2005*. University Press of Kansas.
- Neill, M. (2016). The testing resistance and reform movement. *Monthly Review*, 67(10), 8-28. https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-067-10-2016-03_2
- Oakes, J., Welner, K., Yonezawa, S. & Allen, R. L. (2005). Norms and politics of equity-minded change: Researching the “zone of mediation.” In Fullen, M. (Ed.), *Fundamental change* (pp. 282-305). Springer.
- Owens, R. G., & Valesky, T. C. (2015). *Organizational behavior in education: leadership and school reform*. Prentice Hall.
- Pazey, B. L., Vasquez Heilig, J., Cole, H. A., & Sumbera, M. (2015). The more things change, the more they stay the same: Comparing special education students' experience of accountability reform across two decades. *Urban Review*, 47, 365-392. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0312-7>.
- Reese, W. J. (2007). Why Americans love to reform the public schools. *Educational Horizons*, 85(3), 217-231. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230104822_9

- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.) SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tanner, J. (2016a). The A-F accountability mistake. The Texas Accountability Series. The Texas Association of School Administrators
<https://www.tasanet.org/cms/lib07/TX01923126/Centricity/Domain/393/A-F-Essay.pdf>
- Tanner, J. (2016b). Creating a meaningful community-based accountability system. The Texas Accountability Series. The Texas Association of School Administrators.
<http://www.roscoe.esc14.net/upload/page/0086/docs/TASA%20CBAS-Essay.pdf>
- Tanner, J. (2020). The critical need for a true educational accountability—A call to action.
https://f2b2a7a0-2302-432b-a9d2aaf1fa4c6ac7.filesusr.com/ugd/524369_ad515b7fb2bb45bf97aa9309cf77b2b0.pdf
- Tanner, J. (2021). *The accountability mindset: A blueprint for worthwhile educational accountability*. BravEd.
- Texas Association of School Administrators (n.d.). *Texas Public Accountability Consortium*. Mission: School Transformation. <http://futurereadytx.org/key-players/tpac/>
- Texas Association of School Administrators (2008). Creating a new vision for public education in Texas: A work in progress for conversation and further development. The Texas Association of School Administrators. <http://www.futurereadytx.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/visioning-document.pdf>
- Vasquez Heilig, J. (2015). *Accountability: Are you ready for a new idea?* Cloaking Inequity. <https://cloakinginequity.com/2012/10/17/are-you-ready-for-a-new-idea/>.
- Vasquez Heilig, J., Brewer, T., & Pedraza, J. (2018). Examining the myth of accountability, high-stakes testing, and the achievement gap, *Journal of Family Strengths*, 8(1), 11-23. <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol18/iss1/9>
- Vasquez Heilig, J., Romero, L. S., & Hopkins, M. (2017). Coign of vantage and action: Considering California's local accountability and school finance plans for English learners. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(15), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2818>
- Vasquez Heilig, J., Ward, D. R., Weisman, E., & Cole, H. (2014). Community-based school finance and accountability: A new era for local control in education policy? *Research on Social Work Practice*, 49(8), 715–723. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914558171>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.