

# ROUNDTABLE NEWS

## ACCOUNTABILITY THAT PUTS STUDENTS FIRST



“Which is the truly successful school?” asked John Tanner, founder of braveEd during his Zoom meeting with the National Superintendents Roundtable in January. A school with a graduation rate of 95%+ with an enrollment made up primarily of young people who would graduate regardless of

where they went to school? Or a school with a graduation rate of 75%, with an enrollment made up largely of students likely to dropout?

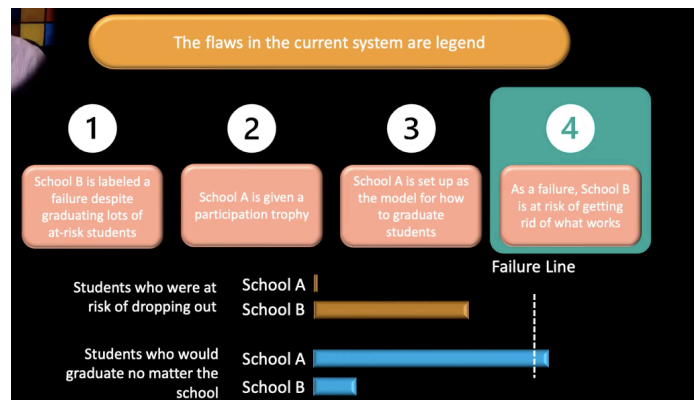
Yet the current accountability metrics used in the United States will hail School A and demand that School B scrap everything it is doing, to the great detriment of the school, its students, and the community it serves.

What we have, insisted Tanner, is an accountability system based on compliance that examines the past. What we need is a system based on the benefits it provides to students and looks to the future. Building such a system, he said, requires us to define the problem, be clear about the challenges, and offer a solution that makes sense for schools.

### Flaws in the current system are legion.

“Let’s define the problem,” said Tanner, “by starting with graduation rates, an easy metric for most people to understand.” The “fundamental flaw” in thinking about graduation rates can be identified when we realize that “we can divide students into two camps.” One camp is made up of students “likely to graduate, no matter what school they attend.” The other contains students who are always going to be at risk of dropping out. If you set the bar for school success at 90% graduation rate, School A, with its 95% graduation rate, may be contributing little to that metric because their students were going to graduate regardless of which school they attended. School B, by contrast, is doing “a great job getting kids across the graduation stage.”

But School B is labeled a failure, while School A gets a participation trophy. Then we set School A up as a model, even though it wouldn’t know what to do with students likely to drop out, and ask School B to change everything it is doing. “It’s just a level of falseness and disingenuity that makes me mad every time I think of it.”



### Testing fails to distinguish between school and non-school effects.

Researchers, said Tanner, understand that when it comes to student achievement, there are school effects and non-school effects. The school effect can be massive, but we frequently see just the opposite, as well.

What standardized testing does is tell you something about the combined school and non-school effects. But based on test scores alone, there’s no opportunity to understand which effect is at work to which degree in any school. “You cannot draw a line in the sand, ethically or morally, with any degree of certainty, and say that above this line is school success and below it is school failure.”

But our current approach to label schools successes or failures means that officials are telling parents: Here are the schools you want your children in. This is the neighborhood where you should buy a house. But here is a neighborhood you want to avoid because of its failing schools. Don’t invest there. And, in places like Texas, schools deemed to be failures will be facing demands to change everything: “Fire the principal, fire the staff, turn it over to a charter organization or a voucher system. These are false messages that are almost the opposite of the truth in many cases.”

**We are trying to improve schools via compliance, not an emphasis on effectiveness.**

Compliance, he warned, is what is driving the current accountability approach, not school effectiveness. Accountability and standards have been hijacked by testing.

Checking all the boxes in a compliance system doesn't give us effective schools. "Suppose," suggested Tanner, "we told doctors that unless 75% of your patients improve under your care, you'll lose your license. We'd have problems the likes of which we've never seen before." Doctors would cherry-pick patients and start practicing in unethical ways. Best practice would go out the window as physicians pursued bad metrics. The profession would become a miserable place to work, because "patient health would become secondary to job security."

We're on the cusp of that with schools, warned Tanner. "If you're in a school the state labels a failure, your efforts to defend best practice will result in people accusing you of being an apologist." We need, he said, to face up to the question of whether we're teaching to the test or doing what is best for children. "The fact that that choice exists tells us we're in trouble."

**The primary stakeholder needs to be the student.**

We will build two entirely different accountability systems depending on how we answer this question, he pointed out. "Am I accountable to the state for high and rising test scores? Or am I accountable to the children in this community for the benefits the community expects when the children come to my school?" How that question is answered will create two fundamentally different organizations.

So, we need to answer the question, "Who is the primary stakeholder?" This is not to dismiss the governor or state legislature. Even if these policymakers went away, "We'd still have a child in front of us who needs an education."

That reality, he insisted, means that the child is our primary stakeholder. "That's why we're here. That's why we're in education."

**Defining accountability.**

When we think about building an accountability system that puts students at the heart of the matter, we need to build an accountability system that "boils down to three things: It boils down to being responsible, to being answerable, and to being easy to understand to all our stakeholders."

Above all, he insisted, being answerable requires telling the truth about your schools. And that truth does not reside deep within the technical organization. It has to be explicable to your stakeholders. "Imagine if your

doctor tossed the results of your lab tests at you and told you to figure it out yourself." Yet, he warned, we lead with complex, technical data that the typical citizen has trouble understanding. Be responsible. Be answerable. And be explicable.

**Benefits-Based Accountability.**

We need to replace an accountability system that examines the past imperfectly through compliance with what Tanner defined as Benefits-Based Accountability.

"Every profession," he said, "is defined through a set of finite benefits its stakeholders expect. Hospitals are expected to provide care and address complex medical problems. Fire stations are expected to help people in crisis with fires, or floods, or getting people to hospitals."



What are the stakeholder benefits for schools? Parents want us to educate their children, care for them, focus on their strengths, make sure the kids have a sense of belonging, and develop them as citizens.

"Look stakeholders in the eye and say, 'Here's where we're effective and why. And here are areas where we're not as effective as we need to be.'" That gesture "is the most trust-building gesture in any accountability system."

We can establish a Benefits-Based Accountability system that is meaningful to stakeholders by understanding that every profession exists to provide finite benefits to primary stakeholders, offer honest accountings for each benefit, tell a truth story using evidence, and account for the future shape of the organization.

We're ready now to hold a national conversation on such a system, he concluded, something that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.