

EDITORIAL

Standards don't measure up

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Page: E-06

Well-intentioned lawmakers wanting to add accountability to public education have instead created a tangled web of standards, grades and buzz words that often confuse parents and confound school administrators.

For example, a student can attend a school the state has deemed excellent, yet, according to the federal government, the school is not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress. A student also can attend a "failing" school, yet the school district has been accredited by the state - failing schools and all.

Can this sort of accountability still be called "reform" if it just creates problems?

Colorado schools operate under three accountability laws - two approved by state legislators, the other by Congress.

On their own, the measures are sound. Mixed together, they create confusion, according to research conducted by the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a private, nonprofit group based in Denver.

In 1998 Colorado legislators approved a law that requires the Colorado Department of Education to accredit school districts.

In 1999 lawmakers created School Accountability Reports. Using data culled from the Colorado Student Assessment Program, schools are rated from unsatisfactory to excellent. Discipline reports, teacher-to-student ratios and other data are included in the reports but are not used in determining the school's performance. Finally, in 2002, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. The cornerstone of President Bush's education platform, it asks each state to meet certain federal goals and requires all schools and districts to make the federal Adequate Yearly Progress list by increasing the percentage of students each year who score proficient or advanced on certain tests.

The ultimate goal is a wildly idealistic 100 percent of all students scoring proficient or advanced by 2014.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation, along with the Colorado Association of School Executives, has researched how the three initiatives overlap and recently released a paper detailing the inconsistencies.

"Standards would be more valuable if they were more clear and straightforward," says Tony Lewis, foundation director. "Let's hold schools accountable but report it in a way that people can grasp it."

Among the foundation's findings:

- Each system uses CSAP scores to judge student performance, but each uses the data differently to measure student achievement and to rate schools and districts.
- Each system excludes a different set of students from the calculations, resulting in contradictory ratings for schools and districts.
- All three systems fail to tell parents, schools and districts how to improve student performance.

Legislators should investigate tailoring Colorado's accountability measures to more closely follow the federal law.

The ultimate goal is to increase student achievement. But the measures should help parents and schools, not confuse them.

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