

Accountability and Governance in the Age of the Kirwan Commission

Changing the Odds

The First Principle

The system is built on the premise that virtually all of Maryland's children, including explicitly children of color, non native English speakers, children from low-wealth families and children with disabilities, will learn to a high expectation standard that equips them by high school graduation:

- To be successful in post-secondary education without the need for remediation and/or,
- To attain a level of knowledge and skill that leads to a job/career that is personally satisfying and pays enough to support a family and,
- To demonstrate the attributes of effective citizenship.

The Second Principle

Second Principle - Multiple parties assume mutual responsibility and accountability for the success of the new system. As a result, each party must perform its function satisfactorily as a precondition to each other party being accountable for performing its function.

The Third Principle

On behalf of Maryland's residents, the General Assembly and the Governor must define who we want to be as a state in ways that link directly to the quality and outcomes of our education system

The Fourth Principle

It is necessary to identify specifically what Opportunities to Learn are required, at least as a starting point, for all Maryland students:

- To be successful in post-secondary education without the need for remediation and/or,
- To attain a level of knowledge and skill that leads to a job/career that is personally satisfying and pays enough to support a family and,
- To demonstrate the attributes of effective citizenship.

The Fifth Principle

The General Assembly and the Governor on behalf of Maryland residents, must then define an adequate level of funding necessary to provide the Opportunities to Learn required to meet the goals of the state. Further, the funding must be distributed equitably

The Sixth Principle

Building a system of accountability that is both effective and respected must include a schedule of carefully defined and transparent early and mid-course reviews of implementation and outcomes. It will be important to avoid unintended consequences as much as possible. The Kirwan Commission recommendations require dramatic change. Dramatic change by definition must often proceed without all questions answered.

The Sixth Principle continued

The point is that if something in the system is not working or it is evident that students, especially those who are most vulnerable, are falling short, as part of the accountability system, we must set in motion a way to know that early. The early knowledge must trigger action at the appropriate level. This must include action by the Governor and General Assembly to alter the architecture, the programs and/or the funding as the review may require.

The Seventh Principle

The State Board of Education and the Maryland State Department of Education should be driven by expertise and have the capacity to lead and support.

The Eighth Principle

The MSDE should develop and maintain an assessment system that actually measures the goals we seek to achieve. Such an assessment system will include:

- All discipline areas and outcomes that we value, not just reading, mathematics and science but other areas such as the arts, history and health.
- Cross-cutting skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and demonstrated skills of good citizenship.
- Few or no multiple-choice tests. Assessment strategies should emphasize a constructive answer focus, demonstrated competence and/or the judgment of professionals.
- Questions on assessment instruments and examples of both good and bad answers should be made publicly available as appropriate for each round of assessment.
- Multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.
- A system that detects, earlier rather than later, students who are struggling and provides for a timely effective response to reduce to a minimum the time that any child is “behind”.

The Eighth Principle continued

- Schools, not individual teacher classrooms, should be the base unit of measurement. This will encourage collaboration not competition among teachers. The school as the unit of measurement acknowledges the impact of school climate (hallway, lunchroom, bus rides) on school achievement.
- There should be no more than five system-wide assessment gateway moments (entry into kindergarten, end of the third grade, end of fifth grade, end of 8th grade, end of high school).
- Instructional strategies must be aligned to assessment and the assessment system must be designed to be part of the day-to-day instructional system.
- The system must emphasize satisfactory growth over absolute achievement with all schools reflecting absolute satisfactory achievement levels within a projected timeline that is both ambitious and realistic. Thereafter, maintenance of the absolute satisfactory achievement levels would be the objective.

The Ninth Principle

Largely positive benefits but balanced with “last resort” negative consequences should flow from school success and persistent school failure at the state, district, school and student level.

The Ninth Principle continued

At an operational level, since performance of students and schools is dependent in the first instance on appropriate support, any consequences to staff or students should not be enforced until the State certifies that the appropriate Opportunities to Learn have been defined and sufficient supports are available to students, schools and districts for them to meet the scheduled outcomes and that the architecture of the elements of the system are the right ones.

The Tenth Principle

Accountability and authority should be aligned.
In the proposed system, the school is the unit of measurement for the accountability system.

The Tenth Principle continued

The metrics to determine whether a school is successful should include at least two indicators:

- First, it should rest with an increasing proportion of all students in the school being deemed to be on track toward meeting the CCR standard upon entering school, at the end of the third grade, at the end of the fifth grade, at the end of the eighth grade and then, of course, based on those actually meeting the CCR standard at the end of the 10th grade.
- Second, it is not enough to see the average performance in a school improve for the school to be deemed successful. The school must ALSO reduce the proportion of students NOT on track to meeting the CCR standard by a defined, realistic percentage each accountability cycle. This second component is a necessary feature of the accountability cycle to ensure that the success gap is steadily reduced to the point of elimination.

The Tenth Principle continued

Note: The paper I shared includes some specific observations regarding the nature of consequences for school success and failure. Those are marked by the following:

- They emphasize the positive in rewarding success and providing strong supports when schools are struggling.
- Clear outcomes are defined and Opportunities to Learn must be explicit. The school is the unit of measurement. The same paradigm of accountability applies at the district superintendent's and district staff level and at the State Superintendent and MSDE staff level. Thus, the proposal alters dramatically the practice of making teachers, and I should add, students, the primary, sometimes the sole, target of the accountability system.
- For negative consequences, the more persistent the failure of schools, the more intense the consequences.

Changing the Odds

The opportunity and challenge you are confronting brings to mind the Shaw quote immortalized by Senator Ted Kennedy in the eulogy of his brother the late Robert Kennedy. “Some people see things as they are and ask “Why?”. He envisioned things that never were and asked, “Why Not?”. The choice we make between these questions from now through sine die 2019 will determine Maryland’s future for the next generation.