

# MAKING SENSE OF

# How to Create an Accountability Framework



*Michelle Walker*

*Brenna Coyne*

As the chief accountability officer of a large urban school district, I frequently get calls from other educators asking how we went about creating our accountability system. “How do you even define accountability?” I often hear. But to create it is to define it.

While the task may seem daunting, it is a necessary one for any district that wants to reclaim its footing in an inadequate federal system that doles out a one-dimensional definition of achievement. Due to its limits, NCLB has pushed educators to expand what accountability means in a more holistic way that addresses the needs of students and the root causes of the achievement gap and lagging graduation rates.

While our district may not have written the book on accountability, the implementation of our new accountability system in 2008 has afforded us some fresh insights that may help others embarking on this process. The following are the vital elements and lessons learned from our developmental process:

## **Strong Leadership with a Clear Vision**

A district must internalize accountability at all levels to fulfill the hardest part: making it a living framework. Without direction and clear expectations from the superintendent and leadership team, the process can easily fall to pieces. The vision articulated in our strategic planning process became the touchstone that the workteams went back to when they ran into stalemates and confusion.

## **The Workteam**

With the vision in hand, we convened a project team to outline the accountability framework. As we considered whom to recruit,

we knew it would be critical to have people with the following knowledge: sense of the overall policy environment (federal, state, district); versed in auditing systems; family involvement/community relations; history of the district; and data analysis. You will also need a strong team of writers and a good editor to ensure that the final document is readable and easily understood. If you are not able to fill these roles internally, consultants might need to fill the gaps.

Be clear about the community's role in the process. Due to the complex nature of NCLB, limitations set by teacher contracts, board policy, etc., we learned that it's best to set realistic expectations for community (and general staff) input.

## Determining the Indicators

One of the biggest questions we faced was whether we were going to keep our state's NCLB requirements as a separate system or integrate it into our new framework. In the end, we knew that if our indicators didn't connect to AYP we'd end up with a dissonance that would overcomplicate the system. But we also knew we wanted to go beyond NCLB and hold all our schools accountable, not just the Title I schools. When determining the other indicators, it was important for us to develop a system that would be manageable, so we chose the fewest but most critical indicators that would have the most impact on student achievement, e.g., attendance, academic growth, dropout rates, etc.

## Sharing the Accountability

Our process was deliberate in articulating individual and collective responsibility among internal and external stakeholders. *Shared accountability* was defined as everyone having a role to play to support the academic success of students; no longer would accountability be solely on the backs of our schools. Like schools, department services will be audited for continued self-improvement. Parents and the wider community will receive repeated messages and provide valuable feedback on how they can help students achieve.

## Vetting the Framework

There must be an honest and respectful effort to engage stakeholders in the process. While it's messy and takes time, people can't support something they don't understand or know about. Internally, it will minimize resistance among principals while externally it will help the community understand they too have a role in the success of our schools.

## Aligning Your Systems

Once the framework is vetted, it must be embedded into the machinery of the district. Not only do you need a clear idea of who will be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the framework, but there needs to be a synchronicity between the framework's implementation and how/when it is communicated. Align your systems (strategic plan, accountability framework, curriculum, communications, professional development, etc.) under one umbrella so that once the framework is rolled out, each system is reinforcing the other in its common goal of raising student achievement.

## Timeline

The timeline really depends on whether a district already has a strategic plan in place or if it still needs to be articulated. The task of developing a shared accountability framework was a direct outgrowth of our strategic planning process and was identified by the community as a key concept for the district to champion. The strategic planning process took about seven months, while the accountability framework took 18 months to complete. It always takes longer than you anticipate.

While the effectiveness of our shared accountability system has yet to prove itself, we know that as we move forward success will depend on ensuring our framework is a living document to be refined as gaps in the system come to light. We know that it is truly a work in progress.

*Michelle Walker is the chief accountability officer of Saint Paul Public Schools, 360 Colborne St., St. Paul, MN 55102. E-mail: michelle.walker@spps.org.*

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