

Chapter 3

Conceptual Framework

To explore the study questions outlined in the Introduction, the research team developed a conceptual framework as a representation of a strong and meaningful accountability system and as a lens through which to view existing accountability efforts. This framework was based on a review of research on effective state and local accountability systems (Elmore et al., 1996; Goertz, Floden, & O'Day, 1995; Massell et al., 1997; Clotfelter & Ladd, 1996; Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997; Adams & Kirst, 1998).

Of crucial importance in the design of the framework was the idea of a cohesive, comprehensive accountability *system*. If an accountability system is to be truly effective, its components must be coordinated so that they can work in concert with one another to produce the desired outcomes. Individual components standing alone or unconnected with other initiatives will be of limited effect.

For example, assessment in and of itself does not constitute a standards-based accountability system, although it is certainly one critical component. For one thing, assessments must be aligned with content standards and designed to measure progress toward them. Moreover, a strong accountability system must work to build the capacity of teachers to implement content standards at the classroom level and should include incentives for the continuous improvement of performance not only at the level of the individual student but also at the level of the school. Processes that build stakeholder buy-in and commitment to the accountability system are also key if the system is to be successful.

As such, the research-based framework designed by the research team includes elements that go well beyond the state's Consolidated Application reporting requirements (McKenna, 1997 & 1998; Fausset, 1998). In particular, the conceptual framework has six interrelated and reinforcing elements:

Alignment of state and local content standards.

The foundation for any accountability system is a set of clearly defined content standards that spell out what students should know and be able to do. In California, some districts were developing such standards prior to the state's own adoption of content standards. Therefore, crucial to having a system that relates consistent messages to schools and students about what is expected of them is ensuring some degree of alignment and congruence among standards at both local and state levels.

Student performance standards and aligned assessments.

Once content standards are established, levels of proficiency, that is, performance

standards, and assessments to measure whether or not students have met performance standards need to be put in place. In California, districts have generally been encouraged to develop their own performance standards and aligned multiple measures of assessment. While a statewide assessment system also exists, its alignment with state content standards is incomplete. Moreover, the state has yet to adopt performance standards.

Ongoing data analyses and reviews of school performance.

Performance standards for schools should also be set—for example, the designation of a percentage of students within a school who in a specified time should meet certain performance standards (e.g., 80% of all students meeting performance standards within five years). School performance standards or “performance goals” then serve as the basis for establishing state and district monitoring, assistance, and intervention programs. Schools should be encouraged to analyze student assessment data to ascertain factors that affect school performance. At the time of this study, California had a process for monitoring schools, but it was not tied to performance goals or to a program of intervention. (This subsequently changed with the passage of PSAA.)

School improvement and intervention strategy.

Schools that are identified as not meeting performance goals should have some avenue of assistance to help them improve. The first stage of such support should be voluntary, but with continued poor performance mandatory interventions to improve the school may apply. Interventions should be tailored to the unique needs of such schools.

Stakeholder involvement and engagement.

Since intervention programs may have significant sanctions associated with them, it is important that there be broad-based support for such an approach. In fact, involving affected stakeholders in all stages of developing an accountability system from standards development to carrying out of sanctions requires constructive communication with and buy-in from students, parents, teachers, school administrators, district policy makers, business, and other community members.

Continuous improvement of an accountability system.

A final critical element of an effective accountability system is a periodic, systematic checking on the impact of such a system. Is it meeting its objective, namely, raising student and school performance? Have there been unintended consequences? What changes to the system need to happen to ensure its ongoing effectiveness? Building a checks and balance process into the system—such as through an outside external evaluator—also helps to guarantee the long-term legitimacy of such a system.

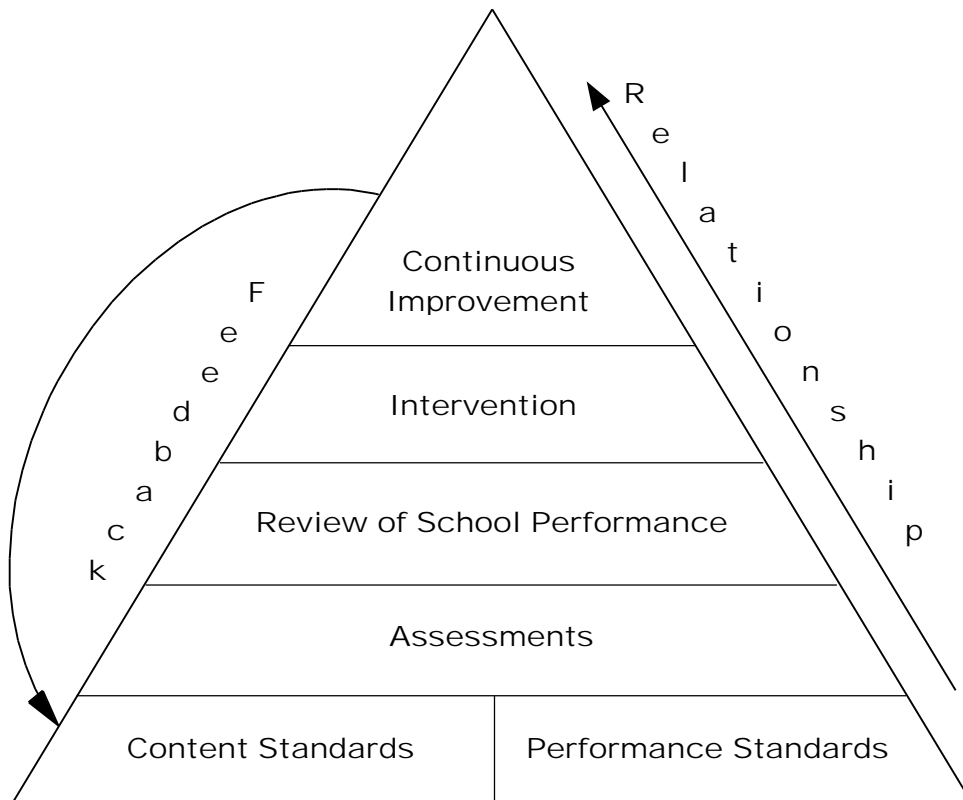
Indicators for each of the six elements of the conceptual framework are shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1
Conceptual Framework for Standards-Based Accountability Systems: Criteria and Indicators

Criterion 1: Content Standards and Alignment	Criterion 2: Student Performance Standards and Assessment	Criterion 3: Review of School Performance	Criterion 4: School Improvement and Intervention Strategy	Criterion 5: Stakeholder Involvement/Engagement	Criterion 6: Continuous Improvement of the Accountability System
Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has grade-level-specific content standards in mathematics and English/language arts. has compared its content standards with the state standards. has content standards that are at least as rigorous as the state standards. has adopted curricular and instructional materials that are aligned with the state and/or district standards. proactively builds the capacity of all its schools to help all students meet the standards. 	Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has grade-level-specific performance standards for students in mathematics and English/language arts. uses multiple measures of assessment as required by the state for gauging whether students meet grade level standards. combines multiple measures in accordance with state requirements. has established reliability and validity of any local assessment measures used. has aligned locally developed assessments (if any) with state and/or district content standards. provides incentives for students to do well on each assessment measure. 	Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has clear and high performance standards for schools. has standards for progress over time for schools as well as absolute standards. uses clearly defined criteria to identify schools in need of improvement. builds the capacity of all schools to analyze/use data. analyzes data to diagnose the causes of a school's low performance. disaggregates assessment data to allow for fair comparisons among schools and to identify areas of concern related to equity. compares the current year's data to the previous year's data. has a system of incentives and consequences for schools related to student performance. 	Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has a clearly articulated and feasible intervention strategy for improving instruction. has an intervention strategy that focuses on capacity building. tailors particular interventions to meet the needs and address the problems of individual schools. 	Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> involves multiple stakeholders in the formulation of the local accountability system. communicates with stakeholder groups to make them aware of the existence of the local accountability system and to explain its implications. attempts to foster buy-in among stakeholder groups to the point where they feel shared responsibility to help students meet standards. makes assessment data public so as to make the public a partner in the accountability system. 	Indicators: The district <ul style="list-style-type: none"> works to sustain, improve, and refine its accountability system over time. is committed to long-term use of the assessment measures it has selected. evaluates the effects of the accountability system. uses the accountability system as a tool for increasing student achievement over the long run.

As Figure 3.2 illustrates, the components of the conceptual framework can be related in a pyramid fashion with the base of the pyramid representing the basis of an educational accountability system and the top of the pyramid representing the ultimate goal of continuous improvement of the accountability system. **Content standards** for curriculum and instruction, together with aligned professional development for teachers, and **performance standards** for students, at the base of the pyramid, form the foundation of an accountability system. Adopting content standards, even when they are aligned with state standards, is not enough. Districts and schools must test whether content standards are being taught by using **assessments that are aligned** with the content standards. Further, schools themselves must be held accountable via periodic **reviews of school performance**. Finding out how well schools are educating children is an effective part of an accountability system when **intervention strategies** are in place to reward good performance and assist schools with poor performance. Finally at the top of the pyramid is the goal of **continuous improvement** of the entire accountability system itself to ensure that the components are helping to improve education for all children.

Figure 3.2
Components of the Conceptual Framework for Accountability Systems



Many aspects of the framework's six elements were explored during our evaluation. As we gathered and analyzed information through the course of this study, it became apparent that some of these elements of an accountability system, such as an incentives and intervention program, were for various reasons not in place at either the state or local level. However, such elements were added at the state level with the passage of the PSAA.

Since the PSAA was not implemented at the time data were collected, there was no way to verify progress in those areas. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework still serves as a helpful guide/tool in reviewing the overall implementation status and impact of the newly emerging state accountability program. Had the contract been fully funded for three years as intended, the research team would have more fully developed and refined this framework to serve as a tool for both the state and districts to use in gauging progress in implementing their standards-based accountability system. The framework as it stands, while somewhat incomplete in its development, can still serve such a function to some degree.

In the Next Chapter

In addition to its potential use as a tool in reviewing accountability progress, the framework also played an important role in this study itself. Flowing from the study questions, the framework served as the basis for the design of the data collection instruments used in the evaluation. These instruments (which are included in the Appendix) are the subject of the following chapter, "Methodology."

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