



# Commissioner's

by Stephen L. Pruitt, Ph.D.  
Kentucky Commissioner of Education

# Comments

March 11, 2016

## Accountability that promotes what's best for students

If you have followed my blogs over the past five months, you probably know by now that my favorite thing about being commissioner is that I get to see firsthand our incredible teachers and students at work. I continue to stand in awe of our teachers and most importantly our students. Given that education is and should be all about our students, we should have an accountability system that reflects that.

Last week, I announced the first step toward developing new state and federal accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act – a series of [Town Hall Meetings](#). I will be traveling around the Commonwealth to 11 locations to hear from our parents, educators, elected officials, community members and students about the things they value in our schools. This is a key first step, but there are a couple of things that I believe we must keep in the forefront as we undertake this exciting, but daunting task of building a new accountability system.

First, we must keep in mind the pillars of our work: equity, achievement and integrity. These three pillars are student focused. Of course, they affect adults, but they are first and foremost about students. As such, our new accountability system must anchored in these three components and students must be our focus.

In 2001, when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law, the way we think about accountability changed. The one really good thing that came out of NCLB was that we cast a spotlight on the performance of ALL students. It has forced us to consider how we need to change instruction to support all of our traditionally underserved populations.

There are two things, however, that I believe were unintended consequences of NCLB that I have not heard a lot of people talking about.

First, accountability and assessment became synonymous. This is something we must correct going forward. I am a believer in a quality assessment system, and a strong accountability system. However, they are separate issues. Assessment must be a part of the accountability system, but it should not be the system. We can glean a lot of data from assessment, but assessment should not be the sole focus of our accountability system. When it is, it effectively limits the curriculum that is taught and I believe ultimately limits the overall learning of our students. We must go beyond just the outputs of tests and look at what is going on with our students in schools and classrooms to evaluate whether their needs are being met.

The second unintended consequence from NCLB is that while we were disaggregating data for our students, we were aggregating school practice. We basically said it was okay to do whatever you need to do to get students to pass the test, often at the expense of other necessary aspects of education such as science, social studies, visual and performing arts, career and technical education, and even how we meet the needs of our gifted and talented community.

Since accountability is reported at the school and district levels, it will be critical that we inspect our new system from every angle to ensure that there are no unintended consequences.

In my opinion, we need a system that promotes best practice and collaboration among our districts. We need a system that promotes learning opportunities to achieve education of the whole child. Items such as school culture, availability and promotion of subjects outside the tested subjects, special attention to equity and diversity with regard to access are all things that will lead us to even greater levels of proficiency for our students. Finally, we need a system that celebrates the good things that go on in our schools and districts and holds all accountable for providing a quality education for all students.

I hope you will join me at one of the [town halls](#). If you cannot, I hope you will make your thoughts known on what our new accountability system should include through a special e-mail box we have set up, [KyEdListens@education.ky.gov](mailto:KyEdListens@education.ky.gov). Please include the perspective from which you are writing – as a parent, educator, student, lawmaker, community member or other shareholder in our education system.

I need your help. The Commonwealth needs your help. Most importantly, the students of this great Commonwealth need you to be part of the conversation and put aside the issues that we have as adults and do what is right for them.

As always, I am so proud to be Kentucky's Commissioner of Education, but I am especially proud at this point in history.

