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Klamath Falls City Schools
District Newsletter

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The New Accountability System: Will It Improve Education?

By Paul Hillyer, Superintendent

Oregon received its long-awaited waiver from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In many ways, this marks a big change for education in the state. No longer will schools be judged mainly on whether or not each ethnic and racial classification of student has made test score targets. They now will be graded on a number of measures that are called the "Achievement Compact." Is this a good or a bad change for our students?

From a practical point of view, the No Child Left Behind framework was a system ready to implode upon itself. Had it continued for another year, Education Commissioner Rudy Crew predicts that about 60% of schools in the state would have been out of compliance. This is because the state tests have increased markedly in difficulty over the last two years. At the same time, NCLB requirements for percentages of students meeting proficient scores drastically increased.

Virtually everyone in education knew the time would come under NCLB that almost every school would be on the failing list due to the continual ramp up of percentages of students from all racial and ethnic categories that had to reach required scores. Therefore, in reality it was a system that was set up to fail from the beginning. It had high-sounding ideals that were not possible to attain. Will the new system be better?

The governor's new accountability system has some of the same components as NCLB. It will require reaching state testing targets for nine categories of ethnic and racial minorities. A number of the new testing requirements are unknown at this point. One change is there will be more of an emphasis on student growth vs. reaching one grade-level test score.

Beyond testing, schools will also be rated on graduation rates, college-going rates, attendance rates at grades six and nine, percentage of 9th graders with six or more credits, and the percentage of high school seniors with nine or more college credits. These targets seem to be good ones for which to strive. There is potential for school districts across the state to learn from one another based on the collection of common information around these indicators.

Another focus of the new state requirements is having pre-kindergarten through college educational institutions work more closely together in order to accomplish the 40-40-20 initiative. The outcome this represents is 100% of Oregon students graduate from high school with 40% going on to graduate from a four-year college, 40% graduating with a two-year degree, and 20% going directly into the armed services or the workplace. Few could disagree with these laudable targets. However, it will take many more state educational resources to make this possible.

Another part of the new system is an increase in difficulty in curriculum standards and testing. The state is requiring all districts to implement the national Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessments. Added to this, districts are required to re-write their teacher and principal evaluation systems to include student achievement measures. Finally, districts are mandated to move to a proficiency-based grading system. What this last mandate means is unclear at this time.

Again, it is hard to argue that these new state requirements are bad. Virtually everyone would say increasing requirements for students and schools potentially could help them improve. This really is not the issue. The issue is this: will it be possible to implement all these changes effectively without additional resources?

Districts such as KFCS need to radically re-design curriculum, instruction, assessments, teacher and principal evaluation, grading, and post-secondary articulation, at the same time that basic support systems have been eliminated. For example, KFCS no longer has a curriculum director or a curriculum department. This was eliminated in the last round of budget cuts. Also eliminated were curriculum coaches at each school that had helped teachers implement standards and testing. Budget has also been eliminated for curriculum supplies and materials for grades K-8. Staff development dollars likewise have been dramatically reduced as have funds to pay teachers for curriculum work. This says nothing about the elimination of other less directly related resources such as counselors, tutors, librarians, music, art teachers, and so forth that have happened virtually everywhere in the state.

These are all critical components in making fundamental system change possible. The state has not chosen to provide these supports to districts. Therefore, one wonders if the new system transformation demanded by the state will simply be seen as the latest failed fad a few years from now. Vision without supports is simply a dream without substance. Or as our farming friends would say it, "Lipstick on a pig, does not change the fact that it is a pig."

So Oregon's success in getting a NCLB waiver can be seen as a good news/bad news proposition. It is welcome change to move away from a very impractical system that was ready to self-destruct. However, will the 40-40-20 plan that replaces it be any better? The answer to that question largely rests with the state budget. Is Oregon going to prioritize education again as they did prior to 2007? If the answer is yes, positive change is possible. If the answer is no, ineffective implementation of the new requirements could cause more harm than good for students.

Other News:

The district has identified a set of measures, called Excellence Indicators, which it will use to gauge its progress in all goal areas. This data will serve as the district scorecard and help it know where to expend resources and energy. The KFCS Board of Directors will also use this dashboard in goal setting and budget allocations. This tool will be a valuable compass to make sure improvement efforts are keeping the district on course to accomplishing its mission. More on this will be given in a future newsletter.