

Kerstin Carlson Le Floch | Drew Atchison | Ji Hyun Yang
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About This Study

This accountability abstract is part of a series of publications associated with the *Study of the Impact of CSI Designation in ESSA Accountability Systems*. The first brief provided an overview of the study and described the theory of action guiding school accountability, while other publications describe analyses related to accountability measures, the clarity of accountability information, improvement actions in CSI schools, and supports to CSI schools.

Study Overview

Our study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which school accountability systems function as intended under the most recent federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and to assess whether student outcomes in schools identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)—representing the lowest performing 5% of Title I schools and all public high schools with graduation rates below 67%—improve. To achieve these goals, we partnered with three states—California, Florida, and Ohio—and performed several activities, including analyzing administrative data provided by the states, administering and analyzing a principal survey, and conducting and analyzing interviews with district administrators in each state. In 2018–19, these states collectively identified almost 1,600 CSI schools. Approximately 800 were identified in California, 550 were identified in Florida, and 250 were identified in Ohio. More information about the study’s design and methods are available in the study overview brief. We provide more details about the principal survey and results for each survey item in a separate compendium.



Key Findings

- Most principals believe that accountability systems unfairly stigmatize specific groups of students and deter teachers from working in identified schools.
- Principals in our study reported that accountability designations incentivized action, but not continuous improvement.
- Teacher and administrator attrition was greater in CSI schools than non-CSI schools in one state.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Role of Motivation and Morale in School Accountability

For the past three decades, policymakers have sought to drive school improvement through school accountability systems. The core components of accountability were first articulated in the 1990s, brought into sharp focus under NCLB, and refined under the subsequent federal education law, ESSA. In concise terms, a school accountability system is designed to focus attention on student performance (by setting performance targets), motivate educators to change (by publicly disclosing performance and through rewards and sanctions), and build capacity (through external assistance and resources); see, for example, Fuhrman et al. (2004) or Le Floch et al. (2007). For accountability policy to achieve its intended end goal—improved outcomes for all students—each step in this theory of action must be implemented successfully. And at the center of this process are the adults in schools, who should be motivated and supported to change their practice in ways that improve student learning.

DATA SOURCES

This mixed-method study leveraged **administrative data** provided by the three partner states, including data related to mobility of teachers and administrators in CSI and non-CSI schools in Ohio. In the spring of 2022, the study administered a **principal survey** to almost 2,000 school principals of CSI schools and a comparison set of relatively low-performing schools in the three study states. We obtained more than 1,200 completed surveys, for a response rate of just over 60%. In the late spring and summer of 2022, the study team conducted virtual, semistructured **interviews** with 41 district administrators responsible for CSI from 20 districts across the three study states. The districts were selected purposively to represent a mix of contexts, including urban and rural districts, districts with varying numbers of CSI schools, and districts representing different populations of students.

The motivational component of accountability is fundamental to the success of the policy (Finnigan, 2010): If school-level actors are not motivated to enact any changes in response to a low-performance designation, the chain of activities associated with the policy will stall. Indeed, the identification of schools in which students are persistently low performing is intended to generate a sense of urgency on the part of administrators and educators. This urgency may be associated with a sense of obligation to the students and a desire to provide a high-quality instructional experience, or it may be associated with a desire to avoid stigma and public censure.

Concerns regarding the negative effects of accountability on administrator and educator morale emerged more than two decades ago. The signaling feature of accountability—that is, flagging underperforming schools—was intended to provoke a reaction on the part of adults in the schools, but it could go either way: stimulating a sense of urgency to improve, or dismay and disengagement. In an early study of the California accountability system, O’Day and Bitter (2003) surveyed both teachers and principals and found that “embarrassment and loss of professional pride” associated with a negative accountability rating was “likely” or “already happening” among 41% of teachers and 65% of principals. However, respondents also believed that the most severe accountability sanctions were unlikely to occur, thus muting the potential ramifications of the accountability system for morale.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) codified school accountability requirements in an unprecedented policy shift. Schools that failed to make “adequate yearly progress” for 2 or more years were expected to

implement interventions that ranged from supplemental educational services (tutoring) for students to removal of teachers and leaders to state takeover. Although national surveys determined that few of the most stringent actions ever took place (Taylor et al., 2010), educators and administrators were sensitive to the threat.

Several studies of NCLB accountability documented a negative association between accountability designations and morale among local administrators and educators. For example, in a study of NCLB accountability in three states, Hamilton et al. (2006) found that at least one third of the principals and teachers they surveyed attributed a decline in morale to the state accountability system. Similarly, Sunderman et al. (2004) surveyed teachers in two districts in two different states and found that teachers did not believe that NCLB accountability would lead to improvement, and that “NCLB sanctions would unfairly reward and punish teachers” (p. 30). In a mixed-method study of Chicago teachers during the NCLB era, Finnigan and Gross (2007) found that accountability pressure decreased morale of teachers who had difficulty attaining accountability goals. Moreover, coverage of NCLB among journalistic outlets, blogs, and advocacy organizations often described teachers as demoralized and burnt out by accountability pressure (see, for example, McElroy, 2007; Finland, 2015; Westervelt, 2016).

Analyses of nationally representative data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) yielded varied findings. An early analysis found that teacher job satisfaction and job commitment were significantly higher post-NCLB than in the years prior to implementation (Grissom et al., 2014). Another set of SASS analyses concluded that NCLB accountability had a weak effect on teachers’ involuntary transfers, but no overall effect on voluntary transfers or teachers leaving the profession (Sun et al., 2016). In contrast, Wronowski and Urick (2019) found that teacher demoralization increased during the NCLB accountability era, also using SASS data.

While several NCLB-era studies focused on the impact of NCLB accountability on educators’ motivation and morale, fewer studies¹ have empirically documented the association between accountability pressures and these constructs under the most recent reauthorization of ESEA.

Study Findings

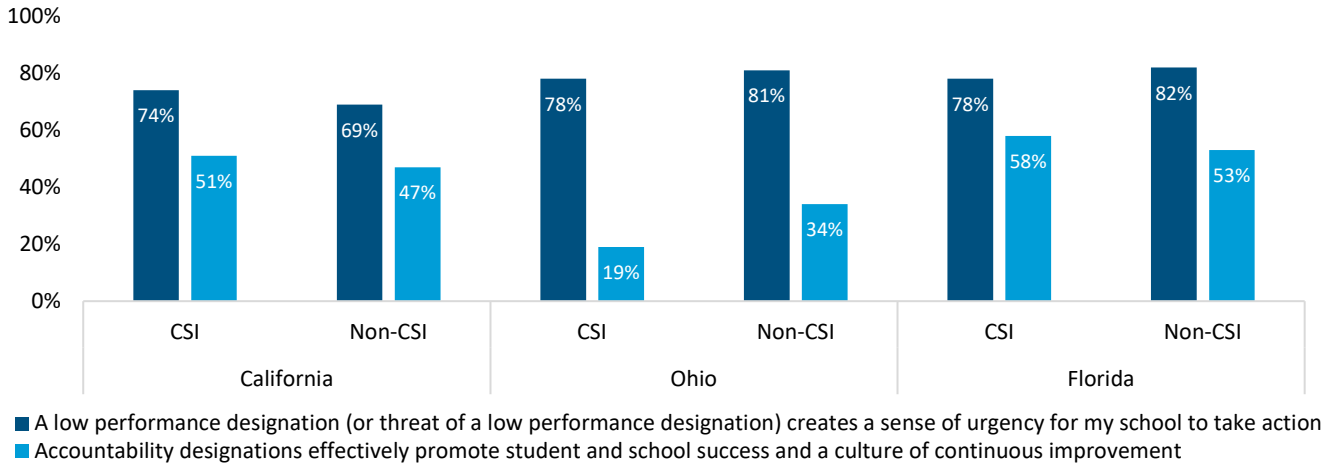
Concerned about the impact of NCLB on teacher morale, policymakers sought to frame ESSA as supportive rather than punitive. Under ESSA, schools are identified for “comprehensive support,” not “corrective action” or “restructuring” (as was the case under NCLB), and the law does not require specific interventions in CSI schools. Although states and districts are required to provide support to CSI schools, they have flexibility in how they do so, allowing them to be responsive to local needs and characteristics. Because of these relaxed guidelines, many policymakers and advocates expected ESSA to be perceived as less punitive than NCLB.

Principals in our study reported that accountability designations incentivized action, but not continuous improvement. At least two thirds of principals in all three states—in both CSI and non-CSI schools—agree or strongly agree that accountability designations create a sense of urgency for their school to take action. This suggests that the signaling power of the accountability system is clearly received at the school level, and the designation is an impetus to act. However, far fewer principals reported that the accountability designation promoted student and school success or a culture of continuous improvement (see Exhibit 1). This disconnect

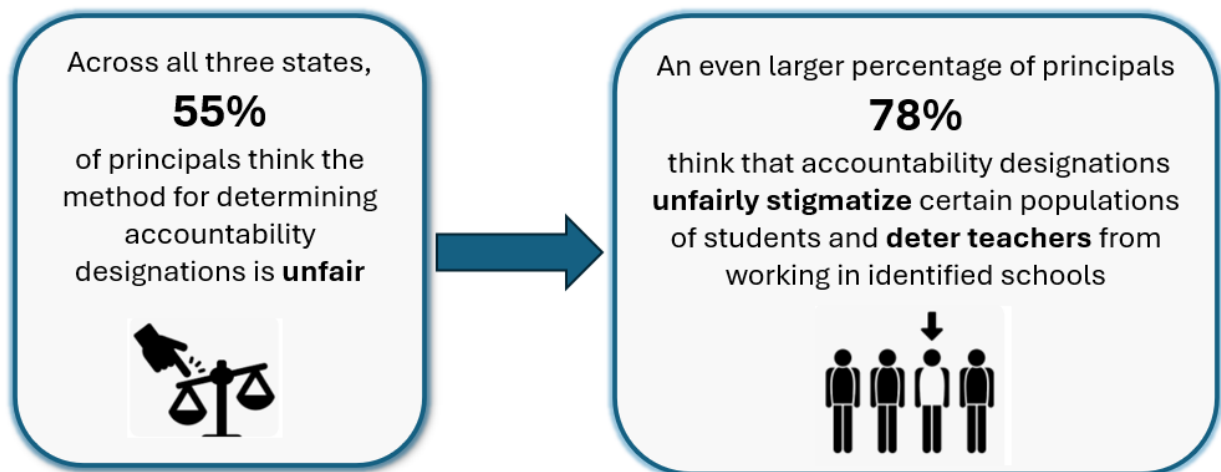
¹ Although a few dissertations address teacher morale and motivation since ESSA (generally through case studies), as of yet, no peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, or research briefs have analyzed large-scale survey data collected during the ESSA era.

between urgency and a culture of continuous improvement suggests that the motivational potential of the state accountability systems is not pushing school-level actors in a constructive direction.

Exhibit 1. Percentage of Principals Who Agree or Strongly Agree With Statements About the Influence of Accountability Designations



Most principals also reported perceptions that accountability designations are unfair, including the method for determining accountability designations and the potential for stigmatizing certain populations of students. The perception that accountability designations are associated with an unfair stigmatization seems to have changed little from prior accountability eras, despite efforts of policymakers to moderate some of the perceptions of accountability as punitive. Moreover, interview data with state and district administrators corroborate responses from local administrators, and respondents from all three states noted the persistent stigma associated with the CSI designation. As one district administrator explained, the CSI designation sets a “gray cloud” over a school.



Coupled with the survey-based finding above is the perception that accountability designations could deter teachers from working in identified schools. The most unambiguous behavioral manifestation of low morale is a high rate of teacher or principal attrition. Administrative data on school personnel mobility from one of our partner states (Ohio) permitted analyses of teacher and administrator turnover.

Using a regression discontinuity design, we found that both teacher and school administrator attrition was greater in CSI schools than non-CSI schools in one partner state in the initial years after CSI identification (Atchison et al., 2023). Similarly, in a study of a school reform effort in North Carolina (described by the authors as “aligned with ESSA requirements”), Henry and Harbatkin (2019) found that schools identified for the most intensive support experienced significantly higher rates of voluntary teacher turnover. These findings provide behavioral evidence that the accountability designations do indeed deter teachers from working in identified schools. Hence, accountability motivates changes in behavior on the part of adults in schools—but not in the desired direction.

Implications

Under ESSA, school accountability is framed intentionally as supportive rather than punitive. Rather than listing a mandated set of interventions, ESSA relaxed federal expectations, instead allowing states and districts to tailor supports and improvement strategies for identified schools. In addition, the inclusion of multiple accountability measures was intended to convey more comprehensive information on school performance, less driven by student proficiency in reading and math. Given these policy shifts, we might have anticipated that principals would report ESSA accountability systems to be fair and non-stigmatizing while still conveying a sense of urgency to improve practices. Perhaps that was too much to hope for.

Our principal survey in three states suggests that many principals believe that accountability systems are unfair, stigmatize students, deter teachers, and do not promote a culture of continuous improvement. They do convey a sense of urgency, but this urgency does not always promote behaviors that promote improved outcomes (see also Hurlburt et al., 2024). Most notably, Ohio teachers and principals depart CSI schools at higher rates than their peers in nonidentified schools. Thus, although ESSA may not have teeth in the form of sanctions, accountability labels clearly have the power to induce a negative response on the part of school staff. And we need to ask ourselves whether these emotional responses (professional shame) or behavioral responses (leaving the school) are those that policymakers intended.

Policymakers should seek to resolve these fundamental challenges with regard to accountability system design. Among them: How can we harness accountability information to motivate a healthy sense of urgency without counterproductive stress and anxiety? Can states couple accountability ratings with recognition or incentives that motivate teachers to remain in low-performing schools? For accountability systems to generate improved student outcomes, they must not discourage and disengage front-line educators who catalyze student learning.

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