

A Guide for School Accountability Committees

By Tom Coyne

With our children heading back to school, School Accountability Committees (SACs) will soon be seeking new members, holding their first meetings, and planning their agendas for this year. As such, it is an excellent time to review the law governing SACs and the reason they were created by the Colorado Legislature, the challenges they will face in this year of transition to Colorado's new academic standards, and some issues that they may want to place on their agendas.

SACs have a legal existence that is separate and apart from school districts. Fundamentally, they were created by the Colorado Legislature to ensure independent review of student achievement results and input into achievement improvement plans and budgets by parents and community members.

SAC duties and powers are covered in Colorado Revised Statutes Title 22, Article 11, Sections 401 to 408. Section 401 details the composition and selection of SAC members: "Each school accountability committee shall consist of at least seven members", including the principal, a teacher, three parents [of students attending the school], one adult member of "an organization of parents, teachers, and students recognized by the school" [e.g., PTA], and "one person from the community" [e.g., a business leader].

Section 402 describes a SAC's specific duties, which include (1) "To advise the principal of the...school concerning the preparation" of the School

Performance Improvement, Priority Improvement or Turnaround Plan, and “to submit recommendations to the principal concerning the contents” of that plan.

(2) “To recommend to the principal priorities for spending school moneys” [i.e., to ensure that the school’s budget is aligned with its achievement improvement plan] and “to send a copy of its recommended spending priorities [and, presumably, the logic that underlies them] to the school district accountability committee and to the local school board.”

(3) “To meet at least quarterly to discuss whether school leadership, personnel, and infrastructure are advancing or impeding implementation of the school’s performance, improvement, priority improvement, or turnaround plan, whichever is applicable, or other progress pertinent to the public school’s accreditation...”

(4) “To provide input and recommendations on an advisory basis to the district accountability committee and district administration concerning principal development plans and principal evaluations.”

(5) “To increase the level of parent engagement in the school”, which “must include, but need not be limited to, publicizing opportunities to serve and soliciting parents to serve on the School Accountability Committee.”

The typical agenda cycle for a School Accountability Committee includes reviewing the school’s student achievement results and plans for increasing parent engagement at its September meeting; discussing the root causes of any achievement shortfalls in October; assessing possible improvement initiatives that can be undertaken at the school to address these root causes,

and setting new achievement targets in November; and reviewing the school's Unified Improvement Plan (which must be co-signed by the principal and the SAC Chair) before it is submitted to the District in December. In January, SACs can review the extent to which major improvement initiatives from the current year's UIP have been implemented, and discuss how to remove any obstacles that have stood in the way. In February, some SACs choose to do a deeper dive into specific achievement related issues at the school, while others move into the preparation of the budget for the next school year (school fiscal years end on June 30th), and its alignment with the proposed major improvement initiatives in the UIP that was sent to the district. The end point of this process is the submission of the school's proposed budget to the district, and the SAC's report to the District Accountability Committee and local school board in April. The final meetings of the year are often spent on further implementation and parent engagement reviews, as well as implementation planning for the next school year's major improvement initiatives.

With respect to their assessment of student achievement results, this year SACs will face a challenge because Colorado is in the middle of its transition to the new (and more rigorous) state academic standards (the Colorado Measures of Academic Success). Until we have two years of CMAS assessment results, we cannot calculate a measure of student achievement growth from year-to-year.

We can, however, still see the percentages of students who have reached various levels of subject proficiency (the new CMAS categories are "Distinguished Command", "Strong Command", "Moderate Command", and "Limited Command", which broadly correspond to the previously used categories of "Advanced", "Proficient", "Partially Proficient" and

“Unsatisfactory”). As was the case with TCAP, students who achieve Distinguished and Strong Command of the new Colorado Measures of Academic Success between grades three and ten should be on track to meet the “College and Career Ready” benchmarks on the ACT tests that every Colorado student takes in Grade 11.

It is important that SAC members understand the critical distinction between achievement proficiency and achievement growth. The former measures the extent to which a student has met an absolute standard of subject matter mastery, based on “cut scores” for different levels of achievement that are set by the Colorado State Board of Education (or, in the case of the ACT tests, by the national ACT organization). Achievement proficiency results reflect both a student’s socioeconomic circumstances and the impact of his or her schooling. The ultimate measure of a school district’s performance is the percentage of its students who reach or exceed proficiency each year, and who meet or exceed the College and Career Ready benchmarks on the Grade 11 ACT. These reflect the extent to which the district is effectively making use of its resources to provide appropriate supports and instruction over twelve years (K-11) to its unique mix of students.

In contrast, achievement growth is a relative measure of the extent to which a student has increased his or her achievement score over the course of a year compared to other students who started with the same score. This is expressed as a percentile – for example, a student in the 76th growth percentile would have increased his or her achievement score by a greater amount than three quarters of the other students who started in the same place. The “Median Growth Percentile” is simply the midpoint student growth percentile for any group of students (e.g., all the students at a school or in a grade who are eligible for free and reduced priced lunch). Unlike

achievement proficiency, achievement growth is much less affected by students' socioeconomic circumstances, and is therefore considered a better measure of a school's impact on student achievement. For example, it is possible for a school with a higher percentage of free and reduced eligible students to have higher median growth percentiles than a school with a very low percentage of free and reduced eligible students, even though, because of more favorable socioeconomic circumstances, a higher portion of students at the latter school are meeting or exceeding the subject proficiency standard ([here is a longer explanation of the Colorado Growth Model](#)).

So what is a SAC to do this year without achievement growth data? Some see this as a problem. I see it as a great opportunity for SACs to broaden their discussion of student achievement issues. Here are some ideas for topics for your SAC to discuss:

What are the results on other achievement assessments like Acuity or MAPS that are used at your school? For example, while CMAS is only given once each year, Acuity and MAPs are usually administered at the beginning and towards the end of the school year, and provide an alternative measure of achievement growth.

What other schools – both in your district and in others – are most demographically similar to yours? How did they do on CMAS? If they outperformed your school, do you understand why?

How does your school compare on the [2015 TELL Survey](#) (which is anonymously filled out by teachers and covers a wide range of teacher time use and other school activity levels) to the average school in your district, and to demographically similar schools that had better achievement results?

Two recent reports have highlighted the poor results obtained from the very large investments of time and money that schools and districts make in teacher professional development. In "[*The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development*](#)", the non-profit New Teacher Project (founded by teachers in 1997) found that the districts they studied were spending an average of \$18,000 per year per teacher on professional development, with minimal impact on student achievement. In the United Kingdom, the Teacher Development Trust has published "[*Developing Great Teaching*](#)", a global review of the research on professional development, and the search for programs that generate significant results. Both of these reports can serve as the starting point for a SAC discussion of how to improve professional development at your school.

John Hattie, who has conducted some of the most thorough analysis of the comparative effectiveness of different achievement improvement initiatives (see his book, "[*Visible Learning*](#)"), has recently published an excellent new paper, "[*What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*](#)." It is an excellent starting point for deeper discussions of what schools can do to improve student achievement results. Hattie's makes the important (and often overlooked point) that the variation in achievement results within demographically similar schools is usually much larger than the variation in results between them. Addressing the sources of in-school variation is a very worthwhile issue for SACs to address this year.

Two of these immediately come to mind. The first is whether everyone in a school is using curriculum that is aligned with state academic standards. When we moved from Alberta (which has a common provincial curriculum) to Colorado, we discovered how widely curriculum can vary here, not just

between districts, but across schools in the same district and even between classrooms in the same school. Moreover, poor curriculum alignment with state standards is an issue that has frequently shown up as a root cause in too many schools' Unified Improvement Plans. This is very low hanging fruit when it comes to achievement improvement.

A second source of achievement variation is varying levels of teacher absence from the classroom. The Center for American Progress has identified this as a critical issue (see their report, "[Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement](#)") as has the National Council of Teacher Quality (see their report, "[Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance](#)"). Every two years, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Education collects data about teacher absence rates in every school and district in the nation. The most recent data are from 2011-2012 (this month districts must submit the 2013-2014 data to DOE). [You can search the Civil Rights Database](#) to find the percentage of teachers at your school who were absent from the classroom for more than ten days (and you can ask your principal for more recent data). As you will discover, absence rates vary widely. For example, in 2011-2012, here are the percentages of teachers in six large suburban districts who were absent from their classrooms for more than ten days: Boulder Valley, 53%, Douglas County, 51%, Littleton, 29%, St. Vrain, 28%, Jefferson County, 26%, and Cherry Creek, 20%.

In creating independent District and School Accountability Committees, the Colorado Legislature created a unique and powerful channel for increasing parent and community involvement in the critical cause of improving student achievement results. At a time when globalization and rapidly improving technology are making the world our children will face after their graduation

much more competitive and uncertain, I can think of few issues that are more important to address. However, great tools are of no use unless people choose to use them. I encourage you to join your School Accountability Committee, and use your expertise and experience to stimulate deep and thoughtful discussions about what we can do to improve our children's future.

Tom Coyne is a political Independent. He chairs the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee, is a member of Jeffco's District Accountability Committee, produces www.k12accountability.org, and has worked on corporate performance improvement issues for more than 30 years.