



Public School Governance and Accountability

By Josh Abram

This issue brief provides an overview of the state governance structure for public K-12 schools and discusses the main provisions of the school accountability system in Colorado.

School Governance

Public education in Colorado is governed by three groups with distinct roles: the General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and school district boards of education.

The state constitution requires the **state legislature** to establish and maintain a thorough and uniform system of free public schools, where any person between the ages of 6 and 21 may be educated.

The constitution also vests general supervision of public schools with **the State Board of Education** (SBE), which is an elected body that is independent of the executive branch and not under the purview of the Governor. The SBE appoints a Commissioner of Education (commissioner) to oversee the **Colorado Department of Education** (CDE).

The commissioner and CDE support the SBE in carrying out its duties, including administering statewide assessments; accrediting schools and districts; adopting rules and standards; and reporting information on school performance. The SBE also exercises judicial

authority with regard to appeals made by charter schools concerning initial authorization or a charter renewal.

The CDE provides schools and districts with technical assistance and administrative services, and acts as the state agency responsible for administering certain federal education laws, such as the distribution of federal money for special education.

Finally, the state constitution vests control of public school instruction in locally elected **school district boards of education**.

Under this system, the legislature provides financial support and establishes statutory guidelines applicable to all schools and districts; the SBE develops rules, standards, and supports for all public schools that are implemented by the CDE; and local school district boards determine curricula and instruction.

School Accountability

State law holds schools and districts accountable for the academic performance of students. Accountability is based on a school or district's performance on common set of indicators, including achievement levels on statewide tests; student academic growth; and post-secondary and career readiness.

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Each student's academic growth is tracked using a series of summative statewide tests. The state collects and reports student performance data from these tests, and holds districts and schools accountable for how well indicators are met.

The law specifies consequences for schools that fail to meet state performance standards and CDE provides resources, technical assistance, and other supports for schools and districts to implement improvement plans.

Standards and Tests

The school accountability process begins with the adoption of academic standards by the SBE. Standards are statements of the academic content knowledge and intellectual skills students need to be successful at each grade level. These state academic standards—or an equally rigorous set of standards—must be adopted by each local school district.

Every spring, the state evaluates all students in grades three through eight and again in grade eleven using a common grade-level test: the

[Colorado Measures of Academic Success \(CMAS\)](#). The CMAS measures how well

students have mastered the standards in mathematics and English language arts, as well as science and social studies in certain grade years. The preliminary and official Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT/SAT), which assess college readiness, are administered to grades nine through eleven.

Academic Growth

Data from CMAS and other assessments are analyzed using a statistical model to determine individual student progress towards proficiency on the standards: the Colorado Growth Model. Schools must use state and local assessment data to help students who are not proficient achieve proficiency within three years, or by grade ten, whichever is first. The model also evaluates the progress towards closing achievement gaps between historically disadvantaged student groups, and for other groups of students who require additional support. It also makes up a portion of educator effectiveness evaluations.

Accreditation Categories

This process results in accreditation by the SBE that a district meets the requirements established in state law and SBE rules. After evaluating attainment on each of the performance indicators, the SBE assigns districts to one of five categories (from highest performance to lowest):

- **Accredited with Distinction**—exceeds expectations;
- **Accredited**—meeting most expectations;
- **Accredited with Improvement Plan**—lower performing, approaching expectations;
- **Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan**—low performing, not meeting most expectations; or,
- **Accredited with Turnaround Plan**—lowest performing, not meeting most expectations.