

# Digital/Edu

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## [Guest Post: A new approach to accountability](#)

*Note: Through March 27th I'll be sharing this Digital/Edu space with some excellent professionals in the area of learning and innovation for one weekly guest post. In addition to bringing new voices and ideas to our readers, this will help me as I finish the first draft of my forthcoming book, *The Test*, on the past, present and future of testing in public schools, to be published by Public Affairs in 2015. Today's guest poster, Joshua Starr, is [superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools](#), a national leader in the debate over 21st century skills, and [@mcpssuper](#) on Twitter.*



School districts across the country are in the middle of the very difficult work of revising and reshaping their curriculum to align with the [Common Core State Standards](#). (CCSS) And this work is worth doing. The CCSS provides our educators an opportunity to improve teaching and learning by organizing around a uniform set of high expectations. Moreover, consistency from state to state and district to district is essential if we truly want to improve public education in the United States.

In Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools (MCPS), where I am superintendent, this work has been going on for several years. A CCSS-aligned curriculum is fully rolled out in elementary grades and is well underway in middle and high schools. Most people see the benefit, but there are growing pains. Teachers need more time for professional development; not everything works the way the folks in central office think it will; and many parents have questions about our new approach. And there remains tension about what the

Common Core-aligned assessments will look like, what the role of AP, IB, SAT and ACT will be relative to PARCC, and how they will be used to support the improvement of instruction.

[Good standards and assessments](#) are extremely important to improving education for our students. But they are only a part of the answer. If we are truly committed to a new definition of “college and career ready,” we need to develop an accountability framework that supports that definition and it needs to look a lot different from No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

For more than a decade, nearly every school district in the United States has aligned its work to meet the “adequacy” of NCLB. Despite lofty mission statements about serving the “whole child” and developing “lifelong learners,” every school had a clear directive: Make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). This was true in MCPS, although the district did effectively hold itself to a higher bar. MCPS encouraged more students to take Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) Classes, paid for every 10<sup>th</sup> grader to take the PSAT, and encouraged students to be well prepared for the SAT, even offering prep classes in the schools. The results have been impressive.

About two-thirds of our graduates take at least one AP or IB test and more than half of our graduates earn a “college-ready” score on an AP or IB exam. MCPS has one of the highest SAT scores of any large district in the nation—an average of 1648 for the Class of 2013. And some of the biggest growth in these areas has been among African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.

However, all of this achievement has not necessarily translated into postsecondary success. About fifty percent of MCPS graduates earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of high school graduation. That is better than the state of Maryland or the country as a whole, but it is not reflective of our stellar K-12 results. And the achievement gap in college completion rates is stark: A white MCPS graduate is twice as likely as a black or Hispanic graduate to enroll in and successfully complete a bachelor’s degree.

This is not uniquely a problem in MCPS. Every school district—especially the larger ones—is dealing with these types of results. At the same time, industry leaders are telling us that our graduates don’t have skills like perseverance, teamwork and creative problem solving that are so important in the 21-century workplace.

MCPS is one of 15 school districts that are a part of the [Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium](#). The Consortium includes the leadership of successful districts that serve large, diverse student populations. In a recent meeting with a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators, we laid out the [framework](#) for a federal accountability system that will support meaningful outcomes for our students. I, and my colleagues in the Consortium, believe a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (aka NCLB) must have these key elements:

1. Establish 21<sup>st</sup>-century outcomes as the goal of all major education laws and policies
2. Require academic content standards and student academic achievement standards aligned with college- and career-readiness outcomes
3. Promote the development and use of high-quality assessment systems and other valid measures of college- and career-readiness
4. Promote innovation and continuous improvement in schools and districts
5. Ensure equitable access to effective educators
6. Promote transparency, engagement, and shared accountability through appropriate reporting of data and information

I believe there is a need for a strong and clear federal accountability system. NCLB had major flaws, but it got us talking about data in a way we never have before and rightly held us accountable for the unacceptable

performance of too many students that have been dis-served by American public education. As we consider the next generation of federal accountability, we need educators, families, industry leaders, higher education officials and policy leaders to come together to help define college and career readiness in a way that includes more than just test scores and graduation rates. We must take the opportunity to provide our students—and those that teach and advise them—with a coherent definition of success that will enable our children to thrive in the future that they want.

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POSTED BY **Anya Kamenetz** ON **February 20, 2014**

Tags: [joshua starr](#), [Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium](#), [montgomery county public schools](#)

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- [Assessment](#) (20)
- [Blended Learning](#) (67)
- [BYOD](#) (8)
- [California](#) (9)
- [Computers](#) (58)
- [Data](#) (15)
- [Innovation](#) (76)
- [MOOCs](#) (10)
- [Online Learning](#) (52)
- [science](#) (3)
- [Social Media](#) (15)
- [Technology](#) (133)
- [Video Games](#) (23)

## • Archives

- [June 2014](#)
- [May 2014](#)
- [April 2014](#)
- [March 2014](#)
- [February 2014](#)

- [January 2014](#)
- [December 2013](#)
- [November 2013](#)
- [October 2013](#)
- [September 2013](#)
- [August 2013](#)
- [July 2013](#)
- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)
- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [February 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)
- [September 2012](#)
- [August 2012](#)
- [July 2012](#)
- [June 2012](#)
- [May 2012](#)
- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [December 2011](#)

[HOME](#) | 

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