

# Enhancing Equity and Empowering Communities through Accountability System Design in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

In recent years, research has clearly shown that improving school outcomes, especially for those who serve at-risk students, requires resources. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System (CNMI PSS) is tackling the matter of equitable resource distribution head-on with the creation of their first-ever Accountability System.

This initiative is championed by a special PSS Accountability Task Force, a team of CNMI PSS educators convened by the Commissioner in 2019 to spearhead the development of the Accountability System. The Task Force partnered with R18CC to build their capacity to do this work, from the visioning and planning stages to putting the system into action and evaluating it.

To date, the Task Force has successfully designed and piloted the new system and is using the lessons learned to roll out accountability practices state-wide with the goal of distributing fiscal and human resources more equitably across CNMI PSS schools.



## Identifying Needs and Charting the Path

In 2017, the then Education Commissioner realized the CNMI PSS needed to change how they distribute resources to schools and decided an Accountability System could be a mechanism to help them do this. Up to that point, the CNMI PSS had been allocating funds to schools based on the size of their student populations. The PSS was increasingly aware that this method did not account for the wide-ranging needs among those populations, including those at high-risk. They saw an Accountability System as a way to capture important information about student performance that decision makers, like teachers, parents, administrators, and law makers, could use to distribute resources more equitably and transparently across CNMI PSS schools.

Together, the Task Force and R18CC explored CNMI PSS's needs and came up with objectives for building the Accountability System. They also decided on guidelines for communicating accountability data clearly and widely, and a procedure for integrating stakeholder feedback on accountability findings to improve how the system works.

The Task force emphasized that the Accountability System needed to be easy for schools to use and align to CNMI cultural values and ways of thinking about education. At the same time, they needed R18CC's help to make sure the Accountability System followed federal education laws and regulations to the letter.

## Taking Action

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A key concern of the CNMI PSS was that the Accountability System fairly measure the performance of all students, including those considered at risk. With the assistance of R18CC, the Task Force made sure that the system of indicators was appropriate to all students. Together, they ran multiple simulations using varying indicators data to settle on those that yielded the most equitable and needs-responsive results **“The CC stepped in and provided guidance [to help] solve that issue”** (Task Force Member).

After a series of revisions, the Task Force and R18CC arrived at an accountability framework, complete with policies, procedures, and a system of indicators streamlined to measure academic performance, attendance, and post-secondary readiness. For example, the CNMI PSS has been dedicated to building a College and Career Pathways program in a parallel initiative with R18CC. Connecting to the goals of that initiative, R18CC made sure that the Accountability System would be able to track students after they graduate high school so the PSS could use those data to improve how they prepare students for post-secondary opportunities.

The Task Force then moved to pilot test the Accountability System in three schools during Year 4 of the project: 1) Koblerville Elementary, (2) Admiral Herbert G Hopwood Middle, and (3) Marianas High School.

*“The R18CC was there to...ensure our accountability system was aligned with those federal requirements while still meeting the unique needs of our state education agency”*

*–CNMI PSS Primary Client*

## Impacts for Sustainable Practice

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The pilot schools were substantially impacted by the accountability initiative in Year 4. While still early, Task Force members, school administrators, and teachers reported analyzing and having highly productive planning conversations around student data to strengthen support for the learning and preparation of all students. For example, one Pilot school educator recalled using data to adjust their teaching practices and increase student achievement: **“[I am] analyzing classroom data...to improve the delivery of my instruction for student success”**.

Pilot school leaders have worked to help frame how educators think about the Accountability System – that the results are not a reflection of whether they are “doing good or bad,” but, as one pilot school principal described, **“the goal is to help us improve student learning.”** These impacts will hopefully spread to the other schools as the Accountability System is rolled out across the CNMI PSS in Year 5.

Using a new communications plan, the PSS has also started engaging communities in conversations about the system and what accountability in education means in the CNMI. They are showcasing news about the results of the pilot in student newsletters and radio broadcasts and developing an evaluation plan for collecting and integrating broad stakeholder feedback.

An important part of R18CC services was training the Task Force to use the online Strategic Performance Management (SPM) system to track and report their progress in rolling out the Accountability System.

The CNMI PSS's adoption of SPM through multiple R18CC projects has likely enhanced the impacts of the Accountability project by connecting all PSS initiatives to their strategic plan. Data on their initiatives can be accessed by anyone using the system. For example, SPM was a source of critical information for their accreditation process. The PSS was able to draw data down from SPM on programs, key indicators, and evaluation results to capture the progress schools have made in their reports to the Board of Education and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

The project is also merging the new Accountability System with the new CNMI PSS State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), expanding opportunities for stakeholders to use data and research to improve student outcomes, strengthen student achievement, and close achievement gaps.

The Accountability System Communications Plan is a comprehensive resource for schools to use in sharing details of the CNMI PSS School Accountability Report with parents, educators, the media, and other stakeholders. The plan provides an overview of the entire Accountability System in addition guidance about how to engage stakeholders, raise their awareness of the system, address their concerns, encourage their participation, and provide ongoing support for interpreting and using accountability results.

## A Bright Future for Accountability

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With the help of R18CC in Year 5, the CNMI PSS will: (1) revise the new Accountability System using pilot data and school feedback; (2) expand the new Accountability System across all public schools with new indicators; (3) revise the new communication plan to share accountability findings with a broad audience; (4) develop ideas for logos and other branding of the Accountability System; and (5) evaluate the Accountability System using the new evaluation plan. This work will sustain PSS's focus on communicating about the Accountability System and using implementation data to continuously improve it so that all students are supported by properly resourced schools.

As a result of this project's work, the landscape of accountability at CNMI PSS has fundamentally shifted. With R18CC guidance, the CNMI PSS has created a solid foundation for high-quality accountability practices. The R18CC is excited to see how they continue the journey to improve communication about school performance and maximize opportunities for all students to benefit from well-resourced and nourishing learning environments.