My colleague Robert Hull has long urged state boards of education to step back so they can get a good view of the whole system: not just the graduation requirements, school accreditation, teacher and leader preparation and development, or accountability systems in isolation but the connections among all areas of education policy in their orbit around student learning standards. These standards have gravity determined by the weight that states assign them in their decision making. This issue is about aligning the planets.

Robert and Don Long put standards-based reform in historical context, arguing that the Every Student Succeeds Act in many respects returns education governance and reform to its roots. Morgan Polikoff offers up five attributes that state policymakers ought to be looking for as they mull changes to their accountability systems—or any other policies, for that matter.

A number of articles in this issue trace the efforts of state boards, state education agencies, and districts to align aspects of their education systems with learning standards.

John Smithson shows us the research and tools that enable North Carolina and Michigan to determine how tightly classroom instruction in their schools lines up with learning standards and state assessments. Such work is not for the faint-hearted, he warns, but then adds: “States willing to undergo the rigors of such an evaluation will have demonstrated a commitment to assessing the accountability of the system itself, and not just a part of it.”

Virginia state board member Diane Atkinson describes the board’s ongoing collaborative efforts to create a Profile of a Graduate, which the board believes can change the high school experience for Virginia students in ways that prepare them better for life and work.

Confronted with the achievement gap challenges faced by many urban districts, Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland focused on stoking the pipeline of school leaders, while ensuring that standards for what leaders are expected to know and do dovetail with student expectations, as well as state and national leadership standards. Douglas Anthony and Pamela Shetley write of their work to marshal a network of universities, the state education agency, district leaders, the Wallace Foundation, and other stakeholders to help make this happen.

Two articles deal with the role of teacher professional development in helping students meet high standards. Jennifer Russell and her colleagues lay out a Tennessee initiative for training and deploying coaches statewide to scale up improvements in teaching math. Their framework revolves around a shared understanding of key coaching practices and evidence-based feedback.

In the anchor leg of this issue, Learning Forward’s Stephanie Hirsh urges state boards to step boldly into five roles in equipping teachers to help students meet high standards. Boards must first set the tone, vision, and policy that encourage schools to develop learning systems and a professional learning culture that will truly transform teacher learning. “These words do not describe better workshops or programs,” Hirsh writes. “They describe the type of support that all educators need to improve their practice daily and deliver better outcomes for students.”

Editor’s Note
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