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editorial

Conflicting school standards

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The tiny Hanover school district in Colorado Springs scored 100 percent on the federal No Child Left Behind report card for 2002-03.

Good news, right?

Not so fast. The state of Colorado also placed the school district on its accreditation "watch list" that year. And this year the district was placed on probation - just one step removed from losing its accreditation.

So, a school district the federal government says is meeting its Adequate Yearly Progress requirements under No Child Left Behind is now in danger of being reorganized by the state and losing its state funding.

It just doesn't make sense, and Colorado lawmakers should step in.

Since school accountability became political buzzwords in the late 1990s, well-intentioned lawmakers have created a tangled web of accountability standards on both the federal and state levels.

Each system has its merits, but when combined they end up confusing parents and sending mixed signals to schools about what needs to be fixed and how to fix it.

In 1998, Colorado legislators approved a law that requires the Colorado Department of Education to accredit school districts.

In 1999, lawmakers created School Accountability Reports. Using data culled from the Colorado Student Assessment Program, schools are rated from unsatisfactory to excellent.

Discipline reports, teacher-to-student ratios and other data are included in the reports but are not used in determining schools' performance.

Finally, in 2002, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, the cornerstone of President Bush's education plan. It requires students to meet certain standards and mandates a highly qualified teacher in each classroom, among other provisions.

State lawmakers are considering some cosmetic changes to the state's School Accountability Reports, but more needs to be done.

The Colorado Association of School Executives, along with the Donnell-Kay Foundation, has been researching the issue and brainstorming with education experts. The groups hope to make recommendations for untangling the mess by the 2005 legislative session.

No one thinks accountability is a bad thing. But it's becoming increasingly clear that too many systems can obscure the ultimate goal of ensuring that no child is truly left behind.