



Making the Grade

A 50-State Analysis of School Accountability Systems

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Introduction and summary

One of the most enduring and contentious debates in education circles concerns the best way to hold schools and districts accountable for improving outcomes for students and closing achievement gaps. Lawmakers, teachers, district administrators, parents, and other stakeholders—all with strong and differing opinions—have wrestled for decades with questions about the appropriate role of the federal government compared with that of states and school districts in the operation of schools and the measurement of their success. Over the past 15 years, however, a national consensus slowly has emerged among the disparate parties and coalesced into a clear movement toward more sophisticated accountability systems and fewer federal mandates.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, signed into law in December 2015, was in many ways the culmination of the accountability movement. After months of negotiations, Congress outlined new requirements for statewide accountability systems that give states the opportunity to design their own systems that move beyond just test scores, while maintaining a clear federal role to protect historically underserved students.

Under ESSA, states must hold schools accountable for student performance in English language arts, or ELA, and mathematics; a second academic indicator, such as growth in ELA and mathematics; progress in achieving English language proficiency; high school graduation rates, if applicable; and at least one measure of school quality or student success. In addition, states are required to disaggregate these indicators, excluding English language proficiency, by individual subgroups of students, including those from low-income families, those from major racial and ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and English language learners.¹

Along with requiring states to use specific categories of indicators, ESSA also includes requirements related to the emphasis that states must place on the different indicators. States must give “substantial weight” to the first four indicators above and “much greater weight” to the combination of those indicators than to the measures of school quality or student success.²

ESSA's new requirements build on the history of school accountability, which began at the state level in the 1990s amid a broader effort to measure school performance.³ The No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB—the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA—increased the federal role in accountability.⁴ Under NCLB, states were responsible for improving student proficiency in ELA and mathematics as well as high school graduation rates. Additionally, schools were required to meet proficiency targets for every subgroup of students annually, with the targets increasing to 100 percent proficiency by 2014.⁵

ESSA, the most recent reauthorization of ESEA, gives states greater flexibility in designing more holistic accountability systems that take into account multiple indicators of school success, while continuing to hold schools accountable for academic achievement. This report analyzes the measures that states currently include in their accountability systems and examines how state systems compare with the new law's provisions, which will take effect in the 2017-18 school year.⁶ To this end, the Center for American Progress analyzed ESEA flexibility waivers and accountability workbooks, supplementing the data from those sources with information and materials from state departments of education.

The authors find that statewide accountability measures fall into one of seven main categories of indicators: achievement indicators, such as proficiency in reading and mathematics; student growth indicators in multiple academic subjects; English language acquisition indicators; early warning indicators, such as chronic absenteeism; persistence indicators, such as graduation rates; college- and career-ready indicators, such as participation in and performance on college entry exams; and other indicators, such as access to the arts.

It is apparent from the research for this report that state accountability systems vary in complexity. It is also abundantly clear that while the majority of states have surpassed the requirements of NCLB, nearly all states will need to make adjustments to comply fully with the new law. As states plan for this transition, CAP recommends that they take the following steps:

- **States should set a vision for their accountability systems and be purposeful about the incentives they create when selecting system indicators.** All states, for example, should set as a clear objective that all students graduate from high school ready for college and a career. States must then select indicators to quantify this goal and gauge progress, while being mindful of the actions and opportunities that these measures encourage schools to prioritize.

- **States must weigh the trade-offs between simplicity and complexity to create a tailored yet comprehensive system of accountability.** States should be thoughtful in designing systems that capture a complete picture of student success and strike a balance between straightforward and nuanced accountability. Systems should be comprehensive, but states should not dilute their systems with unnecessary measures.
- **States, districts, and schools should increase transparency and clarity of school accountability and rating methodology for communities and families.** States' accountability systems align with federal requirements and state priorities, but they serve a much greater purpose than compliance. They also must clearly communicate to communities and families which measures determine a school's performance rating in order to enable stakeholders to make informed choices and better advocate for students.

Over the next year, states should take advantage of the opportunity to improve their current accountability systems with a set of indicators that better captures student achievement and school success.

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