

WHAT MEASURES MATTER... AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE

The Opportunities and Risks for Educational Equity in New York State Under ESSA

The new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has spurred important conversations in New York State and across the country about what indicators should be used for school accountability.

Under the prior law — No Child Left Behind — nearly all of the emphasis was placed on English language arts (ELA) and math achievement on annual state assessments in grades 3-8, as well as high school graduation rates. By inviting states to rethink their accountability systems, ESSA has opened the door to lots of ideas about what indicators states should use to measure school success.

One of the most important things that accountability systems can do is set expectations, and that is why it is so important to get the accountability indicators right. If we measure the wrong things, we risk setting the wrong expectations. If we measure too many

things, we risk setting too many expectations — and so having none of them matter. And, if we put pressure on measures that are weak, we risk letting schools look like they are meeting expectations, even when they're not serving their students.

But accountability indicators are only one use of data in a strong and meaningful accountability system. In fact, ESSA asks New York to determine not just *what matters* in our accountability system, but *what matters for what purpose*.

Our coalition of civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations believes that different indicators can and should serve various purposes in helping the state, school districts, and schools increase achievement for all students — including students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities:

State-Level Equity Dashboard

Although not required by ESSA, a state-level dashboard can help policymakers track progress on accountability indicators as well as the resources and tools that help improve achievement and close opportunity gaps. Indicators could include (but not be limited to):

- The state's school accountability indicators that address academic achievement, English language proficiency, and other indicators of school quality or student success (see next box)
- Access to strong educators
- Access to adequate and equitable funding/resources
- Whether students have rich and rigorous learning opportunities and curricula

The bottom line: Not every piece of important information can or should be an accountability indicator. ESSA asks us to determine not just *what matters*, but *what matters for what purpose*.



School Accountability

ESSA requires the state to establish an accountability system based on four types of indicators. A school's progress on these indicators for each group of students it serves should lead to the state's determination of how the school is rated and whether the school requires targeted or comprehensive support and improvement.

The accountability indicators should be:

Academic achievement

- Percent of students proficient in ELA, math, and science, compared to **long-term achievement goals** set by the state

Another academic indicator

- Percent of students making sufficient academic growth to be on grade level by the time they graduate high school (for elementary and middle schools)
- Graduation rate (for high schools)

English-language proficiency

- A measure of the progress that a school's English learners are making toward English proficiency

Additional indicator of school quality or student success

- Percent of students not chronically absent
- Percent of students not given an out-of-school suspension or other disciplinary measure that removes students from instruction
- College and career readiness measured by a **High School Success Index**

Needs Assessments and School Report Cards

In addition to the data used for accountability indicators, ESSA provides opportunities to use other indicators for public reporting and to help schools identified for support and improvement focus on the root school-based causes of their achievement challenges and the strategies that can help them improve.

These indicators could include (but not be limited to):

- Availability of high-quality pre-kindergarten and access to other **early learning opportunities** for the school's incoming kindergarteners
- Evidence-based school climate surveys
- Access to strong educators
- Intra- and inter-district funding and resource gaps
- Measures of a student's opportunity to learn, including access to computers, books, and other resources and whether students have rich and rigorous learning opportunities and curricula