

SETTING GOALS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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

At its heart, the new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a powerful opportunity for states to set clear expectations that schools must raise the achievement of all of their students — not just some — and that states must help schools in that effort. Depending on how New York’s policymakers set the state’s performance expectations, ESSA could help focus attention and resources on the full range of student groups, including those who are sometimes ignored, and prompt action and urgency to improve our schools.

One of the most important ways that a state communicates expectations is through the goals it sets for schools. ESSA advances this objective by requiring states to set long-term goals and measurements of interim progress on key academic indicators, including English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency and high school graduation rates.

Getting these goals right is critical. If set too low or too far in the future, the goals will be meaningless. But if the goals are set too high, we will simply be setting schools up for failure.

Our coalition of civil rights, education, parent and business organizations believe that we must build real urgency around the improvements necessary to get all children — particularly low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners,

who have been historically underserved — on a trajectory to be ready for college and careers. To achieve this principle, we recommend that state policymakers:

- Set the Same Long-Term Goal for All Groups of Students:** Different — in other words, lower — goals for some groups of students than for others would signal the state’s acceptance of the systemic inequities that have for too long plagued our education system. An illustration of such an approach is shown in the “Recent Growth” example in the following chart. For each academic indicator, New York State’s ESSA plan should establish a single, long-term goal that schools are expected to reach for every group of students. Reaching these goals will necessitate that schools accelerate the rate of progress for the groups that are furthest behind, and will thereby close the state’s achievement gaps. For example, right now 78 percent of high school students graduate on time, including 65 percent of African American and Latino students and 70 percent of low-income students. If the state sets its goal at a 95 percent graduation rate, schools would be expected to help every group of students get to that goal within a set amount of time.
- Set Ambitious but Attainable Goals:** The state should ensure that its goals are ambitious — requiring a significantly faster rate of progress

The bottom line: Policymakers should set ambitious and attainable long-term achievement goals that are consistent for all groups of students — and ensure that schools receive the attention and help they need if they start to fall behind.



than is the case right now — and at the same time attainable — reinforcing the principle that schools can reach the goal with the right strategies, staffing, support, and resources. An ambitious but attainable long-term goal should have a time horizon of roughly 10 years.

- **Create Meaningful Measurements of Interim Progress Toward the Goal — and Use Them:** The most important factors in determining a school’s rating should be the school’s performance on academic proficiency and attainment, and whether the school is meeting the measurements of interim progress for all students and for each of its subgroups of students, as shown in the “Top Performers” example in the chart. The state and

school districts should use this as a vital source of information for flagging when a school may be at risk of falling behind — making it possible to address opportunity and equity gaps as early as possible, rather than simply creating a punitive process.

- **Avoid “Extra” Indicators that Detract from the Goal:** Some have suggested accountability measures for “gap-closing” or “increasing the achievement of the bottom third of students” within a school. These ideas replace objective goals for higher achievement with unhelpful comparisons between groups. For example, closing gaps is not particularly meaningful in a school where all groups of students are low-achieving, and it could create a perverse incentive to depress achievement for higher achieving students.

Why the Goals We Set for Schools Matter

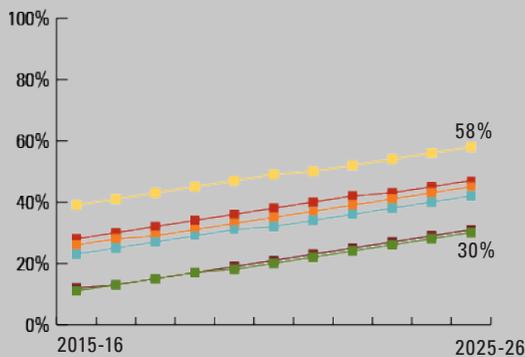
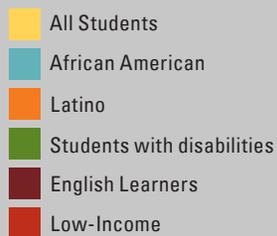
Two examples of long-term goals for math proficiency for grades 3-8 and how they could drive performance

RECENT GROWTH

How would the goal be set?

Between 2013-14 and 2014-15, the statewide “all students” group increased math proficiency by 1.9 percentage points. If each subgroup makes that level of progress for 10 years, they will each increase proficiency by 19 percentage points. Goals are attainable but too low, particularly for historically underserved groups.

Where do we end up?

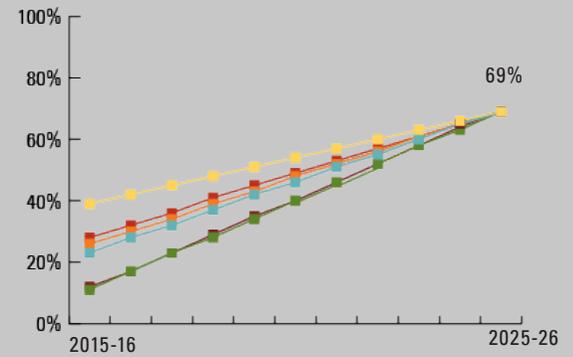


Has New York achieved significantly higher levels of achievement for all groups of students and closed achievement gaps?

NO

TOP PERFORMERS

Right now, in the school at the 90th percentile of all New York schools, 69 percent of students are proficient in math. Within 10 years, we expect every school to reach 69 percent proficiency in math for each group of students. This goal is ambitious, yet we know it is attainable because some schools and student populations are already achieving it.



YES

Data Source: State Education Department. Schools are excluded from this analysis if they are missing 2015-16 grades 3-8 assessment results or 2014-15 graduation rate data, or if the applicable n-size is less than 10.