

5 Things State Leaders Should Do to Advance Equity:

State Accountability Systems, School Improvement, and Reporting



1

Only include indicators in state accountability systems that keep student learning front and center.



2

Ensure that school ratings reflect how schools are doing for all groups of students.

3

Establish criteria that honestly identify which schools need to take steps to improve overall or for one or more student groups.



4

Provide meaningful support to schools that need to improve.

5

Report information that is understandable, easily accessible, and widely available.



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Not too long ago, students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities — who had long gone underserved in our schools — were invisible, hidden behind averages. But in 2002 federal legislation changed all that by introducing accountability systems to ensure that all students — regardless of their race, family income, home language, or disability status — get the education they need and deserve. And in 2015, building on that earlier legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) challenged states to refine their accountability systems to provide the right combination of pressure and support for school improvement. As states continue to implement ESSA, it is critical that strong voices continue advocating for equity.

State accountability systems, school improvement, and reporting can help ensure that each student is served well. [The law includes a number of important requirements](#) for states to take action to achieve equity in school accountability systems. The law also leaves many key decisions up to states — decisions about what to measure, how to communicate how schools are doing on those measures, how to identify schools that need to take action to improve for any group of students, [what to do to support school improvement efforts, and what to do if schools don't improve](#). Although states crafted and began implementing the first version of their plans under ESSA, many states have made changes or are considering future changes to those plans. (See p. 5 for an example.)

This document provides an overview of the five key things state leaders should make sure are in place to ensure their state's accountability, school improvement, and reporting systems support equity and achievement for all students.





1

Only include indicators in state accountability systems that keep student learning front and center.

An accountability system is the set of policies and practices that a state uses to measure and hold schools and districts responsible for raising student achievement for all students, and to prompt and support improvement where necessary. Each state must include multiple measures of student performance (e.g., results from statewide assessments, graduation rates) within its statewide accountability system. [The measures, or indicators, a state chooses to include in its accountability system matter](#). If these systems create the wrong priorities (shifting the focus away from improving student outcomes, for example), create too many priorities (so schools have to chase 40 priorities instead of just focusing on a few important ones), or set expectations so low as to be meaningless (or so high as to be unachievable), stakeholders lose the power that these systems have to drive change.

The measures within an accountability system communicate expectations to districts, schools, and the public. States should:

- ✓ Include indicators that remain focused on whether students are meeting or exceeding grade-level standards in core subjects and whether individual students are making progress over time.
- ✓ Only include indicators that can be disaggregated by individual student group.

Beyond measures of academic achievement and growth, a limited number of comparable and valid indicators have the potential to add to the picture of how well schools are serving all groups of students:

- ✓ [Chronic absenteeism](#)
- ✓ Measures of college and career readiness (e.g., [assessment-based measures](#), [success in college-prep courses](#), and [career readiness](#))
- ✓ High school [on-track rates](#)

See [this document](#) for more information about which indicators meet these expectations.

Why Disaggregation Is Critical

When it comes to accountability, details matter. While a well-designed accountability system shines a light on educational disparities, a badly designed one can actually hide achievement and opportunity gaps, and enable schools and districts to sweep underperformance — for all students or for individual student groups — under the rug. To help ensure that school ratings reflect how schools are doing for all groups of students, ESSA requires all indicators to be disaggregated by student group. This allows stakeholders to see how individual groups of students, including Black, Latino, and low-income students, are performing on each indicator. Things that cannot be measured by student group — for example, the number of advanced classes offered at a school, or the percentage of teachers who have a major or minor in the field they are teaching in — can be part of a school's needs assessment and/or report card but cannot be part of its rating.

2

Ensure that school ratings reflect how schools are doing for all groups of students.

States are required to annually rate schools based on their performance for all students and for each student group on each indicator. State leaders must call for an honest look at whether the system as designed and implemented is capturing the performance of all students in a meaningful way.

[School ratings](#) — be they labels ranging from “excellent” to “in need of improvement,” one to five stars, or A to F grades — are one of the most powerful tools for communicating expectations for school performance, for prompting action whenever those expectations are not met, and for helping parents and others understand how their child’s school is doing. Of course, ratings are just one measure of a school’s health; additional reporting, as described in No. 5 below, provides a more comprehensive picture of how a school is serving its students.

The way ratings are designed — meaning, which criteria schools must meet to get a certain rating — matters. An accountability system that gives high ratings only to schools that demonstrate high performance or fast improvement for all groups of students sends one signal. A system that gives high ratings to schools that are doing well on average but have low results for Black students, for example, sends a very different message.

As states refine and adjust school rating systems, they should make sure these systems:

- ✓ Set the same high performance expectations for all groups of students.
- ✓ Ensure that all individual groups of students are included in a school’s overall rating. Otherwise, schools’ average results for all students will, by default, become the thing that most educators, parents, and community members focus their attention on, removing the incentive for schools to tackle inequities in opportunity and achievement.
- ✓ Have a clear, summative rating (e.g., A–F grades, star systems, etc.) that reflects how the school is doing for each student group on each of the indicators that are part of the accountability system (rather than a rating based entirely on schoolwide averages or ratings for each group that don’t count in the school’s overall rating).
- ✓ Weigh how schools are doing for individual student groups at least as heavily as they do schoolwide averages.
- ✓ Look at each historically underserved group individually rather than lumping them together into a “supergroup.”
- ✓ Include a [federally required indicator of English language proficiency](#) that sets the high expectation that students will reach proficiency within a reasonable amount of time.



3

Establish criteria that honestly identify which schools need to take steps to improve overall or for one or more student groups.

States must use indicators and ratings to identify schools that need support. How a state chooses to identify schools for support matters. First and foremost, identification drives action by the state, district, school, and community. But identification criteria also communicate expectations: They define the minimum level of performance that is considered high enough, or acceptable, before intervention becomes necessary.

ESSA provides states with flexibility in setting criteria to identify schools for Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI). It requires states to identify any school that is “consistently underperforming” for a student group for TSI. States, however, have a lot of discretion when defining what “consistently underperforming” means. Equity-minded state leaders have an important role to play in prompting their states to set a rigorous bar that ensures the state will honestly identify all the schools that need additional support to serve groups of students well.

What Does ESSA Require?

States must identify three types of schools for support and improvement. These include:

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT SCHOOLS: Schools that are very low performing (in the bottom 5% of Title I schools) for all students, or that have low graduation rates

TARGETED SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT SCHOOLS: Schools that are consistently underperforming (defined by state) for any group of students

ADDITIONAL TARGETED SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT SCHOOLS: Schools that are very low-performing for one or more groups of students (i.e., doing as badly for a student group as the bottom 5% of schools are for all students)

Each of these types of schools must take action to improve. Districts must work with these schools to develop and implement improvement plans that include evidence-based strategies. If the lowest performing schools do not improve after a number of years, the state has to take action as well.



With that in mind, state leaders must ensure that [states](#):

- ✓ [Set a higher bar for “consistent underperformance”](#) (TSI schools) than for ATSI schools (i.e., schools with a group of students performing as badly as the bottom 5% of schools are for all students). If they do not, the only schools that would need to take action are those that are doing as badly for a group of students as the absolute lowest performing schools in the state are for all kids. Schools that are only slightly higher performing for all groups of students — say, at the 6th percentile — would get a free pass.
- ✓ Set the same, high expectations for each group of students. A state should not define consistently underperforming based on the size of achievement gaps within a school. For example, a school that is not doing well for its Latino students should have to take action regardless of how it’s doing for its White students.
- ✓ Do not define consistently underperforming as doing worse for a student group than the state is doing on average for that group. For example, some states define consistently underperforming to compare student groups’ performance to the state average for that group. This approach does not just set very low expectations, it sets different expectations for different groups of children. Under such definitions of consistent underperformance, a school where 20% of White students are on grade level could be required to take action, but a school where 20% of Black students are on grade level could be considered just fine. What matters most is the school’s results for each group of students, not how those results compare to other groups.

Kentucky — Moving the Wrong Way

While identification for school improvement may feel complicated or bureaucratic, it is a critical component of state accountability and support systems that equity-minded state leaders must continue to monitor and refine.

As part of its implementation of ESSA, Kentucky began using two labels to identify schools that needed additional support: 1) Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools that were in the bottom 5% of schools; and 2) Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools (equivalent to the ATSI definition under ESSA) that had a student group performing at the same level as the bottom 5% of schools. This was already problematic because it meant that Kentucky was only identifying schools with the very lowest performing student groups for Targeted Support. The state described plans to identify a second category of TSI schools with more rigorous criteria, but they did not identify these schools last year.

But, in early 2019, lawmakers in Kentucky exacerbated the problem when they changed how the state would identify TSI schools. [Beginning in 2019–2020](#), the state intended to consider not only individual student group performance, but also a school’s overall performance in determining whether it will receive support. A school in Kentucky now needs to be in the bottom 10% of all schools AND have at least one student group performing in the bottom 5% of all students for three consecutive years before it is identified for TSI. That means it is highly likely schools that are not serving individual groups of students — including Black, Latino, low-income, English learners, or students with disabilities — well will not receive the additional support they need to help these students because they will never be identified for TSI. Kentucky education officials [have announced](#) that the U.S. Department of Education has informed the state that this change violates federal law. At the time of this publication, it remains unclear how Kentucky will address this issue, but it must submit a plan to address the violation.

4

Provide meaningful support to schools that need to improve.

Each of the types of schools a state identifies under ESSA [must take action to improve](#). Districts must work with these schools to develop and implement improvement plans. If the lowest performing schools do not improve after several years, the state must take action as well. As states and districts begin to implement supports in identified schools, state leaders should, at a minimum:

- ✓ Ensure that improvement plans lay out [evidence-based strategies](#) that address the challenges identified in a school's needs assessment.
- ✓ Share best practices across districts and schools and build district leaders' capacity to evaluate the evidence behind improvement strategies.
- ✓ Identify [gaps in resources between and within schools](#), and require action on their findings.
- ✓ Provide schools with data that prompts schools and districts to identify inequities, such as discipline data by student group and offense type and data identifying students who need [additional attention to get and stay on track](#).
- ✓ Establish ambitious but attainable criteria to determine when a school should no longer be identified (i.e., exit criteria).
- ✓ Require ongoing family and community engagement.



5

Report information that is understandable, easily accessible, and widely available.

While school ratings are critical to increase transparency and ensure resources are directed to the schools and students that need them the most, ratings alone are insufficient. In addition to accountability systems, ESSA requires states to release state and district level reports cards, so states should ensure these [more detailed report cards](#) provide parents, community members, and the public with a range of information on school quality — including how schools are doing for each group of students on all the indicators that go into the rating.

To ensure that [report cards are accessible and understandable](#) for parents, states and districts should include a summary page with the most important student achievement and opportunity-to-learn data, and report cards should be translated into the most common languages spoken in the state. Report cards should include critical equity measures, such as:

- ✓ The school's accountability rating and whether it has been identified as in need of improvement
- ✓ Data on all the indicators that are part of the school's rating (both for all students and for each group of students) and whether the school has been identified as CSI, TSI, or ATSI
- ✓ If available, the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in higher education
- ✓ Federally required [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) measures (e.g., discipline, chronic absenteeism, enrollment in advanced coursework)
- ✓ Professional qualifications of teachers in the aggregate and disaggregated by high-poverty compared with low-poverty schools
- ✓ Per-pupil expenditures of federal, state, and local funds, disaggregated by source, for each district and school for the preceding fiscal year, including actual salary and non-personnel expenditures, not districtwide average salaries
- ✓ Contextual information such as student demographics and assessment participation rates, to ensure that all students are reflected in reporting

On each measure, the school's overall results should appear right next to results for each group of students the school serves.

Linking P-12 and Higher Ed Data

Before states can consider how they will present relevant information to stakeholders, they must ensure they have systems in place to collect this data. For some measures, this will require states to ensure that [data systems are connected](#) to each other. For example, [high school feedback reports](#) let P-12 district and school leaders know where their students enroll after graduation and if those students are prepared for college-level coursework or if they need remediation. These reports are only possible if states have connected their P-12 and higher education data systems.

Among others, [Texas](#) has created a public portal that allows anyone to run reports that combine data from the state's P-12, higher education, and workforce data systems. As states continue to improve these systems, they must ensure that data is accessible and navigable for all stakeholders, including underserved families and communities.

