



# Alliance for Excellent Education Third Annual High School Policy Conference

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## Accountability for What Matters – Graduates Prepared for Success

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Prior to, and certainly since, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), “accountability” has taken center stage as a critical tool for increasing student success and closing achievement gaps. Indeed, valid, transparent accountability systems—properly designed and implemented—can be a major force as schools, districts, states, and the nation work toward those goals.

Unfortunately, the current NCLB accountability system is too often a blunt instrument where it should be a precise tool for promoting positive change. This is especially true at the high school level, where graduation rates are not sufficiently valued and there is a dearth of funding for school improvement.

### **The Current System**

Most observers agree that the current federal accountability system under NCLB does not accurately assess high school-student achievement or attainment, evaluate the progress of high schools, or leverage and support high school improvement. But there is less agreement as to whether these failures are design flaws or the result of poor implementation.

*Assessments:* NCLB mandates assessment of students at least once during their high school years. Different states’ assessments vary greatly, depending on state standards, state definitions of “proficient,” and when students are tested. The mandated, single measure of student proficiency—which many states administer as early as the tenth grade—may not answer the fundamental question of whether or not students are prepared to succeed in college or work. Further, administering only one test (for the purposes of NCLB) during the high school years may create perverse incentives; instead of working to systematically improve achievement for all students, schools may hold back or “push out” low-performing students or focus their attention on improving the scores of a relatively small number of students to improve specific subgroup achievement.

*Graduation rates:* There are multiple flaws in the calculation, reporting, and role of graduation rates as mandated by NCLB and administered by the U.S. Department of Education (the Department). Specifically: a variety of inconsistent and misleading calculations have been developed and approved for use by individual states; only aggregate (not subgroup) rates are used in the determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status; and there is no mandated ultimate graduation goal that would be akin to the 100 percent proficient in reading and math by 2014, nor any corresponding meaningful progress goals. As a result, in some states, a high school can fail to raise the graduation rate of a particular subgroup (or even see it decline), but can still be allowed to make AYP.

*School Improvement:* NCLB states that schools failing to meet progress goals spend insufficient federal funds to provide school choice and supplemental education services (SES)—poor choices to stimulate meaningful change at the high school level. Given that three-quarters of America’s school districts have only one high school and that many failing schools are concentrated in urban areas, high school students often have few, if any, successful schools to which they can transfer. Furthermore, many students have after-school commitments (e.g., extracurricular activities, family, work), making them unlikely to choose SES even in the few places where they are offered. Finally, these “improvement actions” are not driven by performance data, nor do they improve the overall quality of a school.

*Title I Funds:* Title I, Part A, may serve as a meaningful lever for change in elementary schools, but as currently distributed it is an ineffective hook on which to hang high school accountability. Although all schools must meet NCLB mandates triggered at the state level, including testing, reporting, and being labeled “in need of improvement,” only those receiving Title I funds are required to implement improvement actions. Only 8 percent of students benefiting from Title I are in high schools, leaving federal accountability requirements for school improvement essentially irrelevant to most high schools.

### **Where Do We Go From Here? What Role Should the Federal Government Play in High School Accountability?**

Although real questions remain about *who* should be required to do *what*, and *when* they should be required to do it, there seems to be a growing consensus that an effective and useful accountability system for high schools would likely include the following components:

- Sufficient, reliable data and the capacity to use it for instruction, reporting, and decisionmaking
- A set of standards and goals that match postsecondary expectations of colleges and employers
- Multiple valid and reliable measures of student performance
- Measurable progress goals that could take into account both proficiency and growth toward meeting goals
- School improvement measures, driven by data, that are appropriately designed to improve teaching and learning
- Appropriate resources and capacity to make school improvement possible

Currently, states decide what students should learn, how to determine if they’ve learned it, and how to report schools’ progress in meeting those goals. Meanwhile, the federal government has set somewhat arbitrary deadlines for states to meet goals, devised a detailed formula to determine progress, and designated specific action steps for schools that do not meet them. The result is a system of inconsistent goals and unreliable tests that vary across states, and a federal government that micromanages the triage of school improvement.

What if we flipped those responsibilities? The federal government would provide transparency and consistency of goals and a common, reliable way of measuring progress toward them by helping to broker a national agreement on the skills and knowledge expected of high school graduates and by developing high-quality assessments aligned to those goals. Meanwhile, the states would be responsible for customizing school improvement to respond to the individual needs of districts,

schools, and students through a system that allows them more latitude (within parameters designed to ensure proficiency for all children, disaggregation, and other critical components) to devise more sophisticated methods to evaluate schools and determine the appropriate interventions to improve schools based on their needs and capacity.

Interest in a system like this, that concentrates the federal accountability role on *outcomes* rather than *process*, is increasing, and there seems to be general agreement that the components below will be critical to effective design. (The Department's growth model experiment, which provided the states with non-negotiable parameters and permitted them to propose various systems designed to reach the same outcomes, may be a good model.)

- *Data and data systems:* Research and common sense have demonstrated that education policy and practice should be informed by sound data and research. There is a national movement to build statewide longitudinal data systems to provide rich educational data at the student level, but many states are far from having these systems in place. Educators need to be trained and supported to use data to improve educational practice, while the federal government's role in supporting the good use of data to drive success has not been defined.
- *Standards:* State standards are often poorly aligned to college and work needs and vary widely across states, with many setting the bar far below what is needed for long-term student success. As a direct result, a number of diverse voices are encouraging another look at the creation of a set of national standards and assessments. Does the political will exist, or could/should it be built, to move to national standards and assessments? At least voluntary ones? If not, is there any way of building a valid federal accountability system on inconsistent, generally low, state standards?
- *Assessments:* The question of high school-level testing is a contentious one. What should be tested, when, and with what stakes? Is adding "more testing" at the high school level a necessary part of the solution? How can the issue of lack of student motivation to do well on tests that carry no personal stake be addressed? There is agreement that tests must be aligned to standards, but should tenth-grade proficiency, college- or work-readiness, or some other factors be assessed? If a national assessment aligned with national standards is not used, how can the quality of state assessments be ensured? How can states be moved to provide more accurate and reliable assessments of the knowledge and skills of English language learners and students with disabilities? What assessments and which kind should be required for accountability purposes that would minimize the testing burden while yielding sufficient data to drive interventions for students and school improvement?
- *Goals:* The current NCLB mandate of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading by 2014 is questioned by many who feel that it is unlikely that the country can meet this deadline, especially given the gap between the goal and current, state-set proficiency levels. For high schools, the graduation rate goal is just as questionable. While few would argue that schools, districts, and states should not be held accountable for increasing graduation rates over time, and many espouse the graduation rate formula defined in the National Governors Association' Graduation Rate Compact, there is considerable disagreement about whether 100 percent graduation is either attainable or sufficient; many argue that a better goal would focus on *college-ready* graduation.
- *Measuring progress:* Accountability systems can measure progress toward a specific goal or simply assess the status of student performance as compared to the goal. Recently, there seems to be increasing momentum behind the idea of measuring progress based on growth toward a goal, which could encourage schools to increase performance for the lowest- and highest- performing students, as well as those on the "proficient" borderline. However, most growth-model proposals have not addressed high schools, in part because it is hard to measure growth without additional

years of testing. Is there a way to measure growth effectively at the high school level absent additional testing requirements? Is the call for growth models strong enough to overcome apprehension regarding additional testing in high schools?

- *Identifying schools for improvement:* NCLB's current dichotomous system (a school either makes AYP or fails AYP) is quite simplistic, making it difficult to discriminate between chronically failing schools and schools that need targeted improvement. There is growing interest in basing school-improvement actions on finer-grain analyses. NCLB's provisions requiring certain interventions in certain years ignores the fact that a school may need more intensive intervention (or even closure) before five to seven years has elapsed; conversely, it does not allow the possibility that a school improvement measure may be working and that it simply needs more time to become fully effective. How can the federal system be designed so that schools, districts, and states are appropriately evaluated to identify shortcomings in a way that maximizes improvement?
- *School improvement actions:* Best practice and research demonstrate that, while there is no silver bullet for improving high schools, successful reforms share common components. These include personalization, increased rigor, and improved adolescent literacy skills. While additional research is always needed, high school interventions should be based on currently available research and best practices, and informed by rich data systems that identify the weaknesses and strengths of each school and district, rather than political compromises or one-size-fits-all solutions. If federal policy does not mandate common interventions for all schools failing to meet goals, who should determine which interventions are required? How do we ensure that states, districts, and schools have the capacity to improve high schools? What is the federal role in building that capacity?

### **What Will Drive Federal Policy?**

It is essential to address the issues outlined above in order to improve high school accountability. But in the end, a number of underlying questions may have more impact on the direction of federal policy.

- Is there a federal role in ensuring consistency, comparability, and equity across states? If so, in what areas—standards, assessments, improvement actions, reporting? How can the system reflect the realities that all the answers are not yet known, and that states serve as the laboratories of knowledge development? Given the accepted political reality that state and local control over education must be maintained, how can the federal system balance accountability, comparability, and flexibility?
- Even when consensus exists (such as in the case of the definition of an accurate graduation rate), some changes may take years to fully implement in every state. In those cases, should policymakers require interim solutions that can be implemented immediately? If not, will some students be short-changed?
- Rhetorically, most stakeholders argue that raising standards without raising accountability for meeting those standards is meaningless. However, policymakers may not be willing to take the political "hits" that will inevitably accompany public interpretation of decreasing scores as a decline in school performance, rather than a consequence of increased standards or more accurate calculations. Given that both raising standards and increasing accountability will take significant political capital to put into place, can we do both simultaneously—and provide political cover—by doing them nationally?
- A sophisticated accountability system is going to be a complicated accountability system. Are federal policymakers willing to support a system that cannot be broken down into simple talking points and easily communicated to parents and voters? And if the system could win political support, does the very fact of its complexity negate part of the system's value—by making it incomprehensible to parents and educators?

- A sophisticated accountability system that would include world class standards and assessments, multiple indicators of improvement, and individualized response to low-performing schools is also likely to be more costly, and possibly burdensome to state and local officials. Most critics of NCLB focus on the lack of funding to support implementation, and they may oppose any new requirements, however good they may be, if not accompanied by significant new funding. Should the federal role include building state capacity to meet federal requirements? And can federal policymakers guarantee funding for costly provisions in a new system? If not, should new accountability requirements be contingent on new funding?
- Critics have painted NCLB as a purely punitive, unfunded mandate. Can a redesigned accountability system—focused on school improvement—be framed to overcome the punitive reputation of its predecessor and gain the support of the majority of educators?
- Significant energy and political capital have been spent developing, implementing, and defending NCLB in its current form. Advocates on all sides may fear that significantly changing the law will leave it vulnerable to a shift in the “wrong” direction. Can policymakers muster the will to overhaul the current system, or will they merely tinker with it?

We live in an era of educational accountability, when schools and their leaders are increasingly judged by the public and policymakers. Parents and community members are hungry for information about the quality of their own schools and transparency to help with decisionmaking. Educators appreciate benchmarks, progress measures, and access to data that can aide their efforts to help students succeed. Policymakers want to target resources and interventions to the students, teachers, and schools that need support and to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of policies. Valid information and analyses can also force critical, but politically difficult, decisions.

Moving toward a system that more fully meets the needs of all of these stakeholders must become a high priority. While the questions listed above, and others, need to be addressed, it is also clear that Congress has an opportunity, as it approaches NCLB reauthorization, to take what has been learned in the past five years to develop a stronger, better designed, and more effectively-implemented federal accountability system for high schools.