# An ESSA Accountability Rating System Proposal

BY RYAN REYNA[[1]](#footnote-1)

The goal of any school accountability rating system is twofold:

1. Inspire and direct improvement toward college and career readiness for all students, and
2. Reliably measure the impact that a school has on its students, rather than the impact student characteristics have on school performance.

The following model aims to accomplish both goals, while meeting all of the complexities of the Every Student Succeeds Act and providing an easy-to-understand evaluation of school performance for parents, educators, policymakers, and the public.

The proposed model reflects each school’s contribution to student achievement by:

* Placing the greatest emphasis on year-to-year progress;
* Emphasizing improvement of traditionally underperforming students; and
* Judging school performance in the context of similarly populated schools.

**Categories for Rating**

The overall school rating is derived from performance in three areas of measurement:

1. Student Achievement
2. Student Progress
3. On Track to Graduation

*Student Achievement*

The Student Achievement category measures student performance in relation to grade level expectations. This area includes data from statewide assessments in four content areas (English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies), as well as information about early grade progress to demonstrate literacy and numeracy. Students that are performing on grade level have a greater likelihood of entry and success in education and career training beyond high school.

*Student Progress*

The Student Progress category measures how well schools are improving student learning over time. This area includes metrics on the collective performance of students within a school as compared to students with similar assessment history, the year-to-year improvement of the lowest performing students, the likelihood that students demonstrating proficiency will continue to do so in the future, and the progress students make in gaining English-language proficiency.

*On Track to Graduation*

The On Track to Graduation category measures student advancement to high school graduation. The metrics in this area are leading indicators of future academic success, including information on students’ attendance and course taking patterns. Students that attend school regularly and complete rigorous courses have a greater likelihood of high school graduation and positive outcomes beyond high school.

**Indicators**

The following indicators are included in the system:

*Student Achievement*

* Proficiency ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies – This provides information on the percent of students meeting grade level expectations.
* Average Scale Score ELA and Math – This provides information about the performance of students across the test scale. A focus on the test scale encourages support for all students, regardless of how close they are to the proficiency line.
* Early Grade Progress ELA and Math – This provides information about the extent to which students in traditionally underserved populations meet third grade expectations, which is one of the most critical benchmarks on the way to high school graduation. Performance is weighted by each student’s unique demographics. For instance, an African American student receives a different weight than an African American student who is also an English Language Learner. Based on the historical probability of students meeting certain performance thresholds, individual students receive points for meeting or exceeding performance expectations. The information is aggregated at the school level.

*Student Progress*

* Growth ELA and Math – This provides the relative calculation of student progress in ELA and Math over time as compared to their peers at the school level. Growth is calculated using a value-added model, with controls for prior assessment history over multiple years, student demographics (i.e., level of special education classification), and concentration of high-need students.
* Year-to-year improvement of lowest scoring students – This provides information about relative progress of the lowest performing student cohort. This is measured by the percent of students (in both ELA and Math) that scored at Achievement Level 1 in the prior year and who demonstrate greater than one Achievement Level improvement in scale score (for instance, a low AL1 in year x-1 tests at a mid AL2 in year x). Again, the focus on scale improvement is intentional so that this indicator is not misconstrued as encouraging focus on students at the bubble, to the detriment of other low performing students. Any school with fewer than 20 students scoring at the AL1 level will have its 20 lowest performing students reviewed using a similar methodology.
* Maintenance of Proficiency – This provides information about the percentage of students currently proficient who are likely to meet the proficiency standard in the future. This is measured by calculating growth-to-proficiency for any student that met proficiency in the current school year. The proficiency target is established for three school grades in the future (or the 11th grade).
* English-language proficiency improvement – This provides information about the progress students make each year on the path to English-language proficiency. This is measured by the percent of students that increase their score on the ACCESS assessment by at least one level.

*On Track to Graduation*

* Chronic absenteeism – This provides information on the percent of students that are missing substantial amount of school time. Students that miss greater than 18 school days are considerably more likely to struggle in school and fail to graduate on time.
* Core course completion – This provides information on the percent of students in grades 6-8 that pass all of their required core courses (i.e., ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies). Failing a core course in middle school increases the likelihood that a student may not graduate on time.
* Algebra I completion – This provides information about the rigor of student course taking. This is measured by the percent of students earning credit in Algebra I before the end of 8th grade. Students that complete Algebra I before high school are more likely to complete rigorous coursework in high school and ultimately move on to education and training beyond high school.

**Weights**

The categories and individual indicators receive the following weights, depending on the school’s grade configuration (for the purposes of ratings, schools are divided into 3 categories: Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8) and K-8):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | *Points Possible* |
| *Metric* | *Elementary* | *Middle* | *K-8* |
| **Student Achievement** | **30** | **25** | **30** |
| ELA – Proficiency | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| ELA – Scale | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Math – Proficiency | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Math – Scale | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Science – Proficiency | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Social Studies – Proficiency | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| ELA – Early Grade  | 5.0 | NA | 2.5 |
| Math – Early Grade  | 5.0 | NA | 2.5 |
| **Student Progress** | **60** | **60** | **60** |
| ELA – Growth | 25.0 | 25.0 | 25.0 |
| Math – Growth | 25.0 | 25.0 | 25.0 |
| Lowest Scoring Student Improvement | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Maintenance of Proficiency | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| EL Proficiency | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| **On Track to Graduation** | **5** | **15** | **10** |
| Chronic Absenteeism | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Core Course Completion | NA | 5.0 | 2.5 |
| Algebra I | NA | 5.0 | 2.5 |

**Aggregation**

Schools and districts receive an A-F rating based on performance in each category (e.g., Student Achievement, Student Progress and On Track to Graduation) and overall. Individual student data is aggregated at the school and district levels to generate a numeric score for each category. Each of the metrics contributes a weighted value toward the numeric score, which is then converted into an A-F rating. Schools in the bottom 5% of ratings will be identified for comprehensive support.

Parents and the general public strongly support an A-F rating system as it summarizes information in language that they understand. Contrary to popular belief, a significant portion of teachers supports this system as well. However, it’s important not to stop at a single overall rating. It is critical that each category of indicators is also rated, so that detailed information is equally accessible.[[2]](#footnote-2) If given the option between a B-rated school with high achievement and low progress and a C-rated school with low-to-average achievement and high progress, some parents may choose to send their child to the C-rated school. Similarly, strategies for supporting those schools by the district or state will look considerably different. Without additional differentiation at the category level, the accountability rating system may underserve parents and educators.

**Subgroup Performance**

Any school in which a subgroup appears in the bottom 5% of performance on any indicator for three out of the most recent five years shall automatically receive an F letter grade and be identified for comprehensive support. A minimum N-size of 20 shall apply for purposes of this calculation.

Additionally, each school's performance is compared to its nearest (~40) peers within the school category (i.e., K-8). Peer schools are established based on similarity in student populations across four areas: Black or Hispanic race/ethnicity, English Learners, special education, and low-income status. Any school that performs in the bottom 5% of overall performance as compared to its peers shall be eligible to be identified for targeted support. The state’s Secretary of Education will select schools from this list based on the extent of achievement gaps and chronic underperformance.

**Additional Data for School Report Cards**

ESSA places restrictions on the measures that states may include in accountability rating systems. The measures must be available statewide on an annual basis and disaggregated. This is a lofty goal and necessary for ensuring that the performance of our traditionally underserved students is not lost, and yet it does limit the extent to which states can use whole-school measures of performance in their formal accountability ratings.

For instance, student and teacher surveys are supported by over a decade of research indicating that they are correlated to student achievement. Unfortunately, use of those surveys does not appear to be eligible according to the letter of ESSA. It is exceedingly difficult to imagine disaggregating anonymous teacher responses by the subgroups of children they teach. School Quality reviews (or sometimes know as inspectorates) are another great example of a measure that provides important information about the school’s ability to support all students in their opportunity to learn. Once again, the limitation on disaggregation as well as the challenge of operationalizing a system of reviews for all schools on an annual basis makes it challenging to see how this would be allowable according to ESSA.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Be it through state report cards and/or direct interactions with school and district administrators (both are preferable), states should push forward on whole-school measures of performance. It is important not to forget that student performance is shaped by an individual’s interaction with the system around them – the climate, expectations, and supports that can be tracked to ensure that all schools are focused on improvement.

In addition to the measures that are used to determine a school’s accountability rating, states should publicly report on indicators that provide additional context for school performance. Recommended indicators include:

* Student, Parent and Teacher Surveys – Information on components of school success including effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment, and ambitious instruction.
* School Quality reviews – Information on a school’s organization to support student learning.
* Kindergarten Readiness – Information on student’s readiness for school upon entry.
* Percent of students completing required core credits in 9th grade – External validation of student preparedness for the rigors of high school. This measure also takes into account students that drop out prior to completing 9th grade.
* Percent of students completing career interest survey – The extent to which students are exposed to future career opportunities. This allows students to take greater control of their education and training.

Further, the best systems will transparently report comparison information about school performance, including performance in each category and overall for the previous two years, performance at the district and state levels on each indicator, the performance of the average peer school on each indicator, and how each school’s category and overall ratings compares to its peer schools (i.e., bottom or top 10% of its peers).

1. The author most recently served as the Director of Accountability and Data Management at the Delaware Department of Education. Prior to his time in Delaware, he worked in the Education Division of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. He can be contacted at ryan.reyna@gmail.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Additionally, a state may want to display a school’s performance on a 3x3 graph of high, average, and low Status (the Student Achievement and On Track to Graduation categories) vs. high, average, and low Improvement (Student Progress category). This matrix model allows for a quick summary of where the school stands in relation to its peers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is one place where the federal government could support state innovation. The U.S. Department of Education could release guidance clarifying that whole school measures of performance are acceptable to use for the indicator of school quality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)