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Making the Most of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — Helping States Focus on School Equity, Quality and Climate

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Introduction

Staff in State Departments of Education are diligently reviewing and revising their state accountability systems to meet the new requirements and opportunities of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA is the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the primary federal bill guiding K-12 education policy. As a democracy requires equity and adequate educational opportunities, this policy memo provides guidance to states for selecting more inclusive school quality and student success indicators for accountability systems. We do not prescribe a fixed list of indicators that each state should adopt, or even a fixed list of categories for states to consider. Rather, we use indicators of opportunities to learn and school climate to describe the risks and possibilities that states should consider when deciding on indicators. This memo concludes by recommending approaches for selecting indicators that address the importance of equity and of students' perceptions of support, safety, and respect in the classroom.

II. Overview of ESSA

ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind, the previous version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). While many significant changes are included, ESSA is still a primarily test-based accountability system, with states required to "identify a category of schools for comprehensive support and improvement" and then intervene after three years. The law specifies a set of academic indicators, each of which must be given "substantial weight" in the accountability system:[1]

1. Student proficiency on state assessments;

2. English Language proficiency; and

3. Another measure of academic student growth that can be disaggregated by subgroup (graduation rates for high schools; student growth on assessments or another measure for all other schools).

4. At least one additional indicator of school quality or student success beyond test scores.[2]

The fourth indicator, the requirement that states include at least one indicator of school quality or student success, is the focus of this memo. While the choice of such so-called non-academic indicator(s) is left completely to the states, the law provides several examples of potential state-chosen measures or indicator(s):

•   student engagement;

•   educator engagement;

•   student access to and completion of advanced coursework;

•   postsecondary readiness; or

•   school climate and safety.

As with the academic indicators, the non-academic indicator(s) must also be given "substantial weight." However, the law clearly requires that the accountability systems devised by states give "much" more weight, in the aggregate, to the academic indicators than to the non-academic indicator(s). (Note that from this point onward, we use just the singular "indicator"—but the reader should keep in mind that the law allows for either a single non-academic indicator or multiple indicators.)

The requirement to include at least one non-academic indicator of school quality is new to federal policy, and it provides new opportunities for validly measuring broader purposes of schools. The new law requires that this indicator be valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide. The indicator must also be able to distinguish among schools that differ with respect to performance on the indicator. That is, the indicator should show some schools doing well and some doing poorly.

Collecting and analyzing data for a new non-academic indicator presents both a challenge

and an opportunity for state education leaders. The process of selecting an indicator that best aligns to the state's accountability goals is not simple, nor is identifying a valid, reliable, comparable and statewide tool. Not surprisingly, research organizations, think tanks, advocates, and for-profit companies are bombarding state school leaders with topics, products and tools.

Our goal in this policy memo is not to review the wisdom of this law or critique these proffered options, or even to endorse specific measures. Rather, our goal is to establish criteria for selecting non-academic indicators that state policymakers can use to maximize educational equity and opportunity in their schools.

III. Questions to Consider When Selecting Non-Academic Indicators

Deciding *what* and *how* to measure change in students or a school is not easy. An indicator or collection of indicators provides everyone in the school system—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community—with a signal about what is valued and where to focus their attention. NCLB focused attention on achievement test scores, specifically proficiency levels in English/ Language Arts and in mathematics. Years later, there is ample evidence that this limited focus created a perverse incentive to focus on some groups of students ("bubble kids") over others[3] and to focus disproportionately on these two subject areas to the exclusion of others.[4] ESSA maintains NCLB's tightly prescribed test-based emphasis. Yet, ESSA also gives states a limited new flexibility to broaden the goals for which schools are held accountable. Here are questions we suggest state and school leaders consider when making these important decisions.

a. What types of indicators can help schools encourage equity?

Under ESSA, states can choose indicators that shed light on the opportunity gaps that create and exacerbate achievement gaps, such as student access to higher-level coursework.[5] They can also, for example, gather data from schools on how different groups of students experience their school environment. Choosing the right indicator for measuring the environment of the school can help focus attention on aspects of the education system that are critical to increasing equity and opportunity; e.g., improving safety for LGBTQ students[6] and students with disabilities,[7] and improving the racial climate experienced by different groups of students[8] and the level of trust among teachers and school leaders.[9]

Two categories of indicators are particularly valuable in increasing educational equity: *student and teacher opportunity to learn* and *school climate*—with a focus on teachers as well as students. There is strong research evidence that both types of indicators are positively linked to student outcomes, from achievement to social-emotional development and overall well-being.[10]

Opportunity to learn indicators encompass a broad range of possible measures.[11] For example, states may consider collecting information about the conditions in schools and districts that support teacher, parent, community, and student engagement. Such indicators would let us measure where and how schools are building the kinds of meaningful relationships

with families and the larger community that support student learning. Other types of opportunity indicators includes evidence of preparation for future academic and career success, chances to contribute to civic life, and supportive conditions for scaling up effective programs.[10]

Collecting opportunity to learn data across a state could provide state and district leaders with critical information about whether intended changes to schools and teaching are happening. Such data help answer the question of whether all students are provided equitable and adequate opportunities to encounter curriculum and instruction that is of sufficient quality for students to meet state standards. For example, data on teacher opportunities to learn, whether from professional development or induction programs or as part of professional learning communities in schools, provide evidence of "educator engagement" in schools, one of the indicator categories included in ESSA. Though the category of opportunity to learn indicators is broad, it includes several specific measures that states could use to focus attention on aspects of the education system that research proves are critical to student and school success.

School climate indicators provide information from the students' perspective on their perceptions of safety, belonging, and the psychosocial impacts of the school community. Whereas suspension and expulsion data provide one data point that can track more extreme forms of student misbehavior and school discipline issues, school environment indicators such as surveys provide school leaders with broader and more precise data about the school climate. This can include who is more likely to experience bullying and harassment, who feels safe at school, and which groups of students do (or do not) have caring relationships with adults at school. Relationships with caring adults at school act as a protective factor for students and can improve student attendance, engagement, and academic performance.[12]

Additionally, how teachers and other staff experience the work environment of the school is a helpful related measure of school climate. Having a healthy and positive workplace that promotes collaboration, offers professional development opportunities, and fosters community engagement all positively impact teacher retention in schools and student learning.[13] Professional development that occurs in collaborative and collegial environments and provides authentic activities has been shown to generate improvements in student achievement.[14] States and school districts should seek out measures that allow them to learn more about how students and teachers experience the climate of the school community.

b. What are the potential risks of using these indicators?

Not all indicators are valuable for promoting equitable school improvement. Some measures can be counterproductive as they may draw attention away from the conditions in schools that support or hinder student learning. A poorly considered measure might also end up unproductively and unfairly blaming school-level problems on individual students in those schools. There is, for instance, a strong risk of using measures of individual students' psychological characteristics like grit[15] and persistence. Measures of grit that have been used in research are not ready for use in accountability systems.[16]

Selecting measures based on available evidence-based interventions carries some risks. On the one hand, ESSA demands that interventions be based on specific levels and types of ev-

idence. However, there are not enough interventions meeting the ESSA evidence-based criteria to solve the full range of educational problems educators and students face. For example, there are not yet interventions meeting ESSA's evidenced-based threshold, that relate to creating safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ students.. As an alternative, when there are no available evidence-based interventions that are useful to a particular school system, states and districts can build partnerships with researchers to develop, implement and measure new interventions.[17]

Some schools may be tempted to lean on systems they already have implemented. For instance, most schools already have some system for tracking and reporting school discipline data on violent crimes, suspensions, and expulsions. There are two main dangers in relying on these systems. First is the risk of choosing not to document, report, suspend, or expel students as an attempt at showing 'improvement' in their annual data. While policymakers may want to see these numbers decrease, this should be done as part of a deliberate and well-rounded effort to change a school's approach to climate and discipline. As the NCLB experience demonstrated, chasing numbers does not necessarily create school improvement and can, in fact, be counterproductive.

> *Given that a majority of the student-level variance in test scores is not attributable to schools, states must also take into consideration the reality that some indicators may be influenced by factors outside a school's control.*

Second, these data only capture the most severe forms of violence and harmful behaviors. They also don't provide information that would allow school leaders to more precisely diagnose which groups of students are most often targeted (and how and why this occurs). In addition, these indicators do not help identify the negative elements of school climate that could be repaired through evidence-based intervention and prevention programs.

Educator blaming is another potential pitfall for states as they look to adopt new indicators. In many accountability systems, states are attaching the performance of students on standardized tests to measures of teacher quality. While these efforts attempt to identify "effective" teachers and those who need more support, they generate data solely about a narrow range of teacher impacts on students. This approach can erroneously blame individual educators rather than the systems that have created the opportunity gaps for students in the first place. As compared with the currently popular trend of evaluating teachers on unstable student test scores, a much more productive approach is found in evaluating teachers on their use of standards for teacher practice that have been proven effective. These standards-based evaluation systems, such as the National Board Standards for teachers, have been found to produce student learning gains and are generally more supportive of teacher growth and development.[18]

Given that a majority of the student-level variance in test scores is not attributable to schools, states must also take into consideration the reality that some indicators may be influenced by factors outside a school's control. Failure to account for these might hold a school responsible for something that is a result of district policy or of family and community factors (e.g., chronic absenteeism due to housing instability, employment insecurity, or limited availability of medical care).

Finally, for any single indicator or bundle of indicators, there is great risk associated with

their integration into high-stakes accountability systems, because they can create perverse incentives to manipulate responses associated with accountability sanctions or rewards. Except for a few districts and states,[19] student success factors have not been used for accountability purposes, so we do not know when, how, or why they might be manipulated.

c. What evidence is there that a given measure can meaningfully and accurately distinguish schools of differing levels of quality and student success?

As noted earlier, ESSA requires the non-academic indicator to vary significantly from school to school. Yet while analyses of student outcomes and perceptions of climate often reveal large individual differences, those differences can disappear when aggregated, resulting in relatively small differences between schools. Some research studies provide a comparative breakdown of how much variation is likely to be associated with a given indicator. In other words, they say how much schools tend to vary, as well as how much individual students or teachers vary on the measure. This information is important when selecting an indicator, so that the public can understand what a difference between schools actually means. If this guide post is not immediately clear, state leaders can always write to a member of the research team that developed the indicator to find out if there is evidence of significant school-level variation on the measure. Another problem can occur if a measure must discriminate among schools, but all schools across the state have high scores. In this case, "successful" schools might appear to be unsuccessful simply because the entire cohort is high scoring. This is an example of how choosing an indicator that meets ESSA's criterion for discriminating among schools can create an unintended negative consequence, if stakes are attached to low scores.

d. What measures of the indicator are available? And what validity and reliability evidence is there for measures of the indicator?

As explained above, three key criteria for indicators are:

- The measures should be able to meaningfully distinguish performance of schools, particularly with respect to their capacity to promote equity.

- When an indicator is related to school or district policies and practices, accountability for poor performance needs to be ascribed to entire schools or systems, rather than to individual educators or students.

- The measures should take into consideration the range of factors both inside and outside a school's control to change.

To these, we add a fourth:

- They must have demonstrably strong validity and reliability evidence.

The validity of a given measure must be based on evidence from many studies, showing that it measures what is intended and can be used for the purposes intended. Reliability is an aspect of validity that refers in part to the stability of the measure across different adminis-

trations and sites where the measure is intended to be used.

There are many indicators for which there is indeed strong evidence that they meaningfully distinguish among schools and are linked to differences in student outcomes. However, these measures were often validated in "no consequences" environments. Thus, high-stakes uses require new validity evidence. Hardly any measures, beyond tests, have been used for accountability purposes, so evidence on whether these indicators function as a worthy signal of what is important is limited.

Below we share some examples of research-developed indicators—we list the indicator and provide a reference to research that supports it. This is by no means a comprehensive list of measures that states should consider, but rather an illustration of what some states, school districts and schools are working to develop. It is intended to support states' search for valid indicators of measures of opportunities to learn and school climate that would be most useful to their unique context.

Opportunities to Learn

- Number of teachers who meet requirements for a regular teaching credential[20]

- Number of hours of extended learning time, such as through an extended school day, summer school, or afterschool learning[21]

- Student access to advanced coursework[22]

- Presenting intellectually challenging assignments to students[23]

- Instructional quality[24]

- Disproportionality in special education placements[25]

- Instructional coherence[26]

School Climate

- Student and staff measures
  - Safety, relationships, norms & rules, teaching & learning[27]
- Staff measures
  - Trust among teachers[28]
  - Teacher trust in principal[29]
  - Collective efficacy[30]
  - School working conditions (including teacher attrition and burnout)[31]

- Student measures

    o Connectedness to school[32]

    o Chronic absenteeism[33]

    o School facilities maintained and in good repair[34]

    o Student safety, risky behaviors, and belonging[35]

IV. Recommendations

As states and districts work to implement ESSA, non-academic indicators can signal a move away from punitive, high-stakes testing and towards a more holistic understanding of what helps students and educators thrive in school settings. Adapting measures that have a focus on equity and on improving school environments for the most vulnerable students can help states emphasize programs and interventions that can move schools in directions that promote positive, healthy, and high-achieving environments.

Yet deciding on and developing indicators that attend to equity is not a simple or quick process. It requires time to consider a state's unique context—including its strengths and weaknesses in providing equitable education opportunities and safe school climates—alongside the potential to use or develop accurate indicators of progress. There is evidence that education interventions are effective when they are constantly being developed, tested and revised in a continuous cycle of inquiry.[36] Rather than treat the evolution of an accountability system as a crisis, it is worth thinking about how to build change into the system as a constant. There are models around the country of local school systems that have existing democratic and research-driven approaches for developing and revising their accountability systems over time.[37] There are other examples of longstanding research and practice partnerships in which school leaders and external researchers work together to create, measure and adapt education reform efforts over time.[38]

We suggest the following courses of action:

- Identify indicators that signal the importance of equity, including opportunities to learn and/or creating safe and inclusive learning environments.

- Adopt multiple non-academic indicators that states and schools can report in their annual report cards. States can do this even if they must, pursuant to ESSA, adopt a system with a single composite score. The design and presentation of this information can provide a far more comprehensive and authentic view of the schools to parents and the public.

- Carefully combine indicators to signal what is important and avoid perverse incentives for manipulating any one indicator.

- Create reciprocal accountability in which district and state leaders have responsibility to provide resources and create conditions needed to improve quality and

student success indicators.

- Help schools make sense of data on quality and student success indicators by coupling them with opportunity and resource indicators.

- Identify potential evidence-based resources ahead of time that can support schools in improving performance on the indicators (see What Works Clearinghouse for additional resources: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/) and where there may be gaps in available resources to address issues surfaced by use of the indicators.

- Develop an accountability plan that funds and supports school improvement for schools that need it, such as professional development and resources for identifying, adapting, and studying evidence-based programs.

- Plan for a multi-stage rollout that can make new measurement approaches more successful and manageable over time.

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