

ALABAMA



Alabama's proposed accountability system rewards advanced achievement but would benefit from a stronger emphasis on growth.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ANALYSIS

The Every Student Succeeds Act grants states more authority over their school accountability systems than its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Consequently, states now have an opportunity to design school rating systems that improve upon the NCLB model, especially when it comes to high achievers.

NCLB meant well (as did many state accountability systems that preceded it), but it had a pernicious flaw. Namely, it created strong incentives for schools to focus all their energy on helping low-performing students get over a modest “proficiency” bar, while ignoring the educational needs of their high achievers, who were likely to pass state reading and math tests regardless of what happened in the classroom. This may be why the United States has seen significant achievement growth for its lowest-performing students over the last twenty years but smaller gains for its top students.

Starting in 2011, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan offered waivers to states that wanted the flexibility to redesign their accountability systems. In particular, states were allowed to incorporate the use of real student growth measures into their school determinations. This was important for a variety of reasons. First, growth measures more accurately evaluate schools' impact on student achievement than proficiency rates, which are strongly correlated with student demographics, family circumstance, and prior achievement. But just as significantly, well-designed growth measures can eliminate the temptation for schools to ignore their high achievers.

ESSA maintains NCLB's requirement that states assess students annually in grades 3–8 and once in high school, as well as the mandate that states adopt accountability systems that lead to ratings for schools. These systems must include four types of indicators: academic achievement; another academic indicator, which can include student growth for elementary and middle schools; growth towards English proficiency for English language learners; and at least one other valid, reliable indicator of school quality or student success. Each of the academic indicators (1–3) must carry “substantial” weight and, in the aggregate, must count “much more” than the fourth.

Here we examine whether Alabama’s accountability system prioritizes high achievers. We specifically evaluate the state’s plan for rating school performance during the 2016-17 school year. We do not examine the quality of Alabama’s standards, tests, or sanctions for low performance.

This analysis also illustrates how states can seize the opportunity under ESSA to redesign their accountability systems and prioritize high achievers.

This last point is especially important because many state accountability systems are currently in flux. In part, that’s because of recent changes allowed by ESEA waivers, as well as the coming changes driven by ESSA implementation. But it’s also because states across the country recently moved to new, tougher assessments linked to their new, tougher standards.

States may think we’re being premature in evaluating their systems during this time of massive change. Please understand that our primary objective is to identify the design features of an accountability system that works for all students—which we hope will become the prevailing model now that ESEA is reauthorized and states’ testing regimes are becoming stable once again.

Our focus here is on rating systems for elementary and middle schools. A separate analysis will examine the same issues for high school accountability.

HOW STATES CAN PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS IN THEIR SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

In our view, states can and should take four steps to ensure that the needs of high achievers are prioritized under ESSA:

1. **For the first academic indicator required by ESSA (“academic achievement”), give schools incentives for getting more students to an “advanced” level.** Under ESSA, states will continue to track the percentage of students who attain proficiency on state tests. They should also give schools incentives for getting students to an advanced level (such as level four on Smarter Balanced or level five on PARCC). For example, they might create an achievement index that gives schools partial credit for getting students to “basic,” full credit for getting students to “proficient,” and additional credit for getting students to “advanced.” (It’s not entirely clear from the Department of Education’s proposed regulations whether this will be allowed, though we don’t see anything in the law prohibiting it.)
2. **For the second academic indicator expected by ESSA (student growth), rate schools using a “true growth model,” i.e., one that looks at the progress of individual students at all achievement levels and not just those who are low-performing or below the “proficient” line.** Regrettably, some states still don’t consider individual student growth, or else they use a “growth-to-proficiency system” that continues to encourage schools to ignore the needs of students above (or far above) the proficient level. Using true growth models—such as “value added” or the “growth percentile method”—for all students is much preferred.

3. **Include “gifted students” (or “high achieving students”) as a subgroup in the state’s accountability system and report results for them separately.** States can signal that high achievers matter by making them a visible, trackable “subgroup,” akin to special education students or English language learners, and publishing school ratings for their progress and/or achievement. (Obviously, it makes little sense to simply report that high achievers are high-achieving. But whether they are making strong growth is quite relevant. Alternatively, states might publish results for students labeled as “gifted,” though that opens up a can of worms about how that label is applied.)


4. **When determining summative school ratings, make growth—across the achievement spectrum—count the most.** Finally, the Department of Education’s proposed regulations require states to combine multiple factors into summative school ratings, probably through an index. Each of the three academic indicators (achievement, growth, and progress toward English proficiency) must carry “substantial” weight. But in our view, states should (and, under ESSA, are free to) make growth matter the most (50 percent or more of a school’s total score). Otherwise, schools will continue to face an incentive to ignore their high-performers. (States that don’t combine their indicators into a summative school rating receive a “Not Applicable” here.)

DOES ALABAMA’S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS?

INDICATOR	RATINGS	NOTES
1. Does the state rate schools’ “academic achievement” using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an “advanced” level?		Alabama will give additional credit for students achieving at advanced levels. (See Exhibit A.)
2. Does the state rate schools’ growth using a model that looks at the progress of all individual students, not just those below the “proficient” line?		Alabama is still developing its growth model. (See Exhibit B.)
3. Does the state’s accountability system include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup and report their results separately?		Alabama does not include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup or report their results separately.
4. When calculating summative school ratings, does “growth for all students” count for at least half of the rating?		“Growth for all students” will count for 40 percent of a school’s summative rating. (See Exhibit C.)

EXHIBIT A¹

Indicator Descriptors



Student Achievement


- Determined based on the percentage of proficient students in the areas of reading and math utilizing assessments in tested grades
- 50% of points will be calculated from Reading
- 50% of points will be calculated from Math
- The chart below shows the weights that will be applied to calculate the indicator points earned.

Achievement Level	Weight
Level I	0 points
Level II	0.5 points
Level III	1.0 point
Level IV	1.25 points

Accountability Information Subject to Change

EXHIBIT B²

Indicator Descriptors



Learning Gains

- Determined based on individual students who demonstrate improvement in reading and math from one year to the next using multiple years of data.
- Growth Categories for Learning Gains: Low, Average, and High
- 50% of points will be calculated from Reading
- 50% of points will be calculated from Math
- The chart below shows the weights that will be applied to calculate the indicator points earned.

Growth Category	Weight
Low	0 points
Average	1.0 point
High	1.5 points

Accountability Information Subject to Change

EXHIBIT C³

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Alabama State Department of Education
Report Card
2015-2016

Final Grade
December 2017

ABC Elementary School
District: ABC
Grade(s): K-8

State ■
District ■
School ■

INDICATORS		Indicator Description	Grade	Points	Possible Points
Achievement					
Learning Gains	Reading	Determined based on individual students who demonstrate improvement in reading from one year to the next using multiple years of data.	December 2016	80	80
	Math	Determined based on individual students who demonstrate improvement in mathematics from one year to the next using multiple years of data.			
Student Achievement	Reading	Determined based on the percentage of proficient students in the area of reading utilizing assessments in tested grades.	December 2016	60	60
	Math	Determined based on the percentage of proficient students in the area of mathematics utilizing assessments in tested grades.			
Achievement Gap	Reading	Determined based on the progress made using the bottom 25% of student data in reading.	December 2017	20	20
	Math	Determined based on the progress made using the bottom 25% of student data in mathematics.			
Other Indicators					
Alabama PLAN 2020 Program Reviews	Determined based on a review of programs not measured by standardized tests.		December 2017	20	20
Local Indicators	Determined based on one indicator tied to student outcomes.		December 2016	20	20
				Total Points	200
Previous Year Score	Current Year Score	Grade Scale	To Be Determined		
200	200				

ENDNOTES

1. “Alabama’s A–F Report Cards: Update on ESSA Accountability,” Alabama State Department of Education, page 13, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www.alsde.edu/sec/acct/Resources%20Tabbed/AASB%202016%20-%20%20A-F%20Report%20Card.pdf>.
2. *Ibid*, 14.
3. *Ibid*, 10.