

VERMONT



Because it is based almost entirely on proficiency rates, Vermont's accountability system gives schools a strong incentive to ignore high-achieving students.

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 Vermont’s accountability system prioritizes high achievers. We specifically evaluate the state’s system for rating school performance during the 2013-2014 school year—the most recent year for which information is available. We do not examine the quality of Vermont’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 VERMONT’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?		Vermont does not give additional credit for students achieving at an “advanced” level. ¹
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?		Vermont does not use a growth model at this time. ²
3. Does the state’s accountability system include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup and report their results separately?		Vermont does not include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup or report their results separately. (See Exhibit A.)
4. When calculating summative school ratings, does “growth for all students” count for at least half of the rating?		“Growth for all students” does not count toward a school’s summative rating. ³

EXHIBIT A⁴

School Accountability System Based on Student Performance
 2014 Adequate Yearly Progress Report (Based on 2013 Results)



Bellevue Falls Middle School (Windham Northeast S.U.)

Did not make AYP. Title I Year 6 Corrective Action.

READING Title I Year 3 Corrective Action

Did not meet requirements in Reading for all students, free/reduced lunch students, white students.

MATH Title I Year 6 Corrective Action

Did not meet requirements in Mathematics for all students, free/reduced lunch students, white students.

ACADEMIC INDICATOR

Met the Academic Indicator.

PARTICIPATION

Met all Participation requirements.

Group	AYP Decisions				Academic Indicator			Participation	
	Reading Index (1)	Math Index (2)	Academic Indicator (3)	Participation (4)	Number (5)	Indicator (6)	LCB (7)	Total Students (8)	Percent Tested (9)
All Students	NO	NO	YES	YES	147	14%	8%	232	100%
Not Free/Reduced Lunch (For Reporting Only)					79	1%	0%	116	100%
Free/Reduced Lunch	NO	NO		YES	68	29%	17%	116	100%
Without Disability (For Reporting Only)					119	8%	2%	193	100%
With Disability	N<40	N<40		N<40	28	43%	21%	39	100%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	N<40	N<40		N<40	0			++	++
Asian	N<40	N<40		N<40	++	++	++	++	++
African American	N<40	N<40		N<40	++	++	++	++	++
Hispanic or Latino	N<40	N<40		N<40	++	++	++	++	++
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	N<40	N<40		N<40	0			++	++
White	NO	NO		YES	142	14%	7%	225	100%
Not English Language Learner (For Reporting Only)					147	14%	8%	232	100%
English Language Learner	N<40	N<40		N<40	0			0	

1-AYP decision for Reading. No decision is made for subgroups with less than 40 students in the index.

2-AYP decision for Mathematics. No decision is made for subgroups with less than 40 students in the index.

3-Accountability decision for the Academic Indicator. Academic Indicator must be met for All Students. No decisions are made for subgroups.

4-Accountability decision for Participation. Participation rate must be at least 95% for any group in which there are 40 or more students in the testing cohort.

5-Number of students in the Academic Indicator.

6-Academic Indicator is the percentage of students in the lowest achievement level of the reading test.

7-Lower boundary of the Academic Indicator confidence interval. The LCB must be below 15% to meet the indicator.

8-Total number of students in the Participation Rate calculation. This is the total number of students expected to be tested.

9-Percentage of students tested.

ENDNOTES

1. “Accountability Operations Manual: Vermont Accountability System Based on Student Achievement,” Vermont Department of Education, pages 5–6, accessed May 18, 2016, http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-Accountability_Operations_Manual_March_2011.pdf.
2. “State of Vermont Million Dollar Technology Project Report,” Vermont Enterprise Project Management Office-Department of Information and Innovation, pages 34–37, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/jfo/reports/VT%20Million%20Dollar%20Technology%20Report%202016.pdf>.
3. “Accountability Operations Manual: Vermont Accountability System Based on Student Achievement,” 5.
4. “2014 AYP Report-Bellow Falls Middle School,” Vermont Agency of Education, page 1, accessed May 18, 2016, http://education.vermont.gov/documents/SCH_ACO24_14.pdf.