

# HIGH STAKES FOR HIGH SCHOOLERS: STATE ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE AGE OF ESSA



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# FOREWORD

**By Chester E. Finn, Jr.**

Eleven weeks back, those of us at the Fordham Institute reported that current accountability systems in most states give primary and middle school educators scant reason to attend to the learning of high-achieving youngsters—which is to say, those systems generally fail to create incentives, rewards, or even transparency regarding the learning gains that schools are producing for students who have already crossed the proficiency threshold.

We coupled that bleak finding with a reminder that the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) creates a rare opportunity for state leaders to rethink their accountability systems and thereby set matters right.

Now we're back with a similar appraisal of state accountability regimes as they affect high schools. This one isn't quite as gloomy, as we find more states paying attention to high achievers in the upper grades—and the structure of high school is more amenable to such attention, given the scope it affords for acceleration of various kinds.

Not as gloomy, no, but not exactly rosy, as we can identify just four states that are doing it well today (Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas) and four more (Alabama, Idaho, Louisiana, and New York) that are clearly moving in the right direction based on their recently released plans for holding schools accountable under ESSA.

As we found in the earlier grades, most states' accountability systems for high schools lean heavily on proficiency rates—measuring the proportion of students who reach the proficient level on state tests. That's not a great metric for school quality in the first place, considering how closely it correlates to student demographics and prior achievement rather than illuminating the school's true effectiveness as a learning engine. But it's doubly lacking with respect to high achievers, as it signals to schools that those kids—who were already proficient on the first day of the school year—"aren't your problem." Why sweat teaching them more when the school gets no credit for doing so? (Fortunately for the kids, many right-thinking educators do pay attention to their students' needs and opportunities, not just to state-level ratings and policy machinations.)

Accountability schemes for high schools have also focused heavily on boosting graduation rates. That's an important thing to do but, again, does little for high achievers, nearly all of whom were already on track to graduate. Along the way, we must also note, the push to raise graduation rates has fostered such dubious practices as ersatz "credit-recovery" options for those who didn't take or pass the requisite courses the first time around and who may therefore not get truly equivalent learning, even if they wind up with a diploma.

Nevertheless, we're pleased to report some positive developments. For example, we found twenty-two states giving (or planning to give) high schools some accountability points for helping students earn college credits before graduation via Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, early college, and the International Baccalaureate (IB). Note that we only laud states that focus on the actual attainment of college credit during high school—for instance, rewarding schools where lots of kids pass AP tests (i.e., performance), not where they get a lot more kids simply to enroll in AP courses (i.e., access).

The impulse to get more students, especially poor and minority youngsters, into such advanced options is entirely commendable, but here, too, a worthy goal can have unintended side effects—in this case, by leading to the inclusion of students who aren't actually prepared to succeed in more challenging academic settings. It's not clear from the research literature that sitting in an advanced classroom but not succeeding in the course itself does a student much good. And one must also ask whether such an approach is good for the high-ability kids in those classrooms who truly are prepared to get the most from them. All too often, we sense, those who forfeit some of the benefit of such learning opportunities are themselves from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it is their schools—not the fancy high schools in posh suburbs—that tug hardest to open those classroom doors wider and push kids through them who may (through no fault of their own) not be up to the challenges within.

Again on the mostly positive side, we find thirty-two states that calculate—or intend to calculate—academic growth at the high school level using models that include high achievers. That does not, however, mean that they necessarily give sufficient emphasis to growth versus proficiency.

As is evident from the to-ing and fro-ing in the paragraphs above, the dark clouds we spotted on the high school horizon often have silver linings, just as the fluffy ones carry some threat of gloom. That's simply the state of school accountability in the U.S. today. So yes, we see a positive overall trend, as a number of states begin to upgrade their accountability systems in ways favorable to high achievers. But—as demonstrated by the blunt fact that we can only confer overall high marks on eight states at this time—there is a long way to go.

It's important for America's future that we persevere in that journey, because our track record at the high end of academic achievement at the high school level has been seriously disappointing for far too long. Whatever modest gains we wrought in the early grades in the NCLB era, as gauged by measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), twelfth-grade scores have been flatlining for decades, especially at what NAEP terms an advanced level. The same is true of SAT and ACT scores. As for international metrics such as PISA and TIMSS, [we're being sorely outclassed](#) by far too many other countries, both in the fraction of our young people who reach the upper ranks on those metrics and in the representation of lower-SES and minority youngsters (save for Asian Americans) among those who do make it.

Getting the accountability system right for high achievers will not, in and of itself, propel us into the top tier of high achievement on a global scale, but it's a key component of such propulsion.

Fortunately, states now have an opportunity to put America's schools on the right path. It will take leadership and courage, however, as naysayers will always insist that any attention given to high achievers is inherently elitist, if not classist or racist. These nattering nabobs of negativity are simply wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of American teenagers ready to work harder, reach higher, and go further, if only we give them the chance. Many are kids of color and come from poor families. They deserve our attention. State accountability systems can send strong signals about who matters. The right answer is everyone—including high achievers.

A word of caution for those who read this report alongside [our earlier look at accountability for elementary and middle schools](#): the ratings we assign to states in the two reports aren't directly comparable because our metric has changed. And both reports arise from surveys of a changing landscape. ESSA is already triggering revisions in some state accountability systems, and the elapsed time between our two surveys has brought some changes. For example, in the eleven weeks since the first report, Idaho, Louisiana, and New York have released new accountability plans that dramatically impact their scores. We hope this new analysis helps to usher in many more such gains.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY









In this report, we examine the extent to which states' current (or planned) accountability systems for high schools attend to the needs of high-achieving students and how these systems might be redesigned under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to better serve all students. ([Part I](#) of this report examined rating systems for elementary and middle schools.)

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 high schools incentives for getting more students to an advanced level.**
2. **Use the flexibility provided by ESSA to rate high schools using a true growth model—that is, one that includes the progress of individual students at all achievement levels and not just those who are low-performing or below the "proficient" line.**
3. **When determining summative high school ratings, make growth—across the achievement spectrum—count at least as much as achievement.**
4. **Include an indicator that gives high schools an incentive to help able students earn college credit before they graduate.**

Based on these four design features, we rate states' current (or planned) accountability systems using the rubric below and the most recent publicly available information. (See Table ES-1.)

**TABLE ES-1: RUBRIC FOR RATING HIGH SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS**

INDICATOR	RATING
1. Does the state rate high schools' academic achievement using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level?	 / 
2. Does the state rate high schools' growth using a model that includes the progress of all individual students, not just those below the "proficient" line?	 / 
3. When calculating summative high school ratings, does the state assign at least as much weight to "growth for all students" as it does to achievement?	 /  / NA*
4. Does the state rate high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduating via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs?	 / 
Total number of stars possible	A maximum of 3 or 4 stars

\*State doesn't calculate summative school ratings

This rubric is the basis for two sets of ratings: one for the thirty-nine states (plus the District of Columbia) that calculate (or intend to calculate) summative school ratings and one for the eleven states that don't (or don't plan to) take this step. (See Tables ES-2 and ES-3.)

**TABLE ES-2: RESULTS FOR STATES WITHOUT SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS**

★★★★	Idaho, New York, Ohio
★★★☆☆	(None)
★★☆☆☆	California, Kansas, New Jersey, Tennessee
☆☆☆☆	Maryland, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina

**TABLE ES-3: RESULTS FOR STATES WITH SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS**

★★★★★	Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Texas
★★★★☆	Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico
★★★☆☆	Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming
★★☆☆☆	Arizona, District of Columbia, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Utah, Wisconsin
☆☆☆☆	Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia

As these ratings suggest, most current (and planned) state accountability systems provide high schools with few incentives to focus on their high-achieving students. In fact, our analysis indicates that just five states with summative school ratings—**Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Texas**—and three that lack such ratings—**Idaho, New York, and Ohio**—have established (or have plans to create) truly praiseworthy systems.<sup>1</sup>

Our results also highlight the specific areas where states need to improve:

- » Thirty-two states estimate academic growth at the high school level using a model that includes high achievers. Of the eighteen states that fail to do this, eleven don't estimate growth at the high school level and five don't estimate growth at any grade level. The others either fail to rate the schools' growth (Virginia) or use a growth-to-proficiency model that doesn't include high achievers (Oklahoma). Given that student growth is the best way to evaluate schools' impact on student achievement—and the best way to signal that all kids matter—this finding is extremely alarming.
- » Only twenty-one states assign (or plan to assign) at least as much weight to "growth for all students" as they do to achievement when calculating summative high school ratings. Seven states assign some weight to "growth for all students" but not as much as they assign to achievement. And eleven states and the District of Columbia assign no



weight to this measure. (Eleven states don't calculate summative school ratings.) Again, given the importance of growth measures, this finding is very disappointing.

- » Twenty-two states rate (or plan to rate) high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduation via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs. However, at least five of these states (Idaho, Louisiana, New Mexico, New York, and Texas) also rate schools on their participation in advanced coursework, which may create incentives for schools to enroll students who are unprepared for those classes. And two states (Hawaii and Illinois) rate (or plan to rate) schools solely on the number of students who participate in (or pass) advanced classes, which we believe is a mistake.
- » Sixteen states and the District of Columbia rate (or plan to rate) high schools' achievement using an indicator that gives additional credit for students who achieve at an advanced level, such as a performance index.

Unfortunately, regarding this last point, it is unclear from the draft regulations published by the federal Department of Education if such indices will be allowed under ESSA, meaning those seventeen jurisdictions may be required to resume measuring academic achievement via proficiency rates alone. That's a shame, as research suggests that measuring school quality via proficiency rates is a deeply flawed approach that encourages principals and teachers to narrowly focus attention on students performing just above or below the proficiency line.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, we have one major recommendation for the Department of Education:

**ALLOW STATES TO RATE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT USING A PERFORMANCE INDEX.**

Such an allowance is both consistent with ESSA and in the best interests of students. Rather than once again encouraging schools to focus on "bubble kids" as they did under NCLB, the department's final regulations should allow—or, better yet, encourage—performance metrics that account for the achievement of all students.

# INTRODUCTION

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants states more authority over their school accountability systems than did its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Consequently, states have an opportunity to design school rating systems that improve upon the NCLB model. One of the most important improvements they can make is to ensure that their accountability systems encourage schools to pay attention to all students.

NCLB meant well (as did many state accountability systems put in place before it), but it had a pernicious flaw. Namely, it created strong incentives for schools to focus all their energy on helping low-performing students achieve proficiency and graduate from high school, ignoring the educational needs of high achievers, who were likely to pass state reading and math tests and earn a diploma regardless of what happened in the classroom. This may be why the United States has seen significant achievement growth and much higher graduation rates 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. Doing so is important for a variety of reasons. First, it's a much fairer way of evaluating schools' impact on student achievement than looking only at 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. Such systems must include four types of indicators: academic achievement (which can include student growth); high school graduation rates; growth toward English proficiency for English language learners; and at least one other valid, reliable indicator of school quality or student success. Each of the first three academic indicators must carry “substantial” weight and, in the aggregate, count “much more” than the fourth.

Here we examine whether each state's high school accountability system prioritizes high achievers. We do not examine the quality of states' standards, tests, or sanctions for low performance. (See “Important Issues Beyond the Scope of This Analysis.”)

Our analysis also illustrates how states can seize the opportunity under ESSA to redesign their high school accountability systems and make high achievers a bigger priority in determining school ratings.

This last point is especially important because many state accountability systems are currently in flux due to recent changes allowed by Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers, the coming changes driven by ESSA implementation, and the ongoing transition to new, tougher assessments linked to 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 does right by high achievers—which we hope will become the prevailing model now that ESEA is reauthorized and states’ testing regimes are becoming stable once again.

## IMPORTANT ISSUES BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THIS ANALYSIS

In addition to browsing through this report, we encourage readers to spend time with the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s annual fifty-state report card on closing the excellence gap, which paints a comprehensive picture of the variety of state policies that can support high-achieving students. After all, the four design features examined here do not encompass everything that states could be doing to encourage schools to serve their high-achieving students well, nor does our analysis capture all of the critical elements of a state accountability system as they pertain to high achievers. Most notably, we do not consider the content standards and tests that states have adopted, both of which are worth some discussion.

The foundation of any well-designed accountability system is a set of clear, demanding academic standards such as the Common Core State Standards for English and math, which are still in place in more than forty states (despite the political backlash against them). As readers likely know, the Fordham Institute has been a staunch defender of these standards, which we’ve found to be stronger—in substance, in rigor, and in clarity—than what three-quarters of the states had in place before their adoption and on par with the rest. Yet we’ve also warned that they should not be used as an excuse to eliminate services for the nation’s academic superstars. (See our white paper, written by Jonathan Plucker, [Common Core and America’s High-Achieving Students](#).) Though the Common Core standards aim higher than most of the expectations that came before them, they still don’t aim high enough for the country’s top students. No standards could. Consequently, we’ve excluded an evaluation of state content standards from this analysis.

The quality of state assessments matters enormously too, and here we wish we could collect data, especially about the capacity of state tests to accurately measure the performance and growth of students who are well above grade level (that is, whether the assessments contain enough cognitively difficult questions to capture growth at the high end). Unfortunately, a provision of NCLB requiring that all students take the “same tests” was interpreted by both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations as requiring “on-grade-level” testing, effectively prohibiting states from building tests that were accurate for students well above (or below) grade level.

Though the intent of that decision was pure—it prevents states from setting lower expectations for and administering easier tests to low-performing kids—it has curtailed the use of computer-adaptive testing and other strategies for accurately measuring performance at the top of the achievement distribution. Consequently, even the new Smarter Balanced assessments, which are computer adaptive, have been unable to precisely measure the achievement of students well above grade level.

Thankfully, ESSA eliminates this federal hurdle by giving explicit congressional approval to truly adaptive testing (both above and below grade level) as long as students are tested on grade-level items as well.

# METHODS









In our view, states 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 high 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 high 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 a basic level, full credit for getting students to a proficient level, and additional credit for getting students to an advanced level. (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. **Use the flexibility provided by ESSA to rate high schools using a true growth model—that is, one that includes 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, don't use it at the high school level, or 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 those that estimate a school's value added or median growth percentile—is preferable.
3. **When determining summative high school ratings, make growth—across the achievement spectrum—count at least as much as achievement.** The Department of Education's proposed regulations under ESSA require states to combine multiple factors into summative school ratings, probably through an index. Each of the first three indicators (achievement, graduation rate, and progress toward English proficiency) must carry “substantial” weight. In our view, states should (and, under ESSA, are free to) make growth count at least as much as achievement does. Otherwise, schools will continue to face an incentive to ignore their high performers. (States that don't yet roll their indicators up to a summative rating for the school receive a “not applicable” designation here.)
4. **Include an indicator that gives high schools an incentive to help able students earn college credit before they graduate.** One “indicator of school quality or student success” should be the percentage of students who earn college credit via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs, which are among the best ways to challenge high performers. It's important that states focus on actual attainment of college credit or the equivalent, not just participation in these programs, lest the incentives encourage the wrong behavior by schools: shoving students into AP, IB, and/or dual enrollment even if they are not prepared to succeed, leading to frustration on their part and potentially harming the experience of their higher-achieving peers. Let us also acknowledge the questionable value of many of today's dual-enrollment programs. Students are often taught not by college professors but by high school teachers, and the “college credit” earned doesn't always transfer to bona fide colleges. States should therefore encourage more high schools to offer AP and IB courses because those come with external exams, which ensure program quality and rigor.

## SCORING

Based on the four design features listed above, we rated the school accountability systems in the fifty states and the District of Columbia using the rubric shown below and the most recent publicly available information. (See Table 1 and “Data Collection”). In particular, we reviewed report cards for high schools, as well as state documents explaining the nitty-gritty of how school ratings are (or will be) calculated.

**TABLE 1: RUBRIC FOR RATING STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS FOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

INDICATOR	RATING
1. Does the state rate schools’ academic achievement using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level?	 / 
2. Does the state rate high schools’ growth using a model that includes the progress of all individual students, not just those below the “proficient” line?	 / 
3. When calculating summative high school ratings, does the state assign at least as much weight to “growth for all students” as it does to achievement?	 /  / NA*
4. Does the state rate high schools’ success in helping students earn college credit before graduating via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs?	 / 
Total number of stars possible	A maximum of 3 or 4 stars

\*State doesn’t calculate summative school ratings

## DATA COLLECTION

The data in this report reflect information that was publicly available as of October 5, 2016.<sup>3</sup> To collect this information, we scanned state department of education websites for accountability-related documents (such as guides to school rating systems) and inspected school report cards to see what information states reported. For the sake of transparency, we include screenshots of some these documents in the exhibits of the state profiles. To ensure that the information was as up-to-date as possible, we gave state officials the opportunity to review their state’s profile before publication (though not every state responded).

The task of evaluating state accountability systems is complicated by the fact that so many of them are in flux. Consequently, throughout this report we take the following approach: When a state has publicly committed to changes that satisfy the requirements of one of our indicators, we acknowledge that fact by giving it credit for those changes. However, when a state’s intent is ambiguous or unclear, we do not give credit. Thus, because the process of revising a state’s accountability system is often a lengthy and iterative one, our scores sometimes reflect a mix of states’ current and intended systems.

# RESULTS

Our analysis suggests that most current (or planned) state accountability systems provide high schools with few incentives to focus on their high-achieving students. However, there is a great deal of variation between states.

For a more nuanced view, it is helpful to distinguish between states that produce summative ratings of school quality and those that do not. As mentioned in previous sections, states could earn a maximum of either three or four stars depending on whether they combined the indicators by which schools are judged into single grades or ratings. Thus, the thirty-nine states (plus the District of Columbia) that assign such ratings for high schools could earn a maximum of four stars, while the eleven states that don't assign them could earn a maximum of three.

We present the results for both groups of states below, as well as the results for each individual indicator.

## STATES WITHOUT SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS (MAXIMUM OF THREE STARS)

As shown in Table 2, the states that lack summative school ratings do little to encourage high schools to focus on their high achievers, with three exceptions: Ohio, which is the only state whose extant accountability system earns three out of three stars, and Idaho and New York, whose planned systems also earn full marks.

**TABLE 2: RESULTS FOR STATES WITHOUT SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS**

★ ★ ★	Idaho, New York, Ohio
★ ★ ☆	(None)
★ ☆ ☆	California, Kansas, New Jersey, Tennessee
☆ ☆ ☆	Maryland, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina

We view Ohio's high school accountability system as the best in the country for high achievers: it gives schools additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level and rates both their growth (using a model that includes the progress of all students) and their success in helping students earn college credit (via AP, IB, or dual enrollment) before graduating. The systems Idaho and New York have proposed will also do these things.

Less impressive are the four states in this group that earn only one of three possible stars—California, Kansas, New Jersey, and Tennessee—which do little to incentivize schools to focus on their brightest students. And even worse are the four states that earn zero stars—Maryland, Montana, North Dakota, and South Carolina—which do virtually nothing to encourage schools on this front. None of these states reward high schools where students achieve at an advanced level or earn college credit before graduating, and none rate (or report) growth at the high school level.

## STATES WITH SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS (MAXIMUM OF FOUR STARS)

As shown in Table 3, of the thirty-nine states (plus the District of Columbia) that assign summative school ratings, five (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Texas) earn the maximum of four stars and might be considered leaders when it comes to encouraging high schools to focus on their high achievers. All of these states use (or plan to use) growth models that include high achievers at the high school level and make "growth for all students" count for at least as much as achievement when calculating summative high school ratings. Furthermore, all five states give high schools additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level and rate their success in helping students earn college credit before graduating.

**TABLE 3: RESULTS FOR STATES WITH SUMMATIVE SCHOOL RATINGS**

★★★★	Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Texas
★★★☆☆	Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico
★★★☆☆	Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming
★★★☆☆	Arizona, District of Columbia, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Utah, Wisconsin
☆☆☆☆	Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia

Like the states that earn four stars, the nine states that earn three stars out of four include high-achieving students in their growth model and assign at least as much weight to "growth for all students" as they do to achievement. However, three states in this group don't rate high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduating, and four don't give additional credit for students who achieve at an advanced level on state tests.

Twelve states earn two stars out of four, meaning they do little to encourage a focus on high achievers. Most of these states include high-achieving students in their growth model and assign at least as much weight to growth as achievement. However, only six rate high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduating, and just two (Connecticut and Missouri) give additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level.

Similarly, seven states (plus the District of Columbia) earn one star out of four, meaning they do very little to encourage a focus on high-achieving students. Of these states, only Oklahoma currently rewards schools that help students earn college credit before graduating. And only Nebraska, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia give additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level on state tests. The other three states in this group—Arizona, North Carolina, and Utah—include high achievers in their growth model but inexplicably assign less weight to "growth for all students" than they do to proficiency rates.

Finally, six states earn zero stars—Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Vermont, and Virginia—meaning that they discourage high schools from focusing on their brightest students (usually because they rely heavily on proficiency rates with no additional credit for advanced achievement).

In short, although high school accountability systems do a somewhat better job of drawing attention to high achievers than their elementary and middle school counterparts, there is still much room for improvement. Despite ample opportunity to do so over the past few years, most states have largely failed to move beyond the flawed approach to accountability embodied in No Child Left Behind, which placed undue emphasis on proficiency (and graduation) at the expense of students who will easily exceed those minimal standards.

## RESULTS FOR INDIVIDUAL INDICATORS

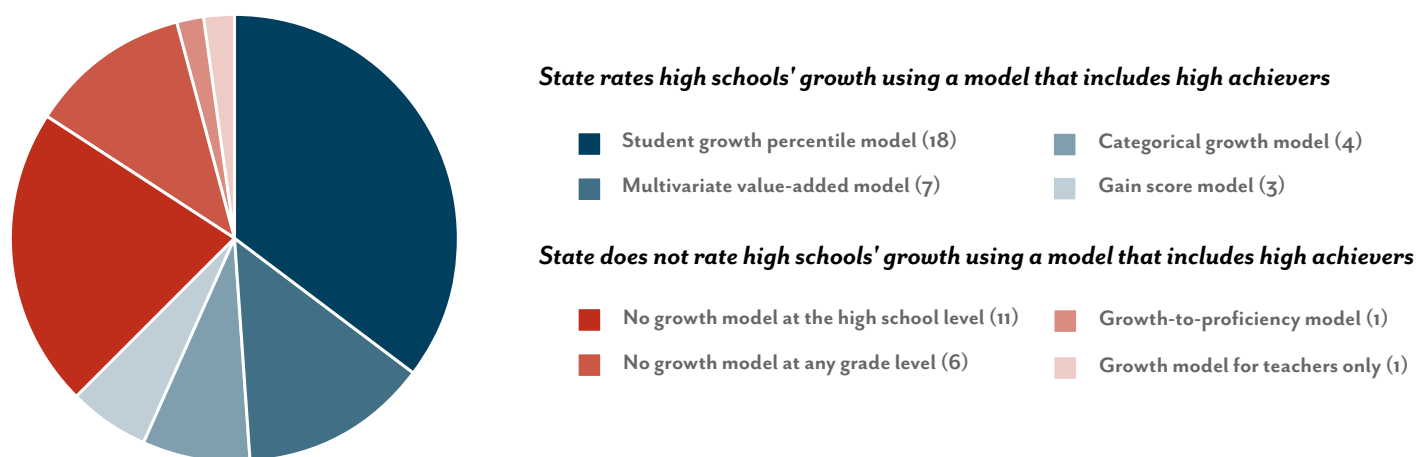
Disaggregating our results by indicator largely confirms our central finding that most state accountability systems do little to encourage high schools to focus on their high achievers, though our analysis does identify a few bright spots.

### *Most states rate high schools' growth using a model that includes high-achieving students*

Encouragingly, thirty-two states now rate (or plan to rate) student growth at the high school level using a model that includes high achievers, meaning they reward growth beyond the threshold for proficiency. (See Table 4, page 19.) That number represents real progress from a few years ago, when such an approach was considered unlawful under NCLB. Of the states in this group, eighteen use a student growth percentile model, seven use a multivariate value-added model, four use a categorical-growth model, and three use a gain-score model.<sup>4</sup>

Of the eighteen states (plus the District of Columbia) that don't rate high schools' growth using a model that includes high achievers, eleven rate elementary and middle schools' growth but have yet to develop a growth model for high schools, and five (plus the District of Columbia) have yet to develop a growth model for any grade. (See Figure 1.) Oklahoma is the only state that rates high schools' growth using a growth-to-proficiency model, which does nothing to encourage schools to pay attention to students who are already proficient. Meanwhile, Virginia has developed a growth model but, as far as we can tell, doesn't use it to rate schools' growth.<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 1: MOST STATES RATE HIGH SCHOOLS' GROWTH USING A MODEL THAT INCLUDES HIGH ACHIEVERS**





*Most states don't give schools additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level*

Sixteen states and the District of Columbia rate (or plan to rate) high schools' achievement using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level. (See Table 4, page 19.) In most of these cases, states have created an achievement index that gives schools partial credit for getting students to a basic level, full credit for getting them to a proficient level, and additional credit for getting them to an advanced level (or something along those lines).<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, it's unclear from the Department of Education's proposed regulations whether states will be allowed to use such indices as one of their academic indicators (see sidebar). Obviously, we believe that they should be allowed to do so—and that the statute provides plenty of room for such an interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

*Most states don't assign as much weight to "growth for all students" as they do to achievement*

Just twenty-one states assign as much weight to "growth for all students" as they do to achievement (in English language arts and math), and eleven states (plus the District of Columbia) assign no weight to this measure. (See Figure 2.)

Some states base a significant proportion of their summative school ratings on growth but base some or all of their growth ratings on growth for low-performing students or other subgroups, as opposed to "growth for all students."

Similarly, some states assign significant weight to other growth measures (such as growth to proficiency) that exclude progress for high achievers and thus do not count as "growth for all students." For example, Oklahoma bases 50 percent of high schools' grades on growth-to-proficiency measures.

## RECOMMENDATION FOR THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

As state officials repeatedly reminded us during the drafting of this report, state accountability systems must abide by Uncle Sam's requirements. Thus, the degree to which states can improve these systems in the coming years depends greatly on how the U.S. Department of Education views its role under the new law.

In light of these circumstances, we have one major recommendation for the Department of Education:

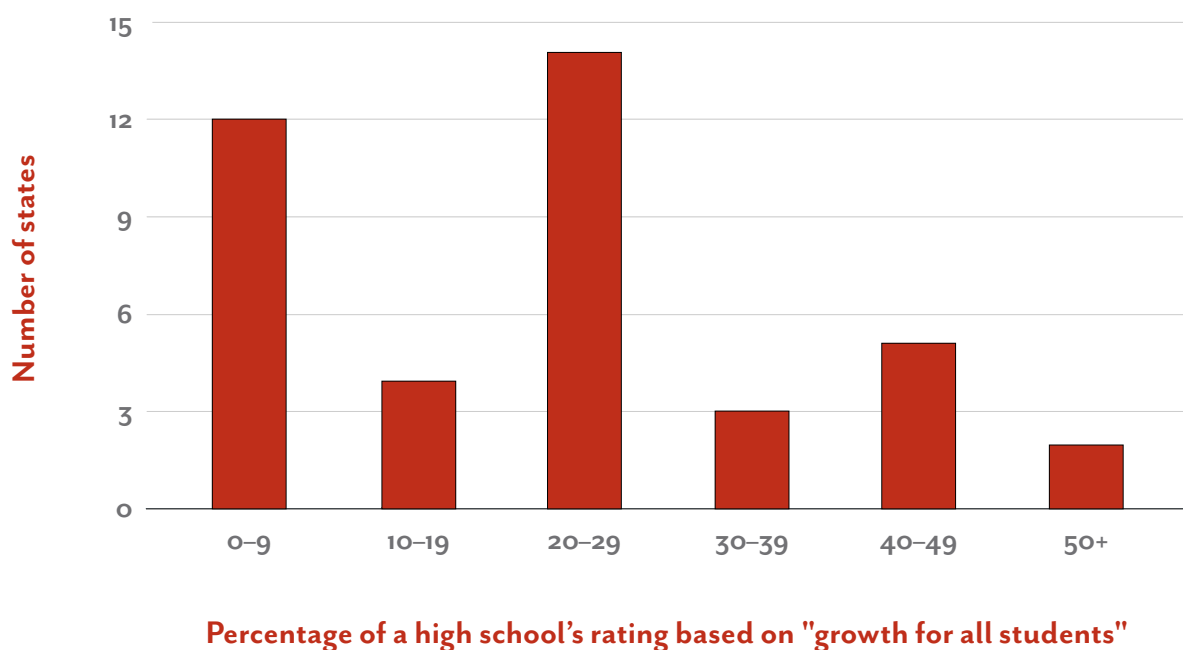
### ALLOW STATES TO RATE ACHIEVEMENT USING A PERFORMANCE INDEX.

ESSA requires the use of an academic-achievement indicator that "measures proficiency on the statewide assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics." But there are multiple ways to interpret this. Unfortunately, the department's proposed regulations seem to expect states to use proficiency rates to measure school performance. This is a mistake that will encourage schools to focus on "bubble kids"—those just above or below the proficiency cutoff—exactly as they did under NCLB.

Instead, the department's final regulations should allow or even encourage performance metrics that account for the achievement of all students, using practices such as proficiency indices or average scale scores. Such a regulation would be consistent with ESSA and would encourage schools to focus on all kids—as they should.

Though no doubt well intentioned, both of these approaches give schools an incentive to ignore their high-achieving students, especially in high-poverty settings where many kids are below grade level. Why not use a growth model that includes all students instead? And why not weight all students' growth equally, or at least make "growth for all students" count for more of a school's summative rating?

**FIGURE 2: STATES ASSIGN LITTLE WEIGHT TO "GROWTH FOR ALL STUDENTS" AT THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL**



*Most states don't rate high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduating*

Twenty-two states rate high schools' success in helping students earn college credit before graduation via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs. (See Table 4.) However, five of these states (Idaho, Louisiana, New Mexico, New York, and Texas) also rate schools on students' participation in advanced coursework—which, if not done carefully, may create incentives for schools to enroll students who are unprepared for those classes. And Hawaii and Illinois rate (or plan to rate) schools solely on the number of students who participate in (or pass) advanced classes, which we believe is a mistake.

Rating schools based on the number of students who participate in advanced courses gives them a dangerous incentive to enroll unprepared students in these courses, so it is far better to rate schools based on the number of students who succeed in these courses. For AP, the easiest way to do this is to reward schools where students score a three or higher on the exam. For IB, schools should earn points for students who score a four or higher. For dual enrollment, states might set external quality standards (for example, by giving points only for students whose dual-enrollment credits are accepted by the state's four-year universities). Admittedly, we are more comfortable with states granting credit for students passing AP or IB tests than for students earning dual-enrollment credit, as the latter rarely comes with external quality controls.

TABLE 4: SUMMATIVE RATINGS FOR EACH STATE BY INDICATOR

STATE	GIVE EXTRA CREDIT FOR ADVANCED ACHIEVEMENT	INCLUDE HIGH ACHIEVERS IN GROWTH MODEL	MAKE "GROWTH FOR ALL STUDENTS" COUNT AT LEAST AS MUCH AS ACHIEVEMENT	RATE SCHOOLS' SUCCESS IN HELPING STUDENTS EARN COLLEGE CREDIT	RATING
Alabama	★	★	★	★	★★★★
Alaska	☆	★	★	☆	★★☆☆
Arizona	☆	★	☆	☆	★★☆☆
Arkansas	★	★	★	☆	★★★☆☆
California	☆	☆	NA	★	★★☆☆
Colorado	★	★	★	☆	★★★★
Connecticut	★	☆	☆	★	★★★☆☆
Delaware	☆	★	★	★	★★★★
District of Columbia	★	☆	☆	☆	★★★☆☆
Florida	☆	★	★	★	★★★★
Georgia	★	★	★	★	★★★★
Hawaii	☆	★	★	☆	★★★☆☆
Idaho	★	★	NA	★	★★★☆☆
Illinois	☆	☆	☆	☆	★★☆☆
Indiana	☆	★	★	★	★★★★
Iowa	☆	★	★	☆	★★★☆☆
Kansas	☆	★	NA	☆	★★☆☆
Kentucky	★	★	★	☆	★★★★
Louisiana	★	★	★	★	★★★★
Maine	☆	☆	☆	☆	★★☆☆
Maryland	☆	☆	NA	☆	★★☆☆
Massachusetts	★	★	★	☆	★★★★
Michigan	☆	★	★	☆	★★★☆☆
Minnesota	☆	★	★	☆	★★★☆☆
Mississippi	☆	★	★	★	★★★★
Missouri	★	☆	☆	★	★★★☆☆
Montana	☆	☆	NA	☆	★★☆☆
Nebraska	★	☆	☆	☆	★★☆☆
Nevada	☆	★	☆	★	★★★☆☆
New Hampshire	☆	☆	☆	☆	★★☆☆

STATE	GIVE EXTRA CREDIT FOR ADVANCED ACHIEVEMENT	INCLUDE HIGH ACHIEVERS IN GROWTH MODEL	MAKE "GROWTH FOR ALL STUDENTS" COUNT AT LEAST AS MUCH AS ACHIEVEMENT	RATE SCHOOLS' SUCCESS IN HELPING STUDENTS EARN COLLEGE CREDIT	RATING
New Jersey	☆	☆	NA	★	★☆☆
New Mexico	☆	★	★	★	★★★★☆
New York	★	★	NA	★	★★★★
North Carolina	☆	★	☆	☆	★★☆☆
North Dakota	☆	☆	NA	☆	☆☆☆☆
Ohio	★	★	NA	★	★★★★
Oklahoma	☆	☆	☆	★	★★☆☆
Oregon	☆	★	★	☆	★★★★☆
Pennsylvania	★	★	★	★	★★★★★
Rhode Island	☆	☆	☆	★	★★☆☆
South Carolina	☆	☆	NA	☆	☆☆☆☆
South Dakota	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆☆☆☆
Tennessee	☆	★	NA	☆	★★☆☆
Texas	★	★	★	★	★★★★★
Utah	☆	★	☆	☆	★★★★☆
Vermont	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆☆☆☆
Virginia	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆☆☆☆
Washington	☆	★	☆	★	★★★★☆
West Virginia	☆	★	☆	★	★★★★☆
Wisconsin	★	☆	☆	☆	★★★★☆
Wyoming	☆	★	★	☆	★★★★☆

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

Since the advent of ESEA waivers, and certainly now under ESSA, states have had greater power to fix the flaws inherent in NCLB and signal to schools that all students—including high achievers—matter.

Admirably, most states have taken advantage of their additional flexibility to adopt robust growth models. But inexplicably, most have failed to put these growth models at the center of their school accountability systems. As a result, they have maintained one of NCLB's biggest problems—a focus on getting kids to proficiency and to graduation.

States now have a chance to do better. Although there may be a temptation for officials to simply tweak the systems that were developed under federal waivers, that would be an enormous mistake and a lost opportunity. Instead, almost every state in the land could dramatically upgrade its high school accountability system by putting more emphasis on student growth, giving schools additional credit for getting kids to advanced levels of achievement, and giving high schools an incentive to help able students earn college credit before they graduate.

High-achieving students—especially those growing up in poverty—need all the attention they can get. They were an afterthought when NCLB was crafted fifteen years ago. Let's not make the same mistake again.

# ENDNOTES

1. New York's rating is based on "high level concepts" documents released by the State Education Department on October 18, 2016. According to the NYSED website, feedback on these concepts will be gathered during the remainder of 2016 and into 2017. That feedback "will inform the draft ESSA plan to be presented to the Board of Regents for approval. After the Board approves the plan, the Department will submit the plan to the Governor for review and the U.S. Department for Education for approval in 2017." See here for more: <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2016/state-education-department-proposes-high-level-concepts-draft-every-student-succeeds-act>. (Note that New York would not have rated as highly had we rated its existing system.)
2. For better ways the Department of Education could address this issue, see Morgan Polikoff et al., "A letter to the U.S. Department of Education (updated July 14)," MorganPolikoff.com (July 12, 2016), <https://morganpolikoff.com/2016/07/12/a-letter-to-the-u-s-department-of-education/>.
3. One exception to this rule is New York, which released its "high level concepts" for ESSA accountability on October 18. Because this document significantly impacted New York's overall rating, we felt it was only right to update our data to reflect the information it contained.
4. Our definitions are taken from "A Practitioner's Guide to Growth Models," Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2013GrowthModels.pdf>.
5. Virginia calculates value added for teachers but not schools. The District of Columbia also fails to rate schools' growth, though its primary charter school authorizer (the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, which oversees 45 percent of the city's schools) does so as part of its accountability system.
6. One exception is Nebraska, which takes an average of students' raw test scores (thus rewarding improvement across the achievement distribution).
7. See, for example, Morgan Polikoff et al., "A letter to the U.S. Department of Education (updated July 14)."

# INDEX OF PROFILES

CLICK ON ANY OF THE FOLLOWING STATE NAMES TO VIEW ITS RATING PROFILE:

ALABAMA

ALASKA

ARIZONA

ARKANSAS

CALIFORNIA

COLORADO

CONNECTICUT

DELAWARE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

FLORIDA

GEORGIA

HAWAII

IDAHO

ILLINOIS

INDIANA

IOWA

KANSAS

KENTUCKY

LOUISIANA

MAINE

MARYLAND

MASSACHUSETTS

MICHIGAN

MINNESOTA

MISSISSIPPI

MISSOURI

MONTANA

NEBRASKA

NEVADA

NEW HAMPSHIRE

NEW JERSEY

NEW MEXICO

NEW YORK

NORTH CAROLINA

NORTH DAKOTA

OHIO

OKLAHOMA

OREGON

PENNSYLVANIA

RHODE ISLAND

SOUTH CAROLINA

SOUTH DAKOTA

TENNESSEE

TEXAS

UTAH

VERMONT

VIRGINIA

WASHINGTON

WEST VIRGINIA

WISCONSIN

WYOMING