

A-F School Accountability

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)¹, states must implement school accountability systems in compliance with the new law and regulations by the 2017-18 school year.

The ExcelinEd ESSA Playbook Series provides state policymakers clear recommendations, practical advice and resources on four core areas of the Every Student Succeeds Act: School Accountability, Interventions, Innovation and Weighted Student Funding Pilot. **This Playbook can help states maintain the simplicity, transparency and rigor found in A-F school grading—and strengthen their commitment to those principles—as they transition to ESSA.**

ExcelinEd has adapted its signature A-F school grading model, which has already been adopted by 17 states, to meet the new requirements for federal school accountability. To ensure a streamlined, effective and meaningful accountability system, we have provided a series of recommendations and lessons learned on the following issues:

- Issuing powerful and transparent A-F school grades and report cards.
- Implementing each of ESSA's required indicators in a manner consistent with the fundamental principles of effective accountability.²
- Using the ESSA-compliant A-F school grading system to identify schools for interventions.



A-F has been a Popular and Effective Accountability Tool for Two Main Reasons:

1. The rigorous model uses sophisticated, valid and reliable indicators that are based on student learning outcomes and that drive improvement of the lowest achieving students in each school.
2. Just as importantly, these indicators are aggregated into a meaningful A-F grade. The easy-to-understand A-F ratings are crucial for promoting transparency and establishing effective incentives for schools. Not surprisingly, these ratings have been incredibly popular with parents. In a national poll, 84 percent of parents supported assigning schools a letter grade based on how well they educate their students.³

— ESSA Resources —

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[Summary of Key Provisions for State Policymakers \(February 2016\)](#)

[Implications for State Advocates and Policymakers \(March 2016\)](#)

[Implications for Standards and Assessments \(May 2016\)](#)

[School Identification and Interventions \(May 2016\)](#)

KnowYourFloridaSchool.org

[USED's Non-Regulatory Guidance for State and Local Report Cards Under ESSA \(January 2017\)](#)

Find more at:
www.ExcelinEd.org/ESSA





COMMITMENT TO THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

ExcelinEd's fundamental principles for school accountability should serve as a foundation for states as they work to bring their accountability systems into compliance with ESSA.

Under ESSA, states must incorporate a set of required indicators (listed in the next section), but states have substantial discretion over how they select and combine these indicators.

As state policymakers make important decisions about how to bring their systems into compliance with ESSA's requirements, ExcelinEd recommends that states adhere to the following set of fundamental principles of effective school accountability systems, which ExcelinEd has developed based on over 15 years of experience in dozens of states:

1. Use clear and transparent descriptors of A, B, C, D and F.
2. Emphasize objective, concise student learning outcome measures.
3. Balance measures of student performance and progress.
4. Calculate student progress toward grade-level and advanced achievement.
5. Focus attention on the progress of the lowest-performing students in each school.
6. Report results in a timely manner as close to the end of the school year as possible.
7. Communicate clearly to parents.
8. Establish rigorous criteria, with automatic increases to the grading scale, in order to earn A, B, C, D or F grades.
9. Use grades to identify schools for recognition, intervention and support.

SCHOOL GRADES AND REPORT CARDS

Under ESSA, states must “establish a system of meaningfully differentiating, on an annual basis, all public schools in the State.”⁴

ExcelinEd Recommendations on School Grades

We recommend that states meet this requirement by having each school earn a single letter grade each year. School scores reported as an A, B, C, D or F establish effective incentives for schools and are incredibly popular with parents and the public because they are so powerfully transparent.

The grading scale should be aspirational, yet attainable, and must meaningfully differentiate among schools. A grading scale that yields all D and F grades does not motivate because earning the top mark is perceived as impossible. Conversely, a system in which all schools earn an A or B becomes meaningless because it does not differentiate and an A no longer signifies excellence. Therefore, states' grading scales should increase automatically if a majority of schools are earning A's or B's (until a score of approximately 90-100 percent signifies an A).

Why Summative Ratings?

Some believe that summative ratings—like A-F letter grades—oversimplify the complexities involved in judging school performance, arguing that dashboard-style reports without a single overall rating more fully capture these complexities.

However, **summative ratings and dashboards are complementary tools, not distinct choices.** States should provide parents with a dashboard of school data and information in addition to a prominently displayed summative rating. These complementary pieces—the school grade and report card—are essential to an effective, transparent accountability system.



Addressing Student Participation in Assessments

Under ESSA, states must annually test no less than 95 percent of students overall and within each subgroup. Additionally, states must provide a clear explanation of how the state will factor this requirement into its accountability system.

The assessment participation rate is important because it preserves the integrity of the system and ensures that schools are being fairly and accurately graded. It prevents schools from only testing higher-scoring students and discourages them from excluding students who are likely to score lower.

ExcelinEd Recommendation: To preserve accuracy in school grading, we recommend that states lower the letter grade of schools that do not meet the 95 percent participation rate. For example, a school with a B would have its grade lowered to a C if less than 95 percent of students are tested. Schools that test less than 90 percent of students would have their grade automatically lowered to F.

ExcelinEd Recommendations on School Report Cards

ESSA requires states and districts to publish annual report cards that provide policymakers, parents and other stakeholders with important information about the performance of schools in their district and state. These report cards must include:

- Performance data from the state accountability system, disaggregated by subgroups of students;
- Professional qualifications of educators;
- Per-pupil spending;
- Disaggregated results for assessments, graduation and participation;
- National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data; and
- Civil Rights data including attendance, course and program offerings, and suspensions/expulsions.

States may also elect to include a multitude of additional data points, including survey responses, teacher effectiveness, class size, and more.

These school report cards are a key part of state accountability systems because they provide contextual information to empower parents and inform school improvement strategies. Access and usability of school report cards is critical. For this reason, many states have undertaken efforts to create modern, simple designs that take advantage of the latest trends in data visualization.⁵



Reimagining School Report Cards

ExcelinEd is encouraging states to not only meet the requirements of the new law, but to reimagine their state's school report card. To help support states, ExcelinEd's Know Your School Project, is creating an exemplar online school report card with an engaging interface using data from the state of Florida to help parents and community members put their local schools' data into context - empowering them with usable information.

The tool was built through an open source development process and the code is being made publicly available following the launch. Access to the design and front-end code gives states a head start toward having their own public reporting tool that reflects their priorities and school data.

Learn more at [KnowYourSchoolProject.org](https://www.KnowYourSchoolProject.org).



ESSA'S REQUIRED INDICATORS

Under ESSA, it is required that state accountability systems be comprised of at least four indicators (states may add more), but states have substantial discretion over how they select and combine these indicators.

ESSA requires that states include four indicators in their accountability systems (states may add more):

1. Academic Achievement;
2. Another Academic Indicator (growth and/or graduation rates);
3. English Learner Language Proficiency; and
4. An Indicator of School Quality or Student Success.

The law requires that:

- Each individual indicator must count for a “substantial” weight, and the first three “in the aggregate” be afforded “much greater weight” than the fourth.⁶
- Each indicator must meaningfully differentiate among schools and be valid, reliable and comparable statewide.
- For any potential indicator under consideration, results must be disaggregated for key subgroups of students on the state and district report cards which must include all students.⁷
- The state establishes a minimum N-size.⁸

ExcelinEd believes, based on our extensive experience with rigorous and effective accountability systems, that each indicator should be objective, based on student outcomes and promote equity across schools.

Required Indicator 1: Academic Achievement

ESSA requires state accountability systems to include an indicator of Academic Achievement that is “based on the long-term goals” of the state “as measured by proficiency on the annual assessments” for all students and for each subgroup.

Academic Achievement must include schools’ proficiency rates in math and reading/English language arts. Federal requirements call for annual assessments for these subjects in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

ExcelinEd Recommendations

We recommend that states use a simple calculation of proficiency rate for each subject:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Students Scoring PROFICIENT or HIGHER on State Assessment}}{\text{Number of Students who TOOK the ASSESSMENT}}$$

An easy-to-understand calculation keeps the focus on the important goal of helping every student achieve proficiency. It also limits the possibility that student performance will be masked by complicated indices that award points for performance above and below proficiency or by values from a regression model that require context and extensive explanations for most stakeholders.



Key Considerations

- **Focus on proficiency.** Rather than awarding partial points for less-than-proficient scores or bonus points for advanced scores, which can mask the performance of some students, states should keep their achievement measure simple and focus on the percentage of students reaching the state’s proficiency expectation.
- **Keep it simple.** Under ESSA, states clearly must set interim performance goals. However, accountability systems that overemphasize disaggregated subgroup proficiency may result in states lowering expectations for certain groups so they can be more easily met. Moreover, overemphasizing subgroup proficiency can create an uneven playing field among schools based on the population they serve.
- **Ensure schools are held accountable for all students.** To ensure the accuracy of the calculation, ESSA requires at least 95 percent of students in tested grades to participate in the state assessment. If 95 percent of students are not tested, the state must calculate the proficiency rate using the number that represents 95 percent of students rather than the actual number of students tested and, therefore, treating those non-tested students as non-proficient.

Required Indicator 2: Another Academic Indicator

State accountability systems must include Another Academic Indicator such as “a measure of student growth, or another valid and reliable statewide academic indicator that allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance.” At the high school level, this indicator must be the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, and states may choose to include extended-year rates.

ExcelinEd Recommendations

Growth indicators are critical to a strong accountability system. They level the playing field so that all schools are accountable for developing students academically regardless of their prior performance. Incorporating growth indicators rewards schools for making progress with students even if those students have not yet achieved proficiency. It also keeps the pressure on schools to ensure high-performing students continue to improve.

For high school, we recommend that states include both the required graduation rate and student growth.

Key Considerations

- **Balance proficiency and growth.** Proficiency and growth should be balanced in an accountability system. To weight growth more than proficiency provides less incentive to ensure students are on grade level. States that too heavily weight growth may find themselves issuing A grades to schools with very few students performing at grade level, which makes the accountability system lack credibility. Conversely, focusing only on proficiency creates little incentive for high performing schools to continue to improve student performance and creates an uneven playing field for schools where most of the students start the year well below proficiency.
- **Measure student growth toward absolute expectations of achievement.** Growth indicators should be based on individual student *growth toward proficient and advanced expectations of achievement* for all students in reading and math. Rather than normative growth measures, which compare students only against their peers, a standards-based (or criterion-based) growth model ensures:
 - » Criteria for determining individual student growth are set, and expectations are known by students, parents and teachers.
 - » All students have the opportunity to demonstrate growth.
 - » Expectations, if met each year, will result in a student reaching proficient or advanced.



- **Avoid comparative improvement models.** Improvement measures that do not track individual student growth should be avoided. Although it might be easier to measure changes in the percentage of students at a given school meeting proficiency, those models do not measure individual student performance over time.
- **Focus on the four-year graduation rate.** For high schools, using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate exclusively ensures the focus remains with on-time graduation. While states may consider and report extended rates, schools should be accountable only for on-time graduates.

Required Indicator 3: English Learner Language Proficiency

State accountability systems must also measure “progress in achieving English language proficiency” for its English Learners (EL). Prior to ESSA, every state was required to use English-language acquisition as a district-level accountability indicator. The new law extends the indicator to individual schools.

ExcelinEd Recommendation

Many states may be uncertain of how this measure will apply at the school level due to a lack of school-level data on students participating in EL proficiency assessments. We, therefore, recommend states incorporate this indicator into their accountability system, at least initially, as a separate rating of “plus” or “minus” as follows:

- Does the school have (N size)⁸ English learners taking the English language acquisition exam?
- If no, do not make any changes to the school report card.
- If yes, did the school meet the English learner English language acquisition target?
 - » If yes, add a plus to the school report card.
 - » If no, add a minus to the school report card.

The plus/minus will provide transparency for parents and the public to know if the school has a large enough EL subgroup for the measure to be valid and, if so, whether the school helped that group meet its annual target. A “minus” would flag the school for additional review to determine if it should be added to the list of targeted support schools.

Key Considerations

Monitor to ensure fairness. States should monitor the percentage of schools held accountable on this measure to ensure fairness across schools with and without English Learners.

Required Indicator 4: Indicator Of School Quality Or Student Success

ESSA requires that state accountability systems include “not less than one indicator of school quality or student success” and gives states a significant amount of freedom to select their own indicator or indicators, as long as the indicators are valid, reliable, disaggregated by subgroup and comparable statewide.⁹

ExcelinEd Recommendation - Elementary through High School

We recommend that states use **growth of the lowest-performing students** in the school as their indicator of student success. Emphasizing growth of the lowest performing students:

- Motivates schools to focus on the students who truly need the most academic support, regardless of their characteristics;



- Levels the playing field for school accountability because regardless of the demographic makeup or size of the school, every school has a lowest-performing student subgroup whereas they may not have individual race, economic, disability or English learner subgroup; and
- Meets ESSA's criteria as a valid, reliable and comparable measure of student success while also driving improvement regardless of how high or low performing a school may be on other indicators.

ExcelinEd Recommendation - High School

We recommend states include **measures of college and career readiness**, such as student success in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, dual enrollment courses and industry-recognized certifications. When measuring this indicator, states should:

- Include all students at the school—not just the smaller group of students who graduated or participated in the advanced opportunities; and
- Give weight to and success to ensure that schools have incentive to prepare as many students as possible to join—and successfully complete—these measures of college and career readiness.

Key Considerations

During the transition to ESSA, states may experience considerable pressure to load their accountability systems with non-academic indicators (i.e. school discipline, teacher turnover, chronic absenteeism, satisfaction surveys, etc.) which may present numerous policy issues or technical implementation challenges. In considering the breadth of potential data for this indicator, policymakers should ask the following questions:

- Is the indicator valid, reliable and related to improved student achievement?
- Does the indicator differentiate among schools?
- What perverse incentives might result from including the indicator?
- Does the indicator measure something that is under the school's control?
- Will adding the indicator dilute the emphasis on student outcome measures?
- Does the value of the indicator outweigh the administrative budget of collecting and verifying the accuracy of data for that indicator?
- Is the indicator aligned to the overall policy goals of the state's education system?



Weaknesses of Some Sample Non-Academic Indicators

Problems with school culture survey indicator:

- Due to selection bias in respondents and pressure to make a school look good, results will be **invalid, unreliable, unrelated to student achievement** and unhelpful to efforts to improve the learning environment.
- **Very expensive and time intensive** for schools, districts, and state education agencies to collect, validate and aggregate new survey data.
- **Dilutes emphasis** on student learning outcomes.

Problems with a student attendance indicator:

- Does **not differentiate** among schools because most schools have attendance rates over 90 percent.
- Creates **perverse incentives** for overly strict district and school attendance policies. And, schools may use non educational strategies to incentivize students to come to school, like movies, parties, treats, taking time away from learning.
- **Dilutes emphasis** on student learning outcomes.



IDENTIFYING SCHOOLS FOR INTERVENTIONS

Under ESSA, states are required to identify low-performing schools for intervention. These requirements also provide states with significant flexibility and authority to design interventions.

ESSA requires states to use their systems of “meaningful differentiation” and required indicators to identify the following categories of schools to receive interventions:

- **Comprehensive Support Schools:** The lowest performing 5 percent of Title I schools and all high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent.
- **Targeted Support Schools:** Schools where one or more groups of students are “consistently underperforming,” as determined by the state, or schools that have one or more groups of students who are performing as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools.

ExcelinEd Recommendations

States should strive for a single accountability system—not one system under state law and another that complies with federal law, which can be confusing for parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders.

Therefore, we recommend that a state’s school grading system be the primary mechanism for identifying schools for support and improvement, though high schools may also qualify based on graduation rates.

Schools meeting the following criteria should be identified for **Comprehensive Support and Improvement**:

- Schools with an F letter grade.
- High schools that have four-year graduation rates below 67 percent.

Schools meeting the following criteria should be identified for **Targeted Support and Improvement**:

- Schools with a D letter grade.
- A, B and C schools if they have subgroups performing as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools.
- A, B and C schools if they have subgroups performing as poorly as the subgroups in D schools.
- A, B and C schools with a “minus” on their English language proficiency indicator should be flagged for additional review to determine if they should be added to the list.

For recommendations on developing a statewide strategy of supports and interventions for these identified schools, please see ExcelinEd’s School Interventions Playbook at www.ExcelinEd.org/ESSA.

What's Next?

Over the next year, many states will continue their transitions to new assessment systems, unwind their NCLB-era policies and revise their accountability systems to meet new requirements to take advantage of new flexibilities under ESSA. We look forward to helping states navigate this transition and renew their commitments to the fundamental principles of effective accountability systems. ExcelinEd stands at the ready to provide the technical assistance and advocacy support that state policymakers will need in the coming months and years.



Visit www.ExcelinEd.org/ESSA or email Info@ExcelinEd.org for additional information and assistance.



ENDNOTES

¹ In December 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law maintains key accountability measures, including reporting requirements and annual assessments, but leaves states responsible for designing school accountability systems and working with local school districts to select interventions in low-performing schools

² The 2016-17 school year will be a transition period for states. They will review their accountability systems for revisions necessary for compliance and alignment to the law and final regulations from the U.S. Department of Education, due by the end of 2016. States must submit their school accountability plans for a federal review process in either March or June 2017, and by August 2017, those new accountability systems must be in place.

³ McLaughlin & Associates, 2014

⁴ ESSA draft regulations go further to require states to provide schools an annual single summative rating. Final accountability regulations are expected by December 2016.

⁵ See more at: <http://www.excelined.org/2015/03/02/transform-convoluted-documents-accessible-school-report-cards>.

⁶ ESSA prohibits the Secretary from “prescribing the weight of any . . . indicator.”

⁷ The state’s major race/ethnicity subgroups: students with limited English proficiency; students with disabilities; and students who qualify for Free and Reduced Priced Lunch must be accounted for in school accountability determinations. In addition to those groups being included in accountability systems, states must also collect and report data on male and female students, homeless students, military-connected students and students in foster care.

⁸ N-Size is the minimum number of students that must be in a single subgroup for the purposes of federal accountability and reporting. The N may be different for accountability than for reporting.

⁹ Additional resources on this topic include the Education Trust’s [Students Can’t Wait Workgroup](#) resources, [Grading Schools: How States Should Define “School Quality” Under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) from Bellwether Education Partners; and [ESSA Indicators of School Quality and Student Success](#) from Chiefs for Change.