

ESSA | Equitable Accountability for All

*Response to the ESSA Framework provided by the Louisiana
Department of Education*

by

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Introduction

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed by Congress in 2015, gave individual states significant flexibility in measuring the quality of their schools. States may now include metrics that acknowledge and reward contextual indicators proven to relate to progress made by the most vulnerable students. This change represents an invaluable opportunity for each state to tailor its accountability framework to best accommodate its unique educational challenges. A review of several published draft ESSA Frameworks from academically successful states (identified by state-to-state comparisons), reveals the addition of a wide range of new metrics designed to measure school progress. These new metrics mark a significant departure from the “one-size-fits-all” federal guidelines of "No Child Left Behind".

In its initial response, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) drafted an ESSA Framework for public consideration and comment. We applaud the department's inclusion of the wider education community as well as their recognition that schools across Louisiana are noticeably dissimilar when it comes to students' general readiness for learning. This one factor is of such critical importance that it was the impetus for the new ESSA legislation.

This white paper discusses possible modifications to the metrics of the LDOE's proposed Framework and calls for consideration of research that informs best practices for constructing equitable accountability metrics for student populations serving considerable numbers of low-income minority students.

Measuring School Quality

Standardized tests do a remarkable job at what they were designed to do, i.e., *provide a longitudinal profile of individual student achievement*. However, the aggregated results of these tests have limited reliability when used as assessments of the quality of a school.

One-time aggregate standardized tests comparisons between schools can never provide reliable evidence that distinguishes effective schools from ineffective ones because it ignores real and persistent learning challenges among students. Standardized test comparisons between schools only confirms what we already know—schools serving poor and special needs children will also be the schools receiving below average ratings when aggregate standardized test scores dominate a school performance score.

Any accountability framework that disproportionately uses a proficiency rating on a single assessment is an especially flawed measure for students who enter school behind their peers. These students need feedback from appropriately spaced formative assessments throughout the school year. Poverty, special needs status, and even the greater distance from enrichment opportunities are factors that research shows result in lower standardized measures of achievement, regardless of student or teacher action. For this reason, the use of spring-to-spring high stakes standardized tests as a primary indicator of the quality of education in an individual school fails to acknowledge that scores on these tests are disproportionately influenced by out-of-school socioeconomic characteristics.

Research over the last decade clearly documents that student scores on standardized accountability tests are strongly influenced by a variety of out-of-school demographic factors such as (1) the percentage of students who are poor; (2) the percentage of students who are minority; and (3) the residential mobility of students' families. These variables are beyond individual school control yet they account for up to 80% of the variance in school-level outcomes. Nationally, schools placed on "Academic Watch" for unsatisfactory performance are, on average, 95.1 % poor and 90% minority.

Moreover, the claim that students at the bottom of the achievement distribution more easily make gains because they have more of a gap to overcome, is not borne by research. Indeed, the opposite— that “learning begets learning” is just as reasonable, in that students at the higher end of the distribution often find it easier to perform because they have accumulated knowledge and skills they can use to acquire new knowledge. Learning success also fosters independent learning strategies that help these students fare better in classrooms taught by ineffective teachers.

Teachers who teach in districts with a large numbers of low-income students are also noticeably disadvantaged in spring-to-spring test gain analyses because their students start the fall further behind than students that are more affluent. Studies of summer learning loss also affirm that teachers who teach a greater share of lower-income students are cumulatively disadvantaged by summer learning loss because estimates of their effectiveness are calculated in terms of gains in their students’ test scores from the previous years.

Researchers have found that three-fourths of schools in the bottom 20% of all schools based on the scores of students during the school year, would not be so identified if differences in learning outside of school were taken into account.

As educators, we recognize that our goal is to help all students and teachers succeed. Students grow and develop at different rates. So judging school and teacher quality should not be a one-size-fits-all aggregation of standardized test results. If accountability is to be fair and informative, policy makers must do more than assess one-time results on standardized tests as a measure of school quality. They must also assess a school’s capacity to create optimum conditions for learning to flourish and include measures of progress with metrics that do no harm. This means creating an equitable context for success that include multiple measures that define student success, creating

educational goals for our schools and teachers, and educating the public about appropriate expectations for single-year academic growth on standardized measures. We must create conditions for every school to have the resources needed to become a happy, productive learning environment; and adhering to a guiding principle of motivation theory that teaches us to capitalize on a growth mindset. We must also manage our limitations until they become our strengths and focus exclusively on the realization that we can do better when we work, learn and grow together.

We assert that a sensible way forward is to shape an ESSA framework for progress in Louisiana that reinforces what we value in our schools and take care not to become overly obsessed with a one-size fits all determination of the quality of our schools. Comparisons of aggregate standardized tests results should not be a sole determinant of school rankings. In that light, a good place to start would be to work together to create an equitable accountability system that rewards what we know quality schools look like, to include the following:

- *More students reading by the end of third grade*
- *More students getting good grades*
- *More students avoiding suspension*
- *More students doing community service*
- *More struggling students attending school regularly*
- *More students taking honors and AP courses*
- *More students taking art and music*
- *More students participating in school activities*
- *More students demonstrating yearly progress*
- *More students graduating on time*
- *More students taking advantage of dual enrollment opportunities*
- *More students with special needs closing the achievement gap*
- *More minority students closing the achievement gap*
- *More students growing at or beyond expected growth*
- *More struggling students getting support*
- *More students choosing the next level of education*
- *More students enjoying school and risking new learning*
- *More teachers understanding and using best practices*
- *More teachers monitoring and managing their professional learning*

- *More schools emphasizing and tracking student progress using appropriately administered formative assessment*
- *More schools using a research-derived framework for instruction*
- *More schools developing a culture of professional learning and development*
- *More districts applying for and achieving district certification by an external agency*

Conclusion

Education has never been more important to the future of Louisiana and the United States than it is today. Our call to take advantage of the new ESSA legislation to create an equitable, forward-thinking framework for growing schools by reinforcing measurable aspects of quality schooling is critical to our well-being. It is time to give up a policy of shaming schools that underperform and begin a new era of recognizing that our schools (especially those that are presently underperforming) do not exist solely because they are ineffective; many have challenges that cannot be remedied by simplistic, punitive measures. The history of Louisiana public education demonstrates that the practice of shaming schools and taking them over is not good for students. Schools in Louisiana are at the bottom of the national rankings and have not changed for more than a decade. As such, we have a responsibility to alter our course and begin providing extensive support for schools in the spirit of cooperation, and create school performance indicators that are equitable, realistic, and achievable. Not doing so is counter-productive and detrimental to student achievement.

Suggestions for Consideration

Several foundations for research in innovation in education, including The Fordham Foundation, The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and The Center for American Progress, suggested the following recommendations for consideration as State Departments of Education prepare ESSA accountability proposals:

- The system should measure the growth of individual students from one year to the next, and make this a significant factor in school classifications. Such measures do a better job of capturing schools' effect on student achievement than do proficiency rates, which strongly correlate with student demographics, family circumstance, and prior achievement. They also indicate to schools that the progress of all students—not just those below “proficiency”—matter.
- Additional credit should be given to schools that help students achieve at a high level. Under ESSA, states must continue to track the percentage of students who attain proficiency on annual tests, but they are free also to give schools incentives for students who earn high marks. For example, policymakers could create an “achievement index” that gives schools partial credit for getting students to “basic,” full credit for getting students to “mastery,” and additional credit for getting them to “advanced.” This approach is allowable under the final accountability regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education on November 28, 2016. However, it is important that credit for high-achieving students do not mask the low performance of other students.
- Accountability systems should give high schools credit for helping students earn college credit while still in high school, such as by measuring enrollment in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses and pass rates on these exams, or completion of “dual enrollment” programs.
- **Change School Performance Descriptors** - The public assumes the letter grades assigned to schools are identical to grades they received in school. As such, they tend to rate A and B as acceptable and all other grades as indicators of an unsuccessful school. When in truth this

is an inaccurate assessment. Many schools who achieve a “C” rating, especially those with large numbers of students with disability or poverty, are in fact quite successful. The Needs Assistance category draws attention to the fact that the school could be nearing improvement with help. The underperforming signals a priority need. These descriptors diminish the shame associated with the letter grade:

- Outstanding instead of A
- Commendable instead of B
- Satisfactory instead of C
- Needs Assistance instead of D
- Underperforming instead of F

- **Reduce Assessments** - Per ESSA guidelines requiring the reduction of assessments, only test English Language Arts and Mathematics in grades 3-8; only test Algebra I and English II End-of-Course Exams in high school; provide grade level specific science test for 5th and 8th grade students; and utilize ACT sub-component science scores for high school students.
- **Award Carnegie Units** - to 6th – 8th graders who score “Fair” on End-of-Course exams in American History and Biology.
- **Increase Index Points** - Increase the amount of points earned for 6th – 8th grade students who score “Good” or “Excellent” on End-of-Course exams.
- **Give Real-Time Results** - Allow students to earn credit within the school performance score calculator immediately after completing an Advanced Placement course rather than waiting their senior year.

- **Recognize Improved Student Attendance** - Allow schools to earn extra credit for a Chronic Absence Reduction of students performing below grade level. Students should be grouped in cohort categories as follows:
 - *Whole school*
 - *Students with Disabilities*
 - *Low SES (high poverty)*
 - *ESL*
 - *All Others*
- Students on the Career Diploma Pathway should only take Work Keys if they sign a waiver understanding their limited opportunity of attending a college or university.
- Schedule testing dates that will accommodate opportunities for schools and school districts to begin school improvement plans and evaluations prior to the end of the school year.
- **Analyze and publish cohort comparison outcomes for rural schools** - The current accountability system does not identify academic progress in schools serving the neediest learners, or inform the public about the specific challenges faced by many of these small, rural schools. Absolute achievement and growth models could be included on a report card as separate items, and any growth model data must accompany an indication of the margin of error.
- **Policy makers should educate the public** about the limitations of the standardized tests as it relates to large affluent schools and small rural school comparisons.

- Allow data to show raw numbers and percentages OR the State Department investigates proven ways to adjust for the impact of population size as they establish Target Points on each indicator.
- **Provide early indications** that schools are on track to success regarding Leading Indicators.
- ESSA requires states to provide intervention for “5% of lowest performing schools” identified as needing “comprehensive support” and “targeted support”. Align the language in the Louisiana Framework to ESSA guidelines and provide exit criteria for these schools.
- **Create District Accreditation Categories descriptors as follows:**

Accredited with Distinction: *The District meets or exceeds statewide attainment on performance indicators as measured by SACS/AdvancEd leading indicators*

Accredited with Improvement Plan: *The District is required to adopt and implement an Improvement Plan*

Accredited with Priority Improvement Plan: *The District is required to adopt and implement a Priority Improvement Plan*

Accredited with Turnaround Plan: *The District is required to adopt and implement a Turnaround Plan*

- Increase the graduation rate target in Louisiana by 8.6 percentage points to 85% by 2025. (Average 1.075 each year for 8 years) - National graduation rate is 82%. Graduation rate in Louisiana increased by 2.9 percentage points to 74.6% in 2014, still below the national average by 7.4% points
- Increase the ACT average to 21 in 2025.
- **Repeal the current ACT/Work Keys Index** and replace it with an ACT index that reflects the National ACT Composite Percentiles as follows:

ACT Composite	Work keys Level	National Composite Percentile	Index Points
0-11	Bronze	1%	0
12-17	Bronze	30%	0
18	Silver	36%	50
19	Silver	43%	75
21	Silver	56%	95
22	Silver	63%	100
23	Silver	68%	105
24	Gold	74%	110
25	Gold	79%	115
26	Gold	83%	120
27	Gold	87%	125
28	Gold	90%	130
29	Gold	92%	135
30	Gold	95%	140
31	Platinum	96%	145
32-36	Platinum	99%	150

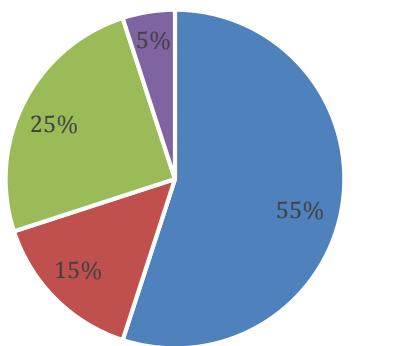
- Include postsecondary success as a leading indicator in the school performance score.
- Replace the current assessment index proposal in the framework with what truly defines all levels of achievement.

Outstanding (Advanced) = 150
 Commendable (Proficient) = 125
 Satisfactory (Mastery) = 100
 Struggling (Basic) = 50
 Underperforming (Approaching Basic) = 0

- Apply subgroup letter grades beginning 2017 as a means to inform schools and promote increased achievement within each group.
- Determine schools needing Comprehensive Support or Targeted Assistance using new assessment measures beginning in 2017-2018 rather than current assessment measures.
- Revise the weights of the indicators to reflect a more fair accountability system.

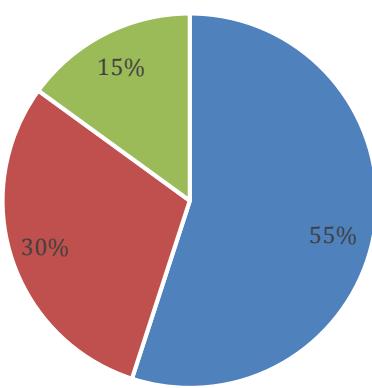
Suggest Accountability Weights

Elementary Schools with
8th Grade



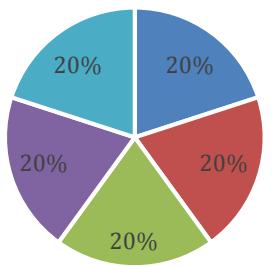
- Assessments
- Growth
- Leading Indicators
- DCAI

Elementary Schools without
8th Grade



- Assessments
- Growth
- Leading Indicators
- DCAI

High School



- ACT
- EOC
- Grad Index/Leading Indicators
- Grad Cohort
- Growth
- Other

Suggested Readings:

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