

June 15, 2016

Governance Studies

Testimony to the District of Columbia State Board of Education

Brown Center on
Education Policy

Presented by Michael Hansen, Senior Fellow and
Deputy Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy

Thank you for inviting me to comment on the topic of school accountability measures around school quality and student success for the District of Columbia. As an expert in education policy research I feel compelled to offer some comments that I feel will help guide good policy decisions, and as a resident of the District and a parent of children who attend public schools here, I feel personally invested as well.

I intend to focus my comments on what I see as two main drawbacks with current student accountability measures (both in DC and in other states) and then offer considerations on how the State Board may avoid some of these drawbacks as you, along with OSSE and other stakeholders, undertake the task of re-designing the accountability system in light of the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Measuring schools, not backgrounds

The first drawback of current accountability systems, [I argue](#), is the use of measures that are intended to provide indicators of academic or school performance, but end up being a more direct reflection of student background characteristics. We know from research that schools are one of several major inputs into cognitive student outcomes, and accountability measures that focus primarily on achievement levels from test scores are inherently capturing not only the contributions of schools in children but also family, peer, and cultural influences. Thus, factors like food or wage insecurity, parental education, health of students and parents will all be correlated with the proficiency levels we are all familiar with from the No Child Left Behind era of accountability. Hence, accountability measures that heavily weight these proficiency levels alone are implicitly labeling schools (and the educators and students in them) as failing when attribution may truly lie with these other factors.

I acknowledge that proficiency measures are not only important considerations to comply with the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act but also help prioritize resources for targeting intervention in the schools where help is needed most. However, I hope that the new accountability system takes proficiency measures as a starting point, not the end point, for evaluating school quality.

And what else might the system include? To the extent that we want accountability measures to reflect mostly what the school is contributing to its students, not what the students' backgrounds bring to the school, we need more direct measures of those school contributions. Allow me to offer some recommendations on how this might be accomplished.

First, student growth measures are those based on gains on standardized test scores over time. There are various methodological considerations one could make in creating these measures—whether to use scale scores or proficiency levels, whether to make adjustments for student demographics, and others, but the commonality across these models is that these student growth measures attempt to remove non-school inputs to isolate what the school is contributing to student outcomes over time. I recommend the use of these measures, and would place a fairly heavy weight on them. In fact, I argue that it is these types of growth measures that are more aligned with parents' and educators' notions of real school quality.

Second, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires the adoption of other non-test measures in state accountability systems. In making a determination about what measures to use, I recommend that you think carefully about whether these other measures are actually capturing what the school is doing or whether these are better reflections of student actions or their backgrounds. For example, some have proposed using measures of student absenteeism or suspension rates for school accountability. I feel caution is warranted on these types of measures for several reasons, but my primary reservation is that we already know these types of measures are well correlated with student poverty. Consequently, using student absences or suspensions is another way to label a school as failing when it may be more attributable to the students that are being served, not the school itself. One way to get around this problem may be to statistically adjust these new non-test measures based on school poverty levels and demographics, implicitly allowing the state to identify which schools have higher absences or suspensions that we'd otherwise expect based on its students. This strategy could help to ensure that any new measures become a closer approximation of the information related to schools and not student backgrounds.

Planning for multiple users of the school accountability system

The second drawback of the current accountability system, in my view, is what I have [referred to in my writing](#) as the “one-system multiple-user” problem. That is, policymakers have designed systems that meet their purposes well, though they have generally failed to take account of other user groups and how they may react to this information in their design. This is problematic because different user groups—parents, teachers, residents in the community—all have an interest in holding schools accountable, though they may not be directly aligned with the government's primary use of the accountability system as a measure signaling where to intervene in schools.

Multiple types of users all using the same public accountability information have the potential to mix the intended signals of the system, and therefore react in adverse ways unintended by the policy. For example, this may happen when high-quality teachers choose to exit a failing school because they don't want the negative stigma attached to them. Residents in neighborhoods with failing schools feel they need to move or turn to a charter school for a viable alternative. While some adverse reactions may be unavoidable, I believe acknowledging and targeting accountability information to different user groups will go a long way to mitigating these unintended consequences, as my belief is that these responses are based on the state's, but not the users' own, evaluation of a school's quality.

I encourage the State Board to consider ways to design the system that enable these users to gain value from the system as well. In the interest of time, I recommend three things.

1. First, recognize that your priorities are not theirs. Where the state may wish to prioritize scarce resources for interventions, other users typically want to understand how well their own children are learning, school safety, and contributions to the community. I encourage the State Board to even consider conducting surveys or holding public hearings specifically to document how the public's views both overlap and diverge with the state's interest in maintaining an accountability system.
2. Second, I encourage the State Board to consider collecting and reporting information in the accountability system that is valuable to these other user groups, but does not actually factor this information into the decision to grade or intervene in a school (thus, no direct stakes from the state are attached to this information). I argue that student absence and suspension measures would really have a place in this category. This information enables parents, educators, and the community at large to use this information to informally hold schools accountable even when the state is not doing so.
3. And third, I encourage the State Board to consider it a priority to explain to different user groups how to access and use the information in the accountability system, with instructions tailored to different groups. Educating these different user groups on how to use the information for their own purposes will be a more productive strategy than simply having them take a single grade on a school report card as a definitive, and ultimately, uninformative measure of school quality.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify here this afternoon. I look forward to any follow up questions and discussion afterwards.