SETTING GOALS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Each new round of data from school districts and states reminds us that the talents of too many of our children are still being squandered. Though we know that mastering the fundamentals of reading by the early elementary grades is critical to long-term success, only about 1 in 3 children are proficient readers by fourth grade. For Black, Latino, and Native children, the numbers are even lower — only about 1 in 5 children. And though mastering the basics of mathematics before heading into high school is critical to success in advanced mathematics and science courses, 4 in 10 low-income students and 7 in 10 English learners don't even make it to the basic level by the end of eighth grade.[1] To make matters worse, all of these groups of students — along with students with disabilities — are often locked out of the sequence of courses they need to complete in high school to be college- and career-ready. Indeed, many never graduate at all, much less graduate prepared.

None of these patterns will change overnight. But they won't change at all unless state leaders set clear and ambitious goals for improvement that communicate real urgency about the need to tackle head-on the gaps in opportunity that contribute so mightily to these results. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an opportunity — indeed, an obligation — for state leaders to do just that: to acknowledge that our communities and states cannot be healthy unless we develop the talents of all of our children, and to engage both educators and communities in an all-out effort to tackle achievement disparities.

What does ESSA require?

ESSA requires states to set ambitious long-term goals, as well as measures of interim progress, in at least three areas: (1) state assessment results in reading/language arts and math, (2) graduation rates, and (3) progress toward English language proficiency for English learners. Goals for improving assessment results and graduation rates must be set for all students and for each student group such that schools have to make bigger gains for groups that start out behind.

A school's performance against these goals, both for all students and for each group of students it serves, must have substantial weight in its rating.

While ESSA doesn't require states to set goals for improving results on other indicators, states certainly may do so.

Questions to ask — and things to watch out for — in your state

The purpose of setting goals in a school accountability system is to communicate clear expectations for — and build real urgency around — the kind of improvements necessary to get all children, rather than just some, on a trajectory to be ready for college and career.

Getting the goals right is critical. Goals that are too low won't lead to meaningful change for students. Goals that are so high as to feel completely out of reach will result in a lack of buy-in from educators and are likely to be dismissed as unrealistic.

Here are some key things to look for — and watch out for — in your state.

1. **Are goals both ambitious and attainable?**

The ultimate goal for schools and districts is to prepare all students for success in college and careers and for civic participation. But as recent data show, on most indicators, our schools are far from where our country needs them to be, especially for historically underserved groups.

In Maryland, for example, only about 40 percent of all fourth-graders and 21 percent of low-income fourth-graders met grade-level standards in reading in 2015, based on the state's assessment. In New York, only 24 percent of eighth-graders met grade-level standards in math in 2016, with far lower results for many groups of students. Moreover, schools are

[1] U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

starting in very different places, both for all students and for individual student groups. In some schools, 50 percent of students are on grade level. In others, less than 5 percent are.

To communicate urgency and prompt the kind of change our students need, accountability goals must be both ambitious and attainable. This means that they need to push schools to improve faster than most have been improving in recent years, especially for groups of students who are typically underserved. At the same time, the state should be able to show that some schools are making the kinds of gains that the state is asking for.

There are a number of ways that states could go about setting goals for schools. They could, for example, pick a number that they think the public will find palatable (e.g., "We will improve the percentage of students meeting grade-level standards from 40 percent to 75 percent") or they could choose to set a goal based on how the highest performing schools in the state are currently doing (e.g., "Our top schools are averaging 70 percent of students meeting standards, so our goal is to get all schools to that level").

Importantly, though, the timeline for reaching goals matters a lot. A shorter timeline can make a lower goal more ambitious, because schools have to improve more each year to get there. Conversely, giving schools more time to reach a goal makes that goal more attainable.

How can you gauge whether your state's goals are both ambitious and attainable?

One way to do so is to ask state officials: **If our schools were to continue to make gains similar to those they've made in recent years, how many would meet the goals for all students? For each group of students?**

The answer you get to this question is critical. Unless you are fully satisfied with what schools in your state have been doing to get their students prepared for life after high school, **less than half of schools** should be able to meet goals for the all-student group if they simply kept improving at their existing pace. For low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities, the numbers should be even smaller. Only the highest achieving and fastest improving schools (perhaps between **10 percent and 20 percent**) should be able to meet the state's proposed goals by simply continuing to do what they are currently doing. Most should have to improve faster. However, if there are no schools that are likely to meet the state's proposed goals, the goals may be too ambitious.

2. Are goals the same for all schools and for all groups of students?

To avoid sending the signal that states expect lower achievement for groups that start out further behind, states should set **the same goal** (for example, the percentage of students who must be on grade level or the percentage that must graduate on time, by a certain year) **for all schools and for all groups of students**.

In recent years, many states set goals that required schools to get halfway to an ultimate goal of 100 percent proficiency for all students and for each student group within six years. While to meet these goals schools had to make substantially more progress for groups that were further behind, the six-year goals themselves differed by school and by student group. As a result, the goals were sometimes interpreted as setting different expectations for different student groups — and, more problematically, lower expectations for historically underserved students.

If a state chooses to set different accountability goals — such as a version of the "get halfway to 100 percent proficiency" model, for example — state leaders must ensure and make absolutely clear that:

a) The goals demand more progress for schools and for groups of students that are further behind; and
b) Meeting these goals will place schools on a path to the same ultimate goal (such as a 100 percent proficiency rate). If this is not clear (for example, if the goals call for schools to reduce differences in results between the highest performing and lowest performing schools for a particular group of students), those goals are unacceptable.

Figure 1: Potential (and Unacceptable) Approaches for Setting Goals

Approach	Notes
Set goals based on how top-performing (e.g., top 10 percent) of schools are doing for students overall. Expect all schools to reach this level of achievement in 10 years for all groups of students.	This goal will require most schools to make substantial improvement and to make bigger gains for groups of students that are further behind. The goal is the same for all schools and for all student groups.
Expect all schools to get halfway to the ultimate goal (e.g., 100 percent on grade level) within 10 years.	While this approach will also require bigger gains for schools and student groups that are further behind, it can be misinterpreted as setting different expectations for different groups of students.
Set goals for each student group based on how top-performing schools are doing *for that group* now. Expect all schools to reach that level of achievement in 10 years.	This approach sets different expectations for each student group. Schools are only expected to do as well for each student group as top-performing schools are doing for that group right now.
Expect all schools to improve the percentage of students on grade level by 2 points per year for all students and for each student group.	This approach fails to require more progress for schools and for groups that are further behind, and as a result, enables disparities in opportunity and achievement between groups of students to continue.

Green: Minimum caution for advocates.
Yellow: Caution required.
Red: This approach is unacceptable.

3. How will the state measure progress toward goals?

Under ESSA, states have to both set goals and establish interim progress targets that measure whether schools are on track to reach them. States could do this in a couple of different ways:

- **By setting a single target for each year that all schools must reach for all groups of students.**

  For example, if schools are getting 30 percent of students to grade level every year, and the state's goal is to reach 70 percent in 10 years (by 2026), progress targets could look like those in Figure 2.
  - The challenge with this approach is that it doesn't recognize the fact that schools are starting in very different places. Schools that currently demonstrate higher performance (above the overall state average) may automatically meet goals for the first few years without needing to improve. On the other hand, schools starting out at low levels of performance (overall or for a student group) may miss the progress targets even if they are improving. For example, a school where 10 percent of students are on grade level could double that percentage in one year and still miss the 2017 target.

Figure 2: Setting a Single Annual Progress Target for All Schools

Year	Progress Target (Percent on Grade Level)
2017	34 percent
2018	38 percent
2019	42 percent
2020	46 percent
2021	50 percent
2022	54 percent
2023	58 percent
2024	62 percent
2025	66 percent
2026	70 percent

- **By setting annual progress targets for each school and subgroup that measure whether schools are on track to reach state goals.** Instead of setting a single target for each year, states could set targets that take into account where each school is starting from and map a path toward reaching the state's goal (*see Figure 3*). This approach is more fair to schools that start out lower performing, and it makes clear that higher performing schools also have to make progress.

Figure 3: Progress Targets That Measure Whether Schools Are on Track to Meet State Goals