



Great Public Schools for Every Student

Provide Students with Multiple Ways to Show What They Have Learned

BACKGROUNDER

March 2010

There is widespread agreement that NCLB helped shine much needed light on the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged student populations. But it also wreaked havoc on schools by mislabeling successful schools as failing, under-serving those schools that are truly struggling, and placing undue emphasis on federally mandated standardized student assessments as the accountability yardstick for entire school systems. The harm caused by NCLB has provoked outrage among educators and parents.

The next iteration of ESEA must help educators and policymakers develop accountability systems that actually help improve student learning. That is, these systems must transparently identify and scale up valid measures of student learning, a much broader concept than student performance. New accountability systems must do more than simply measure student performance on a single test or even measure student growth on a series of tests. Instead, we must address all essential components of student learning by using reliable and varied sources of evidence, beginning with the professional assessment by the classroom teacher. These valid measures of student learning must then be analyzed as one, but not the only, important facet of overall school effectiveness.

Accountability systems must be an essential part of a continuous improvement system designed to improve instruction—not to punish schools or educators. We want to encourage more collaboration and sharing of promising instructional methods, and then to scale up what is demonstrated to be most effective. Assessment systems should be used to identify which schools are most in need of support, with the goal of delivering that needed support. Of course we measure school performance, but it must be done in a way that enhances, rather than stifles, the improvement or transformation process.

- **Can states develop authentic assessment systems that use multiple measures of student learning and school performance?**

A complete and balanced authentic student assessment system (designed as an assessment *of*, *for*, and *as* learning) is but one essential part of the educational improvement process.

Research shows that the current test-and-label system under NCLB is fundamentally flawed. Many education scholars and analysts are making the case that instead of having to demonstrate adequate yearly progress by group status or successive group improvement (currently NCLB “safe harbor”) that states be allowed to develop their own accountability systems using student growth models. Back in 2005, the U.S. Department of Education approved a pilot program to allow states to use growth models to measure AYP, and 22 states and the District of Columbia have since applied to use growth models. To date, 15 states now have approved growth models: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. We recommend that all states be encouraged to set attainable performance goals and that all students receive credit for academic progress.

In addition, we recommend three important changes to the current accountability framework:

- (1) Expand the current student growth models to include other valid indicators of student learning. Student growth on standardized assessments is but one of many indicators of student learning. Evidence of student

growth (as measured by accurate and reliable assessments and differentiated by subgroup) must be augmented with other measures, which may include district-level assessments; school-level assessments; classroom-level written, oral, performance-based, or portfolio assessments; grades; and written evaluations. All measures must be rigorous and follow common protocols to allow comparisons across classrooms.

(2) Require states to monitor multiple indicators of school performance in addition to student learning. These include graduation rates; postsecondary and career placement rates; attendance rates; student mobility or transfer rates; the number and percentage of students participating in rigorous coursework (including honors, AP, IB, dual enrollment, early college); the number and percentage of students with access to courses infused with 21st century skills (communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity); and the number and percentage of students participating in STEM, humanities, foreign languages, creative and fine arts, health, and physical education programs. This robust system would provide a more complete picture of the performance of schools in communities and states, instead of the current system that holds schools accountable based solely on how many students reach an arbitrary cut score on a standardized test in reading, math, and science on a particular day.

(3) Replace the current AYP system¹ and corrective framework with a Continuous Improvement Plan that relies on multiple indicators to help states accomplish the following goals:

- recognize areas of growth in all schools and states (this is an essential part of the continuous improvement paradigm that recognizes that all students can learn and all schools can improve)
- identify schools and programs that may offer innovative approaches or platforms for other schools so that promising practices can be identified and evaluated
- provide feedback to all schools on areas of possible growth or improvement (including support in one or more areas, if warranted)
- identify which schools are either “persistently low-achieving” or that demonstrate “significant educational opportunity gaps” in order to direct intensive resources and intervention supports to them

High priority schools that are identified by the state would be required to collect and submit additional data related to key school climate and success factors, including: leadership and staff experience and turnover statistics; class size (student-teacher ratio); number of National Board certified teachers; number of certified counselors, nurses, and other support staff per student; school building and environmental ratings; school bullying violence statistics; descriptions of professional development and instructional improvement strategies; description of access to libraries, science laboratories, quality health care in the community, nutritional meals, before- and afterschool programs, and community and family engagement activities. Schools that need it would get extra support to collect this broad range of data. The primary purpose of gathering this information would be to direct appropriate resources and interventions to such schools. High priority schools would have to provide such additional data until they were no longer deemed a high priority school.

- **Can states and/or districts establish reliable longitudinal data systems that inform student learning and instruction in a timely manner?**

The NEA supports state and local efforts to achieve high-quality longitudinal data systems. We see the benefits as twofold: connecting early learning to postsecondary (P-16) education systems and providing timely and accurate information to educators about students in order to improve instruction. We support key aspects of high-functioning data systems, provided that such systems sufficiently protect both student and educator privacy. No educational or performance data related to any individual should be made public, nor should ratings or levels be made public if there is a significant possibility that individuals could be identified through such publication. In order for the data to be used for

¹ NCLB currently requires schools to attain 100% student proficiency in math and literacy (and more recently science) by the 2013-14 school year. Schools must demonstrate AYP by setting and attaining increasingly higher target goals. Improvement must occur for every subgroup of students, i.e., low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Schools that receive Title I funds and consistently fail to make adequate progress are then subject to a series of progressively harsher sanctions that range from allowing students to transfer to higher achieving schools and funding private tutoring to reconstitution, dismissal of staff, or even closure.

its intended purpose of improving instruction, all data systems must be associated with job-embedded professional development and planning time.

- **Can current efforts to revamp standards and assessments actually improve accountability systems?**

The NEA supports the current effort by states to band together to voluntarily adopt a common core of high-quality standards in English and mathematics and high-quality assessments aligned to those standards. It's critical that standards and assessments be aligned with each other and with curricula, as well as with teacher preparation and professional development. Standards must address the whole student, and they must foster critical and high-order thinking skills and knowledge that will prepare students for a global and interdependent world in the 21st century and beyond. Assessments must include both formative and summative components, designed from the outset to accommodate the needs of special populations, such as students with disabilities and English language learners. NEA looks forward to the development of standards for other content areas as well as standards for preparing students for various career paths.

- **Can we revise accountability systems to recognize the individual needs of students, such as those with disabilities or who are English language learners?**

There is a critical need for valid, reliable, unbiased methods for conducting high-stakes assessments for all students, including those with disabilities and students who are English language learners. But before you can appropriately assess students, you must first ensure they have an equal opportunity to learn.

To appropriately assess students with disabilities and those who are English Language Learners, states should: 1) ensure that appropriate accommodations are available for students who need them, 2) use the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) in developing assessments for all students to increase accessibility, 3) ensure that valid, alternate assessments are available for those students who are unable to participate in regular assessments, 4) ensure that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams understand the impact of alternative assessments on students' programs and graduation options, and 5) include measures of growth toward grade level targets, such as growth models that represent student progress over time.

NEA Recommendations to Congress:

- **Require the use of multiple, valid measures of student learning and school performance**
- **Use student growth over time as one measure of student learning (rather than relying on a one-day snapshot of standardized test performance)**
- **Replace AYP with a Continuous Improvement Plan system that recognizes schools that achieve growth and correctly identifies schools that are struggling so that meaningful support can be provided**
- **Foster high-quality, longitudinal data systems that can be used to improve instruction and that require protection of student and educator privacy.**
- **Recognize the unique instructional and assessment needs of special populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners**