

## ESSA: Will Adding a Nonacademic Accountability Indicator Enhance Student and Learning Supports?<sup>1</sup>

School accountability is a policy tool with extraordinary power to reshape schools – for good and for bad. Systems are driven by accountability measures. This is particularly so under “reform” conditions.

Passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) brings with it concerns and issues about what will and should be done to ensure that every student succeeds. The months ahead are a critical time for reversing the marginalization and fragmentation of student and learning supports that policies over many years have created.

Detailed discussion relevant to these concerns started with the rule-making related to Title I. The U.S. Department of Education issued a Request for information “seeking advice and recommendations for Title I regulations under ESSA.” While only a small part of the new act, it does call for a focus on what widely are referred to as “nonacademic” indicators (see Exhibit A). This is an especially important matter for those eager to expand accountability as a step forward in broadening school improvement efforts, especially those related to student and learning supports and whole child development.

### About Adding Nonacademic Indicators

As everyone involved with improving schools knows, the only measures that counted under the No Child Left Behind Act were achievement test scores. Now under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) states are required to incorporate at least one nonacademic indicator into their accountability systems. This is an explicit recognition that more than achievement scores are relevant. Not surprisingly, however, concerns about adding “nonacademic” indicators are being voiced and conflicting agenda for what should be added are on the rise.

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<sup>1</sup> This report is from the national Center for Mental Health in Schools in the Dept. of Psychology at UCLA. The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Exhibit A

### Excerpt from: The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

<https://www.congress.gov/114/bills/s1177/BILLS-114s1177enr.pdf>

Title I includes the opportunity for a broader measure of accountability (see page 35):

- “(v)(I) For all public schools in the State, not less than one indicator of school quality or student success that—
- “(aa) allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance;
  - “(bb) is valid, reliable, comparable, and statewide (with the same indicator or indicators used for each grade span, as such term is determined by the State); and
  - “(cc) may include one or more of the measures described in subclause (II).
- “(II) For purposes of subclause (I), the State may include measures of—
- “(III) student engagement;
  - “(IV) educator engagement;
  - “(V) student access to and completion of advanced coursework;
  - “(VI) postsecondary readiness;
  - “(VII) school climate and safety; and
  - “(VIII) any other indicator the State chooses that meets the requirements of this clause.

(Also see page 47):

“(viii) Information submitted by the State educational agency and each local educational agency in the State, in accordance with data collection conducted pursuant to section 203(c)(1) of the Department of Education Organization Act (20 U.S.C. 3413(c)(1)), on—

“(I) measures of school quality, climate, and safety, including rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, chronic absenteeism (including both excused and unexcused absences), incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment; ...”

Note: States will decide on the added accountability indicator(s).

Note: The law also stresses that schools must disaggregate data related to the indicator to show different subgroup outcomes (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, children from low-income families, English-language learners).

### Survey about Nonacademic Indicators

With a hearing on Title I regulations under ESSA scheduled for January 19 at UCLA, we decided that a quick survey was in order to provide information and perspective on the adoption of nonacademic indicators. On January 11, 2016, we emailed a brief survey asking: (1) Do you think adding a nonacademic indicator will improve schools? (YES/NO) and (2) What indicator(s) do you recommend? And we invited any comments respondents wanted to share.<sup>2</sup>

On January 13, we sent out a summary of the initial 236 responses received on Jan 11 and 12; we immediately compiled responses. The first part of this report provides our interpretation of the survey findings (highlighting the concerns raised and some implications). The second part of the report stresses our analysis of the opportunity the focus on nonacademic accountability offers for beginning a fundamental transformation of student and learning supports.

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<sup>2</sup> Our appreciation to all the superintendents, principals, and other public education stakeholders who took time to respond. The initial findings and this report were submitted to U.S. Department of Education – <http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=ED-2015-OESE-0130-0001>

**What the Findings Suggest**

The survey responses are online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/nonacad.pdf> .

- >With respect to whether adding a nonacademic accountability indicator would improve schools:
  - Overall, the vast majority of respondents were positive, although with some significant concerns.
  - Only about 10% responded negatively.
- >Most of those who responded positively hoped that adding a nonacademic indicator would broaden the focus of school accountability and provide more support for students, staff, and families.
- >The primary recommendations for selecting indicators stressed data already gathered by schools (e.g., attendance, graduation rates).
- >A secondary set of recommendation called for a measure of general concepts such as engagement, social-emotional learning, and school climate.
- >Eleven responses indicated specific measures/procedures for gathering data.
- >A significant number of respondents raised concerns about adopting a single indicator.

Exhibit B synthesizes the gist of positive comments and recommendations.

Negative comments mainly expressed the views that one or a couple of nonacademic measures would not improve schools and/or add anything important to school accountability. One respondent cautioned that “adding one more thing to the accountability piece will send things spinning out of control. It is already so much.....since we now have to spend ENORMOUS amounts of time documenting, assessing, and evaluating.” Others indicated that it would just be another “one size fits all” approach and would “invariably tend to favor schools and districts with better access to resources, involved parents, etc. Some were concerned about holding schools accountable for factors upon which that they have little influence. One recommendation was that the “federal government utilize the state required academic performance results and any of the other state required areas it deems appropriate (attendance, graduation rates, drop out rates) as its measure for schools and not require an additional federal accountability measure or report. Some did not want federal government involvement at all. Some noted the lack of capacity to carry out accountability demands.

With respect to the concerns raised, the emphasis was on such matters as: How will the data be used against schools? How will major measurement problems be overcome related to many of the complex concepts? How will the inappropriate manipulation of measures be prevented? Will districts and schools be provided with the necessary resources for additional accountability efforts? (Many do not have the capacity needed to do the job.) How will unintended consequences of the accountability be determined? How will pushback from educators be addressed? Is the intent to help schools enhance equity of opportunity and will the measures help do this?

## Exhibit B.

### Respondents Comments and Recommendations

(1) Positive comments ranged from unqualified support to significant cautions about choosing the wrong indicators. Here is the gist of few:

>Using non-academic indicators can broaden school improvement efforts and make them more realistic, impactful and sustainable.

>If states select the right indicators and the right methods of measuring and tracking them, the changes could provide schools with a more nuanced view of student success and equity,

>“‘That which get’s measured, get’s done,’ and until it becomes part of an accountability system, it will not receive the attention it should have in the process of school improvement. ... This is not the time to select one or two indicators, but an opportunity to embed a full system of supports around learning.”

Some specific measures were recommended, but mostly the call was for measuring the following:

#### I. Student data regularly gathered by schools:

- >Attendance (most often suggested). In many instances, attendance was viewed as a proxy for student engagement.
- >Discipline referrals, suspensions/expulsions
- >Dropout and graduation rates
- >Course completion, career pathways
- >Parent involvement/participation

#### II. Data on number of students participating in special learning activities

- >Enrichment/electives (e.g., art, music, drama, student council, special clubs, sports, etc.)
- >Extracurricular activity
- >Community service
- >Character education, civics, citizenship

#### III. Measures of community/family/school challenges that impact school effectiveness

- >Poverty
- >Barriers to learning and teaching
- >Student and staff stress

#### IV. Data on school resources

- >Support for collaboration
- >Upgrades in facilities/technology
- >Safety measures
- >Quality of resources available (e.g., related to number and qualifications of staff, ratios of staff to students, staff absences and retention community supports, paraprofessional and volunteer assistance, budget)

#### V. Special Student support provided

- >Social emotional learning to address problems
- >Access, use, and efficacy of student and learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching (supports for transitions, English Language acquisition, special education, mental health, wrap around services)
- >Continuum of resources available for student and learning supports
- >Special programs related to college and career preparation

#### VI. Measures of student growth

- >Social emotional learning (skills/resilience/wellness)
- >Student motivation/engagement/connectedness, curiosity
- >Student assets/talents
- >Student self-efficacy/perseverance

#### VII. Survey data collected from students, staff, family, community focused on

- >School climate and safety
- >Teacher/student connection
- >Staff and student wellness
- >Student engagement and re-engagement
- >Parent involvement, engagement, and re-engagement
- >Satisfaction with school/school climate
- >College completion/career choice

Rather than one or a couple of indicators, several respondents called for use of multiple indicators (e.g., multimetric accountability) chosen from a menu and for indicators that allows for differences in the needs of schools (e.g., schools serving low-income families).

***Note that multimetric accountability systems are being piloted in several states and provinces; such a system can include discipline data, social-emotional surveys, and school climate measures – <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/policy/MultimetricAccountability-WhitePaper.pdf>***

## ESSA, Accountability, and Equity of Opportunity

As was the case with the No Child Left Behind Act, ESSA provides a fragmented vision for a broad range of student and learning supports intended to promote equity of opportunity. As a result, there remains a fundamental disconnect between ESSA and the realities of what it takes to improve academic performance. The disconnect is especially evident in schools serving what are often referred to as “low wealth” families. Such families and those who work in schools serving them have a clear appreciation of many barriers to learning and teaching that must be addressed so students can benefit from the teacher’s efforts to teach. These stakeholders stress that, in many schools, major academic improvements are unlikely until the impact of such barriers is reduced effectively.

Adding a couple of “nonacademic” accountability indicators clearly is not a solution. Doing so will likely contribute to the trend to drive student and learning supports in ways that deemphasize any essential work that is not an accountability indicator. For example, efforts to improve attendance often only round up and bring truants back to school, but do little to help teachers re-engage these students in classroom instruction. This is a recipe for a revolving door.

Those who call for what is being called multimetric accountability capture the essence of the problem of emphasizing only one or a few nonacademic indicators. However, they have yet to face up to developing an accountability framework that effectively accounts for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. If the goal of a school accountability system is to improve schools so that they increasingly enhance equity of opportunity, these factors must be included in a comprehensive manner.

All this leads to an appreciation of the need for an expanded outcome framework for school accountability that fully addresses academic achievement, personal and social development, and barriers to learning and teaching. We view such a framework as consistent with what has been called *intelligent accountability*. Appended to this report is an illustration of such an expanded framework.

## Using ESSA to Enhance Student and Learning Supports

Currently, many organizations, professional associations, guilds, and unions are analyzing the reauthorization primarily from the point of view of their specific mission. Conflicting agenda already evident. Rather than weaving together a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to enhance equity of opportunity, the different agenda if acted upon will maintain the separate and competing silos that have marginalized student and learning supports for far too long.

The challenge and the opportunity with ESSA begins with formulation of Title I guidelines in ways that can play a role in ending the fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. The opportunities include:

**First:** As the following excerpts suggest, ESSA’s vision for Title I provides a strong foundation for creating leadership team for developing and guiding establishment of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports at a school.

The Title I school-wide program

"... is developed with the involvement of parents and other members of the community to be served and individuals who will carry out such plan, including teachers, principals, other school leaders, paraprofessionals present in the school, administrators (including administrators of programs described in other parts of this title), the local educational agency, to the extent feasible, tribes and tribal organizations present in the community, and, if appropriate, specialized instructional support personnel, technical assistance providers, school staff, if the plan relates to a secondary school, students, and other individuals determined by the school...

... is developed in coordination and integration with other Federal, State, and local services, resources, and programs, such as programs supported under this Act, violence prevention programs, nutrition programs, housing programs, Head Start programs, adult education programs, career and technical education programs, and schools implementing comprehensive support and improvement activities or targeted support and improvement activities ...

... address[es] the needs of all children in the school, but particularly the needs of those at risk of not meeting the challenging State academic standards, through activities which may include ... counseling, school-based mental health programs, specialized instructional support services, mentoring services, and other strategies to improve students' skills outside the academic subject areas; ... implementation of a school-wide tiered model to prevent and address problem behavior, and early intervening services, coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ..."

**Second:** Note that Title IV augments this foundation with a focus on addressing specific barriers to learning, encompassing

"... drugs, prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation referral, recovery support services, or education related to the illegal use of drugs, such as raising awareness about the consequences of drug use that are evidence-based ...

... violence, the promotion of school safety, such that students and school personnel are free from violent and disruptive acts, including sexual harassment and abuse, and victimization associated with prejudice and intolerance, on school premises, going to and from school, and at school-sponsored activities, through the creation and maintenance of a school environment that is free of weapons and fosters individual responsibility and respect for the rights of others....

... 'school-based mental health services provider' includes a State-licensed or State-certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or other State licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under State law to provide mental health services to children and adolescents...."

**Third:** Note that other titles specifically focus on supports for family engagement, for English language learners, for migrant students, for homeless students.

*The above all fit into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to enhance equity of opportunity. And there are additional opportunities in the title on professional development.*

For details about creating a *Learning Supports Leadership Team* to develop and guide establishment of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports at a school, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>.

**Fourth:** Given the above, rather than just adding a “nonacademic measure,” the new accountability option can be used to establish an expanded outcome framework that directly accounts for a school’s efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. Examples of such indicators include increased attendance, reduced tardies, reduced misbehavior, less bullying and sexual harassment, increased family involvement with child’s learning and schooling, fewer referrals for specialized assistance, fewer inappropriate referrals for special education, fewer pregnancies, fewer suspensions and dropouts.

Of course, in analyzing and interpreting intervention outcomes, evaluation models stress the importance of factoring in antecedent conditions and implementation transactions and comparing subgroups (e.g., districts, schools, subpopulations of students).

Ensuring  
ESSA  
Enhances  
Equity of  
Opportunity

Whatever the additional “nonacademic” indicator(s), states and districts can use this period of transition to begin transforming student and learning supports. The emphasis needs to be on

- unifying student and learning supports by grouping the many fragmented approaches experienced at school in ways that reduce responding to overlapping problems with separate and sometimes redundant interventions
- addressing barriers to learning and teaching through improving personalized instruction and increasing accommodations and special assistance when necessary
- enhancing the focus on motivational considerations with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation as it relates to individual readiness and ongoing involvement and with the intent of fostering intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome
- re-engaging disconnected students
- adding specialized remediation, treatment, and rehabilitation as necessary, but only as necessary,

With all this in mind, implementation accountability needs to focus on assessing the degree that student and learning supports are woven into a cohesive system to enhance effectiveness: first stage – assessing how well district financed efforts are woven together at schools; second stage – assessing how well the school connects with community resources to fill critical gaps in the system. Examples of relevant standards and indicators are included in *Standards & Quality Indicators for an Enabling or Learning Supports Component* online at - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/qualityindicators.pdf>.

## Concluding Comments

As Congress recognized in passing the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, it is time for school improvement to encompass policy and planning that enables every school to replace the outdated patchwork of programs and services used in addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The way to do this involves transforming student and learning supports.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* will lead to revisiting school improvement plans. Moreover, for the bottom 5 percent of schools, for schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate, and for schools where subgroups of students are chronically struggling, the focus on school turnaround will remain intensive. And block grant funding will open up discussions about the best way to allocate resources. These are opportunities for schools to enhance equity of opportunity by unifying and then developing a comprehensive and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students and families. Such a system is essential for ending the fragmentation and marginalization of student and learning supports that is found in every school. Such a system is a fundamental component in increasing collaboration among teachers and support staff, closing gaps in achievement and graduation rates, enhancing post-secondary readiness, fostering positive school-community relationships, and promoting a positive school climate.

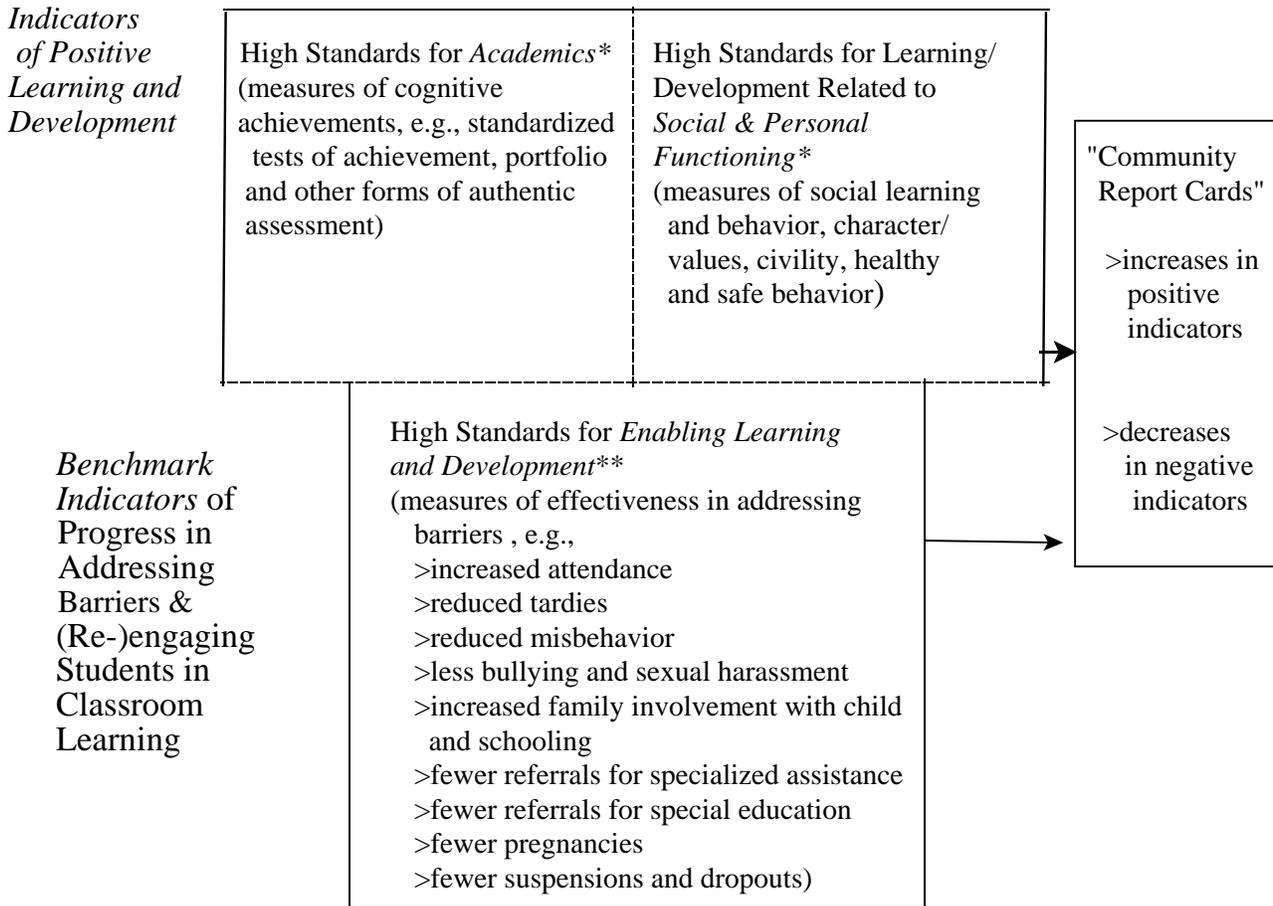
***Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;  
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to  
enabling equity of opportunity and promoting whole child development.***

For more information on transforming student and learning supports,  
see the website pages for the national initiative –  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html> .

And send us your views to ensure an ongoing discussion. Email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

## Appendix

### Expanding the Outcome Framework for School Accountability<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>



\*Results of interventions for directly facilitating development and learning.

\*\*Results of interventions for addressing barriers to learning and development.

*Note:* Positive school climate emerges with major improvements in the above indicators.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of this prototype, see “Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools” which is Appendix A in *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* (2015). By H.S. Adelman & L. Taylor. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>In analyzing and interpreting intervention outcomes, evaluation models stress the importance of factoring in antecedent conditions and implementation transactions and comparing subgroups (e.g., districts, schools, subpopulations of students).

<sup>5</sup>Because many districts/schools lack the capacity and to counter tendencies to manipulate indicators, recommendations have been made for federal/state funding of independent evaluations from which accountability indicators can be disaggregated.