

CONNECTICUT



TWO STARS OUT OF FOUR

*Connecticut's high school accountability system rewards several forms of advanced achievement.
Developing a growth measure for high schools would improve the system.*

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ANALYSIS

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants states more authority over their school accountability systems than did its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Consequently, states now have an opportunity to design school rating systems that improve upon the NCLB model, especially when it comes to high achievers.

NCLB meant well (as did many state accountability systems that preceded it), but it had a pernicious flaw: it strongly incentivized schools to focus exclusively on low-performing students' "proficiency" and high school graduation rates, ignoring the educational needs of high achievers, who were likely to pass state reading and math tests and earn a diploma regardless of what happened in the classroom. This may be why the United States has seen significant achievement growth and much higher graduation rates for its lowest-performing students over the last twenty years but smaller gains for its top students.

Starting in 2011, former secretary of education Arne Duncan offered waivers to states that wanted the flexibility to redesign their accountability systems. In particular, states were allowed to incorporate the use of real student growth measures into their school determinations. This was a much fairer way of evaluating schools' impact on student achievement than looking only at proficiency rates, which are strongly correlated with student demographics, family circumstance, and prior achievement. And, just as significantly, well-designed growth measures can eliminate the temptation for schools to ignore their high achievers.

In 2015, Congress replaced NCLB and its waivers with the ESSA, which maintains NCLB's requirement that states assess students annually in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Under ESSA, states must now use four types of indicators to rate high schools: academic achievement (which can include student growth); graduation rates; growth toward English proficiency for English language learners; and at least one other valid, reliable indicator of school quality or student success. Furthermore, each of the academic indicators (1–3) must carry "substantial" weight and, in the aggregate, must count "much more" than the fourth.

To help states make the most of the ESSA opportunity, we have reviewed how well their present, intended, or most recently employed accountability systems serve high achievers. If a state's system doesn't do a satisfactory job of incentivizing schools to focus on high achievers, we believe that strengthens the case for changing it materially.

States may think we're being premature in evaluating their systems during this time of massive change. Please understand that our primary objective is to identify the design features of an accountability system that works for all students—which we hope will become the prevailing model now that ESEA is reauthorized and states' testing regimes are becoming stable once again.

Here we examine Connecticut's system for rating high school performance during the 2015–16 school year—the most recent year for which information is available. We do not examine the quality of the state's standards, tests, or sanctions for low performance.

Part I of this report, released in August 2016, examined Connecticut's rating systems for elementary and middle schools.¹

HOW STATES CAN PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS IN THEIR HIGH SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

In our view, states can and should take four steps to ensure that the needs of high achievers are prioritized under ESSA.

1. **For the first academic indicator required by ESSA (academic achievement), give high schools incentives for getting more students to an advanced level.** Under ESSA, states will continue to track the percentage of students who attain proficiency on state tests. They should also give high schools incentives for getting students to an advanced level (such as level four on Smarter Balanced or level five on PARCC). For example, they might create an achievement index that gives schools partial credit for getting students to a basic level, full credit for getting students to a proficient level, and additional credit for getting students to an advanced level. (It's not entirely clear from the Department of Education's proposed regulations whether this will be allowed, though we don't see anything in the law prohibiting it.)
2. **Use the flexibility provided by ESSA to rate high schools using a true growth model—that is, one that includes the progress of individual students at all achievement levels and not just those who are low-performing or below the "proficient" line.** Regrettably, some states still don't consider individual student growth, don't use it at the high school level, or use a growth-to-proficiency system that continues to encourage schools to ignore the needs of students above (or far above) the proficient level. Using true growth models—such as those that estimate a school's value added or median growth percentile—is preferable.
3. **When determining summative high school ratings, make growth—across the achievement spectrum—count at least as much as achievement.** The Department of Education's proposed regulations under ESSA require states to combine multiple factors into summative school ratings, probably through an index. Each of the first three indicators (achievement, graduation rate, and progress toward English proficiency) must carry “substantial” weight. In our view, states should (and, under ESSA, are free to) make growth count at least as much as achievement does. Otherwise, schools will continue to face an incentive to ignore their high performers. (States that don't yet roll their indicators up to a summative rating for the school receive a “not applicable” designation here.)

4. **Include an indicator that gives high schools an incentive to help able students earn college credit before they graduate.** One “indicator of school quality or student success” should be the percentage of students who earn college credit via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs, which are among the best ways to challenge high performers. It’s important that states focus on actual attainment of college credit or the equivalent, not just participation in these programs, lest the incentives encourage the wrong behavior by schools: shoving students into AP, IB, and/or dual enrollment even if they are not prepared to succeed, leading to frustration on their part and potentially harming the experience of their higher-achieving peers. Let us also acknowledge the questionable value of many of today’s dual-enrollment programs. Students are often taught not by college professors but by high school teachers, and the “college credit” earned doesn’t always transfer to bona fide colleges. States should therefore encourage more high schools to offer AP and IB courses because those come with external exams, which ensure program quality and rigor.

DOES CONNECTICUT’S HIGH SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS?





INDICATOR	RATINGS	NOTES
1. Does the state rate high schools’ academic achievement using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level?		Connecticut gives additional credit for students achieving at an advanced level. ²
2. Does the state rate high schools’ growth using a model that includes the progress of all individual students, not just those below the “proficient” line?		Connecticut does not rate schools’ growth at the high school level. (See Exhibit A.)
3. When calculating summative high school ratings, does the state assign at least as much weight to “growth for all students” as it does to achievement?		Achievement counts for 48 percent of summative high school ratings, while “growth for all students” receives no weight. (See Exhibit A.)
4. Does the state rate high schools’ success in helping students earn college credit before graduating via AP, IB, and/or dual-enrollment programs?		Connecticut rates high schools’ success in earning college credit before graduating via AP, IB, and/or dual enrollment programs. (See Exhibit B.)

EXHIBIT A³

Schools to Earn Points on New Indicators

Points listed below available in years 2 and 3

	Elementary	Middle	High	Middle/ High
Indicator 1: Academic Achievement – ELA, Math and Science (All Students, High Needs Subgroup)	300	300	600	300
Indicator 2: Academic Growth – ELA and Math (All Students, High Needs Subgroup)	400	400	<i>n/a</i>	400
Indicator 4: Attendance / Chronic Absence (All Students, High Needs Subgroup)	100	100	100	100
Indicators 5 and 6: Preparation for College and Career Readiness (Courses/Exams)	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	100	100
Indicator 7: Graduation - On Track in 9 th Grade	<i>n/a</i>	50	50	50
Indicators 8 and 9: Graduation: (4-year All Students, 6-year High Needs Subgroup)	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	200	200
Indicator 10: Postsecondary Entrance	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	100	100
Indicator 11: Physical Fitness	50	50	50	50
Indicator 12: Arts Access	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	50	50
Total Possible Points	850	900	1250	1350



Note: Indicator 3 is the participation rate.

CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

EXHIBIT B⁴

Indicator 6: Preparation for Postsecondary and Career Readiness - Exams

Indicator	Max Points – All Years
Percentage of students in grades 11 & 12 achieving CCR benchmark on <i>at least one</i> of the following: Smarter Balanced 11 th <i>or</i> SAT <i>or</i> ACT <i>or</i> AP <i>or</i> IB	50

- Percentage of 11th and 12th graders who meet the following benchmark scores on at least one exam:
 - Smarter Balanced – Level 3 or higher on both ELA and math; or
 - SAT – composite score of 1550 or higher; or
 - ACT – meeting benchmark on 3 of 4 exams; or
 - AP – 3 or higher on an AP exam; or
 - IB – 4 or higher on an IB exam.
- Ultimate target is 75%. Points will be prorated based on the percentage of the ultimate target achieved.



Data Source: June PSIS (to establish 11th and 12th graders), SAT/AP from College Board, ACT from ACT, Inc., IB from International Baccalaureate Organization

ENDNOTES

1. Michael J. Petrilli, et al., *High Stakes for High Achievers: State Accountability in the Age of ESSA*, pages 56–61, (District of Columbia: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2016), <https://edexcellence.net/publications/high-stakes-for-high-achievers>.
2. “Using Accountability Results to Guide Improvement,” page 45, accessed September 5, 2016, http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/evalresearch/using_accountability_results_to_guide_improvement_20160228.pdf.
3. “Connecticut State Board of Education ESEA Flexibility Renewal Connecticut’s ‘Next Generation’ Accountability System: March 2016,” page 5, accessed July 13, 2016, http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/evalresearch/next_generation_accountability_system_march_2016.pdf.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.