



Accountability for Closing Gaps and Raising Achievement

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Why is accountability for closing gaps and raising achievement important?

Not so long ago, schools were able to hide the underperformance of some groups of students. If a school's overall performance was OK, it didn't matter if students of color or students growing up in poverty, students with disabilities or those still learning English struggled year after year.

In 2002, a bipartisan coalition came together to change that. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), it was no longer OK to hide behind averages: To be considered successful, a school had to be improving the achievement of all groups of students that it served.

Since federal lawmakers started requiring serious accountability for the performance of all students, achievement among black, Latino, and low-income students has improved. On the longest standing national examination — the NAEP Long Term Trends Exam — these groups have improved faster than at any time since 1980. And students with disabilities that many assumed would prevent them from ever meeting state standards are achieving more than ever before.

To be clear, accountability systems themselves don't close gaps and raise achievement. Only the hard work of educators, students, and parents can do that. But well-designed accountability systems can be a much-needed source of pressure and support by:

- Setting a clear expectation that schools must raise the achievement of all of their students, not just some;
- Focusing attention and resources on the full range of student groups, including those who are sometimes ignored; and
- Prompting action when schools don't meet expectations for any group of students.

What's in current federal law? What problems need attention?

The accountability provisions of NCLB set a goal of 100 percent of students meeting state standards in reading and math by 2014. And there were federally defined consequences for schools where any group of students did not make adequate progress toward that goal.

While game-changing in many ways, these provisions are now in need of updating. States are in the process of shifting to new, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards and assessments, and need to set new ambitious but achievable achievement goals. NCLB focuses on reading and math only, to the exclusion of other measures of college and career readiness; and it focuses on year-to-year proficiency rates, to the exclusion of individual student learning growth over time. Under NCLB, schools that fall far below expectations for all students are treated the same as schools that are just-off target for one group of students. And despite school districts' critical importance to creating the conditions for school success, NCLB largely ignores them.

These problems need attention: Portions of the law are now outdated and unworkable. But in making much-needed changes, Congress must be careful to maintain the core expectation of improvement for all groups of students — not just some — and the expectation of action where any group of students is struggling.

This last point — about action, rather than just transparency — can't be overemphasized. While public reporting of results is critical, parents must be confident that schools will act when their children are falling behind, giving them the supports they need to get back on track. And parents and taxpayers alike need to know that when a school is struggling, the district and state have a responsibility to that school's students that transcends just sitting by and watching.

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What should be included in a reauthorized ESEA?

In return for billions in federal Title I dollars, states should be asked to put in place statewide accountability systems that expect and support all students to graduate from high school ready for college and career. While these systems can and should vary based on state context, federal law must require that all state systems include a few key elements essential to improving results among the students who are the focus of federal investments:

A focus on academic achievement

- State systems should be based predominantly on student growth and proficiency on statewide assessments, accurate high school graduation rates, and other measures of college and career readiness.
- States can choose to include other indicators, such as attendance, student surveys, school safety, parent satisfaction, and working conditions, but these must play a secondary role.

Meaningful goals for improvement and gap-closing

- States must set public, statewide improvement and gap-closing goals for at least assessment results and graduation rates.
- Statewide goals must be translated into improvement targets for districts and schools for students overall and for each subgroup, with greater progress expected for groups that have been behind.
- Performance against improvement targets for all groups of students must be the predominant factor in school accountability ratings.
- Performance against improvement targets should also be a significant factor in district ratings. But district ratings should also be based on measures of support for schools, success with school improvement, and equity in the distribution of such key resources as dollars and strong teachers.

Action based on these goals

- States must specify how schools and districts that exceed targets will be rewarded. And they must specify what the interventions and supports will be for schools and districts that don't meet their targets, including how students in persistently underperforming schools and districts will get the supports they need to meet state standards and graduate from high school.
- Where states rely on districts to be the first responders to underperformance in schools, states must specify how they will monitor districts and intervene when they're not getting the job done.



The Education Trust