

Commission on No Child Left Behind

Public Hearing: “Working Together for Student Success: Accountability, Data and High Standards” April 5, 2010

Testimony of Richard J. Wenning, Associate Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education

Thank you for inviting my testimony at today’s hearing. I’d like to provide my feedback in the context of Colorado’s effort to create an aligned state and federal accountability system focused on all students reaching college and career readiness. We believe that Colorado’s education accountability system provides a model for ESEA and should serve as a single system that meets state and federal purposes. We believe that states with accountability systems that include specific design elements (described below) should have substantial latitude in their implementation so that they support state and local performance management purposes. The basic idea here is that the federal government should hold states accountable for statewide performance and that states should hold districts and schools accountable.

My testimony on behalf of the Colorado Department of Education today is focused on several questions posed by the Commission:

- How is Colorado refining its use of student performance data to improve accountability for student growth, better inform school improvement efforts, and more clearly communicate with the public?
- What is the impact of using a growth model on accountability determinations under No Child Left Behind?
- How can federal policy best promote improved student achievement, more effective accountability and higher, common standards?

How is Colorado refining its use of student performance data to improve accountability for student growth, better inform school improvement efforts, and more clearly communicate with the public?

Educational accountability systems include three basic components: rewards, sanctions and public reporting. Colorado’s approach to educational accountability attempts to balance these components to promote local ownership of high-quality performance information. We believe this local ownership drives insight and action by **users**: students, parents, educators, administrators, policymakers, business leaders, and the public at large.

Colorado believes that the results we expect must start with the end in mind: namely our statutory bright-line principle of all students becoming college- and career-ready by high school graduation. This universal goal clarifies our public responsibility and the focus of our accountability and performance management systems: we must maximize individual student academic growth toward the destination of college and career readiness. We were very pleased to see this principle reflected in the President's Blueprint for ESEA Reauthorization.

However, the Blueprint's intended use of the 2020 date for school vs. state accountability is unclear. Colorado feels strongly that an arbitrary date certain is not helpful for states to calibrate their school accountability systems. This is because a very credible date exists for every student, namely their graduation date. Growth models make it possible to establish ambitious growth expectations for every student, based on what they need to be on track and also allow a roll up for state and federal accountability purposes. This concept is discussed further below.

The clarity of the goal of readiness by exit, particularly in the context of common high standards, supports an essential, powerful and ongoing conversation between every student and his or her teachers and parents about how much growth the student is making, whether it is good enough to **catch up** to proficiency (if the student is not proficient), **keep up** at proficiency (if the student is already proficient), or to **move up** to advanced levels of achievement. Most important is a conversation about how each student, teacher and parent must work together to ensure that the student meets goals and standards. I refer to the capacity to constructively engage in this fundamental conversation, using information effectively to make adjustments and achieve goals, as **Performance Management Capacity**. Plain and consistent language (like catch up, keep up, and move up) promotes meaningful conversations and illustrates the importance of **focusing on the user** of information when designing accountability systems.

The Results We Expect

- New bright line: **all kids ready by exit**
- Incentives focused on maximizing student progress toward college and career readiness
 - Requires definition of readiness and the standards leading there
 - CO Achievement Plan for Kids (SB 08-212)
 - Requires accountability system focused on the goal
 - Education Accountability Act of 2009 (SB 09-163)

The availability of outstanding **instructional improvement and social collaboration technologies** and incentives for using them (particularly through initiatives focusing on educator effectiveness) represent vital tools and opportunities for breakthrough performance improvements. Thanks to advantageous

timing—major advances in technology coinciding with **Race to the Top**—the nation is in a position to provide students and educators the tools they need and deserve to achieve the outcomes we expect. We are primed to promote breakthrough educator collaboration about performance and practice.

Key Catalysts for Performance

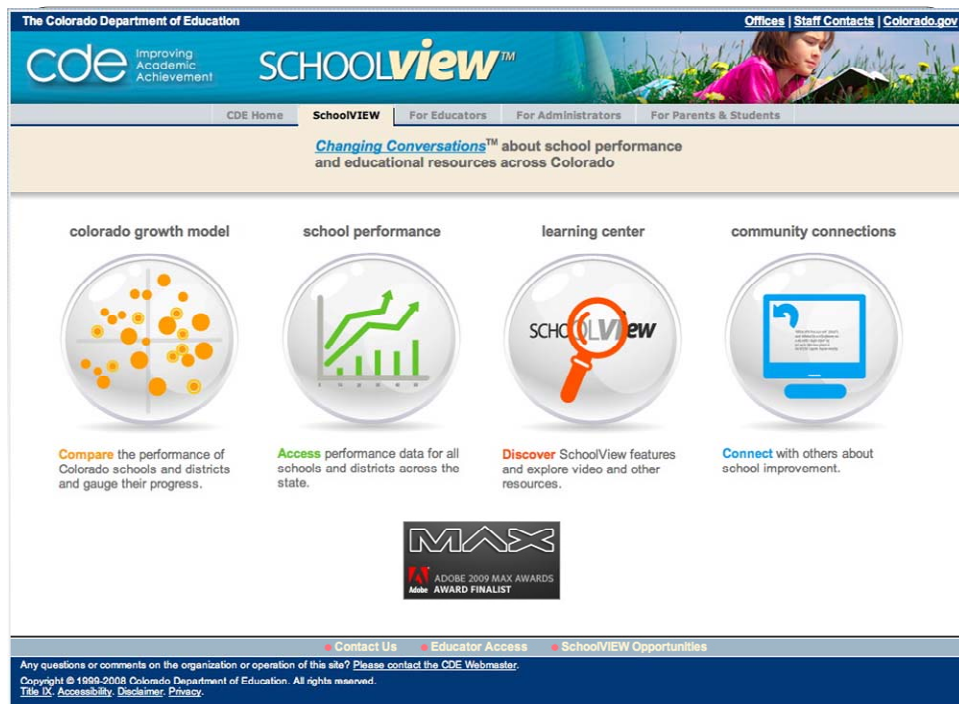
- Breakthrough educator collaboration about performance and practice
- Outstanding instructional improvement technologies drive insight and action by users at all levels
- Widespread understanding of performance motivates public pressure for sustained reform

Underpinning this collaboration in Colorado is a **new and broad public conversation about performance** fostered by SchoolView and the Colorado Growth Model (see figures below). SchoolView is a state-owned tool that we are happy to share with other states. The Colorado Growth Model uses an open-source methodology run on open-source software. We are making the display tools available at no cost to other states through a memorandum of understanding, including commitment to the Creative Commons intellectual property agreement we use.

SchoolView

Instructional Improvement System

- Access to Colorado Growth Model
- Hub for knowledge management
- Aligns accountability system's incentives and disclosure of results with information needs of each user
- Collaboration extends across states: Massachusetts, Arizona, and Indiana have adopted the Colorado Growth Model



About the Colorado Growth Model

The Colorado Growth Model was approved by the U.S. Department of Education for use in its growth model pilot. It uses a common measure to describe how much growth each student makes and how much growth is needed to reach state standards. In doing so, it provides a complete history of individual test

scores for all students. The model depicts growth in a user-friendly and interactive display that provides clear information about student progress toward reaching state proficiency levels within a specific period of time.

The Colorado Growth Model supports a common understanding of how individual students and groups of students progress from year to year toward state performance standards based on where each student begins. The model focuses attention on measuring and maximizing student progress over time and reveals where, and among which students, the strongest growth is happening—and where it is not. It recognizes that the most effective schools are those that produce the highest sustained rates of student academic growth over time. Those schools may or may not be schools with the highest test scores every year.

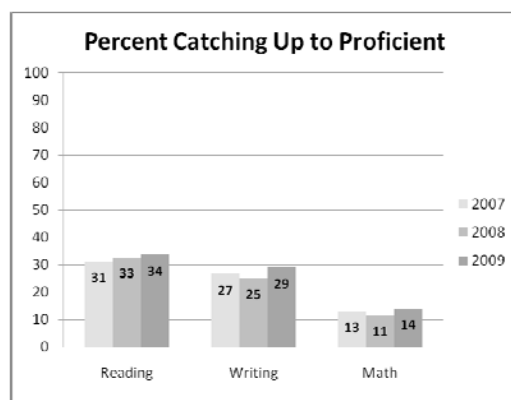
The Colorado Growth Model applies the common measure of *Individual Student Growth Percentiles* to school, district and state performance in a **normative** and **criterion-referenced** manner. The growth model provides a growth percentile ranging from 1 to 99 for every student – also described as “Low,” “Typical” or “High” – and provides the percentile needed for a student to reach Partially Proficient, Proficient and Advanced levels within one, two, or three years.

The model provides *Median Growth Percentiles* that are useful for benchmarking purposes and analysis of gaps in growth rates among groups of students. The overall State Median Growth Percentile for every grade is 50, so it is useful to look for differences from the 50th percentile when benchmarking the growth of the typical student.

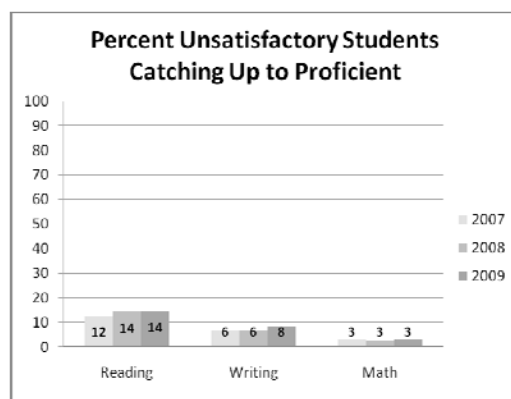
The model also provides information on the **adequacy of growth** to reach and maintain state-defined performance levels — we refer to these as *Catch Up* and *Keep Up*. *On Track to Catch Up* identifies students scoring Unsatisfactory or Partially Proficient in the prior year who achieved enough growth to reach Proficient within three years or by 10th grade. *On Track to Keep Up* identifies students already scoring Proficient or Advanced who achieved enough growth to stay at least Proficient over three years or until 10th grade.

The Colorado Growth Model fills an important gap in the current accountability system required by NCLB. To close the achievement gaps that plague our education system, we must eliminate gaps in how children are growing academically and ensure that our neediest students grow faster — more than a year’s growth in a year’s time — so that they catch up. The following graphics show the percentage of students achieving enough growth to catch up or keep up in Colorado.

Growing Enough to Catch Up to Proficient



Growing Enough to Catch Up From Unsatisfactory to Proficient



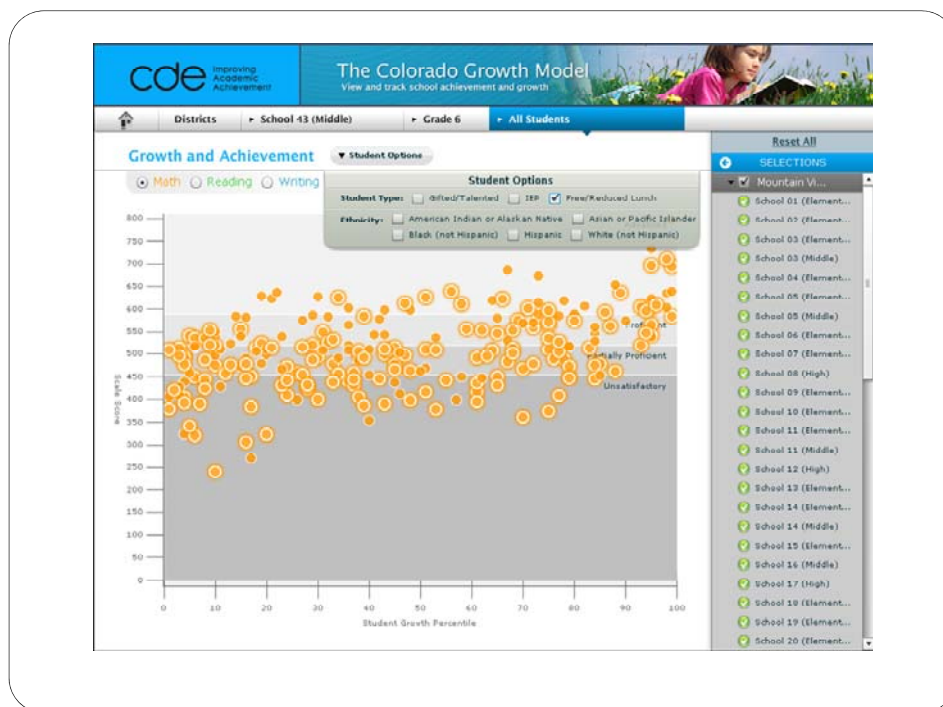
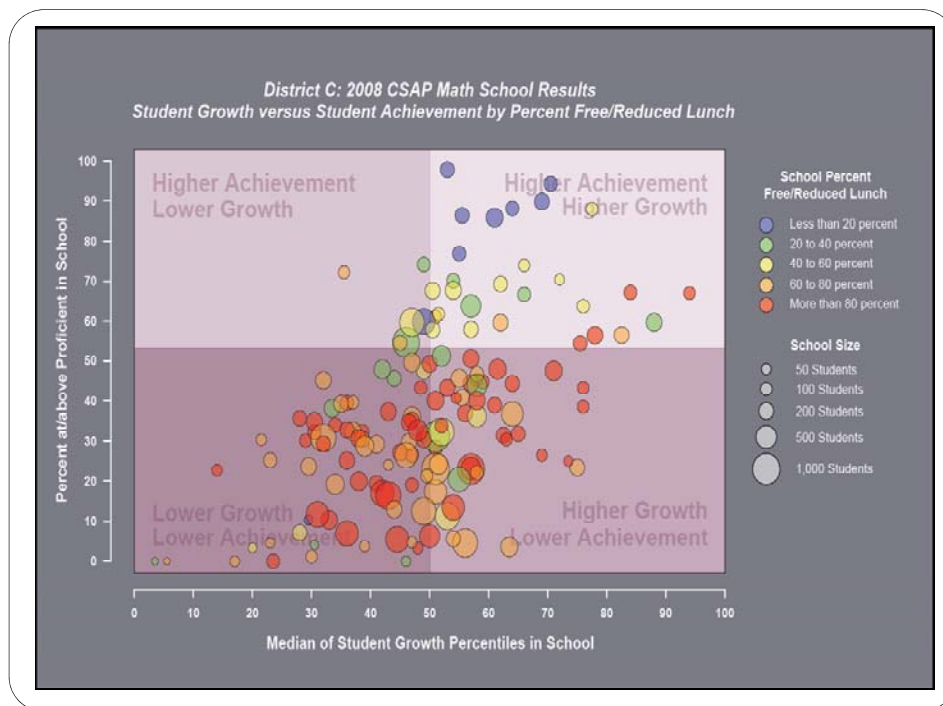
Because AYP today is focused on each school's percentage of students who score "at proficiency" each year, it creates an overly anxious short-term focus on students "on the cusp" of proficiency – the ones who should be easiest to push over the hump and therefore give schools a better rating.

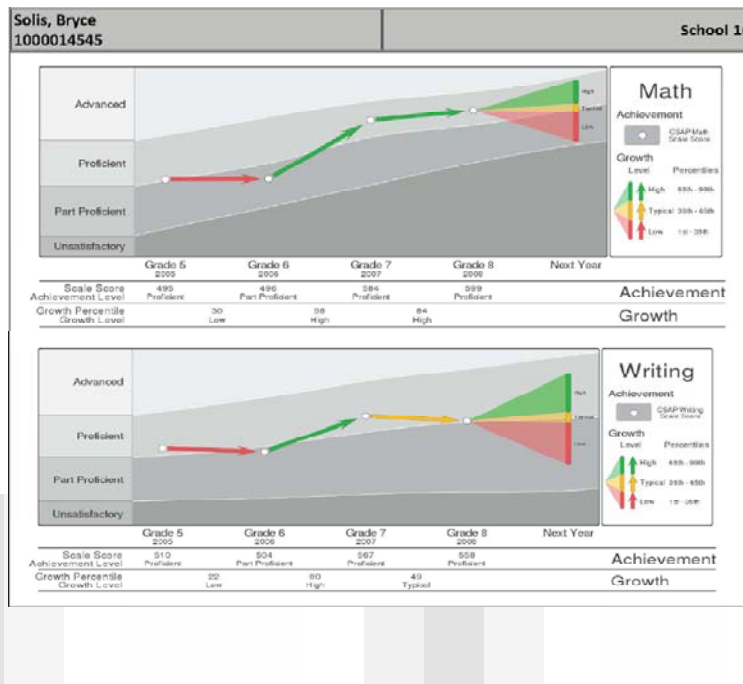
Instead, we should encourage teachers to focus on maximizing every child's progress toward ambitious standards – and developing every child to his or her full potential – while encouraging schools to focus on long-term effectiveness. The federal accountability system should measure whether that is happening. As we measure the performance of schools and districts, we must provide individual student data that educators need in order to focus on improving student learning. Every educator and parent should know in plain language how much growth a child has achieved and how much growth each child needs to reach state standards.

Consistent with these design principles, the Colorado Department of Education used SchoolView to deploy a set of interactive Web-based display tools to provide Colorado Growth Model information about district, school and student performance to parents, educators and the public. These display tools enable and promote new, well-informed conversations about student learning while providing unprecedented public transparency in support of accountability, which allows us to disclose more, use fewer punitive labels, drive strong stakeholder buy-in, and foster sustained public pressure for reform.

Colorado is very interested in collaborating with other states to create a common data visualization platform to drive broad public understanding about educational effectiveness and cross-state performance benchmarking. We are pleased that Arizona and Indiana have elected to work with us on this effort. In addition, Massachusetts has adopted our growth model for its use. Several other states are expected to adopt it as well.







(Note: Contrived, not actual student name used above.)

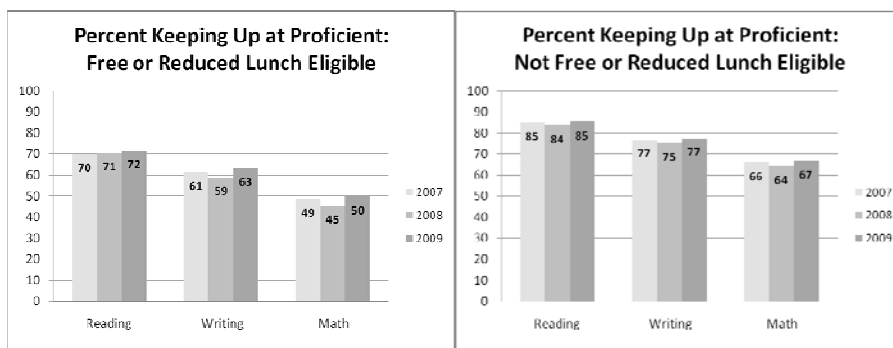
What is the impact of using a growth model on accountability determinations under No Child Left Behind?

The impact of growth models on accountability determinations depends on the policy objectives of the growth model or more basically, the questions the model is designed to answer. We believe two key policy objectives should be met: (1) the ability to make normative judgments about the relative effectiveness of particular schools or educators, and (2) the ability to make criterion-referenced determinations about the adequacy of student growth—whether students are on track to reach college and career readiness by high school graduation. Thus, growth models used for accountability purposes should be capable of answering both normative and criterion-referenced questions.

Normative growth is particularly useful for understanding the distribution of growth and achievement among schools and educators in the context of accountability systems. Combining normative and criterion-referenced growth measures permits states to calibrate their accountability systems to focus on all students reaching college and career readiness by graduation, while identifying schools for recognition as exemplars and others for intensive intervention.

In the context of the Colorado Growth Model, **adequate yearly growth to catch up and keep up** (criterion-referenced growth) is a more rigorous performance metric than the percentage of students meeting Proficiency on an annual basis. This is because adequacy of growth depends on growth rates being “good enough” over time, not just reaching Proficiency in a given year (see figure below). If Colorado were to use its growth model as the exclusive measure of AYP, far fewer schools would “make AYP” under current law.

Fewer Low-Income Students Keeping Up



How can federal policy best promote improved student achievement, more effective accountability, and higher, common standards?

Federal policy can promote dramatically improved student outcomes by ensuring a coherent accountability system focused squarely on building the performance management capacity of stakeholders. For this to happen, the federal role in local school management decisions must be redefined in a manner that recognizes and respects the essential role that states, local educational agencies, schools and individual educators must play if sustained high is to become the norm. Federal policy can either support or hinder the understanding, ownership, and effective use of performance information at the individual, local and state levels through the metrics required and rewards and sanctions established.

State education agencies (SEAs) play a critical role, and SEAs should be re-purposed to support school effectiveness. This will require federal support. SEAs must become reliable providers and brokers of high-quality support and service to schools and districts. They must focus on sustaining continuous improvement in schools and districts while also ensuring that they meet compliance obligations. To achieve this aim, SEAs will need to invest in research and development, program evaluation, and diagnostic school and district reviews focused on improvement efforts. This may require reallocation of resources. SEAs will also need to develop coherent knowledge management strategies to sustain their capacity levels.

Flexibility is also necessary. Expanding allowable uses of funds would allow SEAs to invest in capacity-building strategies to deliver ambitious, desired results. ESEA reauthorization should extend far greater leeway in the use of federal funds at the state and local levels, but only to those SEAs that adopt high-

quality accountability systems based on internationally benchmarked standards for college and career readiness. Incorporating these expectations into the reauthorization of ESEA will go far in ensuring students are truly prepared for college or rewarding careers.

Proposed Design Elements for Reauthorized ESEA Accountability System

The following provides an outline of design elements for a reauthorized accountability system for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as proposed by the Colorado Department of Education. The key features of this outline include establishing a new bright-line goal to replace “100 percent Proficient by 2014,” clear expectations for college and career readiness, and revision of the current AYP system for evaluating school and district performance. The proposed approach is consistent with recent Colorado legislation, specifically Alignment of Preschool to Postsecondary Education (SB 08-212) and the Education Accountability Act of 2009 (SB 09-163).

As a general approach, the Colorado Department of Education supports administrative flexibility being given to the states wherever possible in exchange for accountability. The department believes the following specific suggestions will help move ESEA in this direction:

1. Establish a new bright-line performance goal: Annual expectation of **100 Percent Ready by Exit** – Every student ready for college and career success by high school graduation. This would eliminate the arbitrary 2014 date and allow **each student’s needed timeline** to become the focus of parent, educator, school and district attention.
 - a. States would adopt a rigorous description of college and career readiness (CCR), aligned standards, and a measurement system that determines the rate of individual student **growth toward and attainment of CCR**.
 - b. States would be accountable for making necessary statewide progress toward the goal, and should accordingly hold districts and schools accountable for progress.
2. Measure and report student growth and achievement (attainment) in reaching CCR
 - a. States would measure **rates of individual student growth over time and their adequacy** toward CCR, as well as student **attainment** of standards-defined achievement levels along the way and at graduation.
 - b. Each state would measure and publicly and transparently report these growth rates and attainments for each disaggregated group of students.
3. Evaluate district and school performance
 - a. States would establish at least four levels corresponding to performance of schools and districts on the state metrics for growth and status, based on state-defined expectations for performance of schools and districts. States would have discretion over how to weigh growth and status in their system for determining the performance levels of schools and districts.

- b. States would establish criteria for determining the performance levels of schools and districts, based on disaggregated group performance and state expectations for closing gaps between groups.
 - c. States would specify the number of years a school or district may remain in the bottom two performance levels prior to loss of authorization to operate. No state plan would allow schools or districts to remain in the bottom two performance levels beyond five years. States would be permitted to allow more time for schools or districts that have demonstrated sufficient progress to move from the bottom performance level to the next performance level.
- 4. Report performance to the public
 - a. States would publicly and transparently report the performance of students in each school and district overall and by disaggregated groups based on the growth and status metrics established. This reporting would provide useful comparisons for parents, educators and all other stakeholders.
- 5. Establish rewards and sanctions for levels of performance
 - a. The U.S. Department of Education should establish a system of rewards and sanctions for state education agencies based on statewide performance.
 - b. States would develop rewards and sanctions for schools and districts based on their performance levels. Rewards would include financial incentives for high performance and sanctions would include turnaround or other intensive intervention for the lowest performance level (for chronically underperforming schools and districts) as a final effort prior to loss of authorization to operate.

Identifying Low-Performing Schools for Intervention

In reauthorizing ESEA, Congress should be cautious in prescribing the details of how to identify the bottom five percent of schools based on achievement and growth. Some flexibility is needed so that states can calibrate accountability systems to meet the performance improvement needs of their particular schools and districts. The essential condition is that states must have a credible approach and rationale and be publicly transparent in how they do this. For states without an approved accountability system designed to identify the bottom five percent, ESEA could contain a default approach.

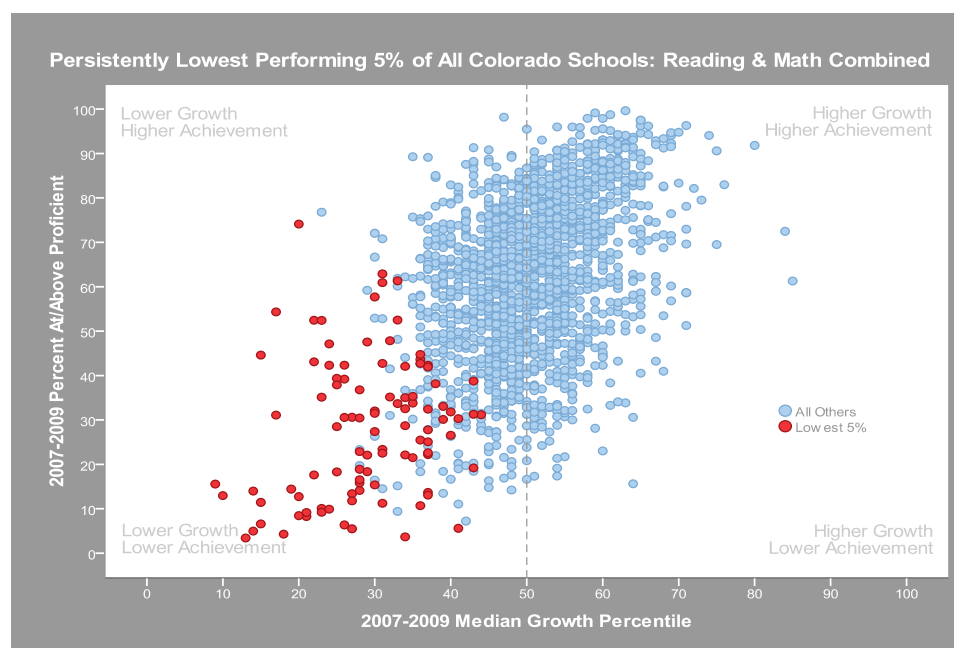
For example, there are more chronically low-performing schools in Colorado than we can effectively intervene in with federal School Improvement Grant [1003(g)] resources. (See figures below.) As we prioritize schools for intervention, we would like to consider persistence and severity of need and whether the intervention fits the problem and can have a scalable impact. Also, to help ensure success, we need to engage communities to understand and support the change. Uncertainty about who is on the “federal list” vs. the “state list” has been unhelpful and has set back our efforts to take on our lowest-performing schools.

To illustrate, consider two hypothetical low-performing schools. One is a high-poverty, chronically underperforming high school with 1,000 students and the other is a high-poverty, 50-student alternative

education school with 20 continuously enrolled students from one year to the next. The alternative school focuses on students who have been incarcerated or have drug treatment needs and helps transition kids back to regular high school or helps students earn GEDs. Many of these very students have experienced failure and disengagement at the comprehensive high school. Both schools are persistently low-performing, but the large high school is a few schools higher in the rankings and thus doesn't make it on the "Tier 2" list. However, its poor performance is a direct cause of the need for the alternative school, now targeted for turnaround.

Colorado would like discretion to determine which school to serve—to attack root causes rather than symptoms. The large high school is a good fit for turnaround. The alternative school is not. Forcing a leadership change at the alternative school could have a negative impact on student engagement and the school is doing about as well as other alternative schools. Without a doubt, we need to take on improvements in our alternative schools. However, state ownership and discretion are critical when we determine where to invest scarce resources in order to increase the supply of high-performing schools, to reach the largest number of students and maximize positive impact.

Conclusions on which schools constitute the bottom five percent depend on the particular analytical lens one uses to identify schools for intervention. Consider the following graphics. The first graphic shows the lowest-performing five percent of schools in Colorado based on standardized growth and achievement data (growth weighted 2:1) over a combined three-year period across reading and math. The second and third graphics show the same schools highlighted by subject area. The axes reflect combined three-year student median growth rates and percentages proficient or advanced. While the first graphic suggests a tight cluster of low-performing schools, the other graphics show the variability of performance by subject area. The point here is that there is not just one way to identify the lowest five-percent. Performance profiles vary by elementary, middle and high school levels. Some schools perform better in one subject or the other. ESEA should leave room for state discretion in making these determinations.



Persistently Lowest Performing 5% of All Colorado Schools: Reading



Persistently Lowest Performing 5% of All Colorado Schools: Math

