

Working Together for Student Success: Accountability, Data, and High Standards

A Public Hearing at Tulane University

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COMMISSION ON
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND
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The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) initiated a national commitment—and sustained national dialogue—to hold schools accountable for the achievement of *all* students. Students who often had been overlooked are no longer invisible, and many are now receiving the attention, resources, and interventions they need to improve. Students have made gains under the law’s disaggregated accountability policy—but they have not been large enough or fast enough to meet the significant challenges we face, and troubling achievement gaps remain pervasive. Once groundbreaking, NCLB (the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or ESEA) must now be updated and improved to help drive the dramatic progress our students and schools need.

In 2007, the Commission recommended preserving the law’s core emphasis on transparent, data-driven accountability for results, while making significant changes to its accountability structure. For example, the Commission recommended allowing states to incorporate “growth models” that measure individual student learning gains into their accountability systems, requiring all states to design and implement a longitudinal data system to measure student growth and teacher effectiveness, and creating voluntary model national standards and assessments. Considerable progress has been made toward these recommendations: 15 states are now participating in a federal growth model pilot, states have rapidly scaled up their data systems, and the state-led Common Core State Standards Initiative has produced common academic standards likely to be adopted in many states.

“We’ll lose lots of kids if we don’t pick up the pace of change in our schools. Strong accountability for results is the key to improving the education of all of our children.”

—Commissioner Delia Pompa, Vice President for Education, National Council of La Raza

The highly competitive Race to the Top Fund (RTT) is helping to drive state and local reform conversations in these and other areas emphasized by the Commission—but RTT/ARRA funding comes with different accountability rules and priorities than does ESEA funding. Accountability may get lost amongst competing federal programs, priorities, and requirements if ESEA—the anchor of K-12 federal policy—is not updated to reflect the shifting landscape, as well as incorporate needed changes like the use of growth models.

To help identify how best to improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the law’s core accountability provisions and examine the implications of the common standards movement and RTT activity, the Aspen Institute’s Commission on No Child Left Behind held the third in a series of national public hearings at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana—a city and state that have earned a national reputation for commitment to accountability and innovation.

Witnesses including district and state leaders as well as national experts agreed that a continued commitment to strong, transparent accountability for the achievement of *all* children is vital—but that there is work to be done at every level to raise standards (and adopt and implement high-quality *common* standards), improve assessments, increase capacity to use data, and refine accountability systems to more accurately reflect students’ achievement and progress.

To access the witnesses' testimonies and view a complete video of the proceedings, visit <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/no-child-left-behind/events>.

As it develops updated recommendations for the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act), the Commission will continue to examine information on this and other topics from a variety of sources, including expert testimony at future hearings and events, comments sent to the Commission, quality research, and discussions with stakeholders. To provide information for the Commission’s consideration, please visit www.nclbcommission.org and select “Your NCLB Comments.”

Witnesses Who Testified

- >> Paul Vallas, Superintendent, Recovery School District
 - >> Rich Wenning, Associate Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education
 - >> Aimee Rogstad Guidera, Executive Director, Data Quality Campaign
 - >> Sandy Kress, Former Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush and Former President, Dallas School Board
 - >> Dr. Judith Moening, Executive Director of Special Education, Northeast Unified School District, San Antonio, TX
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Highlights from Witnesses' Testimony

Superintendent **Paul Vallas** outlined the key ingredients that are helping to lift achievement in Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD), a state-run, school district created in 2003 to turn around low-performing schools, most of which are in New Orleans. In the four years since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has shown more growth in student achievement than any other district in the state, even while serving a more challenging and impoverished population. Vallas credited a combination of increased autonomy, choice, and flexibility for this improvement. The RSD takes over chronically low-performing schools, giving them

Emerging Issues

- ›› Transparent, disaggregated reporting of achievement results has prompted targeted interventions and higher achievement for struggling student groups.
- ›› ESEA's accountability provisions must be calibrated to drive continuous improvement for *all* students and schools through performance-based rewards and consequences, public reporting and transparency.
- ›› Growth measures must complement status achievement measures to improve the accuracy and fairness of accountability determinations.
- ›› College- and career-readiness by each student's graduation is a more meaningful, individualized goal than universal proficiency by 2014, now that states have greater capacity to measure individual student growth.
- ›› We must build capacity for assembling and using actionable, user-friendly data to inform daily and long-term stakeholder decisions.
- ›› The quality of assessments must be significantly improved, particularly for English language learners and students with disabilities.
- ›› High-quality common standards aligned to college- and work-readiness will help ensure that all children learn what they need to succeed beyond graduation—regardless of where they live.
- ›› Eight years into NCLB, "adequate yearly progress" is not well understood by the public.

substantial freedom and a clean break from the local school board's policies, procedures, contracts, and central office. New Orleans schools are the most decentralized in the nation, with sixty percent of the city's students attending charter schools and a rigorous screening process to ensure quality of new schools. Both charter and non-charter schools have autonomy over staffing and budgets, and all schools are schools of choice, with money following students to schools.

Vallas emphasized the importance of having a common curricula aligned to state standards, a longer school day and year, and a highly motivated, energetic teaching corps that is not bound by a collective

bargaining agreement. All of the city’s teachers are recruited, retained, and promoted based on performance, and the quality of school leadership is continually upgraded. Vallas recommended that the federal government significantly improve the quality of assessments, promote alternative pathways to the classroom, and require extended learning time.

Associate Commissioner of Education **Rich Wenning** described Colorado’s efforts to balance rewards, sanctions, and public reporting to promote stakeholder ownership and using education performance information to spur action. The state’s accountability system is geared toward continuous improvement in preparing all students to be college- or career-ready by the time they graduate from high school, which Wenning argued is a more meaningful, individualized timeline than 2014, the date at which current law requires all students to be on grade level.

Wenning testified that Colorado’s highly regarded growth model fills an important gap in NCLB’s current accountability system by measuring and clearly reporting student progress to let parents and educators know whether children are on track to catch up, keep up, or move up to reach achievement targets—which can be a more rigorous metric than is currently required. The focus on individual student performance over time helps ensure that all students receive the support they need to improve and that school performance can more accurately be gauged. SchoolView, the state’s innovative display tool that presents complicated information—such as gaps in how fast children are growing academically—in a user-friendly format, is fostering a much broader and more informed public conversation about school performance, he said. According to Wenning, Massachusetts has adopted Colorado’s growth model and several other states are also expected to adopt it.

“We’ve got to speak the truth about how far away we are from the goal [of all students reaching high standards of achievement], and make sure that parents and teachers can be active participants in that work.”

—Rich Wenning, Associate Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education

Wenning suggested that federal policy be changed to reward states that have strong accountability systems with greater latitude in their implementation and greater leeway in the use of federal funds. But he also argued that “NCLB needs a tougher backbone” to help remove the structural impediments around staffing, time, and funding that hinder progress toward dramatic increases in student achievement.

Aimee Guidera, Executive Director of the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), explained how and why translating data into actionable, user-friendly information to guide practice at every stakeholder level is foundational to meeting the goals of ESEA. According to Guidera, NCLB unlocked the transparent power of data, helping to shine unprecedented light on student and school performance and setting the stage for more nuanced, effective reforms and policies. But while states have made tremendous progress in collecting data and building longitudinal data systems in recent years, efforts to build capacity to use the data to inform decision-making have lagged. For instance, according to DQC’s latest survey, only nine states share individual progress reports with educators, and fewer than half provide reports to stakeholders using aggregate statistics.

Guidera argued that ESEA reauthorization is an opportunity to change the culture around data use from one of compliance and box-checking to one of continuous improvement—using data as a flashlight to

inform decisions and improve instruction. To accomplish this, she recommended that improved data capabilities be built into all aspects of ESEA. Capitalizing on increases in data quality, she said the next ESEA should incorporate more meaningful indicators of academic progress (such as growth measures) into accountability systems, as well as use data to both better support all teachers with targeted professional development and identify effective teachers based in part on their impact on improving student achievement. She emphasized the need for states to think about districts, schools, educators, and parents as customers and be proactive in making tailored information available to them—taking care to protect the privacy and security of individual student data.

Guidera said reauthorization should focus on helping states and districts establish policies that will improve teachers' and school leaders' ability to manage and use data, such as through professional development and in preparation programs. Further, governance bodies at the state and local level must work to align data efforts, protect the privacy and security of identifiable information while allowing appropriate data access and sharing, and break down silos that limit the usefulness of data in addressing policy, evaluation, and implementation questions.

Former senior advisor to President George W. Bush and president of the Dallas School Board **Sandy Kress** urged that ESEA maintain strong accountability for the achievement of all children. Kress reminded commissioners that ESEA passed because the federal government understood that school districts weren't doing enough to help disadvantaged students succeed. He argued that standards-based reform with consequential accountability, begun in the 1990s and accelerated with NCLB, is the "game changer" largely responsible for student gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Highlighting a series of score comparisons over time, Kress noted that Hispanic and Black students, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and the lowest-performing students in general have made the most significant progress under standards-based accountability, though less progress has been made among older students.

Kress argued that data-driven, standards-based accountability has worked increasingly well over the past decade to identify schools' strengths and weaknesses and drive action to close achievement gaps. Therefore, he said, to dismantle or weaken current subgroup accountability requirements for *all* schools receiving federal money (and the pressure to identify and remedy problems) would be a mistake, and is a fundamental flaw of the Obama Administration's ESEA reauthorization blueprint. Instead, these reforms, which have mostly been applied in the elementary grades, should be extended to the secondary level, and in appropriate ways to the postsecondary level, he said. While states should be permitted more flexibility in determining how to remedy failure, Kress stated that the federal government must nonetheless require states to make changes when necessary, and require the continuation (with improvement) of the law's tutoring and school choice options when disadvantaged students aren't making progress.

"...a sense of accountability, always subject to improvements in fairness and effectiveness, is the driving force behind the gains we've made and must continue to make."

—Sandy Kress, Former Senior Adviser to President George W. Bush and Former President, Dallas School Board

Dr. Judith Moening, Executive Director of Special Education at North East Unified School District (NEISD) in San Antonio, Texas, described her district's overhaul of its approach to educating students with disabilities

after their low performance caused many of the district's schools not to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The district mainstreamed most students with disabilities in general education classrooms and created "data coaching" teams to help school leadership throughout improve their use of data to improve student achievement. To foster a collaborative, comprehensive approach and shared ownership of students' performance, teams consist of general education, special education, technology, and English language learner specialists. The district created a web-based data management program to help schools connect student performance data to teachers and state standards. Students with disabilities receive targeted interventions and tutoring to close achievement gaps with their peers.

In 2008-09, for the first time every NEISD school made AYP, and students with disabilities' scores far exceeded state expectations, Moening reported. "Would these accomplishments have been possible without the impetus of a high-stakes accountability system that publicly held us accountable for the achievement of each and every student? I doubt it," she said. "We're in a different place than we were eight years ago. Now that we've instituted public accountability, we've found over time in my district that the idea of support between district administration and campus leadership teams has become a crucial factor in ongoing and continual improvement... We will partner at whatever level of support is required to make sure [students] don't fail... We've found that those consequences that are hammers have had to be employed less and less."

"The impact of NCLB on students with disabilities in my district cannot be overemphasized... North East has gone from being a district which measured the success of students with disabilities separately from that of typical students to a district in which campus principals brag about the pass rates of their students with disabilities on the state exam."

—Dr. Judith Moening, Executive Director of Special Education, North East Unified School District, San Antonio, TX

Witnesses' Recommendations for ESEA

Strengthening AYP, Standards, and Assessments

- Build a more coherent, transparent accountability system that drives continued improvement for all students and subgroups, as well as performance management capacity.
- Maintain disaggregated accountability for all subgroups.
- Include growth measures in Adequate Yearly Progress.
- Allow states to weight growth and status metrics in accountability determinations.
- Require states to have academic standards that prepare students for college and career success.
- Reorient the goal of federal accountability from universal proficiency in 2014 to college- and career-readiness by students' high school graduation.
- Significantly improve tests so that they can better inform growth measures and benchmark student progress.
- Extend standards-based reforms and accountability more significantly to the high school level.
- Continue to hold states, districts, and schools accountable for the achievement and performance of students with disabilities on rigorous assessments of state standards.

Improving the Use and Communication of Data

- Infuse a data-driven approach into all parts of ESEA.
- Continue to publicly report and widely disseminate vital information on student and school performance.
- Help states and districts build capacity to analyze and communicate data and establish policies that will improve teachers' and school leaders' ability to access, manage and use data to improve practice.
- Harmonize federal policy around linking and sharing data and limit the creation of separate federal data collections.

Offering Flexibility and Rewards for Improvement

- Give states with strong accountability systems greater latitude in their implementation and greater leeway in the use of federal funds.
- Increase funding flexibility for districts and schools.
- Support State Educational Agencies in repurposing to support school effectiveness, serving as providers and brokers of high-quality support and service to schools and districts.
- Require the U.S. Department of Education to establish a system of rewards and sanctions for State Educational Agencies based on statewide performance, and require states to develop rewards and sanctions for schools and districts.

Other Recommendations

- Require states and districts to remove barriers that prevent effective staffing, interventions and student options in failing schools.
- Require states and school districts to lengthen the school day and year.
- Promote alternative pathways to the classroom and performance-pay program.
- Encourage collaboration to benefit all at-risk students.
- Improve but do not dismantle parental choice options.

For Further Discussion

The Commission is seeking further comments from interested individuals and organizations on these topics:

- What changes to the ESEA accountability system are needed if some states adopt and implement common standards and assessments and others do not?
- How can we ensure that accountability systems are effective for students with disabilities and English language learners?
- How can we promote the effective use of data at all levels – from student to parent to educator to policymaker?

- In a time of tight budgets, what types of incentives and rewards for improved performance are most effective?
- What outcomes are most deserving of reward?
- How should growth and status be weighted in an accountability system?

Comments may be submitted via the Commission’s website, www.nclbcommission.org (select “Your NCLB Comments”).

What NCLB Currently Requires

Enacted in 2002, NCLB is the latest iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the bedrock of federal K-12 education policy. The stated goal of the law is to close the achievement gap that has long separated economically disadvantaged students and other groups, such as students of color, English language learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities, from their higher-achieving peers. NCLB holds schools accountable for improving outcomes for all students by requiring schools to disaggregate student data by subgroups, thus shining a spotlight on achievement gaps among groups of students. As a result, the urgent need to examine schools’ performance and close achievement gaps is now more widely understood and accepted. Holding schools accountable for the achievement of all groups of students helps to ensure that those groups that have been poorly served by schools receive the resources and interventions necessary to raise achievement, and that they are not “hidden” in schools’ overall performance scores.

Total funding for ESEA is approximately \$25 billion a year, with the “Title I Education for the Disadvantaged” program accounting for about 58% of that funding and driving the law’s key policies.ⁱ (The program received an additional one-time \$10 billion under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).) At the core of Title I are the well-known requirements that hold schools and districts accountable for the achievement of every child. Specifically, states must:

- Develop challenging academic content standards for reading, math, and science
- Assess all students annually against these standards in grades 3-8 and once in high school for reading and math, and in three grade spans (K-5, 6-9, 10-12) in science
- Set a definition of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—as measured by the state’s assessments and another indicator such as graduation or attendance rates—that ensures that all students meet the state’s “proficient” level of achievement by 2013-14¹
- Participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) every two years via representative samples of students in grades 4 and 8 (as a check on what states report based on their own assessments)

In addition, states and school districts must:

¹ This is known as the 100% or universal proficiency requirement. The date set for that goal, 2013-14, was twelve years—the length of a student’s entire elementary and secondary school experience—from the 2001-02 school year during which NCLB was developed and enacted.

- Publish state and district report cards showing student achievement data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, English proficiency, disability status, migrant status, and poverty, along with other information
- Undertake interventions specified in the law for schools that enter “improvement status,” “corrective action” or “restructuring,” after failing to make AYP for two or more consecutive years²

Some argue that NCLB’s accountability system is inconsistent and unfair. Because annual state assessments and longitudinal data for all students were not in place when the law was enacted, schools could not be given credit for the amount of growth individual students achieved. Instead, schools are held accountable for the absolute percentage of students who actually achieve proficiency each year—meaning that schools whose students make tremendous progress but fall short of the target fail to make AYP, while schools who produce little progress with less disadvantaged but initially higher-achieving students could make AYP.

In addition, because states have flexibility in determining the annual targets required on the path to proficiency for all students by 2014, there is variation among states in the percentage of students who must achieve proficiency for a school or district to make AYP.ⁱⁱ That means that a similar-performing school could make AYP in one state but not in another in a given year. States also vary in the rigor of their definition of proficiency, with assessments that range in difficulty and variation in the “cut scores” that students must reach to pass the tests.

Nationwide, the number of schools missing AYP continues to increase as achievement targets increase toward the 2014 deadline of 100% proficiency across all student subgroups. Many states and districts feel overwhelmed by and unprepared to deal with this reality. According to the Center on Education Policy, about one-third of U.S. public schools did not make AYP in 2008-09. Given variations in state standards, tests, and cut scores, the percentage of schools that missed AYP varied greatly by state; only six percent of Wisconsin schools failed to make AYP, compared to more than three-quarters of Florida’s schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although NCLB’s accountability provisions are often branded as tight and inflexible, there is substantial statistical wiggle room in achieving AYP. In addition to the variance in state approaches discussed above, schools can use the law’s “safe harbor” provision to achieve AYP. Under safe harbor, schools that otherwise miss the state proficiency target can make AYP if they reduce by ten percent the previous year’s percentage of students scoring below proficient. Other statistical adjustments that states use in varying degrees include^{iv}:

- *Confidence intervals.* Nearly every state uses a confidence interval, which creates a “buffer zone” that allows schools to make AYP if they are within a certain percentage of the target.
- *Minimum subgroup size.* The larger the state-set minimum subgroup size, the easier it is for schools to make AYP, because schools are not held accountable for the performance of any subgroup under that threshold.
- *Rolling averages.* States can average a school or district’s scores with those of the previous one to two years when calculating AYP.

² The first hearing of the Commission’s current series focused on School Improvement. For more information, see <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/2009/09/02/hearing-losing-patience-chronically-low-performing-schools>.

The application of these statistical adjustments—particularly when combined—results in a significant number of students effectively being exempted from states’ accountability systems.

Impact of the Law on Student Achievement

While no state is close to achieving universal proficiency, there are signs of progress and improvement. According to the Council of Great City Schools, urban schools are continuing to make important gains on state and NAEP reading and math assessments, and achievement gaps are narrowing.^v

A broader analysis of state assessment results conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that achievement gaps between subgroups narrowed in most states at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, most often because the achievement of lower-performing subgroups increased (as opposed to declining performance among higher-performing subgroups).^{vi} CEP found that the Latino-White gap narrowed in 79% of the instances analyzed, while the African-American-white gap narrowed in 77% of instances studied. CEP also found that students with disabilities have made progress in grade 4 at three achievement levels—basic-and-above, proficient-and-above, and advanced.^{vii}

Results of the 2009 NAEP reading assessment and math assessments show that scale scores are up for eighth graders compared with 2007, though they are level at fourth grade.^{viii} Significantly, gains were twice as large for the lowest-performing students. Noting that historically gains have been more likely and larger at fourth grade than at eighth grade, former Institute of Education Sciences Director Grover J. Whitehurst hypothesized that the recent eighth-grade gains “probably [reflect] children who benefited from better instruction in elementary school a few years ago now being tested in eighth grade, or education reforms that were focused on elementary school moving into middle school, or both.” Other promising gains include:

- Reading scores for Black fourth-graders are up six points—or about two-thirds of a year of schooling—since 2002 (the year NCLB was enacted). Black eighth-graders are up one point.
- Hispanic fourth-graders’ reading scores are up five points since 2002, while Hispanic eighth-graders are up two points.
- Black eighth-graders’ scores are up nine points since 2002.

Whitehurst cautions, however, that dramatic shifts in the demographics of the school-aged population, greater inclusion of students with disabilities and limited English proficiency and a host of other changes make it difficult to determine the impact of NCLB on NAEP scores.

Despite these improvements, achievement gaps remain large and pervasive, and as recent research has shown, these gaps have tragic consequences not only for individual students, but also for our collective standard of living. According to a McKinsey & Company study, the persistence of achievement gaps imposes the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession on our country. McKinsey found, for example, that if the gap between low-income students and the rest had been narrowed, the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to \$670 billion higher, or three to five percent of GDP.^{ix}

The Commission's 2007 Recommendations

Following a comprehensive review process with extensive public input, the Commission released *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children* (February 2007). The report is a blueprint for improving NCLB by preserving the law's core principles—including strong accountability for the achievement of *all* students—and making needed changes to accelerate progress toward achieving its goals. Key recommendations related to accountability, data and standards include:

- Allowing states to incorporate “growth models” that measure individual student learning gains into their accountability systems.
- Requiring all states to design and implement a longitudinal data system capable of measuring student growth and teacher effectiveness.
- Improving the quality, validity and reliability of assessments, including assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners (which require significant improvement).
- Requiring states to assess their reading and math content standards against college and workforce readiness standards in partnership with higher education and business representatives.
- Developing model national content standards in reading and math that states could choose to adopt, with periodic comparisons of the rigor of all state standards relative to the national model standards using a common metric.

What Has Changed Since the Commission Released Its Recommendations

New Pilot Initiatives

After Congress failed to reauthorize NCLB on time in 2007, the U.S. Department of Education began to take administrative steps to improve the law where possible, including development of two pilot initiatives.

- **Growth Model Pilot** – Between May 2006 and January 2009, fifteen states were chosen for a pilot to allow states to give schools credit in their accountability systems for schools and districts that make significant progress in moving students to proficiency.^x Using different models and methodologies, participating states track individual student achievement over time to determine whether the student is likely to reach proficiency in a reasonable timeframe. A recent interim report examining eight states active in the pilot's 2006-07 year found that growth models were helping more schools—particularly high-poverty, high-minority, urban schools—to make AYP.^{xi} Across participating states, 3% of schools made AYP uniquely because of growth models, but the percentages varied widely by state.^{xii} The Department of Education's final report will examine in more detail the factors contributing to this variation.
- **Differentiated Accountability Pilot** – Between July 2008 and January 2009, nine states were chosen for a “Differentiated Accountability” pilot initiative allowing states to develop more nuanced accountability systems that better distinguish between schools in need of significant interventions and those that are closer to meeting achievement goals and need more minor adjustments. Participating states may develop and implement their own methods of categorizing schools identified for improvement, and customize plans for improvement and restructuring based on the individual needs of schools.^{xiii} While little information is available regarding preliminary outcomes and lessons under the pilot, a recent report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) examined four

participating states and found that each had tailored their accountability systems to meet local needs “based on what they believe will work best in their states.”^{xiv}

Enhanced Data Capacity

While NCLB does not explicitly call for the creation of statewide data systems, the requirements for the collection and dissemination of assessment and accountability information imply the need for systems to efficiently manage large amounts of data. Surveys by the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) show that states have made remarkable progress in recent years in developing data systems to better inform decisions in classrooms, schools, legislatures, and other areas. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia have received grants under the Institute of Education Sciences’ State Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program.^{xv} \$58.3 million was appropriated for the program in Fiscal Year 2010, with an additional \$250 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

In 2009, 31 states had eight or more of the ten components DQC deems essential to a high-quality longitudinal data system.^{xvi} All but two states have the ability to match students’ test records to measure academic growth from year to year. States have made less progress in adopting policies necessary for addressing college and career readiness and measuring teacher effectiveness.

Enhancements to data capacity will continue, however. In order to receive ARRA funding, every state has committed to building by 2011 a longitudinal data system that follows students through the P-20 education system and into the workforce. But states’ ability to use the data they are collecting has not kept pace with increases in technical capacity. DQC has identified ten state actions for effective data use, including developing data governance structures, implementing systems to provide timely access to information, and building stakeholders’ capacity to use longitudinal data.^{xvii} Forty-three states have implemented three or fewer of DQC’s recommended state actions to date.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus that the current patchwork of state standards and assessments puts the U.S. at a competitive disadvantage and ill serves increasingly mobile students, who are held to different expectations depending on where they live. A majority of states are now participating in the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an effort led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association in partnership with Achieve, Inc., ACT and the College Board. Last summer, governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states (all but Alaska and Texas), two territories and the District of Columbia committed to developing a common core of research and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked, state standards aligned with college and work expectations in English language arts and mathematics for grades K-12.^{xviii}

On June 2nd, CCSSO and NGA issued final grade-by-grade K-12 academic standards aligned to the initiative’s college and workforce readiness standards released last fall. States must now decide whether to adopt them. CCSSO and NGA reportedly will not craft new curriculum or assessments based on the new standards, leaving to others those vital components which give standards meaning beyond aspirations.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)

The ARRA provides significant fiscal support to states and requires states accepting that funding to make progress on critical education reforms—commonly known as the four “assurances”—which include

improving data systems, standards, assessments, and teacher effectiveness, and turning around the lowest-performing schools.

- **State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF)** – \$48.6 billion in formula grants for all states was authorized under ARRA for the purpose of saving jobs and advancing education reform. In order to receive the initial round of SFSF funding (which has already been released), all governors pledged to improve data systems, standards, and assessments and make progress on the other two policy assurances. Applications for the second round of funding were due in January.
- **The Race to the Top Fund** – \$4.35 billion was authorized for this ARRA competitive grant program to drive substantial gains in student achievement. States applying for and receiving grants through this program must demonstrate progress in and a comprehensive approach to addressing all four policy assurances noted above. The U.S. Department of Education’s requirements for the Fund include a number of criteria related to states’ progress in and plans for improving data systems, standards, and assessments. State applications win points for activities such as^{xix}:
 - Participating in a consortium of a significant number of states to develop common standards and assessments aligned to them
 - Adopting common standards in 2010 and commitment to implement the standards thereafter “in a well-planned way”
 - Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system and using data to improve instruction

On March 29th, Delaware and Tennessee were chosen among 16 finalists to win funding in the first phase of the program. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia applied for funding under the second phase of funding, which are likely to be awarded in September. Under the program scoring rubric, state applications will be more competitive if they adopt the final Common Core State Standards Initiative standards by August 2nd.^{xx} Secretary Duncan has reserved up to \$350 million of Race to the Top funds to support states in the development of a “next generation” of high-quality assessments aligned to common standards.

Obama Administration’s ESEA Blueprint

On March 13th, the U.S. Department of Education released “A Blueprint for Reform,” a statement of the Administration’s vision for ESEA reauthorization. The blueprint addresses longstanding Commission priorities such as teacher and principal effectiveness measures primarily focused on student achievement, more aggressive interventions in chronically low-performing schools, higher expectations for students, and the inclusion of student growth in accountability systems. But the blueprint’s approach to accountability has raised questions about its potential to weaken efforts to hold schools accountable for the achievement of *all* children. Important details on this and other priorities remain for Congress to determine.

The blueprint would preserve annual assessments and public reporting of disaggregated data, but eliminate the current 2014 deadline for universal student proficiency, substituting a goal of college and career readiness for all students by 2020. AYP would be eliminated in favor of a new system aimed at college and career readiness and measured based on whole-school and subgroup achievement and growth (and graduation rates for high schools).

States and districts would be given substantial latitude in determining how to deal with schools that miss the new achievement targets. Education Sector offers this summary:

“The proposal would create three new tiers of schools. At one end would be “Reward” schools, schools that were successful in meeting performance benchmarks, raising student achievement, or closing gaps. These schools would be granted greater flexibility and may receive financial rewards as well. On the other end would be “Challenge” schools, schools that the state would select as being in the bottom five percent of performance. Challenge schools would be subject to one of four reform options (transformational, turnaround, restart, or closure) already in use for School Improvement Grants. Another five percent of schools will be slotted into a warning category that would allow states and districts flexibility on improvement strategies.”^{xxi}

The blueprint lacks a clear statement of urgency to improve the vast majority of schools that do not fall into the bottom five to ten percent or qualify as “Reward” schools—meaning that most schools could potentially avoid taking real action to remedy their shortcomings, thereby shortchanging many children. If that were allowed to happen, an otherwise high-achieving school could continually fail one subgroup and never have to take action to remedy that failure.

Another significant shift in the blueprint is a proposed requirement that “beginning in 2015, [certain ESEA] formula funds will be available only to states that are implementing assessments based on college- and career-ready standards that are common to a significant number of states.” Some charge that this requirement amounts to federal coercion of states to adopt the final standards produced by the Common Core State Standards Initiative—the only large-scale effort of its kind—an initiative whose support in some quarters is contingent upon its remaining a state-led effort.

Challenges for a New ESEA on Accountability, Data, and Standards

The next ESEA must address a number of complex policy challenges. While continuing to hold schools accountable for the achievement of *all* children, the law’s accountability provisions must be updated to:

- *Incorporate growth measures.* Policymakers at the federal or state level will need to decide how much growth is enough to “count,” and how growth and “status” (absolute proficiency) measures will be weighted.
- *Incorporate meaningful high school accountability.* The Commission will examine that topic in a future hearing.
- *Recognize the state-led movement toward common standards and assessments.* A number of states are likely to adopt common standards that prepare children for college and careers—which are likely to be a higher bar than many states have currently. The law must account for this development, but also ensure that higher standards do not become an empty aspiration by not continuing to hold schools accountable for helping students reach those standards.
- *Improve results for ELLs and students with disabilities.* States have made significant but insufficient progress in improving instruction and assessments for ELLs and students with disabilities.
- *Improve use of data.* Accountability systems must generate clear, timely, and actionable information to inform decisions at all levels, and capacity must be built to use it.

About the Commission

The Commission on No Child Left Behind is a bipartisan effort to identify and build support for improvements in federal education policy to spur academic achievement and close persistent achievement gaps. Following a comprehensive review process with extensive public input, the Commission in 2007 released a blueprint for strengthening the landmark No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by preserving the law's core principles and making needed changes to accelerate progress toward achieving its goals, particularly in the areas of teacher and principal effectiveness, robust accountability and data, higher academic standards, stronger high schools, and increased options for students. The Commission will continue to advocate bold reform during the ESEA reauthorization process and consideration of related measures in pursuit of an excellent education for all children.

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