

# COLORADO



*Colorado's accountability system puts a strong emphasis on growth, which gives schools an incentive to focus on all of their students. Rewarding schools that help more students achieve at an "advanced" level would further improve the system.*

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS ANALYSIS

The Every Student Succeeds Act grants states more authority over their school accountability systems than 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. Namely, it created strong incentives for schools to focus all their energy on helping low-performing students get over a modest "proficiency" bar, while ignoring the educational needs of their high achievers, who were likely to pass state reading and math tests regardless of what happened in the classroom. This may be why the United States has seen significant achievement growth 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 important for a variety of reasons. First, growth measures more accurately evaluate schools' impact on student achievement than proficiency rates, which are strongly correlated with student demographics, family circumstance, and prior achievement. But just as significantly, well-designed growth measures can eliminate the temptation for schools to ignore their high achievers.

ESSA maintains NCLB's requirement that states assess students annually in grades 3–8 and once in high school, as well as the mandate that states adopt accountability systems that lead to ratings for schools. These systems must include four types of indicators: academic achievement; another academic indicator, which can include student growth for elementary and middle schools; growth towards English proficiency for English language learners; and at least one other valid, reliable indicator of school quality or student success. Each of the academic indicators (1–3) must carry "substantial" weight and, in the aggregate, must count "much more" than the fourth.

Here we examine whether Colorado's accountability system prioritizes high achievers. We specifically evaluate the state's system for rating school performance during the 2013-2014 school year—the most recent year for which information is available. We do not examine the quality of Colorado's standards, tests, or sanctions for low performance.

This analysis also illustrates how states can seize the opportunity under ESSA to redesign their accountability systems and prioritize high achievers.

This last point is especially important because many state accountability systems are currently in flux. In part, that's because of recent changes allowed by ESEA waivers, as well as the coming changes driven by ESSA implementation. But it's also because states across the country recently moved to new, tougher assessments linked to their new, tougher standards.

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.

Our focus here is on rating systems for elementary and middle schools. A separate analysis will examine the same issues for high school accountability.

## HOW STATES CAN PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS IN THEIR 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 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 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 “basic,” full credit for getting students to “proficient,” and additional credit for getting students to “advanced.” (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. **For the second academic indicator expected by ESSA (student growth), rate schools using a “true growth model,” i.e., one that looks at 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, or else they 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 “value added” or the “growth percentile method”—for all students is much preferred.

3. **Include “gifted students” (or “high achieving students”) as a subgroup in the state’s accountability system and report results for them separately.** States can signal that high achievers matter by making them a visible, trackable “subgroup,” akin to special education students or English language learners, and publishing school ratings for their progress and/or achievement. (Obviously, it makes little sense to simply report that high achievers are high-achieving. But whether they are making strong growth is quite relevant. Alternatively, states might publish results for students labeled as “gifted,” though that opens up a can of worms about how that label is applied.)
  
4. **When determining summative school ratings, make growth—across the achievement spectrum—count the most.** Finally, the Department of Education’s proposed regulations require states to combine multiple factors into summative school ratings, probably through an index. Each of the three academic indicators (achievement, growth, and progress toward English proficiency) must carry “substantial” weight. But in our view, states should (and, under ESSA, are free to) make growth matter the most (50 percent or more of a school’s total score). Otherwise, schools will continue to face an incentive to ignore their high-performers. (States that don’t combine their indicators into a summative school rating receive a “Not Applicable” here.)

**DOES COLORADO’S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM PRIORITIZE HIGH ACHIEVERS?**





INDICATOR	RATINGS	NOTES
1. Does the state rate schools’ “academic achievement” using a model that gives additional credit for students achieving at an “advanced” level?		Colorado does not give additional credit for students achieving at an “advanced” level. <sup>1</sup>
2. Does the state rate schools’ growth using a model that looks at the progress of all individual students, not just those below the “proficient” line?		Colorado uses a student growth percentile model. <sup>2</sup> A student growth percentile model compares students to peers with similar achievement in the previous school year by ranking them based on their year-to-year growth.
3. Does the state’s accountability system include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup and report their results separately?		Colorado does not include “gifted students,” “high-achieving students,” or the like as a subgroup or report their results separately. <sup>3</sup> (See Exhibits A and B.)
4. When calculating summative school ratings, does “growth for all students” count for at least half of the rating?		“Growth for all students” counts for 50 percent of a school’s summative rating. (See Exhibits A and B)

EXHIBIT A<sup>4</sup>

School Performance Framework 2014			Level: M	
School: CHALLENGER MIDDLE SCHOOL - 0074			District: ACADEMY 20 - 1040 (1 Year)	
Performance	Performance Indicators	Rating	% of Points Earned out of Points Eligible <sup>2</sup>	
<p>This is the plan type the school is required to adopt and implement, based on the 1 Year School Performance Framework. Schools are assigned a plan type based on the overall percent of points earned for the official year. The official percent of points earned is matched to the scoring guide below to determine the plan type. Additionally, failing to meet test administration and/or test participation assurances will result in a lower plan type category.</p> <p><b>Plan Assignment</b>                      <b>Framework Points Earned</b></p> <p>Performance                              at or above 59%</p> <p>Improvement                            at or above 47% - below 59%</p> <p>Priority Improvement                    at or above 37% - below 47%</p> <p>Turnaround                                below 37%</p> <p>Framework points are calculated using the percentage of points earned out of points eligible. For schools with data on all indicators, the total points possible are: 25 points for Academic Achievement, 50 for Academic Growth, and 25 for Academic Growth Gaps.</p>	Academic Achievement	Exceeds	100.0%	( 25.0 out of 25 points )
	Academic Growth	Meets	75.0%	( 37.5 out of 50 points )
	Academic Growth Gaps	Meets	70.8%	( 17.7 out of 25 points )
	Test Participation <sup>3</sup>	Meets 95% Participation Rate		
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>80.2%</b>	<b>( 80.2 out of 100 points )</b>

<sup>2</sup>Schools may not be eligible for all possible points on an indicator due to insufficient numbers of students. In these cases, the points are removed from the points eligible, so scores are not negatively impacted.

<sup>3</sup>Schools do not receive points for test participation. However, schools are assigned one plan type category lower than their points indicate if they do not (1) meet at least a 95% participation rate in all or all but one content area (reading, writing, math, science, social studies and COACT), or (2) for schools serving multiple levels (elementary, middle and high school grades, e.g., a 6-12 school), meet at least a 95% participation rate in all or all but one content area when individual content area rates are rolled up across school levels (elementary, middle and high school grades).

EXHIBIT B<sup>5</sup>

Scoring Guide						Level: M	
Scoring Guide for Performance Indicators on the School Performance Framework Report							
Performance Indicator	Scoring Guide	Rating	Point Value	Total Possible Points per EMH Level	Framework Points		
Academic Achievement	<p>The school's percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at or above the 90th percentile of all schools (using 2009-10 baseline).</li> <li>below the 90th percentile but at or above the 50th percentile of all schools (using 2009-10 baseline).</li> <li>below the 50th percentile but at or above the 15th percentile of all schools (using 2009-10 baseline).</li> <li>below the 15th percentile of all schools (using 2009-10 baseline).</li> </ul>	Exceeds	4	16 (4 for each subject area)	25		
		Meets	3				
		Approaching	2				
		Does Not Meet	1				
		TCAP	4				
Academic Growth	<p>Made AGP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at or above 60.</li> <li>below 60 but at or above 45.</li> <li>below 45 but at or above 30.</li> <li>below 30.</li> </ul> <p>Did Not Make AGP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at or above 70.</li> <li>below 70 but at or above 55.</li> <li>below 55 but at or above 40.</li> <li>below 40.</li> </ul>	Exceeds	4	14 (4 for each subject area and 2 for English language proficiency)	50		
		Meets	3				
		Approaching	2				
		Does Not Meet	1				
		TCAP	4				
Academic Growth Gaps	<p>Made AGP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at or above 60.</li> <li>below 60 but at or above 45.</li> <li>below 45 but at or above 30.</li> <li>below 30.</li> </ul> <p>Did Not Make AGP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at or above 70.</li> <li>below 70 but at or above 55.</li> <li>below 55 but at or above 40.</li> <li>below 40.</li> </ul>	Exceeds	4	60 (4 for each of 5 subgroups in 3 subject areas)	25		
		Meets	3				
		Approaching	2				
		Does Not Meet	1				
		TCAP	4				

Cut-Points for Each Performance Indicator			Cut-Points for Plan Type Assignment		
Achievement; Growth; Growth Gaps	Cut Point: The school earned ... of the points eligible on this indicator.	Rating	Total Framework Points	Cut Point: The school earned ... of the total framework points eligible.	Plan Type
	at or above 87.5%	Exceeds	59%	at or above 59%	Performance
	at or above 62.5% - below 87.5%	Meets		at or above 47% - below 59%	Improvement
	at or above 37.5% - below 62.5%	Approaching		at or above 37% - below 47%	Priority Improvement
	below 37.5%	Does Not Meet		below 37%	Turnaround

School Plan Type Assignments		
Plan description	Plan description	Plan description
Performance Plan	The school is required to adopt and implement a Performance Plan.	A school may not implement a Priority Improvement and/or Turnaround Plan for longer than a combined total of five consecutive years before the State Board of Education must direct the authorizing district's local school board or the Institute to restructure or close the school. The five consecutive school years commence on July 1 of the summer immediately following the fall in which the school is notified that it is required to implement a Priority Improvement or Turnaround Plan.
Improvement Plan	The school is required to adopt and implement an Improvement Plan.	
Priority Improvement Plan	The school is required to adopt and implement a Priority Improvement Plan.	
Turnaround Plan	The school is required to adopt and implement a Turnaround Plan.	

**ENDNOTES**

1. “School and District Performance Framework Overview,” Colorado Department of Education, page 13, accessed May 3, 2016, [https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/spfdpf\\_technicalwriteup\\_072814](https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/spfdpf_technicalwriteup_072814).
2. *Ibid*, 19.
3. *Ibid*, 7-8.
4. “2014 School Performance Framework Challenger Middle School,” Colorado Department of Education, page 1, accessed May 3, 2016, <https://cedar2.cde.state.co.us/documents/SPF2014/1040%20-%200074%20-%201%20Year.pdf>.
5. *Ibid*, 3.