

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA): Accountability Work Group Meeting #1 – June 14, 2016

I. Anticipated Timeline of ESSA Stakeholder Engagement in Pennsylvania¹



2. Scope of Accountability Work Group²

Under ESSA, Pennsylvania must establish a statewide accountability system to include indicators related to academic achievement (proficiency), academic progress (growth measures), English language proficiency, graduation rates, and student engagement/school quality that “meaningfully differentiate” schools. (For a more detailed breakdown of ESSA’s impact on accountability and school improvement, please see the [ESSA vs. No Child Left Behind crosswalk document](#).)

The Accountability work group’s charge is to develop framework recommendations for state accountability policy with respect to ESSA, bearing in mind that the new federal law – and its corresponding [proposed draft regulations](#) – would continue to require that states place a heavy emphasis on standardized assessment results in identifying schools for improvement, intervention, and support. Work group members were also encouraged to be mindful of (but not necessarily bound by) relevant state policy to ensure as coherent an approach as possible. (A [crosswalk](#) of ESSA requirements and current Pennsylvania law and regulation was provided to work group members ahead of the June 14 meeting and is available on the Department’s ESSA webpage.)

The Accountability work group discussion was facilitated by Alissa Peltzman of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). PA Department of Education (PDE) staff were also available to provide support and assistance, as needed.

3. Emerging Themes – Accountability

The Accountability work group identified several key themes during discussions on June 14:

1. Achievement data, measured against an absolute standard, should carry less weight than transparent, valid measures of student growth. Assessment goals reflected in the state

¹ Note: In its [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\) on accountability, state plans, and data reporting](#), published in the Federal Register on May 31, 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) proposed two deadlines for state education agencies to choose to submit their State Plan(s) under ESSA: March 6 or July 5, 2017. These deadlines are [proposed](#), and timelines will depend on final promulgated regulations as well as further guidance from USDE.

² Discussion notes from the April 28 breakout sessions on accountability are available on PDE’s [website](#).

accountability system should help all students reach their potential by being both aspirational and achievable.

2. Pennsylvania's accountability system should include indicators beyond achievement data that reflect a school's contributions to student achievement to include school climate and student success indicators such as career readiness. (Specific indicators will be a critical area of focus during the next work group meeting on August 30.)
3. Where the accountability system drives interventions, those interventions should be evidence-based, should allow for flexibility based on local context, should explicitly address multiple domains to ensure a comprehensive approach, should be monitored for faithful implementation, and should be supported with appropriate resources.

The Accountability work group also used Pennsylvania's experience with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to rethink previously-prescribed school improvement strategies. For example, measures of stability and sustainability were emphasized ahead of approaches that emphasize dramatic shifts (such as replacing half of a building's faculty or closing a school), and members felt strongly that NCLB's focus on a school's deficits should be tempered with attention to a school's strengths and opportunities to expand on them.

4. Discussion Points – Accountability

Before diving in, work group members were encouraged to identify goals and parameters for the day's discussions by completing the following sentence: "*Stay focused on decisions, strategies, and design plans that _____.*"

Responses included:

- Advance and ensure equity
- Respectfully hold all schools accountable
- Prepare students to be career ready
- Make schools pleasant places for educators, students, and community
- Rely on data-driven, evidence-based, and promising practices – not politics or government agendas
- Allow for a strategic plan
- Close the achievement gap
- Accurately reflect what is happening in schools
- Push the limits and go further than the minimum requirements of ESSA
- Hold schools and communities accountable for growth by exploring school culture
- Go beyond the required racial/ethnic minority subgroup reporting required by ESSA
- Contemplate the world high school students enter when they graduate
- Stay focused on child-centered outcomes
- Include resources that support accountability and school improvement

A summary of the day's emerging themes and related discussion points is below.

Emerging Theme #1: Achievement data, measured against an absolute standard, should carry less weight than transparent, valid measures of student growth. Assessment goals reflected in the state accountability system should help all students reach their potential by being both aspirational and achievable.

- Need to ensure we are measuring growth accurately; some work group members cited potential variability in growth measures poverty as a variable for which to control in any growth model.
- Growth can help balance and mitigate effects of poverty and other out-of-school factors (versus “point in time” achievement data) while setting achievable academic targets for all students.
- Growth can’t be measured until we determine where to begin; need to establish long-term goals, identify gaps (e.g., pre- and post-tests), and develop evidence-based strategies to fill them.
- Assessment should better account for student transiency and poverty, with a focus on student potential and improvement rather than a set benchmark.

Emerging Theme #2: Pennsylvania’s accountability system should include indicators beyond achievement data that reflect a school’s contributions to student achievement to include school climate and student success indicators such as career readiness. (Specific indicators will be a critical area of focus during the next work group meeting on August 30.)

- Accountability system should include multiple indicators that focus on equity (access, inputs) and holistic elements that contribute to student success; schools should be good places for kids to be, and offer many opportunities for learning.
- Current accountability indicators/domains are too narrow, and do not address important issues like school climate.
- In addition to expanding measures beyond achievement data to include school climate, state should align resources to those broader, more holistic areas (e.g., adding social supports and resources).
- Pennsylvania’s career and technical education (CTE) community is an example of the importance of leadership and student engagement in improving academic achievement and success.
- Tying educator accountability to point-in-time standardized assessments (PSSAs, Keystone Exams) isn’t working; educator evaluation should be disconnected from these tests.
- Need for research and evidence of “what works” for instruction; members discussed the example of “highly qualified teacher” requirements established under No Child Left Behind as an example of requirements that did not deliver the impact policy makers expected for students.
- Use four, five and six year cohorts for measuring graduation rates.
- Measurements should be diagnostic and provide clear accountability roles for each stakeholder (teacher, principal, administrator, etc.).

Emerging Theme #3: Where the accountability system drives interventions, those interventions should be evidence-based, should allow for flexibility based on local context, should explicitly address multiple domains to ensure a comprehensive approach, should be monitored for faithful implementation, and should be supported with appropriate resources.

- Mental health needs should be supported and integrated in the school building (e.g., provide counselors or mental health professionals in each school), as well as afterschool programs as an integral approach to supporting schools.
- Integration of community resources (people, not just money) and social workers to more holistically and effectively address students’ needs.
- State should tie school improvement strategies to evidence, rather than attempting drastic governance or structural changes that have not yielded improvements.
- Accountability system should trigger research-based interventions backed by state financial and other support; schools should be rewarded for adhering to interventions and committing to full implementation.
- Interventions should be trauma-informed and responsive to the social, emotional, and health needs of students and the communities they live in.
- Interventions for low-performing schools shouldn’t be a “one size fits all” approach; system should recognize that challenges and opportunities are different for each school.

- State should explore how the school district is spending money and investing resources to address gaps and challenges.
- Work group members expressed concern that there is currently no framework in place to help low-performing schools improve.
- Parent and family engagement must be prioritized.
- State should provide guidance on how to spend Title I dollars reserved for school improvement for lowest-performing schools.
- Interventions and improvement strategies should focus on promoting stability among programs, training, and a long-term timeline, instead of trying something out then moving away from it quickly (e.g., initiatives need to be in place for more than one year).
- School improvement interventions should empower teachers and promote best practices for classroom instruction.
- PDE should provide robust technical support; act as a connector to expertise, research, and best practices.
- All schools need services; state should play a connecting role here as well.
- Continue to leverage IUs as a resource for school districts (can help districts navigate support services as a core function).
- Desire for local autonomy concerning interventions.

5. Other Discussion Areas – Accountability

In addition to the emerging themes and discussion points identified above, work group members also addressed the following:

- **Accountability to Support the Whole Child:** Throughout the day, work group members raised the importance of designing accountability systems that promote broader conceptions of student success.
- **Resource and Capacity Issues:** Pennsylvania’s recent budget impasse and longer-term funding issues (e.g., unfunded mandates, significant gaps in per-student spending, etc.) create major challenges for schools. Absent additional resources, schools must find other ways to support themselves and their students. In addition, work group members raised the issue of local capacity, including quality of leadership, and the challenges of trying to fit school improvement efforts into other required initiatives (Comprehensive Planning, Chapter 4 requirements, etc.).
- **Clear, Concise, and Credible Accountability System:** Work group members discussed the importance of developing a clear and simple accountability system that is easy to understand and is highly credible.
- **Importance of Stability in Driving School Improvement:** Members discussed the negative impact of frequent program changes and pivoting priorities on school improvement efforts. Many of the interventions prescribed under NCLB did not work, or did not provide enough time for implementation and evaluation. State should provide breathing room and – to the extent possible – stability and predictability for local school leaders looking to implement tailored, evidence-based interventions.
- **Data Matters:** While work group members were not asked to develop a specific list of recommended accountability system indicators and weights, they did contemplate the types of indicators that Pennsylvania should consider adopting under ESSA. Within these discussions, work group members raised the need for indicators that are comprehensive, holistic, valid, and can inform school improvement efforts. Members also discussed the importance of disaggregation, as well as the challenges that an N size might present, especially for smaller school districts (nearly half of Pennsylvania’s school districts have fewer than 2,000 students).