

# re:VISION

## School Accountability Systems and The Every Student Succeeds Act

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The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) replaced the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) in December 2015, substantially changing the federal role in education and how schools across the country will be held accountable. For state policymakers, designing new ESSA-compliant accountability systems is a significant opportunity and a serious responsibility.

Both NCLB and ESSA are reauthorizations of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1964 (ESEA) and have important similarities and striking differences in their approaches to school accountability. Under NCLB, states complied with rigid federal requirements for setting performance goals on grade-level standardized tests for students from all backgrounds and implemented mandated interventions in schools if those goals were not met. ESSA – like its predecessor – continues to require states to conduct grade-level testing, report results by subgroup, and implement school accountability systems; however, **ESSA gives states**

**greater authority to determine the specifics of what is measured and how those measures are used in school accountability.** The new law does not give *carte blanche* to the states, but it does give significantly increased flexibility. ESSA opens the door for innovation in school accountability systems, while the responsibility for maintaining high expectations for all students rests squarely on the shoulders of the states. This issue of *re:VISION*, designed to inform state accountability policy, pairs the specific ESSA accountability requirements with important design considerations in light of these requirements and the opportunity afforded by the new flexibility.

## CONTEXT: ACCOUNTABILITY IN K-12 EDUCATION

Most school accountability systems have a common rationale: if states measure and report important student outcomes and identify, reward and sanction schools based on their results, then schools and educators will seek to do their best to achieve those outcomes. As the dictum holds, “What gets measured gets done.”

This logic led some pioneering states like Texas and North Carolina to implement accountability systems in the 1990s, and also led to the passage of NCLB in 2001. NCLB significantly influenced schooling across the country by requiring the use of test-based student outcomes for school accountability. Evidence indicates that school accountability has had some positive, albeit modest, [effects](#) on student outcomes. **But NCLB fell short of its ambitious goal: the proficiency of all students by 2014.**<sup>1</sup>

Though praised for drawing attention to persistent achievement gaps, NCLB also faced many criticisms, including that it over-emphasized standardized testing and unintentionally led some states to lower their standards to avoid the law’s mandated interventions and sanctions. Starting in 2012, the Obama administration gave states some respite from the school accountability requirements of NCLB through ESEA flexibility. This temporary flexibility was granted in exchange for new commitments to policy reform in teacher evaluation, content standards and interventions in low-performing schools – a different, but arguably more prescriptive set of federal requirements.

With the passage of ESSA, the U.S. Congress has made clear that while the federal mandate for school accountability is important and here to stay, Congress intends NCLB-era school accountability to be reworked *largely by states* in the pursuit of better outcomes for students.

## Content Standards, Assessments and Long-Term Goals in ESSA

Content standards – descriptions of what students must know and be able to do at each grade level – and assessments – tests measuring students’ achievement of those standards – are, as University of California researcher Morgan Polikoff put it, “[the foundations upon which the current system of standards-based accountability in U.S. education is built.](#)”<sup>2</sup> ESSA is built on a similar foundation.

### Content Standards

ESSA, like NCLB, requires states to establish content standards. States must adopt “challenging state academic content standards” in English language arts, mathematics and science. These standards must apply to all public schools and public school students and align to entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the state’s system of public higher education. Neither the federal government nor the secretary of education can have any influence over the state standards, and the standards are not submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

### Assessments

ESSA requires that students take assessments of the state content standards in English language arts, mathematics and science (see chart for required grade levels).

**The ESSA testing requirements are virtually identical to the NCLB requirements.** In the drafting

process for ESSA, many civil rights and equity-focused organizations advocated strongly and successfully to maintain the testing requirements from NCLB. Grade-level testing and subgroup accountability help ensure that groups of students that have historically struggled are counted and schools are held accountable for all students. Additionally, grade-level testing allows the measurement of [student growth from year to year](#), a useful measure of educational success that will likely feature in most states’ ESSA-compliant accountability systems (discussed further on page 4).<sup>3</sup>

ESSA Testing Requirements

Grade	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10-12
Math	X	X	X	X	X	X	Once in this span	
English	X	X	X	X	X	X	Once in this span	
Science	Once in this span			Once in this span			Once in this span	

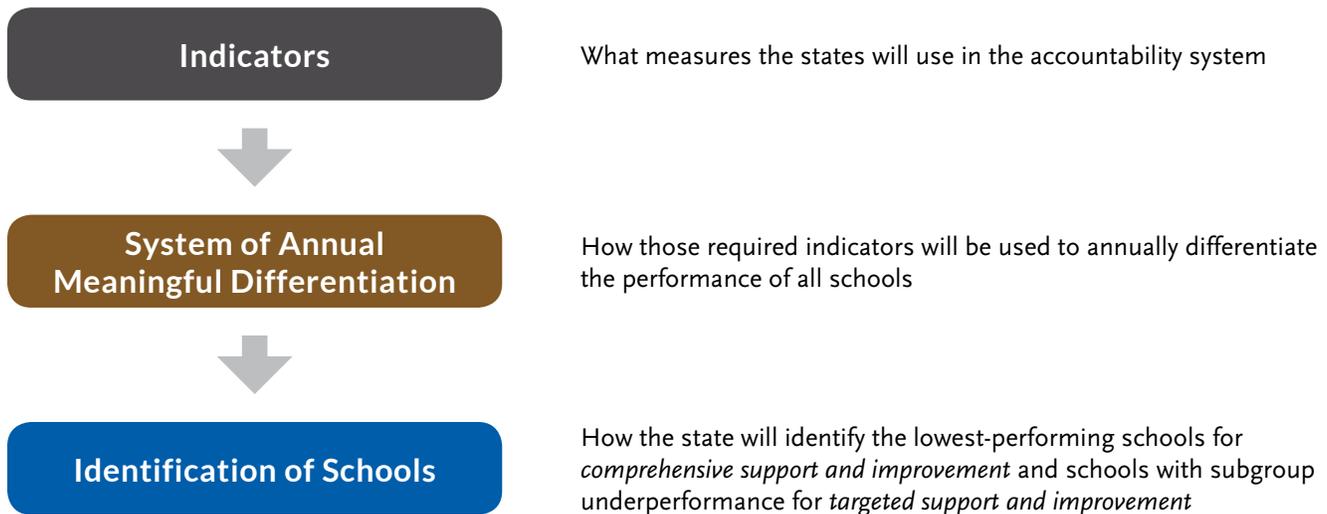
### Long-Term Goals

NCLB required states to set annual measurable objectives (AMOs), which were annual targets for increasing the percent of proficient students on academic assessments. These AMOs were set for all student subgroups by race, socioeconomic background and disability. AMOs were used to determine whether a school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward 100 percent proficiency, which was the most important required categorization of a school under NCLB (i.e. “meeting” or “not meeting” AYP targets).

ESSA does away with AMOs and AYP, replacing them with the comparatively non-restrictive requirement that states “establish ambitious State-designed long-term goals, which shall include measurements of interim progress toward meeting such goals.” The goals must be set for improvement over time on state assessments and graduation rates. Importantly, these goals must be set for all subgroups and must be designed so that meeting the goals for subgroups who are behind will lead to *significant progress in closing statewide proficiency and graduation rate gaps*.

## Indicators, System of Meaningful Differentiation, and Identification of Schools

In general, ESSA’s approach to standards and assessments is similar to NCLB’s and other past state systems. ESSA suggests some new and different approaches to accountability. School accountability requirements under ESSA have three major sections that states must respond to:



### Indicators

The indicators section of the law requires that three main measures be included for all schools:

- **Academic Achievement**
- **English Language Proficiency**
- **School Quality or Student Success**

Additionally, all systems must include the **graduation rate** for high schools and **one additional measure of academic success** for elementary schools.

Each of the following indicators are discussed along with policy considerations for states as they respond to the requirements.

## Academic Achievement

- Required of all schools
- Measure of student learning – proficiency required, growth optional

### What must be measured?

Annually, states must measure student proficiency on state standardized tests aligned to the state content standards in mathematics and English language arts in grades three through eight and once each in high school. Additionally, science must be assessed once in elementary, middle and high school.

### What choices must be made by the state?

- What assessments will be administered
- If and how student growth will be used in school accountability
- If the state will allow, as the law permits, high schools to use *a nationally-recognized high school academic assessment*
- Whether to assess subjects beyond those required (for instance, social studies or the arts)

## Considerations

### Assessment quality

Assessments must accurately measure the most important knowledge and skills in the state's academic standards. **Policymakers should ensure that tests meet the highest standards for validity and technical quality.** For more information, read [High-Quality College and Career Ready Assessments](#), as well as the recent report, [Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments](#), which evaluates the PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT Aspire assessments (the tests currently being used by the largest number of states).<sup>4</sup>

### Proficiency cut scores

Many states have recently [instituted higher standards and more challenging test cut scores](#) (cut scores set how well a student must do on a test to be counted as proficient).<sup>5</sup> As states consider standards and tests used for measuring academic achievement under ESSA, **policymakers should maintain high standards and cut scores that give students and parents accurate feedback on progress toward readiness for college and career.**

### If and how to use growth

Importantly, ESSA *requires* states to measure student proficiency (how many students reach a defined level of performance) and also allows states to include student growth (the amount of improvement a student makes based on where they start). Many states currently use accountability systems that combine proficiency and growth to make school-level determinations. The distinction between growth and proficiency is important; proficiency has greater implications for students' life prospects, while growth provides the fairer annual estimate of the effectiveness of the school and educators. **Policymakers may use ESSA to revisit how their state uses growth in school accountability and, if choosing to combine growth and proficiency, ensure that the model is transparent to the public, as well as balanced and fair to educators.**

### Additional Tests

Under ESSA, states may allow districts to use a nationally-recognized high school assessment like the SAT or ACT in place of their typical high school assessments. If choosing to allow this option, **policymakers must ensure that the national assessment aligns with state standards and that results can be compared with districts that do not opt for the national assessment.**

### English Language Proficiency

- Required of all schools
- Not previously required in NCLB Accountability Systems

#### What must be measured?

States must measure *progress in achieving English language proficiency* for newly arrived English learners (ELs) on English language proficiency tests. Additionally, states must measure ELs in English language arts, mathematics and science (with some flexibility in timelines for inclusion in overall accountability).

#### What choices must be made by the state?

States must determine what adequate progress in achieving English language proficiency will be in their state, including timelines for that progress. States will also have to determine how and on what timeline English learners will be included in assessments of academic achievement in English language arts, mathematics and science.

### Considerations

#### Including English proficiency in existing models

In almost all cases, English language proficiency will be a new measure in states' accountability systems (according to a recent report, only [six states currently include a measure of English language proficiency](#) in their systems). **Policymakers will have to determine how to weigh this measure among existing measures like graduation rates and academic achievement.**<sup>6</sup>

#### When and how to count English learners in the accountability system assessments

The law allows states to either:

- Excuse a first-year EL from taking the English language arts assessment and to not count English language arts and/or math results in the first year an EL arrives, but count them every year thereafter
- OR
- Require ELs to take all assessments in their first year but exclude the results from the accountability system, then measure growth on the assessments in the students second year, and finally include proficiency scores in their third year.

**Policymakers will have to determine when and how to count English learners in the accountability systems in order to be fair and ensure their progress.**

### School Quality or Student Success

- Required of all schools
- New federal requirement in school accountability systems

#### What must be measured?

ESSA requires that not less than one of the following be included in the school accountability system:

- Student engagement
- Educator engagement
- Student access to and completion of advanced coursework
- Postsecondary readiness
- School climate and safety
- Any other indicator the state chooses that is valid, reliable, comparable and statewide

#### What choices must be made by the state?

States will have to determine what additional measure(s) will be included and how to weight the additional measure(s). The language in ESSA requires that all other measures (academic achievement, English language proficiency, graduation rate and elementary academic indicators) be afforded “much greater weight” than the school quality or student success measure(s). The implication is that the measure of school quality or student success should not be the major determinant of the system of annual differentiation, and accountability systems should maintain a focus on academic measures of achievement.

### Considerations

#### Selecting additional measure(s)

The inclusion of this new category of indicator provides an opportunity for states to broaden what is measured, in order to include outcomes other than standardized test scores. A number of large districts in **California** are using the [CORE school accountability system](#), which includes measures like chronic absenteeism; student, staff and parent climate surveys; and suspension rates, in an attempt to build a “broader basket” of measures to “help school communities identify strengths to build upon and challenges to address.”<sup>7</sup> **Connecticut** also recently rolled out [a new accountability system](#) that includes points for physical fitness and access to the arts, alongside typical assessment-based indicators.<sup>8</sup> **Policymakers will want to consider what additional measures can reward schools for ensuring a well-rounded education for students while continuing to focus on academic achievement.**

#### Using non-academic measures

[Recent research](#) has established the value of non-cognitive and social-emotional skills. Stanford University Professor Carol Dweck’s research indicates a growth mindset – believing that academic achievement is not a result of a fixed intelligence but instead can be changed through hard work and persistence – is a strong indicator of later life success.<sup>9</sup> Many schools are starting to focus on building these dispositions in students; however, the vast majority of non-academic measures have never been tested in a high-stakes accountability environment and may be subject to gaming or unintended consequences, leading researchers [to question their use in accountability models](#).<sup>10</sup> **Policymakers will want to explore these new types of measures carefully, possibly choosing to pilot measures before including them in their state’s accountability system.**

## High School Graduation Rate

- Required of *high schools only*
- Four-year rate required

### What must be measured?

States must measure the four-year cohort graduation rate and, at the state's discretion, the extended-year graduation rate. The four-year cohort graduation rate is the percentage of students entering the ninth grade who graduate from high school within four years. The extended rate is typically the percentage of students entering the ninth grade who graduate within five or six years.

### What choices must be made by the state?

States must determine whether to include an extended-year graduation rate indicator and how to balance the graduation rate measure with other measures.

## Considerations

### Extended cohort measures

Including the percentage of students who graduate within five or six years ensures that schools get credit for all students who graduate, but four-year graduation is traditionally the goal most schools set for students. **Policymakers may choose to include extended-year rates and will want to ensure that extended year rates and four-year rates are balanced in a way that aligns with their goals for students.**

### Weighting as compared with assessment results

High school accountability systems that weigh assessment results too heavily as compared to graduation rates risk decreasing focus on preventing students from dropping out. Likewise, systems that put significant weight on graduation rates might incentivize lowering academic standards to ensure a high graduation rate. **Policymakers will want to consider a balance between graduation rates and assessment results that ensures schools are rewarded for both achievement and graduation rates.**

### Elementary Academic Indicator

- Required of *elementary schools only*
- May be a measure of student growth

#### What must be measured?

Either a measure of student growth, if determined appropriate by the state, or another valid and reliable statewide academic indicator.

#### What choices must be made by the state?

States must choose whether to include student growth to meet this requirement (see academic achievement considerations) or, if not using growth, what additional academic measure might be used.

### Considerations

#### Consistency in inclusion of growth

Most states can meet this requirement by including growth. It is technically possible to include student growth in elementary school but not in high school or vice versa. However, **policymakers will likely want to treat high schools and elementary schools similarly in terms of the balance between growth and proficiency.**

#### Additional academic indicator

If using an additional academic indicator other than growth, **policymakers will want to ensure that the additional indicator is not duplicative of the English language arts, mathematics and science assessments already required.** This may include considering assessments in other content areas such as social studies to ensure accountability systems incentivize teaching a well-rounded curriculum.

## System of Annual Meaningful Differentiation

ESSA requires that these five indicators are used to “establish a system of meaningfully differentiating, on an annual basis, all public schools in the state.” While ESSA’s requirements for making school determinations are **less** specific than NCLB’s, they are **more** specific than other areas of the new law, such as intervening in low-performing schools or instituting teacher evaluation systems – both of which are essentially turned over to the states.

### What is required of an ESSA-compliant system of meaningful differentiation?

The state must:

- Use the required indicators to make an annual determination for every public school. This might be school grades (A through F like [Florida](#)), school levels (Level 1 through 4 like [Connecticut](#)) or other categorizations that differentiate school performance.<sup>11</sup>
- Give substantial weight to each indicator; however, academic achievement, English language proficiency, high school graduation rates, and elementary academic indicators must together have much greater weight than the school quality or student success indicator.
- Include “differentiation of any such school in which any subgroup of students is consistently underperforming.”

### State ownership of the system

Instituting a system of meaningful differentiation is a central responsibility for state policymakers under ESSA. Ultimately, this system will represent what the state values and should be informed by a theory of action true to the intent of ESSA: “...to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps.”

NCLB and NCLB waivers, due to their prescriptiveness, often led states toward a compliance mindset, focusing on the minutiae of satisfying federal requirements. Because there are fewer ESSA requirements, state political leaders must now shoulder the weight of making school accountability decisions, which are often complex, and ensuring they align to their values and goals for students. **ESSA represents an unprecedented opportunity for state policymakers to lead.** The considerations identified below are aimed at ensuring that the system of meaningful differentiation reflects the values and collective leadership of the state and will lead toward better outcomes for all students.

## Considerations

### Plan for ESSA accountability in light of existing accountability systems

All states have an NCLB or NCLB-waiver compliant accountability system in place. Because ESSA is very similar to NCLB in terms of testing requirements, states may have the option to only slightly modify their current accountability systems. This may be a good option for states where evidence points to an accountability system that is working to help improve student outcomes. However, **policymakers may want to use this opportunity to look at school accountability anew and build a system that incorporates what the state has learned and values.**

### Engage all stakeholders authentically and use their counsel

ESSA requires stakeholder engagement in the development of the state’s overall plan. Previously, these plans have been functionally under the control of state education agencies (SEA), in part because they are required to submit the plan. ESSA is explicit that state plans must include timely and meaningful consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. **Policymakers will want ensure a range of strategies are employed to gather feedback on the state accountability plan and that the feedback is compiled, made publicly available and is evident in the final system.** Many states like North Carolina, Minnesota, Colorado and Washington started ESSA feedback meetings in the spring of 2016.

## Considerations

### Stakeholders that must be consulted:

- The governor
- State legislators
- State board of education members
- Local education agencies (including rural districts)
- Native American tribes
- Teachers, principals, school leaders, charter school leaders
- Other school staff

### Design an equity-focused accountability system

NCLB required that schools met AMOs for every student subgroup in order to meet AYP. Even the highest-performing schools would not meet expectations if one subgroup did not achieve its goals. While a system like this is not the only way to hold schools accountable for subgroup performance, **policymakers should recognize that systems that roll all student performance into averages and give little weight to subgroup performance, risk hiding underserved populations and may not strongly incentivize closing achievement gaps. This is an underlying value of NCLB that must also undergird states' ESSA-compliant systems.**

### Focus on students at all levels of performance

Most NCLB accountability systems are built on a model that rewards schools for getting students to the proficient level. In a system where there are four levels (for instance *below basic*, *basic*, *proficient* and *advanced*), schools are not necessarily incentivized to move a student from *proficient* to *advanced* or from *below basic* to *basic*. While systems that issue different points for different levels may be more complicated, **policymakers may want to consider systems that award [different points for all different achievement levels](#) to incentivize ensuring all students are learning.**<sup>12</sup>

### Represent values in weighting

**Choosing the weight of each indicator in the system of differentiation is largely a question of values, not science. Some important weighting questions that policymakers will want to consider:**

- Should the state system put more weight on absolute achievement, more on growth, or weigh them equally? How does the state's plan to use the results influence this weighting?
- How will the system weigh the performance of subgroups such that schools are accountable for all students, especially those farthest behind or from historically underperforming subgroups?

### Ensure 95 percent participation in assessments

States must be able to accurately and objectively measure student achievement. High-quality aligned assessments are useless if students do not take the test. Starting in 2013, large numbers of parents opted their students out of state testing. While the reasons are often understandable (such as not seeing the test as individually useful or seeing it generate an inordinate amount of stress for students), opting students out of testing is a serious threat to transparency about school performance, the integrity of accountability systems, and the ability to research and identify effective practices. For this reason, ESSA requires that 95 percent of eligible students take the assessments. **Policymakers will want to consider the underlying causes that might contribute to opt-out (including focusing on how tests are used), communicate why state assessment are important, and build participation incentives into their state accountability system.**

### Tackle the persistent challenges of school accountability

Often, it is politically expedient to paint the status quo – in this case NCLB – as flawed in a fundamental and easily fixable way. This is especially true of accountability built on student test results. While ESSA does issue flexibility, *it is not a complete departure from test-based accountability*. It is not enough for states to champion the end of NCLB. **Policymakers should consider how their new system will address issues that will not be immediately or easily resolved, such as test quality, narrowing of curriculum, student time spent testing, and the pushback on the sometimes outsized influence of testing on schools.**

Starting in 2017-18, the state system of meaningful annual differentiation must be used to identify two categories of schools:

- Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)
- Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)

States must identify schools for CSI at least once every three years and must establish exit criteria for leaving the designation behind.

**Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools**

CSI schools are intended to be the lowest-performing, highest-needs schools in a state.

<p><b>Identification</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the above system of meaningful annual differentiation, states must identify not less than the <i>lowest-performing 5% of Title I funded schools</i> as CSI schools.</li> <li>• Any high school that graduates <i>less than two-thirds</i> of its students must be identified as a CSI school.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intervention</b></p>	<p>Unlike NCLB and NCLB waivers which required specific interventions and turnaround models in low-performing schools, ESSA outlines basic tenets but leaves intervention up to the state. At a minimum, a local education agency’s (LEA) plan for a CSI school must include evidence-based interventions; be informed by a school-level needs assessment; identify resource inequities; and be approved by the school, the LEA and the SEA.</p>

**Considerations**

**Ensure schools with the most need are identified as CSI schools**

Troublingly, there continues to be a group of public schools, almost invariably in high-poverty environments, where the majority of students graduate underprepared – if they graduate at all. Too often these school are caught in the trap of generational poverty, are under-resourced, and are unable to attract and keep talented educators. **Policymakers should design accountability systems that will identify CSI schools where achievement and graduation rates are chronically low and should ensure that modest yearly growth gains don’t exclude schools in educational distress from identification and support.**

### Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

NCLB brought a focus to subgroup performance and closing achievement gaps. Likewise, ESSA requires states to use their system of meaningful differentiation to identify “any such school in which any subgroup of students is consistently underperforming, as determined by the state, based on all indicators.”

<b>Identification</b>	Based on the system of annual differentiation, any school with a consistently underperforming subgroup must be identified as a TSI school. The definition of this will be determined by the state.
<b>Intervention</b>	Unlike NCLB, which required escalating federally prescribed sanctions when any identified subgroup failed to meet AYP, ESSA requires <b>schools identified for TSI to design and submit an evidence-based plan</b> to the LEA to address the subgroup underperformance.

### Considerations

#### Define consistently underperforming subgroups

ESSA allows states to make their own determination about what counts as a consistently underperforming subgroup. This is a consequential decision. Accountability systems under NCLB waivers allowed states to group underperforming students into what is called a *super subgroup*, typically defined as the bottom quartile of students in any school. Schools are held accountable specifically for the performance of that super subgroup. Super subgroups do not appear to comport with ESSA’s requirement for a consistently underperforming subgroup (and current draft regulations confirm this). ESSA intends for schools to be held accountable for specific populations, such as students with disabilities, students who are economically disadvantaged, or students from a historically underperforming racial group. **As policymakers think about how their system of meaningful differentiation will define consistently underperforming subgroups, they will want to consider questions such as:**

- Will the state set a single bar for consistently underperforming subgroups (e.g. subgroups with less than 50 percent of students scoring proficient?) and identify all schools with subgroups that do not meet that cutoff? Or will the cutoff be unique for each subgroup?
- Alternately, will states require schools to be identified if they fail to meet interim progress measures or are not on track to meet the state-designed long-term goals?

#### Intervention in CSI and TSI schools

While best practices in school intervention are beyond the scope of this brief, please see our forthcoming [re:VISION](#) for more information on intervention in low-performing schools.

##### Overview

For a general overview of ESSA, read the first in this re:VISION series, [The Every Student Succeeds Act: Opportunities and Responsibilities](#)

#### Want to see creative examples of school accountability models?

The Fordham Institute sponsored a design competition for ESSA-compliant accountability models. Read them at <http://edexcellence.net/events/essa-accountability-design-competition><sup>13</sup>

## Synopsis of ESSA School of Accountability Requirements

<b>Indicators</b> to be measured <hr/> 5 indicators are required	<b>All Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic Achievement (with optional student growth)</li> <li>English Language Proficiency</li> <li>School Quality or Student Success</li> </ul>	<b>Elementary Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Additional Academic Measure (or student growth)</li> </ul>	<b>High Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four-Year Graduation Rate</li> </ul>
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which must be used  
to establish



<b>A System of Annual Meaningful Differentiation</b>	<p>The system will differentiate <b>all public school</b> every year with two important rules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will provide substantial weight to the indicators – with four indicators having <i>much more</i> weight than school quality or student success</li> <li>Include differentiation of any school in which any subgroup of students is consistently underperforming based on all the indicators</li> </ul>
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through which the  
state will



<b>Identify Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beginning in 2017-18, identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI).</li> <li>CSI schools will be no less than 5% of the lowest-performing schools and include all high schools that graduate less than two-thirds of their students.</li> <li>Additionally, schools with low-performing subgroups will be identified for TSI</li> </ul>
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