MEASURES AND ACCOUNTABILITY: ELIMINATING INEQUITY

Until the Ohio General Assembly called for the State Board of Education to adopt an aligned set of standards, assessments and accountability measures almost 15 years ago, Ohio lived with a deep inequity in its education system. Essentially, prior to that time, expectations, measures and accountability for what students should know and be able to do were either non-existent or varied widely depending on a student’s zip code. As a result, students living in high-wealth areas were often the beneficiaries of rigorous and challenging learning expectations, giving them a leg up on college and career. Students living in economically disadvantaged urban and rural areas were often subject to low expectations, placing them at a significant disadvantage. By enacting clear accountability measures, anchored to standards and gauged by aligned assessments in 2001, Ohio signaled that it was serious about ensuring that all school districts would be held responsible by policymakers and taxpayers for providing a high-quality education to each and every student, no matter where they lived.

Ohio’s system for measuring student, school and district success has come a long way in 15 years. Intense discussions about how schools should be held accountable, who should hold them accountable and what should happen if schools do not show progress have been underway since Ohio enacted its school accountability policies. Policy Brief #4 explains the current steps Ohio takes to transform its lowest performing schools or those that have not shown progress.

Over the course of 15 years, Ohio has taken significant steps to improve how it measures student and school performance and holds schools accountable for teaching all students. Two improvements stand out:

1. **Disaggregating student performance data** by income, race, ethnicity and disability remains one of the greatest advances to Ohio’s accountability system. By breaking apart the data, parents and educators can see how well schools are serving students from all backgrounds. Low student performance can no longer be masked by the performance of the higher-achieving students.

2. **Using valued-added data** to measure how much progress a group of students made relative to the expectation of progress. For instance, students in one school may score low in achievement on their state tests in a given year, but this does not mean they are not learning. The value-added progress component, as it is called on the A-F Report Card, considers where a child starts at the beginning of the year and what growth he/she makes over the course of the year. It does not penalize a school that serves a significant number of disadvantaged students, unless those students are not making adequate progress. It also gives teachers and schools credit for adjusting their teaching to help all students learn more, whatever level of knowledge and skill they possessed when the school year began.

Value-added scores have previously been based on state test results in math and English language arts in grades 4-8. This year, the measures will also include state tests in grades 5-8 science and grade 6 social studies as well as math and English language arts end-of-course high school exams. Value-added is also used to measure teaching effectiveness through student performance on tests, representing just one aspect of effective teaching.
HOW DOES OHIO CURRENTLY MEASURE AND REPORT STUDENT, SCHOOL AND DISTRICT SUCCESS?

Ohio’s 2016 School Report Cards, expected to be released in mid-September 2016, will include measures within six broad categories or components.¹

- **K-3 Literacy**: Considers how successful schools are in getting struggling readers on track to proficiency in third grade and beyond.

- **Progress**: Looks closely at the growth that all students are making based on their past performances. It answers the question: did students get a year’s worth of growth?

- **Achievement**: Measures if students are meeting the expectations of their grade levels based on state tests in math, English language arts, science and social studies. The achievement component represents the number of students who passed the state tests, how well they performed on them and the performance of gifted students.

- **Gap Closing**: Shows how well the state’s most vulnerable population of students performs, compared to all students, in meeting expectations in English language arts, math and graduation.

- **Graduation Rate**: Looks at the percent of students who are successfully finishing high school with a diploma in four or five years.

- **Prepared for Success**: Considers how well prepared students are for all future opportunities whether the training is in a technical field or for the workplace or college. Measures in this component include college admission test performance, dual enrollment credits, industry credentials, honors diplomas, Advanced Placement (AP) participation and scores and International Baccalaureate (IB) participation and scores.

In addition to these measures and components, the Report Cards include:

- **School district financial data**, which breaks down how much money the school spends on classroom instruction and identifies the source of the revenue (federal, state and/or local).

- **Student enrollment and attendance figures**, along with **teacher evaluation data** and **school choice options**.

The state’s accountability system provides separate report cards for dropout recovery and prevention schools, career technical education providers and STEM providers. These report cards are based on the model described above but have different measures and grading benchmarks to better reflect their missions and the students they serve.

ABOUT PHILANTHROPY OHIO

Philanthropy Ohio is an association of foundations, corporate giving programs, individuals and organizations actively involved in philanthropy in Ohio. Its mission is to provide leadership for philanthropy in Ohio and to enhance the ability of members to fulfill their charitable goals. It provides the network, tools and knowledge to help people engaged in philanthropy become more effective, powerful change agents in their communities. Together, its more than 220 members hold over $50 billion in assets and provide over $4 billion in grants to nonprofit organizations that work to improve the lives of community residents.
2015-16: A YEAR OF TRANSITION

This school year, the third of a multi-year phase-in of new tests and new measurements with A-F grades, ushered in a major change for Ohio’s A-F Report Card. The state implemented new assessments in math and English language arts (refer to Brief #2). As a result of this shift in tests, report cards issued for school districts in the fall of 2016 cannot be directly compared to previous report cards.

Because of the new tests, the Ohio legislature passed a “safe harbor” provision, essentially deciding that no district, school, teacher or student will face new penalties or interventions for low grades on tests given during the 2014-15, 2015-16, and, in some cases, the 2016-17 school years. While no new schools and districts will be identified for interventions, those already receiving interventions will continue to receive those interventions unless their performance improves. Safe harbor also delayed the release of overall letter grades for schools and districts until 2018.

Ultimately, this safe harbor provision gives schools a chance to reset their baselines, which will create some challenges. Expectations have increased, and, as a result, measures of student performance will likely decrease. This doesn’t mean that students are learning less. In fact, they could be learning more. It means that students are being measured against more challenging expectations. Students, parents, families, teachers, leaders and policymakers should be prepared for a dip in results. This shift will be painful, but it is necessary to accurately reflect student and school performance and to provide teachers and leaders with the information they need to target supports and improvement efforts.

In most ways, today’s accountability and report card system is more rigorous, comprehensive and transparent than the previous version, which only included four measures: indicators met, performance index, value-added and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) status. The indicators that comprised the measures included state tests, attendance rates and graduation rates. The previous version did not include school finance and college readiness indicators. It also rated 44 percent of the state’s school districts as “excellent” or better on state report cards in 2009, for instance, creating a focus on ineffectual minimum standards.2

ALIGNING WITH EVERY STUDENT SUCCEDS ACT (ESSA)

Fortunately, Ohio’s recent improvements to its accountability policies and A-F Report Cards sync up with the direction of ESSA. Under ESSA, state accountability plans must include long-term goals, measures of progress toward those goals and an explanation of how the state plans to differentiate schools. Revised plans would take effect during the 2017-18 school year.3

One major change brought forth by ESSA includes the reporting of more disaggregated data. Ohio currently breaks down and reports on data according to race and ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status. ESSA adds homeless students, foster care students and children of active duty military personnel to the list of subgroups. ESSA also requires that Ohio report on:

• Exclusionary discipline rates;
• Chronic absenteeism;
• The professional qualifications of educators;
• Federal, state and local per-pupil expenditures;
• The number and percentage of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities taking alternate assessments;
• Disaggregated rates of students who graduate from high school and enroll in higher education; and
• State level results of NAEP compared to the national average.

No doubt the reporting of this data will require increased effort from school districts and the Ohio Department of Education, but it will be worth it. The newly-reported measures will shine light on areas that have long been dark, resulting in greater transparency and improved equity.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD
Resisting the Urge to Retreat in Accountability

In spite of strong progress made, school accountability is losing momentum in Ohio. The debate continues to intensify and some want Ohio to ease up on its expectations for students, educators and parents, based on questions about Ohio’s assessments.

Policymakers are beginning to question the state’s approach to accountability because they may not fully understand the components of the accountability system or the calculations of value-added scores.

Ohio’s policymakers will face on-going resistance to the state’s accountability system, and we must resist the urge to retreat. Think about it this way: If the issue at hand were heart disease, would we suggest that we quit testing the patient? No. The patient, doctors and family members would continue to search for the right answers. Philanthropy Ohio believes that we must look at accountability in the same light.

In addition to not retreating from the state’s accountability system, Philanthropy Ohio recommends the following:

1. Go back to the development of a state-level report card for Ohio. There was a day when the Ohio Department of Education prepared a report card that evaluated the state on the same measures it used to evaluate districts. The state report card offered an important, consistent look at statewide progress. The department stepped away from that report several years ago. It needs to go back to publishing state-level measures. Such a report could be used to track the long-term goals of ESSA.

2. Use changes required by ESSA as an opportunity to streamline the number and types of measures on the report card. If one of the report card’s goals is to clearly and transparently report on progress and gap areas, then Ohio should use the changes required by ESSA as an opportunity to clarify and streamline the number and types of measures on the report card. The department should engage the report card’s audience on what they want to know and how to improve the online interface.

3. Make no major changes for three years, including the use of value-added data, until after the report card is improved and fully implemented (e.g., component and overall grades are reported). The system has shifted significantly over the last three years and Ohioans need an opportunity to use and become familiar with the newest accountability system before it changes again.

4. Hold the line against efforts to weaken the system and do not step away from the use of valid and reliable student-growth data. It is an essential tool in understanding if students have demonstrated a year’s worth of growth, no matter what their knowledge base was coming into the classroom at the beginning of the year. It is also a fair measure among schools.

5. Develop measures that appropriately gauge student gains in 21st century skills and non-cognitive skills, including grit, collaboration, teamwork, planning, organization, managing multiple priorities, etc.

Our students’ economic and social mobility depends upon a strong education system and higher levels of student performance. Accountability and measures ensure that our schools deliver on this promise. Ohio must continue to build upon the principles that have led to gains in student achievement. And, we must be careful to amend and enhance accountability where necessary, and not abandon it. Doing so means we abandon our students. That is not an option.

ENDNOTES


