

NCLB WAIVERS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

THE GRADUATION RATE BALANCING ACT

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When it comes to state education accountability systems, times are changing fast. This is clearer than ever with the advent of not only waivers from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) but also the multitude of state accountability index systems and “A through F” school-grading systems rolling out across the country.

The multiple measures of college and career readiness included in the new systems offer potential benefits over the use of state test scores and graduation rates alone. For example, states can now create a more nuanced and comprehensive view of college and career readiness that might include end-of-course assessments, success on college-level courses, and graduation rates, as well as growth in student achievement. However, if these new indices are to be accurate and meaningful, states must not water down accountability measures within them, particularly accountability measures for improving graduation rates. This brief provides five questions that can help states and districts ensure strong graduation rate accountability, using data already available in state reporting systems.

A great deal is at stake for students and our economy if new state systems fail to hold firm on graduation rate accountability. Earnings and employment data show that high school graduation and postsecondary education are more important than ever to success in and for our economy. States have adopted a variety of reforms—including NCLB waivers, common and rigorous state standards, and school turnaround efforts—all with the same goal: graduating students of all backgrounds, prepared for college and careers. It is incumbent on states to ensure that accountability systems under NCLB waivers hold true to this goal and support it.

As a 2013 Alliance for Excellent Education report details, there are areas for praise and for concern among accountability approaches under the new NCLB waivers. For example, according to the Alliance’s analysis, New Mexico has set a 95 percent graduation rate goal—a rigorous target; however their adjusted cohort rate only comprises 17 percent of the state’s accountability index, and a low subgroup or overall graduation rate does not trigger identification as a priority or focus school for intervention—nor are subgroup graduation rates included in the state’s accountability index.¹ This accountability construct—which is similar to more than 12 states’

systems—runs the risk that schools not meeting students’ needs could go unidentified under the state’s system. The Alliance also identifies a number of ways that states can strengthen current graduation rate accountability constructs moving forward.

Building on those recommendations, this Jobs for the Future policy brief offers five guiding questions on graduation rate accountability.² These can help states and districts strengthen current and proposed accountability and school improvement systems immediately, using information already at their disposal. New accountability measures under NCLB waivers can provide a more robust picture of student success, and they can encourage schools and districts to prepare more students for college—if states get the delicate balancing act of measures right.

By asking the following guiding questions, states and districts can get the clearest view possible of student graduation success and where to target reforms. Highlighting adjusted cohort graduation rate accountability is an essential tool for revealing trends and gaps that might otherwise be overlooked—and it can all be done with data already available under NCLB and waivers.

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR STATES AND DISTRICTS

SHINING A LIGHT ON DATA

- 1. Do “school report cards” on state and district websites clearly and prominently display cohort graduation rate outcomes and progress toward yearly graduation rate targets, for all students and for each subgroup?**

Because adjusted cohort graduation rates are the most accurate way to look at how well schools hold onto students and move them through to graduation, parents and the public should have easy access to these data on school report card websites (e.g., with a “graduation rate button”), even if a state includes more than just this measure to make college- and career-readiness determinations. Currently, this information may be buried in less accessible reports, where it goes unseen and unused.

REFORMING SCHOOLS TO ADDRESS WEAK GRADUATION OUTCOMES

- 2. If a subgroup does not meet its annual cohort graduation rate targets for two years in a row, does the district or state ensure that school reform action results?**

Cohort graduation rates by subgroup (e.g., low-income, race/ethnicity, students with disabilities) are important indicators for states, districts, and the public to track and act on. They raise a flag when there may be a problem within a school. Federal rules already direct states to set targets for increasing cohort graduation rates statewide for each subgroup of students. However, under new state-developed indices, some schools with low or stagnating graduation rates for subgroups will not be flagged for improvement, regardless of whether a state is meeting its cohort graduation rate targets.

It is essential that states and districts intentionally look at subgroup progress on cohort graduation rates—data that are already reported by each school: this is the most accurate measure of progress. Moreover, states and districts should require action when state cohort graduation rate improvement targets are not met after two years. This will help ensure that students in schools with low graduation rates receive the help they need to graduate, regardless of the school’s accountability status or grade.

DEFINING SUCCESS TO INCLUDE COHORT GRADUATION RATES

- 3. Can a school meet targets or excel on the state’s accountability system while its cohort graduation rate stagnates or decreases for any subgroups?**

If so, this should be a flag to a state or school district to investigate further. Perhaps the accountability index system needs revisiting. Particular actions are likely needed to address the reasons behind poor or stagnating graduation rate performance.

- 4. If a state accountability index/system includes dropout rates, can a school meet or exceed annual accountability performance targets without improving its graduation rate?**

Under the 2008 regulations, graduation rates do not include dropout rates, partly because the states have varied greatly in how accurately and consistently they measure them. Now that some states and districts include dropout rates in accountability indices, they must have ways to understand if and when an overall dropout rate masks cohort graduation outcomes. In fact, a district dropout rate may improve even if some of its cohort graduation rates decline or stagnate. States need to be able to identify and resolve such issues quickly so that students do not continue to fall through cracks.

- 5. Is there a large gap in the state between the number of “priority” or “focus” schools that have low graduation rates and the total number of high schools that have cohort graduation rates below 60 percent?**

Under NCLB waivers, priority and focus schools are targeted for school improvement actions and supports because of poor performance on college- and career-readiness indicators over time, including graduation rates.³ However, if priority and focus school determinations do not match up with low graduation rate schools, states could have a large number of schools doing a poor job of graduating students without ever identifying those schools for improvements. States and districts must keep close tabs on this gap to help them inform and improve school turnaround efforts.

ENSURING STUDENT SUCCESS AND TARGETING REFORMS

Over the past decade, enormous efforts have been made to ensure that NCLB fosters meaningful accountability for graduation rates, revealing how well schools are doing on graduating all students and spurring action when students are not being served well. Ten years after the passage of NCLB, those efforts are coming to fruition: In accordance with 2008 U.S. Department of Education regulations, all states now report on and set annual targets for rigorous “adjusted cohort” graduation rates, which more uniformly reflect when a student earns a diploma compared with the graduation rate calculations formerly used for federal accountability purposes.

These regulations represent a landmark step forward, but their impact now hinges on how states implement accountability for graduation rates, given the flexibility they gain with NCLB waivers. Overall, the risks are high that graduation rates will simply count *less* in the new accountability system. Under the approved NCLB waivers, most states are including graduation rates as just one of many measures in an index of college and career readiness; many are even using multiple measures of graduation, not just the more accurate cohort rate. Moreover, the states vary in the weight they give to these measures.

For the sake of our students, getting the quality and balance of college- and career-readiness measures right from the beginning is critical in complex index systems, as recent reports and articles have made clear.⁴ Not only that, these state index systems are very new, making it imperative to check and recalibrate them over time to ensure a continuing focus on graduating *all* students and preparing them for college and careers.

Some states, like Massachusetts, strategically left room in their waiver applications to change the balance and quality of measures in the future—for example, by adding measures of college readiness and success measures (e.g., dual enrollment credits, college remediation rates). However, even with such improvements, it is critical that accountability systems support not only college and career readiness but also graduation for all students, *which means not watering down the weight of graduation rates*. Simply put, other measures become less meaningful if a large number of students do not earn a high school diploma and thus are severely set back in their quest for college and career success.

The five simple questions we propose can focus states and districts more tightly on what matters in graduation rate accountability to maximize student success. Answering this set of questions can help ensure that a full picture of graduation rate outcomes receives attention within accountability indices, state monitoring, and school improvement. Similarly, the questions can help inform and foster dialogue between the federal government and states and districts as NCLB waivers and accountability systems evolve and mature.

We suggest that states, districts, and the U.S. Department of Education include these questions in their toolboxes as they work to uphold the promise of reforms that increase the college and career readiness and graduation of all students. While data from the National Center for Education Statistics show an increase in average freshman graduation rates in 2010, we still lost at least 22 percent of all students that year, according to the NCES, and major gaps between cohorts of students persist. Our country cannot afford for schools to step back from efforts to increase graduation among all students.

ENDNOTES

¹ Alliance for Excellent Education, *The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability*, February 2013. <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ESEAWaivers.pdf>.

² These questions are based, in part, on conversations with Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center and research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, and on a forthcoming report from Civic Enterprises, the Graduate Center, America's Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education: *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic Annual Update 2013*, by Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Mary Bruce, and Joanna Horning Fox.

³ For the U.S. Department of Education's definitions of "priority" and "focus" schools, see: <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/demonstrating-meet-flex-definitions.pdf>.

⁴ See, for example: Alliance for Excellent Education, *The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability*. February 2013; Daria Hall, *A Step Forward or a Step Back? State Accountability in the Waiver Era*, Education Trust, February 2013; Michelle McNeil, "Graduation Rates Latest NCLB Waiver Flash Point: Some Say Flexibility on NCLB Could Dilute Accountability," *Education Week*, October 30, 2012; and Anne Hyslop, "Waiver Watch: Time for ED to Get Serious about Graduation Rates," Ed Money Watch Blog, New America Foundation, December 4, 2012.

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