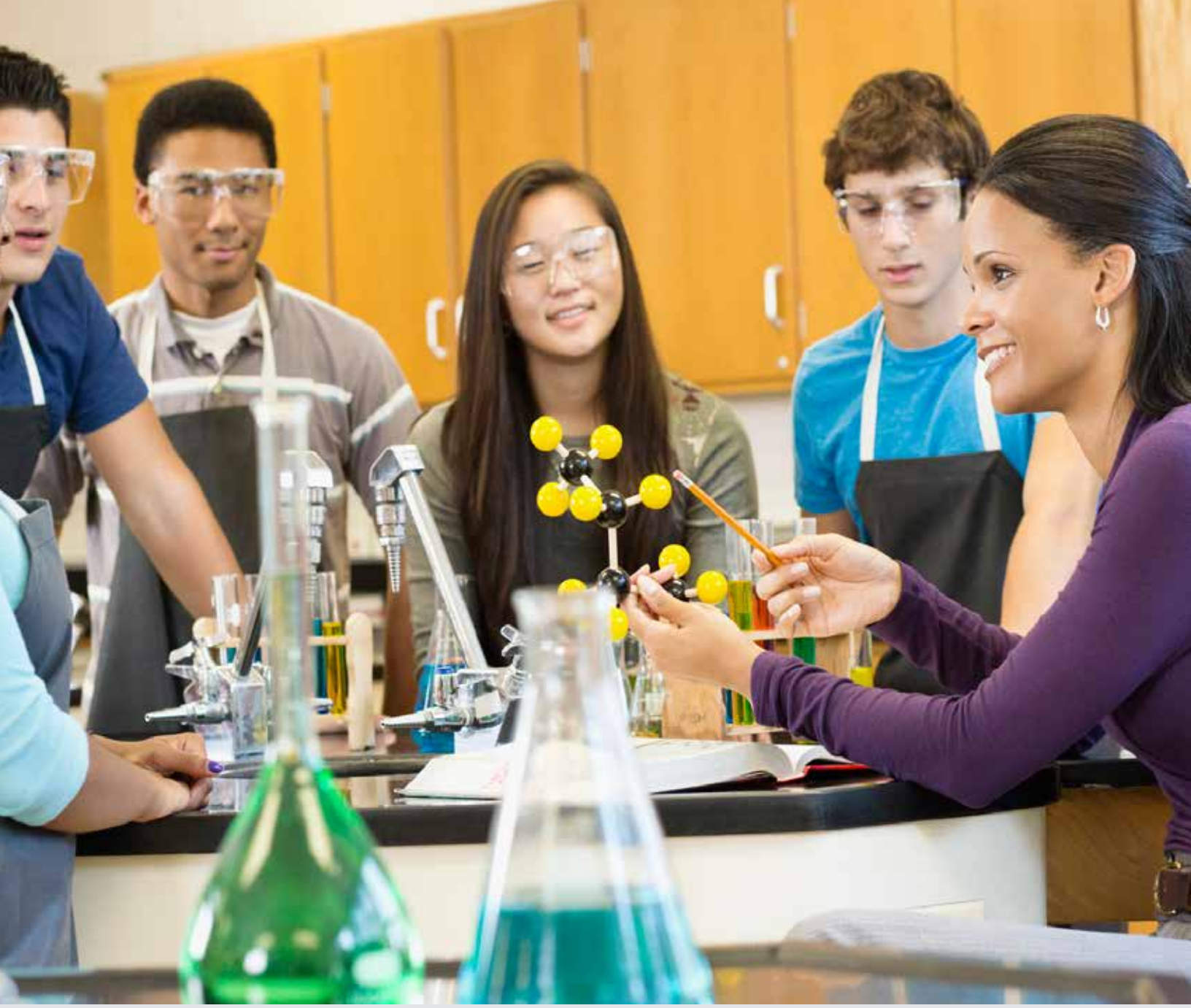

Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth

How New State Accountability Systems Can Support School Inclusion and Student Success

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Executive Summary

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states, districts, and schools with an opportunity to create greater equity for students in the provision of education, and to accelerate efforts to support historically underserved students by ending the school-to-prison pipeline.[1] The law provides states with an opportunity to implement higher-quality accountability and improvement systems that include multiple measures of school success—measures that will help determine what issues garner state and local attention, what school practices are incentivized, what policies and supports are provided to ensure that student needs are addressed—and, ultimately, end the school-to-prison pipeline.

States committed to promoting equity and improving outcomes for historically underserved youth can choose measures that reward schools for adopting inclusive policies and practices designed to equip and empower youth to succeed, and to result in higher achievement and graduation rates. As states develop their accountability and improvement systems under ESSA, they can choose high-leverage measures of school progress that, when combined with effective policies, hold promise for supporting success for the youth most marginalized by the education system.

To promote equity and improve outcomes, states can:

- track **suspension and expulsion rates**, while removing zero-tolerance discipline policies that have proven ineffective in improving youth performance, replacing them with restorative justice practices;[2]
- incentivize schools to evaluate and improve **school climate**, which is associated with youth achievement and educational attainment, for all groups of youth, with special attention to those who are most vulnerable;
- monitor **attendance and chronic absenteeism**, and create approaches to intervene early and support attendance where needed to increase learning time;
- use an **extended-year graduation rate** (e.g., 5, 6, or 7 years), as well as a 4-year rate, to encourage high schools to work with and bring back young people who, for a variety of reasons, could not graduate in 4 years; and
- measure youths' access to and completion of **college- and career-ready courses of study** in an effort to open up evidence-based pathways to future success that help youth reach their potential and encourage schools to offer these opportunities to all youth.

These measures can provide information to help identify appropriate evidence-based strategies and resources (described in this report) to improve youth outcomes and close gaps among youth subgroups.

Introduction

The primary goal of k–12 education should be to empower young people to reach their full potential. Meeting this goal requires an inclusive and supportive learning environment designed to meet the promise for each and every child. Unfortunately, data show that historically underserved youth—including youth of color, those with disabilities, and those from low-income families—frequently fail to receive the attention, information, and high-quality supports they need and deserve within the education system. As a result, these students are often left disempowered by the process.

The Challenges Presented by the No Child Left Behind Act

While a legacy of resource inequalities and highly standardized, bureaucratic systems contributes to this marginalization and disenfranchisement of youth and their communities, education policies that advance high-stakes accountability systems are also a significant factor. The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act imposed test-based accountability systems carrying significant consequences for students, teachers, and schools. NCLB determined consequences for poor performance on annual assessments that could include programmatic interventions, staff changes, and even school closures based on whether schools could meet ever-increasing test score targets each year. Researchers found that the difficulty of meeting these targets placed "increasing pressures to push poor-performing students out of their schools. Those who suffer disproportionately from these practices include students with disabilities, children of color, English language learners, and undocumented students, as well as homeless youth and youth in foster care."[3]

Studies have documented repeatedly how such policies led many schools to push out youth who experienced challenges,[4] and data on graduation rates show the resulting disparities: Almost three-quarters of a million youth—disproportionately youth of color, with disabilities, and from low-income families—do not complete high school each year.[5] According to research by UCLA's Civil Rights Project, "every dropout costs society hundreds of thousands of dollars over the student's lifetime in lost income," significantly undermining "a community's future."[6] The consequences of marginalizing youth in schools—and the resultant exclusion of youth from educational opportunity—have devastating and lasting impacts on youth, their families, and the larger society.

States can choose measures that reward schools for inclusive practices that empower and equip all students to succeed and that close gaps in achievement and graduation rates.

Changes Under the Every Student Succeeds Act

The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the law that replaced NCLB, provides an opportunity for states to develop and implement policies that change these experiences. States can use this opportunity to implement higher-quality accountability and improvement systems that include multiple measures of school success. States can choose measures that reward schools for inclusive practices that empower and equip all students to succeed, and that close gaps in achievement and graduation rates.

These equity measures and associated policies should encourage schools to meet the needs of the whole child by rewarding schools for keeping youth in school, diagnosing their needs, and pursuing productive evidence-based strategies to better support their success.

Five critical elements should be included in these equity measures and policies:

1. Tracking suspension and expulsion rates, while removing zero-tolerance discipline policies (which have proven ineffective in improving student performance[7]) and replacing them with restorative justice practices.

2. Evaluating and improving school climate, which is associated with student achievement and educational attainment, for all groups of students, with special attention to those who are most vulnerable.

3. Monitoring attendance and chronic absenteeism, and creating means to intervene early and support attendance where needed.

4. Using an extended-year graduation rate (e.g. 5, 6, or 7 years), as well as a 4-year rate, to encourage high schools to work with and bring back students who, for a variety of reasons, could not graduate in 4 years.

5. Measuring students' access to and completion of college- and career-ready courses of study that open a pathway to the future and help them reach their potential, thereby graduating young people who can think critically, solve complex problems, communicate and collaborate with peers effectively, and be self-directed in their learning.

This report describes how ESSA provides an opportunity for states to better support historically underserved students through the thoughtful selection of specific equity measures in their accountability and improvement systems, as well as through necessary investments in school designs and practices. By embracing this opportunity, states can meaningfully contribute to creating future generations of strong thinkers and good citizens who can thrive and build strong communities.

The Nature of the Problem

The wide-ranging impact of student marginalization is perhaps most evident in the nation's disparate rates of graduation, incarceration, and employment. According to the most recent *Building a Grad Nation* report, graduation rates for Latino and African American students lag significantly behind those for White students, with the gap between Latino and White students at 11 percentage points in 2014, and the gap between African American and White students at nearly 15 points.[8]

Educational Attainment

The education system's failure to ensure that students graduate from high school affects numerous aspects of their lives. Graduation rates reflect more than just how many youth do not graduate each year: They are an indication of which youth are less likely to earn a living wage and escape from or fall into poverty. Students who graduate high school have better economic and health outcomes, are more likely to participate in a democracy and their community, and less likely to engage in criminal activity or need social services.[9]

Indeed, researchers have estimated that a 10% increase in high school graduation rates would result in a 9% decline in criminal arrest rates.[10] Today, a young African American man between the ages of 20 and 24 who does not have a high school diploma (or an equivalent credential) has a greater chance of being incarcerated than of being employed.[11] Sixty-eight percent of males in state and federal prison do not have high school diplomas,[12] and there is a 70% chance that an African American male without a high school diploma will end up in jail by his mid-30s.[13]

Researchers have estimated that a 10% increase in high school graduation rates would result in a 9% decline in criminal arrest rates.

The nation's criminal justice system, which has quadrupled in size within the last four decades,[14] reflects these disparities in opportunity. The increase in mass incarceration, despite a steady decline in crime rates,[15] has been most consequential for people of color: African Americans and Latinos are 25% of the U.S. population yet comprise nearly 60% of the prison population.[16]

However, even for those who graduate, a culture of low expectations and lack of access to a strong college preparatory curriculum often places them at a disadvantage in postsecondary education. For example, while the number of African American students at community colleges and other institutions that grant associate degrees has increased, African American student enrollment at top-tier universities has remained unchanged for the last two decades.[17]

The school-to-prison pipeline must be replaced by a pipeline to success that recognizes and advances individual dignity, intellect, and potential. To prevent school marginalization and pushout—and, ultimately, stem the tide of mass incarceration and its impact, particularly on individuals, families, and communities of color—education systems must be restructured to enable student success.

Educational Needs

The root causes of these problems rest in both social challenges and school design. Each year, about 46 million children in the United States are exposed to violence, crime, abuse, or psychological trauma.[18] More than 10 million children have had a parent incarcerated at some time during their childhood, with many children entering the child welfare system as a result.[19] In addition, more than 31 million children live in families whose income is inadequate to cover their most basic needs, and therefore these children experience food and home insecurity, among many challenges. The proportion of youngsters in these circumstances grew from 39% to 44% of all children between 2008 and 2014.[20]

Children and youth who experience these types of adverse childhood experiences[21] often have "poor health and educational outcomes, such as increased absenteeism in school and changes in school performance."[22] Not surprisingly, such experiences "can affect sustained and focused attention, making it difficult for a student to remain engaged in school."[23] Further, chronic stress affects "the chemical and physical structures of a child's brain, causing trouble with attention, concentration, memory, and creativity."[24]

Greater educational supports are also needed for new immigrant students and students who are pregnant or parenting teens, caregivers, or working to provide financial support for their families. These various needs are particularly difficult to meet in traditionally organized "factory model" schools, which minimize relationships between adults and students, and instead incentivize educators to teach in a standardized, impersonal manner that disengages students. In many high-need communities, schools are also under-resourced and frequently lack a stable supply of well-qualified educators.[25] This, too, impacts the extent to which students are attached to, and engaged by, their schools.

Schools and educators, especially in high-poverty communities, need high-quality resources, training, and organizational supports to be able to identify and address the many challenges their students face. States and districts need to provide the conditions and incentives to allow their schools to create responsive, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.

The Role of New State Accountability and Improvement Systems

New state accountability and improvement systems for public schools can play an important role in changing the incentives and conditions that marginalize and exclude students from school. Just as accountability policies under NCLB created incentives to boost test scores by pushing youth out of school, new accountability policies under ESSA can be used to create systems that keep youth in school and support their learning. In turn, the resulting accountability indicators can encourage policies that keep students in school and discourage policies that put them on a path to dropping out.

As states work to implement ESSA and redesign accountability and improvement systems, they have an opportunity to incorporate indicators of performance that can provide information and incentives for educators, parents, and the community. Using these indicators, they can create conditions that leverage greater school inclusion and success for historically underserved youth.

Using these indicators, [states] can create conditions that leverage greater school inclusion and success for historically underserved youth.

ESSA requires that states use multiple measures to evaluate student and school progress. The state must measure and report data annually from these indicators for all students and, separately, for each identified group of students. Required indicators include:

1. A measure of academic achievement using annual assessments in English language arts and math.
2. An additional academic measure for elementary and secondary schools, which can be a measure of student growth.
3. The 4-year graduation rate for high schools (an extended-year rate may be included as well).
4. A measure of progress in language proficiency for English language learners.
5. At least one measure of school quality or student success.

The set of measures selected by the state must be combined to identify schools for comprehensive improvement and support (including, at a minimum, the lowest-performing 5% of schools) or targeted improvement and support (for schools with substantial gaps or low performance among subgroups of students). The measures must be incorporated into a set of statewide decision rules for identifying schools, with the academic measures weighted most heavily. Both the federally required and state-selected measures can be designed to focus on leveraging attention and support to the needs of the most underserved students.

The academic indicators can be designed to focus on the needs of all students, and to reward schools for holding them close and moving them forward. For example, states can choose to reward schools for growth in student academic performance across multiple levels of proficiency, and give greater weight to moving the lowest-achieving students upward. In addition, states that choose to include an extended-year graduation rate can reward schools that keep students who need more time to graduate, and identify and retain students who are at high risk for dropping out, rather than allow them to leave.

In addition, there are many possibilities for leveraging the indicator(s) of school quality or student success, colloquially known as the "fifth indicator," although there can be any number of additional measures. The inclusion of such indicators has the capacity to create incentives for schools to create a sense of belonging and acceptance for all children and youth, and to encourage and support youth to stay and thrive in school. In what follows, we describe five "equity indicators" (rates of suspensions and expulsions, school climate, chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and college and career readiness) that, combined with effective policies, could make a substantial difference in the success of historically underserved and marginalized youth.

These types of indicators can provide actionable information to identify needs, and to target resources and supports to educators and students. Further, attention to these indicators can support and incentivize the reorganizing of schools to focus on maximizing student potential rather than inadvertently extinguishing it. Each section includes examples of evidence-based strategies and resources for improving performance on the measure for schools and districts struggling overall or for subgroups of students.

Reducing Student Suspensions and Expulsions

Rationale

Over the last several decades, researchers have noted that the overuse and disparate use of suspensions and expulsions have been significant contributors to dropout rates and the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline. According to the most recent Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, during the 2011–2012 school year, 3.5 million students were suspended in school, 3.45 million students were suspended out of school, and 130,000 students were expelled.

High rates of school exclusion have been encouraged by zero tolerance policies, which assign explicit, predetermined punishments to specific violations of school rules, regardless of the situation or context of the behavior.

These high rates of school exclusion have been encouraged by zero-tolerance policies, which assign explicit, predetermined punishments to specific violations of school rules, regardless of the situation or context of the behavior.[26] In many cases, punishment for even minor violations is severe, such as suspension from school for wearing the wrong clothing, speaking out of turn, or failing to turn in homework. In theory, zero tolerance deters students from violent or illegal behavior because the punishment for such a violation is harsh and certain.[27] However, research shows that zero tolerance practices ultimately increase illegal behavior and have many other negative consequences for student academic achievement, attainment, and welfare, as well as for school culture.[28] Furthermore, according to the UCLA Civil Rights Project,

> researchers find that the frequent use of suspension brings no benefits in terms of test scores or graduation rates. Thus, the oft-repeated claim that it is necessary to kick out the bad kids so the good kids can learn is shown to be a myth. In fact, research suggests

that a relatively lower use of out-of-school suspensions, after controlling for race and poverty, correlates with higher test scores, not lower.[29]

Students of color and those with disabilities are disproportionately suspended compared to their White and non-disabled peers. These disparities are often a function of the fact that students are treated and punished differently despite engaging in similar behaviors. Studies show that African American students receive harsher suspensions for more subjective and less serious behavior than their White peers.[30] Data also demonstrate that disparities in rates of discipline are not the result of more serious misbehavior; rather, students of color are suspended from school for fairly minor behavior that doesn't pose a serious threat to safety.[31] For example, research shows that African American female students are more likely than White female students to be suspended for subjective infractions such as defiance and dress code violations.[32]

The relationship between school exclusion and incarceration is strong. Students who are removed from school lose instructional time and tend to have lower academic success, higher rates of grade retention, lower graduation rates, and are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system.[33] In some states and districts, "school discipline becomes criminalized through its extension into the juvenile court,"[34] regardless of the severity of the behavior, such as whether a student is being disciplined for truancy or willful defiance rather than causing some form of damage or injury. Data from several districts across various states "show that the alleged misconduct leading to court referral is typically quite minor. This 'net-widening' effect reflects increased collaboration between schools and the juvenile justice system, which has eroded the traditional boundaries between the two institutions."[35]

Further, studies show how the "anticipatory labeling of students as future prisoners in need of coercive control or exclusion can be a self-fulfilling prophecy as students frequently suspended from school face increased risks of juvenile and adult incarceration. Just as the success of a 'College Prep' track can be gauged by the share of students in this track who attend college, the reliability of penal and exclusionary practices at weeding out those students on the 'fast track' to jail may, perversely, legitimate and reinforce these practices."[36]

When students are regularly removed from the classroom, they fall behind in their classwork, and they experience a social and emotional distancing and disengagement from school.

Student exclusion from school begins a process of successive failures. When students are regularly removed from the classroom, they fall behind in their classwork, and they experience a social and emotional distancing and disengagement from school.[37] The more time students spend out of the classroom, the more their sense of connection to the school wanes,[38] along with their ability to succeed academically as they miss more and more instruction. This distance promotes disengaged behaviors, such as truancy, chronic absenteeism, and antisocial behavior,[39] which in turn contributes to the widening achievement and opportunity gap. Research shows that the frequency of student suspensions undermines academic performance and increases the likelihood of dropping out.[40] It also leaves a mark on their school records that most likely will negatively impact their postsecondary education opportunities.

Under ESSA, school quality and student success indicators used for accountability purposes must be disaggregated by race and other student characteristics. Research indicates that tracking suspension and expulsion data by student groups can help highlight racially disparate practices, and promote positive behavioral interventions that can improve student engagement and academic success.[41]

Because students who belong to two or more disadvantaged subgroups are at the highest risk of being suspended, districts benefit from conducting a cross-sectional data analysis, where possible, to get a better understanding of who is being suspended and to identify more effective interventions.[42] For example, in Chicago, 75% of African American male students with disabilities in middle school were suspended, and African American females with disabilities were suspended at higher rates than White and Latino males.[43] Similarly, compared to White male students with disabilities served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), rates of out-of-school suspensions are more than twice as high for American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, African American, and multiracial male students with disabilities served by IDEA.[44]

In an effort to reduce the use of exclusionary practices, many schools have moved to establish social-emotional supports for students, as well as restorative justice practices centered on promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships. For example, California has achieved a sharp decrease in suspension rates as a result of this type of policy. Between 2011 and 2016, suspensions have declined by 33.6%, driven by a 77% decline in suspensions for "willful defiance," and expulsions have dropped 40.4%.[45]

Although there is still a steep learning curve for many schools and districts to figure out how to create engaging learning environments and social-emotional supports for students, many have shown it can be done.[46] If states are committed to ending the school-to-prison pipeline, they can use state accountability and improvement systems to incentivize and reward districts for reducing school exclusion. They can also provide targeted resources, training, and support to educators for instituting positive and effective school discipline policies and practices.

If states are committed to ending the school-to-prison pipeline, they can use state accountability and improvement systems to incentivize and reward districts for reducing school exclusion.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Reducing Rates of Suspension and Expulsion

To reduce rates and disparities in rates of suspension and expulsion, states, districts, and schools should remove zero-tolerance policies and eliminate the use of suspensions and expulsions for lower-level offenses, replacing them with supportive, inclusive, and effective strategies[47] to address student misbehavior, including restorative justice.[48]

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is an approach that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by problematic behavior. It is generally accomplished through cooperative processes that include all stakeholders, leading to transformation of people, relationships, and communities. In schools, restorative justice programs bring the affected parties together to evaluate the situation, determine how to make amends, and reintegrate students into the classroom and school community.[49] Resources include:

Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide for Schools—Produced by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, this comprehensive guide focuses on ways that schools can integrate restorative justice practices. The guide looks at challenges to implementation, defines the subject, and provides three approaches to using restorative justice in schools.

Restorative Justice: A Working Guide for Our Schools—This guide from the Alameda County School Health Services Coalition covers a range of topics, and includes an in-depth introduction, examples of restorative practices, and a discussion of the impact these programs can have on youth.

Restorative Justice: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools—This guide from the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign provides different examples of restorative practices, along with implementation tips and strategies, and examples from school districts.

Restorative Practices: Whole-School Implementation Guide—The San Francisco Unified School District uses restorative practices throughout the district. This guide provides a framework for planning, implementing, and using restorative practices across a school or district. There are many useful insights into the unique considerations of implementing a program. The district also offers useful curriculum-planning resources.

Source: Davis, M. Restorative justice: Resources for schools (2015). https://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis (accessed 12/27/16).

In addition, states and districts can support the development and implementation of both model school discipline policy and agreements that clarify the distinction between educator discipline and law enforcement discipline, eliminating referrals to law enforcement for all nonviolent, noncriminal offenses. The Dignity in Schools Campaign provides several resources for policies that remove police from schools, replacing them with effective staff-led strategies for classroom management, conflict resolution, and mediation.[50]

When staff lack strategies for managing behavior, focused supports may be needed. Using classroom-level data to provide targeted professional development for teachers, particularly for early-career teachers, may also be effective. Research indicates that there is a relationship between a high suspension rate and a higher than average number of novice teachers.[51] States, districts, and schools can also reduce disproportionality by providing training on implicit bias and asset-based youth development for teachers and administrators, school resource officers, police, juvenile judges, and others dealing with juveniles.[52]

Resources for districts and schools include joint guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, *Rethink School Discipline: School District Leader Summit on Improving School Climate and Discipline Resource Guide for Superintendent Action*,[53] which provides evidence-based action steps on the district and school level for initiating and enhancing local efforts to create safe, supportive school climate, discipline systems, and practices in collaboration with local stakeholders. Options for replacing zero-tolerance policies, such as targeted behavioral supports for at-risk students, promoting student-school bonds, and character education and social-emotional learning programs are included in the National Education Association's *Multiple Responses, Promising Results: Evidence-based, nonpunitive alternatives to zero tolerance*.[54]

Building a Positive School Climate and Promoting Social-Emotional Learning

Students' connections to and successes in school are strongly influenced by the way they are treated in school: whether they feel they are cared about and belong, how they are supported both psychologically and academically, and what resources they feel they can access when they need help. These dynamics are influenced by school climate and culture, which can be measured in an accountability system through student surveys and on-site reviews of practice. Such surveys can also measure students' experiences of social-emotional safety and skill development, which help create and sustain a positive school climate.

Rationale

A positive school climate is one that "fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society."[55] Components of a positive school climate include "norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe."[56] This happens where students, educators, and families are engaged and respected; are working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision; and where educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.[57]

Developing a positive school climate depends, in part, on providing social-emotional supports to students, as well as teaching students social-emotional skills that enable positive relationships, and prevent conflicts and bullying. Providing a positive school climate also requires that staff learn social and emotional skills and their applications to a range of school practices, including school discipline and academic instruction that develop students' abilities to collaborate, problem solve, and become self-directed, resourceful, and resilient.[58] As students and school personnel refine their social and emotional competence, school climate improves, just as the existence of a positive school climate creates the atmosphere within which social and emotional learning can take place.[59] In short, social and emotional competence develops within a complex system that influences all facets of the school day and community.[60]

Providing a positive school climate requires that staff learn social and emotional skills and their applications to a range of school practices.

Well-implemented social-emotional learning programs are associated with positive outcomes, ranging from significantly better test scores to improved social skills, attitudes, and behavior.[61] Recognizing this connection, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is adding new measurements for student noncognitive skills, and, at a global level, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is doing the same.[62] Many schools and districts have also begun to focus on social and emotional learning, given compelling research on the science of learning and human development.[63]

State accountability and improvement systems can emphasize the importance of a positive school climate and support its development. Effective school climate measures can reveal whether students feel well-supported socially, emotionally, and academically—for example, whether they feel safe, have adults they can go to for support, or feel as if the school treats them with care. The most common measures of school climate are self-reported student surveys that, when

properly administered, can allow disaggregation of data by student subgroup—a requirement for inclusion in the federal accountability component of a state's system.[64]

> Effective school climate measures can reveal whether students feel well-supported socially, emotionally, and academically.

These student surveys can also include items that measure social-emotional supports and learning opportunities within the school.[65] Measures that can be used include those that reveal whether schools are engaged in practices that help students develop social and emotional skills—for example, whether students have opportunities to collaborate in class, engage in conflict resolution, revise their work, and develop a growth mindset.[66]

State policymakers might consider recommending additional measures to be implemented at the local level for diagnostic and school improvement purposes rather than school identification. These could include teacher surveys, parent surveys, or qualitative data from school quality reviews, all of which could contribute to locally collected and used indicators of school climate or opportunities to learn. These can be effective equity measures even if they may not be used as an official "fifth indicator" for federal accountability purposes.

Both classroom climate and teachers' support for students' social-emotional development and learning can also be measured through classroom observation tools, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),[67] which is used by many early childhood programs and elementary schools. Some of California's CORE districts have used teacher ratings of students' skills (measuring the degree to which individual students have developed certain competencies) to complement student self-reports. Such assessments can also be folded into other performance assessments students engage in—for example, evaluating students' collaboration on a project with other students.[68] These kinds of assessments may be used at the local level to guide teaching and learning initiatives, along with school and district improvement efforts.[69]

As educators receive data from these surveys, they can evaluate what is working well overall and for different groups of students, and where there are problems or difficulties that remain to be worked on. Many teams use the surveys each spring to plan initiatives for the coming school year and track progress with the following year's survey. Having regular access to student voice, as well as to other insights from teachers and parents, allows a more student-centered perspective to be factored into continuous improvement plans.

From an accountability perspective, states can identify interventions and provide assistance to schools to develop strategies to help students feel safe and supported, so that they can learn in a productive and respectful school climate.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Creating a Positive School Climate and Supporting Social and Emotional Learning

States and districts can support educators in implementing measures of school climate and social and emotional learning in part by providing teacher and leader training on how to use data from surveys and other sources to inform school improvement initiatives and the use of professional development resources. Teachers and leaders should also be provided with sufficient time to analyze and respond to the data.

Resources for helping schools create inclusive and positive climates include the U.S. Department of Education and American Institutes for Research's *Safe and Supportive Learning*,[70] and organizations such as the Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), Engaged Schools, and the National School Climate Center that, aligned with the strategies commonly pursued, recommend:

- Creating a site-based climate team composed of students, teachers, administrators, other staff, and parents that meets regularly, to identify and address school climate issues.
- Working with students and teachers to create consensual norms for respectful behaviors that are known and supported by all members, along with instituting conflict resolution training and restorative justice practices that strengthen individual success and a sense of a community.
- Improving the physical environment to make it comfortable and student-friendly, clean, and well lit; displaying student art, projects, and papers conveying that students are at the center of the school's mission; and including multicultural images and texts in instruction.
- Increasing student voice and participation in all aspects of the school, from academic input and engagement in projects to leadership of clubs and social events, to training for conflict resolution and peer mediation in disputes.
- Implementing ongoing activities that support diversity and promote tolerance, deepen understanding, and increase respect for differences. These activities have greater impact when they are not independent but are consistent with themes woven into the curriculum.
- Creating opportunities for the least engaged youth, beyond traditional athletics and academics, which are often competitive and include few students. Such opportunities include reaching out to invite students into clubs and extracurriculars; supporting students in starting their own clubs or groups; and initiating dialogue opportunities and surveys that ask students what they want to become involved in and how they want to become involved.
- Supporting social skills curriculum and instruction that actively teach the social-emotional skills that equip students to communicate effectively, establish solid friendships, and resolve their differences nonviolently. This can be accomplished directly through lessons that teach these skills, and it can also happen more indirectly through class meetings or strategies such as cooperative learning that teachers use in their classrooms. Success requires that students experience consistent messages in all social-emotional curricula and in all classes.[71]

Ideally, schools will integrate supports for social and emotional learning into general school and classroom practices so that they are viewed as an integral part of academic development, done in furtherance of, and not in lieu of academic success. One recent summary suggests that educators should:

- "view nonacademic skills through a developmental lens with the understanding that they must be nurtured by the same explicit teaching, modeling, support, and opportunities given to academic skills;

- place an emphasis on the key roles that students' environments and relationships play in the development of nonacademic skills;
- use rigorous criteria to identify appropriate nonacademic skills to prioritize, including evidence that they are teachable and correlate to academic achievement; and
- recognize that a focus on foundational nonacademic skills, such as self-regulation and relationship-building, will help to support the development of other skills, such as resiliency and agency."[72]

Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism

Rationale

Chronic absenteeism has a significant impact on student achievement and graduation rates, setting students up for failure. Ensuring that all students receive the support they need to remain present and engaged in learning throughout their k–12 experience begins with obtaining an accurate picture of how much instructional time students are losing and why.

All states collect and report data on "average daily attendance," which is based on the percentage of students in attendance out of the total enrollment on an individual school day. These data are distinct in both calculation and utility compared to "chronic absenteeism" data that are most often based on the percentage of students missing 10% or more of school days. Because different students can be absent on different days, average daily attendance data does not provide information regarding whether and which students are chronically absent. For example, a school could have an average daily attendance of 90%, yet 20% of the students at the school could be chronically absent. Because the chronically absent students are out of school on different days and data are not reported by student, this set of chronic absences would be masked by the average daily attendance data.

Because different students can be absent on different days, average daily attendance data does not provide information regarding whether and which students are chronically absent. For example, a school could have an average daily attendance of 90%, yet 20% of the students at the school could be chronically absent.

According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, during the 2013–14 school year:

- more than 6.8 million students—or 14% of all students—were chronically absent;
- more than 3 million high school students—or 19% of all high school students—were chronically absent; and
- rates of chronic absenteeism were higher for students of color. Compared to their White peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students were over 50% more likely to lose three weeks of school or more, Black students were 30% more likely, and Hispanic students were 9% more likely.[73]

Chronic absenteeism negatively impacts student performance. Students who are chronically absent, on average, score lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than students with better attendance, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.[74] Students who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and 1st grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the 3rd grade.[75] Students who cannot read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.[76] Additional studies demonstrate the connection of chronic absenteeism to low academic achievement and high dropout rates, and suggest that attendance may predict a student's academic progress as effectively as test scores.[77] Students who are chronically absent are 68% less likely than other students to graduate.[78]

A study in Utah examining the impact of chronic absenteeism on graduation rates found that, starting in 8th grade, a student who is chronically absent in any year is 7.4 times more likely to drop out of school than a student who was not chronically absent during any of those years.[79] Therefore, reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism is an effective early intervention strategy for improving student achievement and graduation rates. By including chronic absenteeism rates in a state's accountability and improvement system, schools will be provided with this critical data so that they can be recognized for developing strategies to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism, thus increasing the amount of time students are engaged in learning. State accountability and improvement systems can include this indicator in evaluating school success and identifying whether schools need additional support.

Communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors can measurably reduce students' chronic absenteeism.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Reducing Rates of Chronic Absenteeism

Research has found that school, family, and community partnership practices can significantly decrease chronic absenteeism.[80] In particular, communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors can measurably reduce students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Also, schools that conduct a greater total number of attendance-focused activities have been found to be more likely to decrease the percentage of students who miss 20 or more days of school each year.[81] School reorganization to strengthen student-staff personal relationships can also be a productive strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism. It is also beneficial for schools and districts to constantly recognize, model, and promote good attendance, and promptly respond to initial absences; schools can do this through teachers or advisors who serve as student advocates and the first point of contact with the family, or through attendance teams composed of teachers, administrators, counselors, and sometimes parents who meet continually to analyze the data and devise solutions.[82]

Schools can also mount individually targeted efforts to understand why certain students continue to be absent, despite positive incentives and recognition. This may include attending to the factors contributing to a student's emotional and cognitive engagement, as well as health and housing

issues, or other home or community factors, to gain a more complete understanding of the student. One such strategy uses student outreach efforts that include communicating to the parent and the student that the student was missed; asking the reason for nonattendance; and considering, where appropriate, intensive, individualized, and clinical interventions that may involve one-on-one services from helping professionals.[83]

A key part of the solution is also likely to be implementing data collection and analysis tools that allow educators to track and identify attendance issues in an ongoing and timely manner.

Along with reporting rates of chronic absenteeism in annual data collected by the state, districts and schools should consider data systems that allow them to access such data more frequently so that they can respond in real time.

Finally, in defining and tracking "chronic absenteeism," it would be more effective and allow for early intervention for the state to establish a consistent statewide calculation that is based on the percentage of days a student is absent while enrolled at a particular school, such as 10%, rather than a minimum number of days, such as 15 days. This would allow districts and schools, who have access to the data more frequently than the state, to track and identify for early intervention highly mobile students who may not have been considered chronically absent based on the total number of school days in a new school but would be considered chronically absent based on the percentage of days they have missed.

Additional evidence-based strategies to address chronic absenteeism are included in a toolkit jointly released by the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U.S. Department of Education, *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*.[84]

Implementing an Extended-Year Graduation Rate

Rationale

Since the passage of NCLB, federal accountability systems have focused on 4-year graduation rates, typically treating youth who do not graduate in 4 years as dropouts, and removing any recognition for schools that work with struggling youth to ensure they can graduate in 5 or 6 years. These may include youth who immigrated to the U.S. as teenagers with little previous education and may need time to catch up academically, those who dropped out for a job or childrearing, those who have been incarcerated, or those who simply need more time and assistance to reach high standards.

For schools, the sole use of a 4-year graduation rate has provided no incentive to try to retain or bring back youth who cannot graduate in 4 years, particularly if they are low-achieving. Such students are considered a liability in the accountability system, pulling down average test scores while also counting as dropouts under a 4-year graduation rate. Since one in four students do not graduate within 4 years (with much higher proportions in high-need communities), incentives are needed to serve these students more effectively.[85]

Extended-year graduation rates can provide that incentive for schools to keep, educate, and graduate youth with challenges that prevent them from graduating in 4 years. Further, "[i]n the case of some dual enrollment, early college, and similar programs, as well as for special education students and others with extenuating circumstances, graduating in 4 years is not always part of the

plan. … [R]eport[ing] extended-year graduation rates would provide a more accurate picture of who is and is not graduating."[86]

> Extended-year graduation rates can provide [an] incentive for schools to keep, educate, and graduate youth with challenges that prevent them from graduating in 4 years.

New York City has long tracked extended-year graduation rate data, and the impact is particularly noticeable in schools serving immigrant youth. For example, a study of the Internationals High School Network, a group of 17 schools with a strong track record of success in graduating recent immigrant English learner students and sending them to college, found that their average graduation rates grew from 63% after 4 years to 89% by year 7. The study's authors note that, "these data suggest that a 4-year graduation measure is inadequate to capture the full impact of the Internationals."[87] These data suggest that when schools are incentivized to keep and support youth with extra challenges, more youth may ultimately graduate.

Similarly, in Michigan, for economically disadvantaged students, the 6-year graduation rate showed a 9% increase over the 4-year rate and more than a 6% increase in the graduation rate for African American students.[88] These increases are due in part to state, district, and school dropout and prevention recovery efforts that include increased high school redesign options such as flexible programming and programs that blend secondary and postsecondary education and provide wraparound supports.[89]

The majority of states collect extended-year graduation rate data. As of 2015, 31 states report 5-year graduation rates, and 13 of those states report 6-year graduation rates as well.[90] Including extended-year graduation rates as part of accountability systems provides an important protection against the perverse incentives that existed under NCLB for schools to exclude lower-performing youth to boost accountability metrics focused on test scores and goes further to reward schools for keeping youth if they need more time.[91]

States should use the opportunity provided by ESSA to incorporate the extended-year graduation rates into accountability and improvement systems. In doing so, states would be supporting and rewarding schools that are implementing evidence-based strategies to ensure that all youth graduate, even those who may need more than the standard number of years.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Improving Graduation Rates

A number of studies find that structural changes in traditional factory-model high schools can have a substantial effect on increasing graduation rates. Dropping out of school is more often than not the final stage in a cumulative process of increasing disengagement from school, which can easily happen in contexts where students are not well known by the adults.[92] Smaller schools and those that have created more personalized learning communities tend to have markedly higher graduation rates than large schools in which students can easily get lost and fall through the cracks.[93]

As documented in a carefully controlled set of longitudinal studies,[94] New York City's small high schools of choice have resulted in an increase in the 4-year graduation rate by 9.5 percentage points and the extended-year rate by 8.9 percentage points for students matched by demographic characteristics with those in larger high schools. Gains are especially noteworthy for students of

color and students with disabilities, across all diploma types, and were accomplished without a decline in achievement, demonstrating that academic rigor was not compromised in an effort to increase graduation rates. Instead, high school reforms included a combined focus on high-quality educators, personalized learning environments, and high academic expectations.

In addition, organizational structures such as advisory systems and teaching teams that create strong, long-term relationships between youth and adults contribute to lower dropout rates, as does an authentic curriculum that engages youth in real-world problem-solving.[95] Case studies of a number of schools that have created strong achievement, as well as increased graduation and college-going rates for historically underserved students, show that these high-performing schools share the following features:

- curriculum, instruction, and assessments designed to help students engage in the learning process and that develop analytical, collaboration, and communication skills;
- formative assessments that enable teachers to understand how and what students are learning so they can support student mastery of content, skills, and dispositions;
- school structures that support personalization and connections to adults within the school and to the community outside of school;
- teachers working together to focus on students' strengths, interests, and needs, to engage in their own learning, and to collaborate on the improvement of their instructional practices; and
- leadership that is shared among the adults in the building with a specific focus on incorporating the voices of teachers, staff, administrators, and parents in key decisions.[96]

Effective efforts to increase graduation rates also include supporting the whole student. All students, and high-need students in particular, benefit from integrated student supports that offer mental health and other health services, as well as after-school supports, mentoring, and tutoring, all of which can make a difference in graduation rates. Evidence is beginning to demonstrate that these types of supports can contribute to decreases in grade retention and dropout rates.[97]

Strategic and timely use of data by educators and support staff is also critical to identifying youth who need intervention, and the appropriate targeted intervention and supports needed at the school level.

Strategic and timely use of data by educators and support staff is also critical to identifying youth who need intervention, and the appropriate targeted intervention and supports needed at the school level. A description of these types of effective evidence-based strategies can be found in MDRC's *Findings on School Improvement Strategies*,[98] which describes the positive impact of efforts such as New York City's Small Schools of Choice (which emphasizes academic rigor; strong, sustained relationships between youth and faculty members; and community partnerships to offer relevant learning opportunities outside the classroom), and Diplomas Now (which focuses on using early-warning indicators related to attendance, behavior, and course performance to identify at-risk students and

then intervenes with targeted support to get struggling youth back on track). Additional strategies to support on-track efforts are described in *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth-Grade Year*.[99]

Expanding Access to a College- and Career-Ready Curriculum

Rationale

According to a report by the Equity and Excellence Commission, inequities in educational opportunities are perpetuated through differential access to a high-quality curriculum that focuses on critical thinking skills, and prepares students for college and careers. Lack of access to a meaningful, relevant curriculum affects student achievement, graduation, and postsecondary success. Dropping out of school is more often than not the final stage in a cumulative process of increasing disengagement from school, the moment when students decide it offers them little of interest or utility.[100]

Furthermore, early sorting of children into different curriculum tracks often prevents students from encountering and acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in subsequent grades.[101] A large body of research has shown that students have differential access to college preparatory curriculum and to high-quality career-technical programs that are aimed at skilled employment in the modern economy.[102] The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights reports, for example, that schools with high proportions of African American and Latino students are much less likely to offer advanced courses such as calculus and that, across schools, African American and Latino students are underrepresented in advanced placement courses and Gifted and Talented programs—the kinds of settings in which higher-order skills are most purposefully developed.[103]

Research demonstrates that taking college preparatory coursework in high school correlates with several indicators of college readiness, from college enrollment[104] and grades[105] to persistence and completion.[106] Similar research shows that students enrolled in career academies (which blend academic preparation with well-designed experiential learning in occupational fields) enroll in community college at higher rates,[107] are more prepared for college coursework,[108] and experience higher wages and greater employment stability.[109]

Research demonstrates that taking college preparatory coursework in high school correlates with several indicators of college readiness, from college enrollment and grades to persistence and completion.

State accountability systems that include information regarding student access to and completion of a college- and career-ready curriculum can incentivize more attention to students' curriculum opportunities, and reveal whether additional resources and supports are needed.

Many states are already working to utilize indicators of college and career readiness within their accountability systems to leverage high-quality opportunities so that they are provided much more equitably to students. Examples include:

- Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas use evidence of challenging course offerings, including the availability of advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, or college credit courses as part of their college- and career-readiness indicator.[110]
- Hawaii, Connecticut, and New Jersey use the total percentage of students who enroll in any institution of higher education within 16 months of earning a regular high school diploma as one way to indicate college and career readiness.[111]
- Eleven states, including Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, and Illinois, use the percentage of students who receive industry certification to measure college and career readiness.[112]

California is developing a college- and career-ready index that includes measures of how many students complete a college preparatory curriculum or a high-quality career-ready sequence of courses and internships; how many take and pass advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual-credit college courses at a college-readiness level;[113] and how many reach a college-ready score on the 11th grade Smarter Balanced test.[114] The index will eventually add indicators such as the California Seal of Biliteracy, which recognizes proficiency in two or more languages (a skill increasingly needed in the global economy) and perhaps the completion of rigorous performance-based assessments or graduation portfolios.

The use of college- and career-readiness indicators can reveal which students have access to a relevant and engaging college- and career-ready curriculum. The inclusion of these indicators thereby strengthens the ability of states to meaningfully tackle many of the structural and societal challenges they face in locally relevant ways in an effort to provide statewide access to this type of curriculum to all students.

Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Increasing Access to College- and Career-ready Curriculum

To strengthen learning opportunities for their students, especially the historically underserved, states may want to consider incorporating into state accountability and improvement systems indicators of college and career readiness. One of the most important things that an accountability system can do is to ensure that 100% of students graduate from high school with a productive pathway to the future.

Indicators can include access to and performance in:

- advanced coursework, including advanced placement and International Baccalaureate programs;
- dual enrollment and early college programs, including college credit accumulation;
- completion of a college preparatory course of study and/or a high-quality career technical course of study (often developed with industry);

- applied learning opportunities, including work-based learning opportunities, and career and technical education certifications; and
- postsecondary education outcomes, such as rates of enrollment, remediation, persistence, and completion.[115]

States and districts can also include measures of students' demonstrated competence in areas such as world language (e.g., a demonstration of proficient communication in a language other than English), as California is doing, the arts (e.g., a demonstration of performance in an area of the performing arts), as Louisiana is considering doing, or other fields.

> One of the most important things that an accountability system can do is to ensure that 100% of students graduate from high school with a productive pathway to the future.

For examples of state legislative actions to increase student access to a high-quality college- and career-ready curriculum, see the National Conference of State Legislatures' *Accelerated Learning Options: Dual Enrollment AP, and IB*.[116] For instance, Idaho established the "8-in-6 Program" to identify students who are taking courses in grades 7 through 12 at an accelerated rate and provide them with an incentive to participate in dual credit, with the intent of earning up to 2 years of college credits while still in high school. The program will provide funding so that a portion of the summer online courses, and online overload courses taken by students will be paid for by the state department of education. Arkansas established the Advanced Placement Training and Incentive Program to prepare more students for success in higher education, postsecondary training, and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and provides grant funding to organizations that implement measures to achieve the goals of the program.

To support success on these indicators, many states have established college- and career-ready standards anchored in core academic knowledge and skills that recognize competencies considered by higher education, employers, and parents as critical to success.[117] Several resources for states to consider in supporting these policies are contained in the U.S. Department of Education's *Blueprint for College- and Career-Ready Students*,[118] which includes strategies for establishing standards that meaningfully map routes toward readiness for college or a career; creating systems that reward schools, districts, and states for success, require rigorous interventions in the lowest performers, and allow local flexibility in most cases to achieve results; using disaggregated data on progress and growth to fairly and accurately assess school needs and appropriately target strategies; and increasing resource equity at every level of the system.

Achieve's *Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High Schools: A Guide for State Policymakers* includes information on aligning high school standards with postsecondary education, and providing a high-quality curriculum and teacher support.[119] MDRC's *Preparing High School Students for Successful Transitions to Postsecondary Education and Employment* describes efforts that can be taken at the state, district, and school levels. At the state level, efforts might include creating governance mechanisms and financial incentives to align k–12 and postsecondary education planning and budgets, and providing feedback to high schools by creating a system for tracking students across the k–12 and postsecondary education systems and into the workplace. Efforts at the district

and school levels could include emphasizing rigor and high expectations for all students, along with appropriate counseling and other supports; integrating strong academic content into career-focused classes; and collaborating with postsecondary education institutions, economic development agencies, and employers to help create smoother transitions to college and the workforce.[120]

Among successful state-supported models are Linked Learning schools in California, which have combined academic preparation for college along with career and technical education, work-based learning experiences, and integrated student supports to increase relevance and skill development through applied learning opportunities. Supported by a state public-private Career Pathways Trust, these efforts have increased credit accumulation, graduation rates, college-going rates, and access to highly skilled careers for certified Linked Learning pathway students.[121]

States and districts have also increased youth success in college preparatory coursework by offering supports, such as AVID college-readiness programs,[122] that trains educators in providing academic and psychological supports to students. Districts can select and develop thoughtful, curriculum-embedded assessments of students' knowledge and skills that provide ongoing diagnostic information to support learning. For example, districts may take advantage of the opportunities under ESSA to include assessments in the form of projects, portfolios, or extended-performance tasks, as well as the inclusion of performance tasks in other academic subject areas such as science. These tools provide meaningful learning experiences that can inform the teaching and learning process, and enable greater success for youth.[123]

Conclusion

All students deserve the right to be educated in classrooms and schools in which they are challenged academically, to have teachers who care about them and have access to the supports and resources to educate effectively, and to graduate ready to pursue postsecondary success—that is, to have a positive future and be engaged, productive citizens in thriving communities. The passage of ESSA presents a moment in time—an opportunity for states to move away from policies that incentivize schools to meet the demand to boost test scores by eliminating the students who experience personal and academic challenges.[124]

The use of a multiple measure accountability and improvement system offers states the opportunity to gather and utilize a diverse, more nuanced set of data. Such data are meaningfully connected to student success, and actionable by schools and districts to drive continuous improvement and identify the appropriate interventions and support. Among the measures that can be monitored and addressed to make a difference are suspension and expulsion rates, school climate, chronic absenteeism, extended-year graduation rates, and completion of high-quality college- and career-ready courses of study.

Working on these indicators will encourage schools to address common challenges to school completion for underserved students, and reward schools for continuously improving student supports and outcomes. States can also leverage these more equitable outcomes by providing targeted and intensive support and resources to schools that are struggling overall or with particular groups of students.

This moment also provides an opportunity for states and districts to demonstrate their commitment to interrupting policies and practices that may inadvertently feed the school-to-prison pipeline. Perhaps the most important opportunity under ESSA for states, districts, and schools is the chance to rise to the challenge set before them—to recognize and advance the dignity, promise, and potential in all students as they strive to graduate high school and college, to excel in their school experiences, and to be fully prepared to succeed and shape the life ahead of them.

Endnotes

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