DISPATCHES

from the Next Generation Accountability Learning Community for Small-to-Midsize Urban Districts

# Exploring Foundational Questions For Next Generation Accountability

These reflections have been prepared by the staff of the Next Generation Accountability Learning Community (NGALC). The NGALC is a group of roughly two dozen New England educators interested in the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) from the perspective of small-to-midsize urban districts. In the pages that follow, we summarize foundational questions that this learning community is confronting for the benefit of readers concerned about the future of accountability in the small-to-midsize city context. This dispatch is the first in a series of texts that will document the learning community's progress and engage a wider group of stakeholders in our timely dialogue.

The NGALC gathered recently in Boston for the first of three summer meetings. Members in attendance included state agency officials, classroom teachers, superintendents, principals, and union representatives. Many of these participants wear several hats as education leaders at school, district, and state levels, within professional associations, and across realms of policy and practice. They were joined by project advisors and staff.

The first session focused on opportunities and challenges ESSA presents small-to-midsize urban districts with a deep dive look at measures of academic achievement and student growth.

## I. Unpacking Next Gen Accountability

In thinking about the opportunity ESSA presents from the perspective of small-to-midsize urban districts, members of the learning community surfaced many foundational questions for further reflection. Their angle and wording vary by role:

### Building leaders are asking:

- How do we define success and what measures accurately differentiate performance?
- What does it mean, and how might it work, to define success differently for different schools or contexts? Can that be done equitably?
- How do teachers/building administrators influence state implementation of ESSA, and contribute to the conversation around innovation in accountability policy to better serve high-need students?

### District leaders are asking:

- How can we get state policies to accurately reflect the priorities and values communities have for their schools?
- What are our opportunities to use multiple measures, rather than a limited few?
- How do we design accountability to balance transparency for the public with the complexity we need to both assess school performance meaningfully and provide information that will support school improvement?

### State leaders are asking:

- How do we capture a richer picture of school performance without losing transparency for parents and the public?
- Beyond prescription, how do states support districts in their efforts to improve?
- How do we change the accountability narrative from a focus on identification to a system for supporting educators and administrators to continuously improve all schools?

## II. Academic Achievement at the Core

Because academic measures will continue to play a predominant role under ESSA, understanding how states can better measure academic proficiency and a school's contribution to academic gains is fundamental to conversations about next generation frameworks for accountability.

Proficiency has the great challenge of appearing to be "easy" to understand, when it is in fact extremely complex. As the most heavily weighted measure in current state accountability formulas (see appendix), proficiency has been a predominant focus for many, including state agencies, local educators, and families. This is seen as one of the main achievements of first generation accountability policy: establishing standards that we can expect all students to meet regardless of their socioeconomic background.

However, in practice, strong emphasis on proficiency has created widespread concern that urban schools now focus time and other resources too narrowly on tested subjects. Setting "proficient" as a bar has also placed pressures on urban schools to target students who test near the cut score. In effect, this contradicts the goal of all students meeting high standards, particularly as proficiency is seen by many as well below where affluent students are expected to perform. Some states have adjusted formulas to address this problem, but these adjustments can make it more difficult to explain the calculations leading to school rating determinations.

DISPATCHES

### What is The Next Generation Accountability Learning Community (NGALC)?

NGALC helps state and district leaders in New England leverage the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* to advance the success of students in small-to- midsize urban school districts. NGALC has three goals:

- Focus accountability policy and public attention on both the challenges facing small-to-midsize urban districts and their successes and potential leadership as innovators;
- Deepen participants' knowledge of emerging federal accountability policies and options in ESSA, and increase their capacity to implement needed improvements using them; and
- Equip leaders, in the learning community and beyond, to develop, influence, and support accountability innovations—in policy and practice—that lead to improved student outcomes.

Approximately two dozen teachers, principals, central office leaders from small and mid-size urban school districts, together with senior state agency staff from each of the six New England states, make up the formal NGALC membership. Many others participate in NGALC by viewing expert presentations to the group and other content posted on our website (massinc.org/ngalc) and sharing their ideas.

NGALC is intentionally focused on small-to-midsize urban schools and districts for concrete reasons. These urban communities serve a significant fraction of the region's high-needs students. They face great challenges in raising student achievement and striving for equity. Many have been a part of developing innovation in their work and are in a position to help others leverage innovation and advance student achievement.

While most educators share in the belief that the expectation should be that all students reach proficiency, this is quite clearly different from expecting that 100 percent of students in a grade in a school serving large concentrations of high-need students will score proficient on the testing date. Looking at academic proficiency scores aggregated this way to measure school performance creates a distorted picture of the contribution of urban schools and can undermine the work of educators who are in fact functioning together as a team at a high level and having a significant impact on student learning.

To gauge the "value-added" of schools to student learning, states have incorporated measures of growth. In most states, these growth measures have not been built to fully control for urban context. Moreover, in many states growth measures are assigned less weight than academic proficiency measures in accountability rating formulas. There is also evidence that due to lower variability in growth metrics and the way that they have been embedded in formulas without accounting for this compressed distribution, growth measures may have played even less of a role in differentiating high-performing urban schools than published weights would suggest.

By design these academic growth measures are given less weight than academic proficiency measures, in part because accountability policymakers have desired not to lower the expectation that all students reach proficiency. As one leader put it: "Student growth from 4 out of 16 to 8 out of 16 is a tremendous achievement and should be recognized as such. But 8 out of 16 is still a losing score."

State agencies also face a challenge in that they are required by the US Department of Education to produce one overall score. This has meant we have systems that are not built to tell the public about how students are performing and the effect of the school on student performance. Providing only one measure conflates these two separate but equally important questions and creates tensions between those who want all students to succeed and educators in urban districts who wish to be assessed fairly on the impact of their work.

Addressing the question of how we rate urban schools in terms of value-added versus student outcomes also raises questions about the distribution of resources. If accountability measures were to show urban districts performing across a wider continuum, it might be more difficult for state agencies to target resources to these invariably high-need communities—getting the student scoring 8 of 16 to where she ought to be will take resources that might not be forthcoming if growth measures push her school into a high-performing category. With funding to support school improvement increasingly scarce, policymakers cannot take this political reality lightly.

## III. Early Reflections on a Range of Foundational Questions

As learning community members posed and reflected on these central questions, several themes emerged. Three that stood out most sharply are summarized below:

**1. The realities of ESSA implementation will make it difficult to move to next generation accountability policy all at once.** While many see ESSA as a call from Congress to provide the states with flexibility to redesign accountability to match community values and priorities, the requirement that a new system be submitted to the US DOE by the spring of 2017 and in place the for the 2017-2018 school year makes it difficult for state departments with limited capacity to engage stakeholders and examine new approaches.

States also face significant political uncertainty with a changing administration in Washington and legitimate disagreement among stakeholders about the goals of accountability and how they can best be achieved. And while the law affords more flexibility, the draft regulations issued by the US DOE appear to significantly constrain states. As one state leader observed, "People have expectations that it is a whole new world. There are some opportunities, but they are fewer than people think."

And yet many see this moment as an opportunity not to be lost. As one leader put it, "Can we stop long enough to ask the question—why are we doing this, and does what we are doing align with the purpose we are pursuing?"

Others urge their peers to probe more deeply and consider some kind of "reset" to align accountability more closely with the personalized instruction and deeper learning we would like to see in all of our classrooms: "Are we really going to continue to hang most of our accountability work on the same single set of tests?"

**2. Educators from small-to-midsize urban districts want to engage in policy development at various stages. While such a large role is not historically common, ESSA presents opportunities to establish new partnerships.** One way to succinctly state the challenge at this moment is: can we help state agencies use this moment to build positive engagement and move ahead incrementally toward superior next generation models? The answer is clearly yes.

There is certainly no shortage of educators from urban districts in New England who have a high level of interest in accountability policies that are shaping the future of schooling and learning in the US. In the past, educators have lacked opportunities to immerse themselves in the details and complexity of these policies and to participate in dialogues

and exchanges that can truly influence the design and implementation of accountability frameworks. With the tight implementation timeline, authentically engaging these leaders will be difficult but not impossible.

The learning that state agency officials must undertake to evaluate the new set of additional metrics ESSA requires to ensure that schools are educating the whole child creates a unique moment. These metrics are relatively untested. States will need to work closely alongside local educators to pilot these measures in different settings and develop a better understanding of how they could be incorporated into accountability frameworks at scale in the future. State and local collaboration will also be critical to learning how these new metrics can be used by educators to support continuous improvement, and how state departments can better position educators to communicate the value of new metrics to the public.

Such an exchange between state and local education leaders is also an opportunity to evaluate what measures the state should adopt and others that might be better left to districts to incorporate into local accountability designs, perhaps with state support and recognition that what communities have put in place to rigorously measure success in meeting local priorities should also command considerable attention.

**3. Educators recognize that balancing transparency with the complexity of accountability policies is a high stakes challenge for small-to-midsize urban districts.** This is a classic set of competing values. Parents, community members, taxpayers and others want to be able to know and understand the quality of their schools, and they want to know what goes on "under the hood" of the central office and the school board.

The problem is that what actually works best to support student success is often a complex set of tools which do not easily lend themselves to 30-second narrations. Understanding academic student growth measures, for instance, is not for the faint of heart, even in their more rudimentary forms.
This communication challenge is what makes next generation accountability so crucial for small-to-midsize urban districts. These are residential communities that need families to value their schools in order to maintain healthy, economically integrated neighborhoods. If we fail to differentiate the performance of small-to-midsize urban districts in ways the public can appreciate, these cities will struggle to attract residents. Evidence from NCLB also shows how accountability designations influence where talented teachers and administrators seek employment. To the extent accountability frameworks fail to recognize effective urban schools, they will only make it more difficult for urban districts to recruit and retain the talented educators they need to be successful.
Fundamentally, there is real reason to question whether we can build such a system without first resolving the questions about the purpose accountability: Are we providing the public with transparent and reliable information about performance? Providing educators with vital information to support continuous improvement? Identifying low-performing schools to target for intervention? It is likely that a consensus building effort could lead us to an "all of the above" position. In that case, how will we prioritize among potentially competing/conflicting purposes? Can we achieve the top priorities in ways that can contribute to achieving lower priority purposes, or at least do as little damage as possible to them?

## IV. Responding to the Challenge

NGALC staff recognize learning community members for offering their time, travelling long distances, engaging in respectful dialogue, and creatively considering new pathways forward. Later this month these committed leaders will reconvene to engage in a conversation about the "student success and school quality" provisions of ESSA. In September, they will meet for a final session focused on interventions and next steps.

As the NGALC confronts these new topics, we will continue to deliberate on the foundational questions explored in this dispatch. Working together to enhance the flow and exchange of information on these topics is absolutely critical, as efforts to rethink the purpose and design of accountability require more time for stakeholder engagement and reflection than the current implementation timeframe supports. Toward that end, we are eager for your thoughts and ideas. Please direct correspondence to the contact below:

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## Additional Reading

Channa Cook-Harvey and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich. "Redesigning School Accountability and Support: Progress in Pioneering States" (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2016).

"Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Comparison of the No Child Left Behind Act to the Every Student Succeeds Act" (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015).

"Growth Models: Issues and Advice from States" (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, 2012).

Katherine Castellano and Andrew Ho. "A Practitioner's Guide to Growth Models" (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013).

Linda Darling-Hammond and others. "Pathways to New Accountability through the Every Student Succeeds Act" (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2016).

Morgan Polikoff and others. "A Letter to the US Secretary of Education" (July 12, 2016).

## Appendix

### New England Accountability Indicators: Two (Rough) Comparison Tables

The tables below list accountability indicators currently utilized by New England states and the weighting assigned to each indicator. Since the indicators are broken down into rounded percentages, they will not total to 100 in every instance. Furthermore, there may be other factors that do not directly measure into the accountability calculation (like participation rate), but do measure into whether a school is failing or not. The tables do not include indicators used as "extra credit" (Massachusetts).

These tables are meant to show the breakdown of indicators used in accountability calculations and how much relative weight each indicator is assigned; they do not depict all the nuances of each state's accountability policies. They were produced using available online resources. To find more about the methods for measuring each indicator and what the indictor entails, please visit the websites listed below:

| | |
|---|---|
| MA | http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/annual-reports/school-leaders-guide.pdf |
| NH | http://education.nh.gov/instruction/school_improve/documents/comm_task_force_report.pdf |
| RI | http://www.ride.ri.gov/InformationAccountability/Accountability.aspx |
| ME | http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards/resources/methodology.html |
| VT | http://education.vermont.gov/documents/EDU-Accountability_Operations_Manual_March_2011.pdf |
| CT | http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/evalresearch/using_accountability_results_to_guide_improvement_20160228.pdf |

## A Comparison of High School Accountability Indicators

| INDICATOR | MA[1] | NH | RI | ME | VT[2] | CT[3] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proficiency[4] (ELA) | | | 20[6] | 15 | 25 | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (ELA) High Needs[7] | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (Math) | | | 20 | 15 | | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (Math) High Needs | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (Science) | | 11.1 | | | | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (Science) High Needs | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Proficiency (Writing) | | 11.1 | | | | |
| Proficiency (Writing) High Needs | | | | | | |
| Growth (ELA) | 14.3 | 11.1 | | | | |
| Growth (ELA) High Needs | | | | | | |
| Growth (Math) | 14.3 | 11.1 | | | | |
| Growth (Math) High Needs | | | | | | |
| Gap Closing[8] (ELA) | 14.3 | | 15 | 15 | | |
| Gap Closing (Math) | 14.3 | | 15 | 15 | | |
| Gap Closing (Science) | 14.3 | | | | | |
| Chronic Absenteeism | | 11.1 | | | | 5.26 |
| Chronic Absenteeism High Needs | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Participation (In NECAP & Access for ELLs) | | 11.1 | | | 25 | |
| College & Career Readiness (% taking courses) | | | | | | 5.26 |
| College & Career Readiness (% passing exams) | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Post-Secondary Education Rate | | | | | | 10.5 |
| On Track to Graduate | | | | | | 5.26 |
| 4 Year Graduation Rate | | 11.1 | 30 | 20 | 25 | 10.5 |
| 5 Year Graduation Rate | | 11.1 | | 20 | | |
| 6 Year Graduation Rate | | | | | | 10.5 |
| Cohort Graduation Rate % | 14.3 | | | | | |
| Annual Dropout Rate % | 14.3 | 11.1 | | | | |
| Physical Fitness | | | | | | 5.26 |
| Arts Access | | | | | | 5.26 |
| **Total %** | **100.1** | **99.9** | **100** | **100** | **100** | **99.88** |

## A Comparison of Elementary & Middle School Indicators

| INDICATOR | MA | NH | RI | ME | VT | CT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proficiency (ELA) | | | 20 | 16.7 | 50 | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (ELA) High Needs | | | | | | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (Math) | | | 20 | 16.7 | 25 | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (Math) High Needs | | | | | | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (Science) | | 10 | | | | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (Science) High Needs | | | | | | 5.56 |
| Proficiency (Writing) | | 10 | | | | |
| Proficiency (Writing) High Needs | | | | | | |
| Growth (ELA) | 20 | 30 | 15 | 16.7 | | 11.1 |
| Growth (ELA) High Needs | | | | | | 11.1 |
| Growth (Math) | 20 | 30 | 15 | 16.7 | | 11.1 |
| Growth (Math) High Needs | | | | | | 11.1 |
| Gap Closing (ELA) | 20 | | 15 | 16.7 | | |
| Gap Closing (Math) | 20 | | 15 | 16.7 | | |
| Gap Closing (Science) | 20 | | | | | |
| Chronic Absenteeism | | 10 | | | | 5.56 |
| Chronic Absenteeism High Needs | | | | | | 5.56 |
| Participation (In NECAP & Access for ELLs) | | 10 | | | 25 | |
| Physical Fitness | | | | | | 5.56 |
| Arts Access | | | | | | 5.56 |
| **Total %** | **100** | **100** | **100** | **100.2** | **100** | **99.88** |

## Table Notes

1 There are ways to earn extra credit/indicators used to determine the added credit that are not incorporated into this table (i.e. drop-out reengagement, ELL proficiency).

2 Vermont does not weight its indicators, but evaluates whether a school (also broken down into different subgroups) is reaching its AMOs (falling within a confidence interval) or not. If a school or a subgroup consistently fails to achieve its AMOs, it is identified as a school in need of technical assistance.

3 Participation is also measured, but not included in weighted calculation.

4 Proficiency accounts for the percent of students who achieve the "proficient" result on standardized tests (like PARCC or NECAP).

5 NH calculation includes weighting of high needs subgroups, but weighting differs depending on whether there are enough students in a subgroup.

6 RI calculation includes added credit when high needs students perform well on standardized tests.

7 High needs is defined as students with disabilities, ELLs, and low SES students.

8 Gap closing metric captures the discrepancy between the bottom 25% performers and the top 50% performers.

9 Difference between current three-year average and the last year's three year average.

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