



## Accountability Systems Landscape

School accountability systems are tools to measure and compare school performance statewide. These systems can serve many purposes, including sharing information, measuring progress toward state and local goals and supporting greater educational equity. While federal law has required statewide school accountability systems in all states for nearly two decades, these systems still reflect state-specific priorities and often interact with other policy areas, such as school [accreditation systems](#).

Policy changes under the federal [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), the 2015 reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, provide states an opportunity to improve upon their existing systems. This may include transitioning from systems focused on assessments and graduation rates to systems that incorporate a wider variety of measures of school quality.

Accountability systems typically serve three, interlocking purposes: 1) measuring school performance, 2) reporting to the public and state leaders on that performance, and 3) identifying schools that need improvement. ESSA requires that states use certain performance metrics and include certain information—such as disciplinary, teacher qualification, and funding data—on their school [report cards](#), which must be available to parents and the public.

### Common Metrics & Rating Systems

States use many common metrics in their accountability systems, at least in part because ESSA requires state

accountability plans to include five core metrics. These metrics are: 1) proficiency on assessments, which may include growth in proficiency in high school; 2) growth in proficiency in grades below high school or another academic indicator; 3) high school graduation rates; 4) progress of ELs toward proficiency; and 5) a metric of school quality or student success.

Some states have used this fifth metric as an opportunity to incorporate new and innovative measures, such as school climate survey results or postsecondary enrollment, into their accountability systems. Measures of [chronic absenteeism](#) and [college and career readiness](#) have proven to be the most popular school quality or student success metrics.

Many, though not all, states choose to use a single summative rating system to identify school performance on report cards. In order of popularity, common rating systems include: A-F grades, a descriptive rating (e.g., Excellent, Good), indices (e.g., 1-100), and stars (1-5). These ratings can provide a user-friendly guide to school performance, but many argue that they oversimplify the complex nature of school performance.

### Funding Transparency

For the first time, ESSA [requires](#) states to publish online the per-pupil spending for each school and district in the state. State and local report cards must disaggregate expenditures by federal, state and local sources.



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Additionally, reported expenditures must include actual teacher salaries rather than average salaries. This is important because teacher salaries make up roughly 60 percent of an average district budget. Under the new reporting structure, actual teacher salaries may reveal inequitable distributions of more experienced teachers across a district, as these teachers often earn higher salaries.

## Accountability System Levers

States can use the school performance information from accountability systems to make decisions that either promote improvement or reward success. A few states have required local stakeholder engagement to ensure that schools are being held accountable by the communities they serve and meeting local needs.

### ***Promote Improvement***

All states identify [several categories](#) of low-performing schools for additional support from the district or state. Additional support typically includes a [needs assessment](#) to determine the root causes of low performance, an improvement plan, and targeted [strategies](#) matched to the school's needs. Schools that fail to improve within a specified time frame are subject to more rigorous [interventions](#).

### ***Reward Progress and Performance***

States may provide rewards—in the form of additional funding or greater local autonomy—for schools that make significant improvement or are high-performing. For example, the [Arkansas School Recognition Program](#) awards \$100 per student to schools in the top 5% either for student achievement or growth and \$50 per student for schools in the top 6-10% for student achievement or growth.

A [rewards program](#) in [Arizona](#) provides a bonus to districts for each high school student receiving a passing score on a qualifying exam for college credit (e.g., AP); the bonus is higher for students in schools with over half of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. At least 50 percent of the bonus must be distributed to the teacher associated with the student passing the exam.

**Texas** is considering a recommendation to award additional funding to each school with: 1) third-graders achieving reading proficiency and 2) high school graduates who do not need postsecondary remediation and who enroll in postsecondary education, achieve an industry-recognized certificate, or enlist in the military. A final report issued by the state's [Commission on Public School Finance](#) at the end of 2018 describes the proposal in more detail.

Other states provide flexibility from certain policies to reward or incentivize performance. In **Tennessee**, for example, districts designated as high performing have increased flexibility in the use of certain funds, teacher evaluations, and school calendar decisions, and these districts may apply for a waiver of other laws and regulations that hinder progress toward their goals.

### ***Engage Local Stakeholders***

In **Colorado**, all schools and districts are required to convene an [Accountability Committee](#), which is tasked with making recommendations to the principal and district superintendent, especially around school improvement planning and strategies. In [California](#), district plans describe the district's "goals, actions, services, and expenditures to support positive student outcomes."