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Creating Next-Generation Accountability Systems:

What Lawmakers Need to Know About Emerging State Efforts To Broaden Measures of School Performance to Bolster Accountability and Improvement

Last spring, the Sandler Foundation asked key Congressional staffers and Obama Administration officials what research information they needed to reauthorize ESEA. Democrats and Republicans said they could use a synthesis of what we know – and don't know – about how states currently evaluate schools using a broader range of measures than currently required under the law. While there is near-universal dissatisfaction with AYP's narrow, rigid measures, lowest-common-denominator standards, and punitive accountability regime, there is growing interest in developing a next-generation approach to school accountability and diagnostics. The following document –based on a Sandler Foundation-funded RAND Corporation study and information from other key sources– provides insight on what activities are emerging across the states and how the federal government might support a growing interest in indicators of college- and career-readiness, student growth, and other measures of school success and student learning. A forthcoming RAND report, to be released mid-May, will examine federal and state roles in school improvement and state capacity to improve low-performing schools.

- **Many states are already using additional outcome-oriented measures of school performance beyond what is required for meeting AYP.** According to RAND Education's new report, "Expanding Measures of School Performance," many states—20 of 50—have developed accountability systems that use measures that go well beyond current AYP parameters to include: student performance in additional subjects (most often history or social studies); growth in student performance over time; and college and career readiness, including SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement test participation and scores, as well as dropout and graduation rates. For example, a 50-state progress report released recently by Achieve, Inc., indicates that 12 states are using the percentage of high school graduates who earn a college- and career-ready diploma for a range of purposes, including school-level reporting/incentives, and that Texas and Louisiana use the measure for accountability. In most instances, however, current NCLB requirements discourage these measures from being used for AYP purposes.
 - **States are also experimenting with other types of indicators that are being used for diagnostic, planning, and improvement purposes.** Twenty states publish information about school performance using indicators aimed to promote transparency, determine causes of underperformance, target support and interventions, make policy decisions, set goals for improvement, and enforce accountability requirements. For example, states are increasingly using measures of safe and supportive learning environments, graduation-risk indicators, and results of "interim" academic assessments. They also are comparing the performance of schools with similar demographics, using school surveys and third-party inspections, and examining more comprehensive measures of student transition to adult life, including employment rates and enrollment in college courses or job training.
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- **Using this wider range of indicators provides states and schools with more accurate information, promotes flexibility, and helps support improvement efforts.** Employing a broader range of measures helps maintain and promote strong accountability by allowing for more accurate assessment of school outcomes, promoting more valid inferences about school performance, and providing more balanced incentives to teachers and principals. The broader set of indicators also promotes state and local flexibility, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to accountability that can stifle innovation and limit autonomy. They also strengthen school improvement systems by helping states target supports and interventions, and track which strategies are most likely to support long-term success for students, and provide early warnings when students are not making progress toward graduation.
 - **Research is unclear on a wide range of critical issues, such as which measures work best in what circumstances and implementation costs, but is unequivocal about the limitations of the current system.** Researchers, therefore, suggest that lawmakers encourage and promote state experimentation and innovation, with a focus on five key areas:

Outcome Measures Focused on Academic Progress

1. **Achievement and attainment beyond math and ELA**, including measures of student growth, performance in other subject areas, and advanced course-taking.
2. **Progress indicators** demonstrating student advancement toward high school graduation or college- and career-readiness.

Measures of School Factors Associated with Student Success

3. **Positive school culture**, including student and teacher satisfaction, academic challenge, engagement, safety, and orderliness.
 4. **Positive behavioral, emotional, and physical health outcomes**, including indicators of suspensions, expulsion, and physical health.
 5. **Information about discrepancies in resources** available to schools and students.
- **Include both outcome and diagnostic measures in reauthorization of ESEA.** The federal government should require states to have initial outcome determinations based at least on improved reading and math assessments (aligned to college- and career-ready standards) and accurate graduation rates. Federal law also should permit and encourage each state to include additional, aligned, valid outcome measures. Beyond outcome measures, Congress could require deeper diagnostic review for the 5-percent lowest performing schools. Congress could promote state action while taking into account current state fiscal constraints by encouraging state consortia to work on measures, and also, as the Council of Chief State School Officers has suggested, by providing states broad latitude about what measures to pursue and the timeframe required to introduce them. While states should be encouraged to experiment, common assessments and reporting of graduation rates would enable meaningful cross-state comparisons.