

STATE EDUCATION POLICY

The basics behind state's new school improvement system

By [John Fensterwald](#) | August 11, 2016 | [6 Comments](#)

For the past year, EdSource has followed the development of the [new school improvement](#) and [accountability system](#) that the State Board of Education is leading. The 10-question primer that follows provides an overview of the work so far and what lies ahead.

What does a state school accountability system do?

Using objective measures of student performance, an accountability system can serve multiple purposes. It can:

- Identify districts' and schools' areas of strength and weakness and gaps of achievement among student subgroups;
- Let parents know how their school and students subgroups within a school are doing compared with others in their district and the state;
- Identify lowest-performing schools receiving federal Title I funding for low-income students (those schools must receive extensive assistance to improve under federal law);
- Help teachers and principals set strategies for improvement;
- Guide the community in setting priorities and directing funding in their annual budget and planning document, the [Local Control and Accountability Plan](#) (LCAP).

Why is California changing its system?

For 15 years, the state used the Academic Performance Index (API) to rank schools and districts based on standardized test scores, which critics considered a one-dimensional view of performance that led schools to focus too much attention on test results. The Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown created a framework for a broader accountability system in 2013 through the Local Control Funding Formula. The law says school districts should pay attention to eight priorities, including school climate, parent engagement and the implementation of new state academic standards as well as student achievement. The State Board of Education suspended the API in 2014 and has been working on criteria with which to evaluate performance on eight new priorities.

Congress, in passing the Every Student Succeeds Act, also requires the state to evaluate schools using multiple performance measures.

What will the new metrics measure?

Also called performance indicators, the measures initially will include what the federal government requires under the Every Student Succeeds Act:

- Annual test scores in math and English language arts;
- The rate of improvement in those scores over time;
- High school graduation rates;
- Rates in which English learners are reclassified as proficient in English;
- A least one more, non-academic factor, which initially will probably be student suspension rates.

The state board is also considering an indicator of success in preparing students for college and careers through a combination of metrics and the rate of chronic absenteeism from school. After the state begins to collect data, it may add results of school surveys of students, parents and teachers and test results in the Next Generation

Science Standards.

What's the difference between state and local indicators?

State indicators, including the ones required by the Every Student Succeeds Act, use uniform, reliable data that enable statewide comparisons of schools and districts. Other indicators, such as those measuring school climate and parent engagement, use data that aren't yet collected statewide or aren't valid for cross-district comparisons. They'll be used to measure local priorities as part of a district's LCAP.

What will the new school report card look like?

The state board [has a design in mind](#). Just as a student report card tells how a child does in each subject, the school report card will display how a school or district does on every state performance indicator. Instead of a letter or number grade, there will be one of five colors, from red to blue, based on how closely the school met the state annual target and rate of improvement objectives for each indicator. The color codes will range from red (needing substantial improvement) to blue (exceeding the state goal), with orange, yellow and green in between.

Will I like it?

State board staff will continue to refine the look, and you'll have a better sense after the state board meets in September, but initial reviews of a draft were quite critical. Some parents said the [color coding](#) was confusing, and, with columns for results of student subgroups, too busy. If you're an activist who wants to dig deep into data, the design and links to details on each indicator may work. But if you're a parent who wants a quick summary at a glance, you may want something simpler.

How will the lowest-performing schools be identified?

The state board wants to establish a single federal-state methodology to avoid

confusion, but that may prove challenging. Both the federal and state systems require intervention, but under different rules.

The 2013 Local Control Funding Formula defines persistently low-performing districts as those in which three or more student subgroups fail to show improvement in one or more of eight priority areas over a four-year period.

Congress, in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, focused on schools, not districts, and said that states should designate for comprehensive assistance the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools receiving federal Title I aid.

GOING DEEPER

- [EdSource Guide to Local Control Funding Formula](#)
- [Summary of proposed regulations for Every Student Succeeds Act, May 2016](#)
- [Explanation of draft school and district report cards, July 2016](#)
- [Website of Collaborative for Educational Excellence](#)
- [Federal, state accountability systems could clash, August 2016](#)
- [State board chooses state performance indicators, May 2016](#)

The U.S. Department of Education wants states to combine multiple school performance indicators to create a system of ranking schools. The state board dislikes this approach. There are other key areas of disagreement as well. It will be clearer by the end of the year whether there is room for compromise.

What will happen to low-performing schools?

The Legislature created a new state agency, the Collaborative for Educational Excellence, to oversee the work with struggling schools and districts. [Carl Cohn, its executive director](#), insists the agency will pivot from top-down, prescriptive and

“punitive” approaches of the past toward creating partnerships with county offices of education, nonprofits and nearby districts committed to a philosophy of “continuous improvement.” What happens to schools that don’t improve, even after extensive help, is not clear. For now, Cohn and his small staff are personally directing a pilot in Palo Verde Unified, a small district in Blythe, where, to set the tone, they created a book club to read education reformer Michael Fullan’s “Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems.”

What’s the timeline for the new system?

To meet an Oct. 1, 2016 deadline, the state board must approve the initial state performance indicators, tied to specific standards for measuring achievement, at its Sept. 8-9 meeting. The current plan is for districts and schools to receive their initial report cards, using 2015-16 data, in late fall. The actual start date for state and federal accountability systems is the 2016-17 school year, although California and other states have asked the U.S. Department of Education to delay the federal system for another year. The state board has stated that it will add and refine indicators over time, as the state collects and evaluates more data.

Will it make a difference in improving student achievement?

The new accountability system is just one element among larger changes. Those changes include the implementation of new academic standards, an expansion of career and college readiness programs and, with the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula, a shift in power from Sacramento to local districts. The funding formula redistributes money to districts based on enrollment of English learners, low-income students and foster children. (The formula did not increase overall funding levels.)

How effectively school boards, parents and teachers in nearly 1,000 districts and 1,200 charter schools set these priorities in motion and stay on top of them in their Local Control and Accountability Plans will largely determine whether students will benefit

from the changes. The data in the new school report cards and district LCAPs will begin to provide the answers.