



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
ESSA Implementation**

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**By
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Good morning, my name is Jerry Oleksiak, and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). For more than 30 years, I was a special education teacher, primarily in the Upper Merion Area School District and the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of PSEA's 180,000 members about some of the opportunities we see with the state implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

First, thank you for inviting PSEA to discuss ESSA implementation in the commonwealth. I hope this will be one of many conversations we will have on the topic over the next year or so. PSEA stands ready to help with that effort, as ESSA has the potential to once again be a generational change in how public education operates and instruction is delivered. Our members are anxious to put their years of classroom experience to work on ESSA implementation so we get it right and learn from the mistakes and unintended consequences of its predecessor law.

As a response to the many negative consequences of No Child Left Behind's (NCLB's) accountability requirements, ESSA has the potential to be a breath of fresh air for states. Although it does not get rid of annual standardized testing requirements, it does limit the authority of the federal government to prescribe many accountability provisions or consequences for schools that struggle. With what we know of the timeline for state implementation, the accountability system is Pennsylvania's most urgent need in terms of ESSA compliance given that the new system must be ready for the 2017-18 school year. This gives us just a little more than a year from now to have the system ready to go, and that's why I'm going to focus my comments on school and district accountability this morning.

ESSA requires every state accountability system to include a few key measures. These include:

1. The results of annual standards-based state assessments in reading and mathematics, for all students and disaggregated by student subgroups;
2. A test of English language proficiency for English language learners;
3. For high schools, the four-year graduation rate, and for elementary and middle schools at least one additional academic indicator;
4. At least one indicator of support for learning, such as measures of student or educator engagement; student access to and completion of advanced coursework; or school climate; and
5. Long-term goals and measures of interim progress toward such goals for all students that address, at a minimum, proficiency on state tests and high school graduation rates.

States can add indicators to the accountability system, as long as in the end *academic indicators count for more than non-academic indicators* in the final accountability rating. ESSA also requires states and districts to provide evidence-based supports to the lowest 5 percent of schools that struggle to attain the state's achievement goals. Specific types of support, however, are defined at the state or local levels, not by the federal law.

The amount of state flexibility we've been granted by ESSA means we have a lot of decisions to make over the next year. PSEA looks forward to the opportunity to help inform those decisions, a process in which we are already playing a role.

A New Vision for Positive Accountability in Pennsylvania

Researchers and policymakers are beginning to build a deeper understanding of the importance of an accountability system in which all schools can grow and succeed rather than a system that designates as failures a disproportionate number of poor schools and students. PSEA encourages policymakers to use the new flexibility in ESSA to build an accountability system that reduces reliance on state test scores and helps all schools improve. An effective accountability system should hold schools accountable for what they can control and find examples of effective as well as ineffective practice. An accountability system cannot be meaningful if it is designed only to measure failure or success and then punish failure regardless of its root causes. In our view, an effective accountability system provides credible information to help those in the system know what is working well, point out where specific support for improvement is necessary, and suggest specific supports and interventions that are likely to foster improvement.

To create an accountability system as I just described, PSEA recommends that the state consider the following strategies.

First, use multiple valid indicators associated with clear goals for public schools.

NCLB's accountability system reduced goals for school improvement to test scores. This has had the unfortunate, unintended consequence of corrupting teaching to a practice more about tests than learning. While higher test scores are one possible measure of school improvement, they aren't the only one, and they are not the best one.

ESSA requires Pennsylvania to set long-term and interim improvement goals within the accountability system. Goals must address both overall student achievement and reducing achievement gaps between subgroups of students. Ideally, the goals and associated indicators extend beyond reading and math and address other important aspects of schooling; as a matter of fact, ESSA *requires* states to include at least one indicator of school quality that is not a test score. For example, indicators could include measures of school climate, teacher learning opportunities, student/teacher ratios, socioemotional supports for students, or student attendance. PSEA researchers are currently looking into what could be valid measures of school quality. We are hoping to provide a recommendation to PDE through its workgroup process and to all of you over the summer.

The adoption of an accountability system with multiple indicators to measure progress toward our goals would be a positive step to reduce the power of any single indicator designed to assign blame or highlight failure, one that narrows teaching and learning to testing.

In addition, when selecting indicators for the accountability system, legislators should insist that each indicator be valid for the purpose for which it will be used. Multiple indicators reduce the validity pressure on each individual indicator. Further, validity is determined in relation to the purpose for which the indicator is used. The higher the stakes associated with any indicator the greater the validity required. And conversely, the lower the stakes the less validity we demand. Thus, *any indicator that is used to inform high-stakes decisions must meet particularly stringent validity standards so that the consequences that emanate from its use are both constructive and fair.* While this idea is grounded in research, practice, and common sense, this has been a problem with the state accountability system in the past, where specific indicators have been used to inform high-stakes decisions without any evidence that the indicator is valid or reliable for the purpose.¹ Conversely if multiple indicators are used as a screen for further investigation, a more relaxed validity standard can be applied.

Second, measure individual school performance against expected performance.

Decades of research have made clear that schools with different demographics usually perform in different ways on standardized tests – ways that are predictable. In fact, the strong relationship between poverty and achievement exists in every state, including Pennsylvania;² it exists on the National Assessment of Educational Progress;³ and it exists on the SAT.⁴ It also exists in college graduation rates.⁵ The relationship between poverty and student test scores is perhaps the most persistent and pervasive finding in studies of student achievement. This is why scores on the School Performance Profile so closely correlate with the percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch: because high-poverty schools consistently and predictably perform differently than low-poverty schools.⁶

By pretending, against all evidence, that high-poverty schools should be able to perform similarly to low-poverty schools on test-based measures like the SPP, we repeatedly label poor schools as failures and wealthy schools as successes. The problem is not “failing schools.” The problem is poverty. We simply don’t recognize poverty in our current system. If we want better

¹ For example, neither PSSAs nor Keystone Exams have ever been validated as measures of teacher or principal effectiveness. Nor has the Keystone Exam been demonstrated to be a valid predictor of success beyond high school.

² Sludden, J., et al. 2015. Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile: Not the Sum of Its Parts. Philadelphia: Research for Action http://8rri53pm0cs22jk3vvqna1ub-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/RFA_PACER_SPP_Brief_March_2015.pdf

³ Baker, Bruce. 2011. More on NAEP Poverty Gaps and Why State Comparisons Don’t Work. School Finance 101, May 9 <https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2011/05/09/more-on-naep-poverty-gaps-why-state-comparisons-dont-work/>

⁴ College Board. 2016. 2015 College-Bound Seniors Total Group Profile Report. Princeton, NJ: College Board. <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/sat/total-group-2015.pdf>

⁵ The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. 2015. Philadelphia: Pell Institute and the University of Pennsylvania. http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_45_Year_Trend_Report.pdf

⁶ Sludden, J., et al. 2015. Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile: Not the Sum of Its Parts. Philadelphia: Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/pennsylvanias-school-performance-profile-not-the-sum-of-its-parts/>

performance, we need to address the true cause. In the interim, we need to measure student achievement properly.

As an analogy, imagine holding all people to the same physical fitness goal: a six-minute mile. Repeated measurement and analysis would show that some groups of people are, on average, much further from the goal than others. A group of runners averaging a 10-minute mile benefits little from being told repeatedly that they fail to attain the goal; in fact, there may be good reasons why they fall short of the goal, and there may be more appropriate ways to measure the physical fitness of this group of runners. Conversely, for the group of runners who already average a five-minute mile, a new or different physical fitness goal may encourage continued improvement.

Because a single standard does little to inspire improvement among those who perform exceptionally above or below the standard, *Pennsylvania should employ statistical models to compare school performance to expected performance based upon demographic variables.* Rather than judging all schools in relation to a single standard, such a system would identify examples of exceptionally well- or poor-performing schools by comparing predicted to actual performance. The same statistical model could be employed to determine which schools have smaller-than-expected achievement gaps and which have larger. Approaching measurement in this way holds schools accountable for their direct impact on student achievement because it begins to take account of demographic factors that may distort the school effect. It also reduces the likelihood that schools will fall in the bottom 5 percent due to characteristics of students or communities.

Third, use the system of goals, valid multiple indicators, and comparison of actual with expected performance to determine those schools in the “lowest 5 percent” as required by ESSA.

Evaluating schools using multiple measures and comparing actual and expected performance is a powerful and appropriate way to reliably find schools that are most in need of supports and interventions.

ESSA requires that several categories of schools receive support and interventions: schools that score in the lowest 5 percent on the state accountability measure; high schools that fail to graduate more than one-third of students; and schools with consistently underperforming student subgroups. The accountability system described here could be used as a screen to determine which schools in each of these categories are performing below their expected level, and consequently the bottom 5 percent as required by ESSA. This would ensure that test scores are not the sole determinant of the bottom 5 percent of performing schools, and ensure that the right schools are receiving support and interventions.

Fourth, develop a diagnostic system to determine specific needs within schools.

State test scores are not designed to tell a school what they are doing poorly or how to improve. Schools need comprehensive diagnostic tools to focus their improvement efforts. Some schools also need help prioritizing multiple needs and selecting a narrow set of improvement strategies that are most likely to have the greatest positive impact. To truly help schools improve, accountability systems need to not only find schools that are under performing; they need to provide clear information about what those schools need to improve performance.

Take, for example, a scenario from the medical field: A patient may have an elevated body temperature, but this is not enough for a diagnosis; the doctor engages in further data collection to determine what is causing the elevated temperature. It could be a bacterial infection, a virus, or heatstroke – all of which require very different interventions. On the other hand, the patient may have an elevated body temperature because she just jogged three miles to the appointment; in such a case, medical intervention may be unwarranted and counterproductive.

Low test scores are like a fever – one of several signals of a potential problem. Further diagnostic analysis determines why a score is not what we expect. Different schools have different needs, and they will need to implement different strategies to improve student learning. These needs could lie in several policy or programmatic areas, including leadership development,⁷ curriculum and instruction,⁸ learning time,⁹ new teacher support,¹⁰ school safety,¹¹ and parent involvement.¹² Their needs also could include such items as interventions for highly mobile students or support to reduce administrative turnover. It is important to note, however, that no single intervention will work for all schools because schools each have different challenges. No amount of “test and punish” will change that. ESSA recognized that the federal government shouldn’t be dictating a “one-size fits all” model of school intervention. PSEA believes that all of us have the responsibility to recognize and ensure that schools receive individualized feedback from a valid, reliable, appropriate diagnostic system so they can determine what steps need to be taken to improve.

Several states have developed comprehensive diagnostic tools that provide detailed feedback to schools and districts about targeted improvement strategies. New Hampshire, for example, has a

⁷ See, for example, <http://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/LeadershipMatters.pdf>

⁸ See PSEA’s “20/20 Vision” for more information about curriculum and instruction. <http://www.pageturnpro.com/PSEA/10469-PSEA-20-20-Vision-for-the-Future/index.html#48>

⁹ See PSEA’s “Solutions that Work” for more information about increasing learning time. http://psea.org/uploadedFiles/LegislationAndPolitics/Solutions_That_Work/STW-MaximizeAcademicLearningTime.pdf

¹⁰ See PSEA’s “Solutions that Work” for more information about supporting new teachers. http://psea.org/uploadedFiles/LegislationAndPolitics/Solutions_That_Work/STW-ImproveNewTeacherInductionAndMentoring.pdf

¹¹ See PSEA’s “Solutions that Work” for more information about school safety. http://psea.org/uploadedFiles/LegislationAndPolitics/Solutions_That_Work/STW-EnsureSafeAndSecureSchoolEnvironment.pdf

¹² See PSEA’s “Solutions that Work” for more information about parent involvement strategies. http://psea.org/uploadedFiles/LegislationAndPolitics/Solutions_That_Work/STW-EncourageParent-Family-CommunityEngagement.pdf

district peer-review and an auditing process that provides comprehensive feedback to districts based on common criteria. In Vermont, schools participate in an integrated field review every three years that examines program and practice expectations for local test results. The system also uncovers examples of promising practices in schools and provides specific supports and interventions to struggling schools. In Massachusetts, monitoring site visits to low-performing schools are used to gather information about leadership, professional collaboration, instructional practices, student supports, school culture and climate, not to point fingers but to improve or replace existing strategies at the local level. ESSA provides Pennsylvania with the opportunity to develop a diagnostic system similar to or better than those in other states. Such a system would provide useful and timely feedback to schools about the inputs, processes, and circumstances that are most relevant to improve school outcomes and narrow achievement gaps.

Finally, support schools in implementing intervention strategies.

Once we have determined through a structured, high-quality inspection process precisely what inputs, processes, and circumstances suppress student outcomes, then there is an imperative to support targeted improvement. Viewed in this way, the ultimate purpose of accountability is to provide specific evidence-based interventions to build capacity where it is most needed. This capacity building may occur at the classroom, school, district, or state level, as needed.

ESSA requires states initially to allow schools and districts to determine which evidence-based interventions are most appropriate in individual schools. The state role is to provide critical supports and resources. The first level of that support is diagnostic. Once a school knows the findings, it can then begin to address them. Beyond that the state could facilitate partnerships between schools that struggle in specific ways and other similar schools with effective programming in the area of focus. The state could provide on-the-ground training and support opportunities for common challenges that struggling schools and districts may face. The state must be ready to provide additional resources to support improvement strategies, especially where it is determined that resources are an impediment to effective programs and processes.

Simply put, we need to make decisions about intervention based on research-based, valid, reliable, appropriate diagnostic feedback from individual schools and not a pre-determined list of disproven interventions. If we learned one thing from our many years under NCLB, it should be that.

Conclusion

ESSA provides an important opportunity for Pennsylvania to re-conceptualize school accountability. Focusing accountability on holding schools accountable for what they control and building capacity recasts the accountability system as a positive driver of improvement.

To reiterate, a supportive accountability system:

1. Uses multiple valid indicators;

2. Compares school performance on such measures to expected levels of performance;
3. Identifies struggling schools using those indicators and comparison of performance;
4. Includes a diagnostic system to provide information for school improvement; and
5. Provides evidence-based supports to improve learning.

Such a system would be a significant step beyond the “test-and-punish” model that, over 15 years, has failed to demonstrate the promised improvements in student achievement or reductions in achievement gaps. It is time to build a truly supportive accountability system that serves as a trigger to improve specific school practices, not as a weapon to punish schools.

All of this must be done with our ultimate desired outcome in mind – a great public school for every child.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. PSEA looks forward to working with all of you and PDE in the coming months to develop an ESSA State Plan that provides a strong foundation for academic success for every student.