



# Incorporating Equity Measures in New State Accountability and Improvement Systems

## *Implementing an Extended-Year Graduation Rate*

### Abstract

This policy brief is part of a larger research report, *Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth: How New State Accountability Systems Can Support School Inclusion and Student Success*, that describes how ESSA provides an opportunity for states to better support historically underserved students through the thoughtful selection of specific equity measures in their accountability and improvement systems. These five measures are:

1. Reducing student suspensions and expulsions.
2. Building a positive school climate and promoting social-emotional learning.
3. Eliminating chronic absenteeism.
4. Implementing extended-year graduation rates.
5. Expanding access to a college- and career-ready curriculum.

This brief treats the research, rationale, and evidence-based interventions associated with **implementing extended-year graduation rates**.

For the full report, go to <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/advancing-educational-equity>.

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### Introduction

New accountability policies under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) can be used to create systems that help schools develop stronger supports for historically underserved children and youth. As states work to implement ESSA and redesign accountability and improvement systems, they have an opportunity to incorporate indicators of student and school performance that can provide educators, parents, and the community with the information and incentives needed to create conditions that support greater school inclusion, and target resources to keep students in school and enable their success. ESSA provides the option for states to include an extended-year graduation rate in their accountability and improvement systems in addition to the 4-year graduation rate. By including an extended-year graduation rate as an indicator, states can provide incentives for schools to engender a sense of purpose, engagement, and belonging for all children and youth that keeps them engaged in their learning, and prepares them to thrive in school and beyond.

### Why This Measure Matters

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, federal accountability systems have focused on 4-year graduation rates, typically treating youth who do not graduate in 4 years as dropouts, and removing any recognition for schools that work with struggling youth to ensure they can graduate in 5 or 6 years. These may include youth who immigrated to the U.S. as teenagers with little previous education and may need time to catch up academically, those who dropped out for a job or childrearing, those who have been incarcerated, or those who simply need more time and assistance to reach high standards.

For schools, the sole use of a 4-year graduation rate has provided no incentive to try to keep in or bring back youth who cannot graduate in 4 years, particularly if they are low achieving. Such students are considered a liability in the accountability system, pulling down average test scores, while also counting as dropouts under a 4-year

graduation rate. Since one in four students do not graduate within 4 years (with much higher proportions in high-need communities), incentives are needed to serve these students more effectively.<sup>1</sup>

Extended-year graduation rates can provide that incentive for schools to keep, educate, and graduate youth with challenges that prevent them from graduating in 4 years. Further, “[i]n the case of some dual enrollment, early college, and similar programs, as well as for special education students and others with extenuating circumstances, graduating in 4 years is not always part of the plan. ... [R]eport[ing] extended-year graduation rates would provide a more accurate picture of who is and is not graduating.”<sup>2</sup>

New York City has long tracked extended-year graduation rate data, and the impact is particularly noticeable in schools serving immigrant youth. For example, a study of the Internationals High School Network, a group of 17 schools with a strong track record of success in graduating recent immigrant English learner students and sending them to college, found that their average graduation rates grew from 63% after 4 years to 89% by year 7. The study’s authors note that “these data suggest that a 4-year graduation measure is inadequate to capture the full impact of the Internationals.”<sup>3</sup> These data suggest that when schools are incentivized to keep and support youth with extra challenges, more youth may ultimately graduate.

Similarly, in Michigan, for economically disadvantaged students, the 6-year graduation rate showed a 9% increase over the 4-year rate and more than a 6% increase in the graduation rate for African American students.<sup>4</sup> These increases are due in part to state, district, and school dropout and prevention recovery efforts that include increased high school redesign options such as flexible programming, and programs that blend secondary and postsecondary education, and provide wraparound supports.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of states collect extended-year graduation rate data. As of 2015, 31 states report 5-year graduation rates, and 13 of those states report 6-year graduation rates as well.<sup>6</sup> Including extended-year graduation rates as part of accountability systems provides an important protection against the perverse incentives that existed under NCLB for schools to exclude lower-performing youth to boost accountability metrics focused on test scores and goes further to reward schools for keeping youth if they need more time.<sup>7</sup>

States should use the opportunity provided by ESSA to incorporate the extended-year graduation rates into accountability and improvement systems. In doing so, states would be supporting and rewarding schools that are implementing evidence-based strategies to ensure that all youth graduate, even those who may need more than the standard number of years.

## **Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Improving Graduation Rates**

A number of studies find that structural changes in traditional factory-model high schools can have a substantial effect on increasing graduation rates. Dropping out of school is more often than not the final stage in a cumulative process of increasing disengagement from school, which can easily happen in contexts where students are not well known by the adults.<sup>8</sup> Smaller schools and those that have created more personalized learning communities tend to have markedly higher graduation rates than large schools in which students can easily get lost and fall through the cracks.<sup>9</sup>

As documented in a carefully controlled set of longitudinal studies,<sup>10</sup> New York City’s small high schools of choice have resulted in an increase in the 4-year graduation rate by 9.5 percentage points and the extended-year rate by 8.9 percentage points for students matched by demographic characteristics with those in larger high schools. Gains are especially noteworthy for students of color and students with disabilities, across all diploma types, and were accomplished without a decline in achievement, demonstrating that academic rigor was not compromised in an effort to increase graduation rates.

Instead, high school reforms included a combined focus on high-quality educators, personalized learning environments, and high academic expectations.

In addition, organizational structures such as advisory systems and teaching teams that create strong, long-term relationships between youth and adults contribute to lower dropout rates, as does an authentic curriculum that engages youth in real-world problem solving.<sup>11</sup> Case studies of a number of schools that have created strong achievement, as well as increased graduation and college-going rates for historically underserved students, show that these high-performing schools share the following features:

- curriculum, instruction, and assessments designed to help students engage in the learning process, and that develop analytical, collaboration, and communication skills;
- formative assessments that enable teachers to understand how and what students are learning so they can support student mastery of content, skills, and dispositions;
- school structures that support personalization and connections to adults within the school and to the community outside of school;
- teachers working together to focus on students' strengths, interests, and needs, to engage in their own learning, and to collaborate on the improvement of their instructional practices; and
- leadership that is shared among the adults in the building with a specific focus on incorporating the voices of teachers, staff, administrators, and parents in key decisions.<sup>12</sup>

Effective efforts to increase graduation rates also include supporting the whole student. All students, and high-need students in particular, benefit from integrated student supports that offer mental health and other health services, as well as after-school supports, mentoring, and tutoring, all of which can make a difference in graduation rates. Evidence is beginning to demonstrate that these types of supports can contribute to decreases in grade retention and dropout rates.<sup>13</sup>

Strategic and timely use of data by educators and support staff is also critical to identifying youth who need intervention and the appropriate targeted intervention and supports needed at the school level. A description of these types of effective evidence-based strategies can be found in *MDRC's Findings on School Improvement Strategies*,<sup>14</sup> which describes the positive impact of efforts such as New York City's Small Schools of Choice (which emphasize academic rigor; strong, sustained relationships between youth and faculty members; and community partnerships to offer relevant learning opportunities outside the classroom), and Diplomas Now (which focuses on using early-warning indicators related to attendance, behavior, and course performance to identify at-risk students and then intervenes with targeted support to get struggling youth back on track). Additional strategies to support on-track efforts are described in *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth-Grade Year*.<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

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