



# Incorporating Equity Measures in New State Accountability and Improvement Systems

## *Building a Positive School Climate and Promoting Social-Emotional Learning*

### 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 **building a positive school climate and promoting social-emotional learning**.

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 requires that state accountability systems incorporate at least one indicator of school quality or student success that are annually measured and reported for all students and, separately, for each identified group of students, and used to help identify schools for intervention and support. There are many possibilities for leveraging the indicator(s) of school quality or student success to help students reach their full potential. States may also select indicators for diagnostic purposes that can drive continuous improvement. By including measures of a positive school climate and social emotional learning, 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

Students' connections to and successes in school are strongly influenced by the way they are treated in school: whether they feel they are cared about and belong, how they are supported both psychologically and academically, and what resources they feel they can access when they need help. These dynamics are influenced by school climate and culture, which can be measured in an accountability system through student surveys and on-site reviews of practice. Such surveys can also measure students' experiences of social-emotional safety and skill development, which help create and sustain a positive school climate.

A positive school climate is one that “fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society.”<sup>1</sup> Components of a positive school climate include “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.”<sup>2</sup> This happens where students, educators, and families are engaged and

respected; are working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision; and where educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.<sup>3</sup>

Developing a positive school climate depends, in part, on providing social-emotional supports to students as well as teaching students social-emotional skills that enable positive relationships, and prevent conflicts and bullying. Providing a positive school climate also requires that staff learn social and emotional skills and their applications to a range of school practices, including school discipline and academic instruction that develop students' abilities to collaborate, problem-solve, and become self-directed, resourceful, and resilient.<sup>4</sup> As students and school personnel refine their social and emotional competence, school climate improves, just as the existence of a positive school climate creates the atmosphere within which social and emotional learning can take place.<sup>5</sup> In short, social and emotional competence develops within a complex system that influences all facets of the school day and community.<sup>6</sup>

Well-implemented social-emotional learning programs are associated with positive outcomes, ranging from significantly better test scores to improved social skills, attitudes, and behavior.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing this connection, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is adding new measurements for student noncognitive skills, and at a global level, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is doing the same.<sup>8</sup> Many schools and districts have also begun to focus on social and emotional learning, given compelling research on the science of learning and human development.<sup>9</sup>

State accountability and improvement systems can emphasize the importance of a positive school climate and support its development. Effective school climate measures can reveal whether students feel well-supported socially, emotionally, and academically—for example, whether they feel safe, have adults they can go to for support, or feel as if the school treats them with care. The most common measures of school climate are self-reported student surveys that, when properly administered, can allow disaggregation of data by student subgroup—a requirement for inclusion in the federal accountability component of a state's system.<sup>10</sup>

These student surveys can also include items that measure social-emotional supports and learning opportunities within the school.<sup>11</sup> Measures that can be used include those that reveal whether schools are engaged in practices that help students develop social and emotional skills—for example, whether students have opportunities to collaborate in class, engage in conflict resolution, revise their work, and develop a growth mindset.<sup>12</sup>

State policymakers might consider recommending additional measures to be implemented at the local level for diagnostic and school improvement purposes rather than school identification. These could include teacher surveys, parent surveys, or qualitative data from school quality reviews, all of which could contribute to locally collected and used indicators of school climate or opportunities to learn. These can be effective equity measures, even if they may not be used as an official “fifth indicator” for federal accountability purposes.

Both classroom climate and teachers' support for students' social-emotional development and learning can also be measured through classroom observation tools, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),<sup>13</sup> which is used by many early childhood programs and elementary schools. Some of California's CORE districts have used teacher ratings of students' skills (measuring the degree to which individual students have developed certain competencies) to complement student self-reports. Such assessments can also be folded into other performance assessments students engage in—for example, evaluating students' collaboration on a project with other students.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of assessments may be used at the local level to guide teaching and learning initiatives, along with school and district improvement efforts.<sup>15</sup>

As educators receive data from these surveys, they can evaluate what is working well overall and for different groups of students, and where there are problems or difficulties that remain to be worked on. Many teams use the surveys each spring to plan initiatives for the coming school year and track progress with the following year's survey. Having regular access to student voices, as well as to other insights from teachers and parents, allows a more student-centered perspective to be factored into continuous improvement plans.

From an accountability perspective, states can identify interventions and provide assistance to schools to develop strategies to help students feel safe and supported, so that they can learn in a productive and respectful school climate.

## Evidence-Based Strategies and Resources for Creating a Positive School Climate and Supporting Social and Emotional Learning

States and districts can support educators in implementing measures of school climate and social and emotional learning in part by providing teacher and leader training on how to use data from surveys and other sources to inform school improvement initiatives and the use of professional development resources. Teachers and leaders should also be provided with sufficient time to analyze and respond to the data.

Resources for helping schools create inclusive and positive climates include the U.S. Department of Education and American Institutes for Research's *Safe and Supportive Learning*,<sup>16</sup> and organizations such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Engaged Schools, and the National School Climate Center that, aligned with the strategies commonly pursued, recommend the following:

- Creating a site-based climate team comprised of students, teachers, administrators, other staff, and parents, which meets regularly to identify and address school climate issues.
- Working with students and teachers to create consensual norms for respectful behaviors that are known and supported by all members, along with instituting conflict resolution training and restorative justice practices that strengthen individual success and a sense of a community.
- Improving the physical environment to make it comfortable and student-friendly, clean and well lit; displaying student art, projects, and papers that convey that students are at the center of the school's mission; and including multicultural images and texts in instruction.
- Increasing student voice and participation in all aspects of the school, from academic input and engagement in projects to leadership of clubs and social events, to training for conflict resolution and peer mediation in disputes.
- Implementing ongoing activities that support diversity and promote tolerance, deepen understanding, and increase respect for differences. These activities have greater impact when they are not independent but are consistent with themes woven into the curriculum.
- Creating opportunities for the least engaged youth, beyond traditional athletics and academics, which are often competitive and include few students. Such opportunities include reaching out to invite students into clubs and extracurriculars; supporting students in starting their own clubs or groups; and initiating dialogue opportunities and surveys that ask students what they want to become involved in and how they want to become involved.
- Supporting social skills curriculum and instruction that actively teach the social-emotional skills that equip students to communicate effectively, establish solid friendships, and resolve their differences nonviolently. This can be accomplished directly through lessons that teach these skills, and it can also happen more indirectly through class meetings or strategies such as cooperative learning that teachers use in their classrooms. Success requires that students experience consistent messages in all social-emotional curricula and in all classes.<sup>17</sup>

Ideally, schools will integrate supports for social and emotional learning into general school and classroom practices so that they are viewed as an integral part of academic development, done in furtherance of, and not in lieu of academic success. One recent summary suggests that educators should

- “view nonacademic skills through a developmental lens with the understanding that they must be nurtured by the same explicit teaching, modeling, support, and opportunities given to academic skills;
- place an emphasis on the key roles that students' environments and relationships play in the development of nonacademic skills;
- use rigorous criteria to identify appropriate nonacademic skills to prioritize, including evidence that they are teachable and correlate to academic achievement; and
- recognize that a focus on foundational nonacademic skills, such as self-regulation and relationship-building, will help to support the development of other skills, such as resiliency and agency.”<sup>18</sup>

## Endnotes

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12. Additional resources for states and districts considering implementing indicators of social-emotional learning include: American Institutes for Research. (2015). Are you ready to assess social and emotional development? <http://www.air.org/resource/are-you-ready-assess-social-and-emotional-development> (accessed 12/14/16); Duckworth, A. L., & Yeager, D. S. (2015). Measurement matters: Assessing personal qualities other than cognitive ability for educational purposes. *Educational Researcher*, 44(4), 237-51; Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
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