

The basics of state's new school improvement system

By John Fensterwald | August 11, 2016 | *EdSource*

(Updated Sept. 19 to include actions by the State Board of Education.)

At its September meeting, the California State Board of Education approved a new comprehensive and dramatically different school improvement and accountability system that was three years in the making. This 10-question primer provides an overview of the system.

What's the value in having a state school accountability system?

Using measures of student achievement and school and district performance, an accountability system can serve multiple purposes. It can:

- Identify districts' and schools' strengths and weakness as well as gaps in achievement among racial, ethnic and other 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 funding for low-income students that must receive extensive assistance;
- Help teachers and principals set strategies and revise curriculums 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 mostly on standardized test scores. Numerous critics said this one-dimensional view of performance led schools to focus too much on test results. The Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown in 2013 created a broader framework for accountability as part of the Local Control Funding Formula. The law says school districts must pay attention to eight priorities, including school climate, parent involvement, new state academic standards and student achievement.

The State Board of Education suspended the API in 2014 and has been working on choosing the measures, which the board calls performance indicators, of the new priorities. Congress, in passing the Every Student Succeeds Act in late 2015, also requires states to evaluate schools using multiple measures.

What will the new performance indicators measure?

There are two types. State indicators will use data that enable statewide comparisons of schools, districts and charter schools. Local indicators will measure harder to quantify priorities, including school climate and parent involvement, with data that either aren't yet collected statewide or aren't valid for cross-district and school comparisons.

There will initially be six state indicators:

- Scores on standardized tests in math, English and, later, science;
- Readiness for college and careers, based, for now, on Grade 11 test scores and percentages of students who complete a career technical education pathway or high school courses for admission to Cal State and UC;
- Progress of English learners in learning English;
- High school graduation rates;
- Suspension rates;
- Rates of chronic absence, starting next year.

There initially will be four local indicators:

- School conditions, including qualified teachers, approved textbooks and safe, clean schools;
- Implementation of Common Core and other academic standards;
- Parent engagement;
- School climate through local surveys of parents, teachers and students.

What will the new school report card look like?

Just as a student report card tells how a child is doing in each subject, the summary page of the school report card will likely display how a school or district, along with student subgroups, are doing on every state performance indicator. There will be five colors, based on how closely the school met state or local annual targets and the rate of improvement over several years (see sample above). The colors will range from red (needing substantial improvement) to blue (exceeding the state goal). Here's a peek at a draft version. The online version will link to detailed explanations of each indicator and to guidelines and best practices for improvement.

Graduation Performance Categories

Graduation Change

Level	Graduation Change				
	Declined Significantly by more than 5%	Declined by 1% to 5%	Maintained Declined or improved by less than 1%	Increased by 1% to less than 5%	Increased Significantly by 5% or more
Very High 95% or more	Gray	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
High 90% to less than 95%	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green	Blue
Median 80% to less than 90%	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Green	Green
Low 67% to less than 80%	Red	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow
Very Low Less than 67%	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red

SOURCE: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Will I like it?

Reviews of initial drafts of the report cards were critical. Some parents and advocacy groups said that the color coding was confusing. Others said the report cards should include a summary of each school's performance, with more emphasis on test scores, to make it easy to compare schools. The final version of the school and district report cards will be ready in early 2017. If you're a parent leader who wants to dig deep into data, the proposed design may work for you. But if you only want a quick summary at a glance, it may not.

How will the lowest-performing schools be identified?

In order to avoid confusion from different state and federal rules for intervention, the state board wants to establish a single system. The Legislature has defined persistently low-performing districts as those in which multiple student subgroups have failed to improve in more than one priority area. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act focuses on schools, not districts, and requires identifying the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, about 500, for comprehensive help, based primarily on test scores. The state board disagrees with this approach; it will be clear in 2017 if there's room for compromise.

What will happen to low-performing schools?

The Legislature created a new state agency, the Collaborative for Educational Excellence, to oversee work with struggling schools and districts. Carl Cohn, its executive director, says the agency will stop top-down, "punitive" approaches under the No Child Left Behind Act and instead build partnerships with county offices of education, nonprofits and nearby districts. What will happen to schools that don't improve, even after extensive help, isn't clear. For now, the agency's small staff will demonstrate how a "continuous improvement" approach will operate through pilot projects in several districts.

What's the timeline for the new system?

Although districts and schools will receive 2015-16 performance data in late 2016, and the first report cards by February 2017, the official start date for both the state and federal accountability systems will be the 2017-18 school year. The state board says that it will continue to add and refine measures over time.

After reading my school and district report cards, what should I do?

The data on the performance indicators will show how well districts are meeting each of the state's eight diverse priorities. The reports will highlight disparities in achievement among student groups.

In November, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence will hold all-day workshops in eight locations. By attending one, parents, teachers, administrators and school board members will learn how they can respond to poor results on report cards through policy and funding decisions in next year's Local Control and Accountability Plan.

Will the new system make a difference in improving student achievement?

The new accountability system is just one element among larger changes. Those changes include implementing new academic standards, expanding career and college readiness programs and, with the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula, shifting power from Sacramento to local districts.

The new accountability system will help identify problems but will not solve them. It shouldn't be judged by the number of districts and schools that may eventually require state intervention. Instead, look for whether the state's nearly 1,000 districts and 1,200 charter schools are using report card data to set ambitious goals and redirecting resources to underperforming students – and whether county offices of education, which must sign off on LCAPs, are reinforcing that they do.