

December 13, 2016

Dear [[Governor/Superintendent]],

As leaders of three organizations that span the ideological spectrum--and that all care deeply about boosting educational opportunities for all students--we write to urge you to keep high-achieving low-income students in mind when designing your state's new school accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While we believe that students struggling to meet grade-level targets should be a major focus for school reform, we also believe that high-achieving at-risk students should not be overlooked.

For much of its history, our country has ignored the talents and potential of many Americans. We will never know what great progress might have been made in science, medicine, business, and many other fields if we had taken advantage of the brainpower and abilities of *all* our people.

Tragically, children growing up in poverty continue to face many barriers to opportunity. A 2014 White House report, [“Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students,”](#) states: “While half of all people from high-income families have a bachelor’s degree by age 25, just one in 10 people from low-income families do.”

It hasn’t helped that our school accountability systems have largely ignored the needs of the low-income children who are meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations but still need attention and support to meet their full potential. Thankfully, the ESSA gives states a once-in-a-generation opportunity to set things right.

Why An Additional Focus on High-Achieving Low-Income Students?

Our K–12 system has historically done the greatest harm to our lowest-performing students, who tend to come from poor and minority families. Using accountability to improve matters for such children has therefore been, and should remain, a major policy focus.

But it should not be the only focus. The challenge going forward is to devise accountability systems that raise the ceiling as well as the floor. This is partly about fairness: It’s wrong for any child to miss out on academic challenges at school, and we should do everything we can to develop the full potential of all our students.

And there’s a powerful case to be made for accelerating social mobility by educating high-ability low-income children. These are the kids—many of them from minority groups—who have a strong chance to succeed in selective universities, become leaders in their communities, and climb the ladder to the middle and upper class. Yet they are also still dependent on the education system to recognize and draw out their potential. If we want tomorrow’s scientists, entrepreneurs, and inventors to look like America, our schools need to take special pains with the education of high-ability kids from disadvantaged circumstances.

Making High-Achieving Low-Income Students a Priority under ESSA

ESSA offers state policymakers a chance to set schools on the right trajectory for years to come. You now enjoy far greater leeway to design a school accountability system that will work well for *all* students as it transforms annual test results in reading, writing, and mathematics, and other information, into sound judgments of school effectiveness—what it means to be great school or a failing one.

Specifically, when you submit your new accountability system to the U.S. Department of Education for approval in the coming months, the research teaches that it should include three components that will ensure that all kids count.

- First, the system should measure the growth of individual students from one year to the next, and make this a significant factor in school classifications. Such measures do a better job of capturing schools' effect on student achievement than do proficiency rates, which are strongly correlated with student demographics, family circumstance, and prior achievement. They also indicate to schools that the progress of *all* students—not just those below “proficiency”—matters.
- Second, it should give additional credit to schools that help students achieve at a high level. Under ESSA, states must continue to track the percentage of students who attain proficiency on annual tests, but they are free also to give schools incentives for students who earn high marks. Policymakers could, for example, create an “achievement index” that gives schools partial credit for getting students to “basic,” full credit for getting students to “proficient,” and additional credit for getting them to “advanced.” This approach is allowable under the final accountability regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education on November 28, 2016. However, it is important that credit for high-achieving students should not be allowed to mask low performance of other students.
- Third, your system should give high schools credit for helping students earn college credit while still in high school, such as by measuring enrollment in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses and pass rates on these exams, or completion of “dual enrollment” programs.

Now is the time to ensure that all our children receive the education they deserve. Current policies are wasting enormous amounts of human talent. We need to recommit ourselves to the American dream of opportunity for all.

Thanks for considering our recommendations, and please let us know if we can be of help as you move forward with the design of your new accountability system under ESSA.

Sincerely,

Catherine Brown

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