

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #13: CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS THAT GIVE SCHOOLS CREDIT FOR ADVANCING STUDENTS WHO ARE FAR BEHIND GRADE LEVEL

CONTEXT

Personalized learning has particular potential to benefit students who are far below grade level. In traditional whole-class instructional settings, teachers calibrate instruction to grade-level content. As a result, students who are below grade level rarely receive explicit instruction that will close gaps from their previous schooling; lacking the foundational skills to master grade-level content, these students fall further and further behind. Personalized learning models help solve this problem by diagnosing each student's current skill level and enabling teachers to differentiate instruction and learning experiences so that students who are behind can master foundational skills before moving on to grade-level content. Unfortunately, state accountability systems, which use tests calibrated to grade-level standards, may not give schools sufficient credit for making progress with students who start out far below grade level. These traditional systems may even create a disincentive for schools to focus on building these students' foundational skills. Even growth models, designed to measure student progress over a year, may not reflect growth among students who are very behind academically when these models use data from exams covering grade-level content. To foster the expansion of personalized learning models that improve outcomes for below-grade-level students, policymakers must ensure that accountability systems award credit to schools improving students' knowledge and skills—even if these students are still not ready for grade-level content.

PLAY IN ACTION

Under federal law, states must assess every student using the statewide assessment for the student’s current grade. But there is nothing to prevent states or districts from taking into account additional data that provide a fuller picture of the progress schools foster among students who begin a school year far below grade level. Other types of formative and adaptive assessments, such as the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress, can provide a measure of student growth that is not dependent on a state assessment aligned to grade-level standards. Because personalized learning models involve frequent, ongoing formative assessments to calibrate instruction to students’ progress, they have a wealth of such data. States should create multiple pathways for evaluating schools that, although they may perform poorly on statewide assessments, exhibit strong growth on other types of measures.

Colorado offers an example of how to thoughtfully incorporate this sort of data into judgments of school performance. The Colorado Department of Education evaluates all schools and districts in the state based on four performance indicators: academic achievement, academic growth, academic growth gaps, and postsecondary and workforce readiness. Data for these

measures come from statewide standardized assessments, the Colorado Growth Model, and school-level measures such as graduation rate.

Using this data and the district and school performance frameworks, the Colorado Department of Education then determines a preliminary accreditation rating for each district, as well as the improvement plan status for each school in the state.¹ If a district disagrees with its accreditation status or with the improvement plan status of any of its schools, it can submit a request for reconsideration. In its request, the district must provide alternate data or evidence that reflect student progress on state performance indicators. A team will review each district and school’s evidence and make a final recommendation to the education commissioner as to whether a district’s accreditation status or a school’s plan type should be revised. By allowing districts to submit additional data, Colorado recognizes that state-identified measures may not present a comprehensive picture of how some schools, particularly those with at-risk populations, serve their students. Allowing districts to provide additional data to the state also decreases pressure on educators to “teach to the test,” and may encourage schools to implement personalized learning models.

¹ Colorado school districts may fall into one of five categories: accredited with distinction, accredited, accredited with improvement plan, accredited with priority improvement plan, and accredited with turnaround plan. Schools are assigned one of four improvement plan types: performance, improvement, priority improvement, or turnaround. For more information, see: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/performanceframeworks>

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

States that wish to allow districts or schools to provide alternative evidence of student progress must determine when to allow them to provide such data. Colorado allows districts to submit data to appeal their accreditation status once they have received it from the state. But such an appeals process may not address the concerns of some schools, which may fear that even a successfully appealed rating would still send a message to parents and the public that the school is struggling. States could go a step further by allowing districts to submit alternative measures for “pre-clearance” at the beginning of a school year. If states approve of these alternative measures, schools would provide the data for them at the end of the school year. A pre-clearance process would signal that the state approves of other metrics of student growth, and could offer greater legitimacy to schools that want to use alternative measures. During the pre-clearance process, the state and the school or district would agree to specific performance targets to demonstrate adequate growth. Schools that do not meet these targets would still be identified as failing to make sufficient growth.

Policymakers will need to decide how much flexibility to grant districts in submitting additional evidence of student progress. Colorado allows all districts to submit alternative data to appeal their performance rating, but states may want to consider allowing only districts or schools that serve

particularly high-need student populations, or those that are implementing innovative models, to be eligible for such a process. States may also wish to pilot the process by allowing a handful of selected schools to submit alternative evidence of student growth, in order to refine pre-clearance and goal-setting criteria before expanding the process to other schools.

In addition, states will need to establish rigorous processes to review evidence submitted by districts and to ensure that additional measures do not compromise rigor. Some state education agencies may have staff capacity to review the data and make these determinations, while other states may want to create independent expert panels. Certain methods of evaluating student growth based on metrics other than grade-level standards—such as the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress—are currently used by many districts, but as personalized learning models evolve, providers and schools may start using new types of assessments. An expert panel would be able to advise a state on whether students in a particular school or district are truly making adequate growth.

States will also need to set standards for how much student progress schools must demonstrate. For students who are far behind grade level, simply providing evidence of some growth is not enough. To close the achievement gap, students behind

grade level must make more than a year's worth of academic progress each year. In Colorado, adequate growth for low-performing students is defined as growth that will place a student on track to gain grade-level proficiency within three years.²

Transparency is crucial to any process that allows districts or schools to receive credit for student growth using alternative metrics. Parents and the public should have access to both the data that led to the school's original rating and the data presented by the school to justify changing the rating (with the caveat that states should not release any data that compromise the privacy of individual students). Such transparency is important to ensuring the integrity of the process and public trust in revised ratings, and to enabling parents and other stakeholders to make informed decisions about school performance.

LEGISLATION

Colorado, S.B. 09-163 (Education Accountability Act)

CONTACT FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

A summary of the outcomes of **Colorado** districts and schools that requested **reconsideration of their ratings** in 2013 can be found at: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/2013RequesttoReconsiderSummaries.pdf>

More details on the **process** for **Colorado** school districts to **request reconsideration** of their ratings can be found at: http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/Submitting%20Accreditation%20Categories%20and%20Requests%20to%20Reconsider_07-30-13.pdf

For more information on **Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress**, see: <http://www.nwea.org/products-services/assessments>

² "Catch-up growth" in Colorado is defined as sufficient growth for a student to reach grade-level proficiency within three years or by 10th grade, whichever comes first. For more information, see: http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/uip/downloads/dataanalysisi_trainingmaterials/adequategrowthbasics.pdf