

# MAKING ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY WORK FOR PRINCIPALS

## Introduction

How and how much should we test students? What information should we require schools and districts to collect and monitor? And what should we do when that information suggests a school is not meeting our expectations? Those questions are at the heart of Congressional discussions regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Unsurprisingly, how you answer depends on whose interests are foremost in your thinking: parents concerned about their own children's experience and learning outcomes, teachers seeking authentic information about student progress to inform their practice, community leaders concerned about ensuring all young people are getting a fair shake, or taxpayers wanting to ensure that public money is well spent.

All of these perspectives matter and should, together, inform assessment and accountability provisions in federal law. But, at the end of the day, in each and every school, it is the principal who bears responsibility for moving the entire school forward. Principals account for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement<sup>1</sup> and can have a greater impact on all students than individual teachers because principals ensure effective instruction year to year across the entire school.<sup>2</sup> The best way to see effective teaching and student achievement gains at scale is to develop great school leaders and support them to lead. Assessment and accountability policy at the federal level should help effective principals do their job and incent districts to ensure there are effective principals in every school.

This brief offers recommendations on federal policy for assessment and accountability that are grounded in research on effective principal practice and on the direct feedback of effective school leaders. On assessment, New Leaders recommends that a reauthorized ESEA maintain assessment requirements, including the existing flexibility to innovate with new assessments that are comparable statewide. However, we believe states must carefully audit assessment requirements, including any testing added beyond the minimum federal requirement, to ensure full transparency. On accountability, New Leaders recommends that a reauthorized ESEA include state accountability systems focused significantly on student growth. Further, state plans for intervention in the weakest schools should focus on staffing these schools with effective principals and creating the school- and system-level conditions for them to succeed. These recommendations are spelled out in detail below.

New Leaders is positioned to offer these recommendations because of our 15-year track record preparing principals as transformational leaders. To date, we have trained more than 1,600 principals and teacher leaders who, this year alone, are impacting over 350,000 students – 90 percent of whom are students of color and 85 percent of whom are from low-income households. Students in schools led by New Leader principals consistently achieve at higher levels than their peers, have higher graduation rates, and are making progress in closing the achievement gap. We also have a strong commitment to investigating the practice of our most effective leaders; their experience informs our research-based and practice-driven policy recommendations.

**"Assessment data can shine a spotlight on inequities and it helps me to advocate for my kids and school community. Data allows me to talk to teachers, students, and parents about areas of improvement in addition to celebrating our successes. Being able to compare my students in an "apples-to-apples" way with children across town and the country enables me to say with conviction that: Yes, we are preparing our kids for the future!"**

— Aqueelha James  
Cohort 12 New Leader  
Emerging Leader 2011-12  
Principal, John Burroughs  
Education Campus

<sup>1</sup> Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation; Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

<sup>2</sup> Branch, G., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). *Estimating the effect of leaders on public sector productivity: The case of school principals* (pp. 45). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education

## Listening to Principals to Improve Assessment and Accountability

Based on what principals have told and shown us through their work, we believe that reauthorization of ESEA should help principals in specific ways:

### 1. Help principals make a case for urgently improving outcomes for students by providing them with data that highlights growth for individual students and for subgroups of students.

Effective principals want to know if their students are on track for college, career, and citizenship and they want to be able to easily and clearly share data with students, teachers, and families in order to celebrate improvements and keep a focus on areas where faster growth is needed. To monitor student progress, principals need data achievement and growth data for individual students and subgroups of students. Having data reported in a transparent fashion and having goals for overall attainment, growth, and gap-closure helps principals keep a spotlight on student achievement. Further, having a consistent, external yard stick against which to measure their school's progress helps them establish a vision and plan of improvement.

### 2. Help principals improve instructional practice by ensuring that assessments and accountability systems provide sophisticated information and support teachers in the use of sound pedagogy.

Data from state assessments help effective principals improve instruction over the long term. Specifically, principals use annual data to measure progress against their long-term strategic goals and to make important budget, scheduling, and staffing decisions. So, to be useful to principals, state assessments and accountability ratings must be sophisticated and be generated in time to inform these annual decisions. Further, the assessments themselves should encourage teachers to implement sound pedagogical practices, especially a focus on higher order thinking skills, not to increase focus on test preparation strategies. Newer state-adopted assessments appear to be moving in this direction and existing law usefully allows for additional flexibility for pilots of alternative assessment systems that are highly rigorous and comparable. Federal law should continue to bolster these promising developments.

### 3. Help principals exercise strong leadership by ensuring that accountability systems provide actionable information and remove unnecessary barriers.

Effective principals want an accountability-for-responsibility compact. They embrace high expectations for student growth and achievement when the measures make sense, but they experience too little support and too many constraints on how to staff their schools, spend their resources, and run their programs. Many of the current school rating systems tend to offer limited value, the positive designations often masking problems and the negative designations focusing exclusively on school conditions rather than system conditions. States need better systems that address these concerns and focus on providing timely, actionable information to principals. Further, when schools need significant improvement, state accountability systems should examine both school-level instructional strengths and weaknesses as well as system-level conditions that hinder improvement, and should recommend strategies that remove barriers to principals' ability to lead.

### 4. Help principals keep a focus on teaching and learning by managing testing burdens and distractions.

Effective principals limit distractions, keeping the focus on building strong school cultures and continuously improving teaching and learning. Unfortunately, they too often find themselves managing distractions associated with assessments and accountability. In some school districts, this may take the form of over-testing, with additional and duplicative layers added on at the state and local levels, including practice tests. In other districts, principals are combating perceptions of over-testing or wrestling with tests that don't support the needs of diverse learners, including English Learners and students with disabilities. All of this suggests the need for comprehensive audits of state assessment systems to ensure that the frequency, length, stakes, and number of tests are contributing to a strong understanding of student learning without impinging on time for learning. Further, state accountability systems need to be clear and straightforward, measuring student growth in ways that are understandable to parents and other stakeholders; for many states, this change will require new and better data reporting and analysis capabilities.

**“High-quality tests allow students to exhibit their learning in multiple ways and provide teachers with many opportunities to assess students’ academic growth. To truly set students up for success after high school, we need to ensure both pedagogy and assessments are focused on the skills that matter most: critical thinking, complex reading, sophisticated writing, deep discussion, and thorough research – in other words, the same skills students will need to be successful in college, career, and life.”**

— David O’Hara  
Cohort 10 New Leader  
Principal,  
Expeditionary  
Learning School for  
Community Leaders

## Recommendations for ESEA

### Assessment:

Maintain annual statewide assessment requirements and adjust them in ways that will help principals by:

- Continuing to require annual assessments in grades 3–8 and once in high school in reading and math and by grade span in science.
- Requiring that high-quality assessment systems measure both grade-level achievement and growth.
- Ensuring that assessments measure critical thinking and problem solving skills and are aligned to college- and career-ready standards.
- Publicly reporting disaggregated student assessment results (i.e., by race, language, socio-economic status) in a manner that protects student privacy and gets data to principals in time to inform annual planning and budgeting processes.

Require that state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) audit assessment requirements in order to transparently share the amount of time students spend on assessments and to remove duplicative and unnecessary assessments. Provide appropriate accommodations and conduct research on the testing requirements for diverse learners and come up with recommendations for improvement.

Continue to allow SEAs to apply to the Secretary of Education (the Secretary) for waivers on behalf of an LEA or consortium of schools to pilot new approaches to rigorous assessment systems with comparable data. These assessments must be properly normed, allow for determinations of student success and progress against subject-specific standards, and allow for comparable data reporting that meets the same requirements as reporting for traditional assessments.

### Accountability:

Require that SEAs develop and implement a state accountability plan that maintains a high bar for outcomes by:

- Using student growth data and graduation rates in their accountability systems with the flexibility to include additional measures (e.g., higher-level course taking or college persistence rates) to ensure students are prepared for college, career, and citizenship.
- Setting achievement goals for schools that articulate ambitious but attainable growth over time and encourage use of these targets as a baseline for goals that principals set with their managers for purposes of principal evaluation.

Build SEA capacity to develop and maintain the necessary data analysis needed to design sophisticated growth measures and support principals and system leaders to understand and respond to them.

Ensure that any SEA-developed system of rating schools be based primarily on improvement of outcomes over time and generates ratings in time to influence annual planning and budgeting.

Ensure state accountability systems provide meaningful intervention in schools with the weakest overall performance and those with large achievement gaps. The state plan should:

- Ensure that identified schools are led, going forward, by highly effective principals who have the needed supports to be successful in their role. It should include a range of options for districts to demonstrate to states that the current or newly selected principal is highly effective, such as selection based on rigorous hiring tools, completion of a preparation experience aligned to the needs of turnaround schools, demonstrated success in similar schools, demonstrated proficiency as measured by a valid and reliable principal evaluation system that differentiates between strong and weak performers, and (for current principals) leading indicators that school improvement is underway.
- Ensure that the local school improvement planning process: (1) includes participation by the new principal; (2) identifies and addresses conditions at the school level and at the system level that are inhibiting improvement; and (3) provides principals with balanced autonomy over staffing, budget, and program.
- Ensure that local school improvement plans include: (1) research-based strategies for improvement; (2) adequate resources for sustainable implementation; and (3) opportunities for principals to adjust priorities and strategies from year to year based on their assessment of school needs.