



Ensuring Academic Development and Growth of Every Student Matters in an Accountability System: Colorado

Purpose of the Paper

In an effort to find a straight forward way to assess school effectiveness, the creation of accountability systems have had perverse effects – they incentivized a concentration on one subgroup of students at the expense of other students. While that seems like a simple thing to correct, to do so requires careful design of an accountability plan.

“Proficiency” is an important measure and marker, and is a logical place to focus accountability efforts. But many systems have learned that focusing exclusively around a proficiency “line” creates strong incentives – intended or not – to ignore students that are either well above or significantly short of proficiency. This line also shifts the majority of time and resources onto the subset of students near the proficiency line (to ensure those below it reach it and those slightly above it don’t fall below it).

Colorado has long been a leader in the attempt to actually capture and report individual student growth, in addition to simple proficiency. However, as with all states, previous federal laws limited the flexibility on how to incorporate that data into the overall systems.

Colorado’s submitted ESSA plan addresses the specific challenge of ensuring the overall accountability system values the growth and achievements of every student in two primary ways. First, the plan utilizes the median of all test scores – as opposed to a basic proficiency percentage – making the achievement level of every single student important to the school’s score. Second, the plan uses a real individual student growth measure and affords sufficient weight to assure that the achievements and progress of every student also matters, even if they are far above proficiency or struggling to come within reach. Individual advancement should always matter for every student.

This paper will review the specifics of Colorado’s plan in this area, how it was developed, and close with some key thoughts from Senator Hill on what other states might take away from Colorado’s experience in the development of these key aspects of their ESSA plan.



Senator Owen Hill

represents the citizens of Senate District 10 in El Paso County. Senator Hill serves as chair of the Senate Education Committee. He also serves as vice chair of

Finance and is a member of the State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee.

Senator Hill is an Air Force Academy Graduate with a Ph.D. in Economics from the Pardee RAND Graduate School. He formerly served as the CFO for a non-profit and also owns his own construction company.

Senator Hill and his wife Emily have four children. His goal is to continue to advocate for the ideas that will create jobs and make Colorado students successful in the 21st century.

“ Colorado’s accountability system is designed so that every student counts. Growth and achievement are valued to the highest degree and the state’s ESSA plan brings responsibility back to local schools and districts. ”



Dr. William Bennett

Chairman of Conservative
Leaders for Education

Development and Enactment of the Idea

Senator Hill began with this fundamental proposition in describing how Colorado came to these particular positions in the development of its ESSA plan, “Colorado has said the child should be the focus, not the institution.”

Senator Hill continued, “Colorado’s plan recognizes that all students are different, and it’s not just where they end up, but where they started. That difference is growth. The Colorado growth model is what we focus on. A successful classroom is one that takes all of our students wherever they start and makes sure they grow as much as possible. And that’s what we hold teachers and the schools accountable for, can we grow the students from their baseline?”

Accountability in education should mean that every family has access to a high quality education option that works for their children. The main goal of the overall accountability system must be to ensure the massive amount of tax payer dollars flowing into the system is actually working to give all of our children a thriving future.

ESSA allowed states to rethink the entire system and the flexibility to address issues like making sure the growth of every student always matters. Senator Hill observed, “It’s one of the first examples in recent history where the federal government has willfully given power back to the states. Colorado is different than Connecticut or Tennessee, or any other state. We have our own opportunities out here and ESSA gives us the flexibility we need to have a unique Colorado focused education system that is different than the other 49 states out there. We get to compete with other states to say how we make sure we have high quality, accountable systems for every one of our students.”

These new measurements of accountability are designed to show policy-makers, parents, and taxpayers exactly what schools are doing to meet students’ unique needs. Senator Hill concluded, “Rather than having a one size fits all policy, the new measures give us the chance to tailor that and make sure we have the right alignment between students and teachers.”

How it Works

Colorado’s state plan directly deals with the issue of ensuring the growth of every student matters, by using a mean scale score in measuring achievement, and the weighting of a real student growth model. The Colorado plan states the following in Section 4.1.A.i. (Page 49):

“This methodology [Mean scale score] has several other advantages over percent at benchmark (Polikoff, 2016) including that the performance of all students is reflected in the accountability metrics, not just those students who are close to the proficiency cut-scores. This creates accountability for students that are struggling greatly and currently nowhere near meeting the benchmark, as well as for students who are above the benchmark that can reach even higher levels. Mean scale scores provide similar performance inferences for school accountability as percent at benchmark. Finally, the percent of students scoring at benchmark will be reported publicly, as long as student data privacy is maintained.”

The Colorado plan also explains its “Median Student Growth Percentile” system in Section 4.1.A.ii (Page 50). The Fordham Institute recently described the system favorably as one, “which compares the progress of each student at a school to the progress of similar students at other schools and then assigns the student a “percentile rank” between zero and ninety-nine based on how his or her progress stacks up.” See <https://edexcellence.net/articles/touchdown-colorado-a-school-rating-system-that-gets-the-basics-right>. Fordham concluded on this growth component: “The advantage of this approach is that it is grounded in reality rather than the fantasies of policymakers or reformers. Instead of trying to specify the amount of progress students should make based on some utopian ideal, it rewards or sanctions schools for making more (or less) progress than one might expect under the circumstances.”

Finally, at Section 4.1.D.ii. the plan (Page 62), discusses the sufficient weighting of growth versus other measures as follows:

“In 2016, the Colorado State Board of Education (SBE) approved that for elementary and middle schools, 40 percent of points come from Academic Achievement measures and 60 percent from Academic Growth measures; for high school the weighting was 30 percent Academic Achievement, 40 percent Academic Growth and 30 percent Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness.”

The plan can be found here:

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/essa>



Accountability From a Reform-Minded District Leader's Perspective

Colorado has for a long time, focused on the growth model, and looking at the growth of students to really measure accountability of schools. Certainly getting students to proficiency is great, but ensuring students are going toward proficiency (especially students who are behind or lagging,) is needed to be an effective school. The growth model has therefore been a critical part of our system in Colorado.

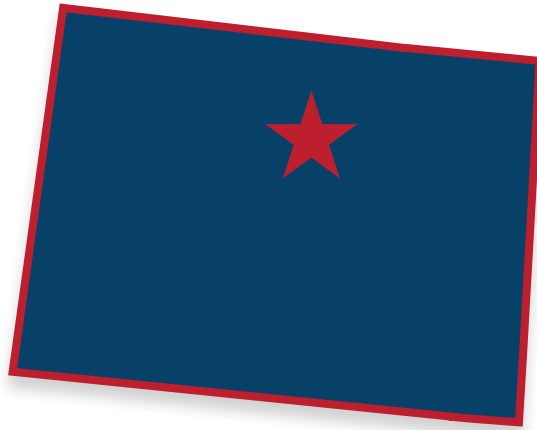
Accountability in education is critical, because we are accountable to taxpayers, parents, and most of all - to the student. We need to ensure that we are providing the best preparation to be a successful citizen in our community, state and nation. We need to have measurements to ensure that what we do is effective in preparing students for life after the K-12 system.

Accountability also needs to measure academic growth of all students, but also include non-academic measures so that they are ready for the 21st century skills necessary for college, the workforce, or the military.

Colorado's reforms over the last several years, have allowed us to lead the way in the accountability. We have to recognize that public education is the last best hope to move students out of poverty and we must ensure students are prepared with the skills they need to be successful. That is our hope for our nation, to change the demographics and the chasms for the haves and the have nots.



Dan Snowberger
Durango Superintendent



Key Advice for Other States

Senator Hill offers the following points to state leaders who are interesting in pursuing this innovative concept:

- “Design the system with students at the center, not institutions. That means any indicators or measures, including the weighting of that data, should not create incentives that drive the focus of schools or districts either towards or away any group of students. The achievements and growth of every student should always matter.”
- “In implementation, the details should flow from the bottom-up, not the other way around. Districts need flexibility, while being held accountable for all students, to help find and develop the measures that best represent their schools and communities.”

