



Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education Position Statement on Growth-Based Accountability Models

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Two bills recently proposed by Georgia legislators, House Bill 1100 and Senate Bill 352, propose substantial changes to the state's method for determining yearly progress rates of public schools and for communicating school performance to the public. These two identical bills would require the Department of Education to use a student growth model as the primary factor in calculating schools' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Additionally, the bills would establish a system of grading schools on a scale of A, B, C, D, or F based upon student achievement on standardized tests. To help inform policymakers and stakeholders about the research and principles related to growth-based accountability and school grading systems, the Georgia Partnership issues the following statement on this topic.

Over the past two decades, the field of public education has increasingly grown data-driven and performance-based. State and federal law now mandate accountability systems for public schools that measure and evaluate progress toward meeting a set of academic goals. Georgia's accountability system includes a federally-required measurement of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of each public school and district. Like the majority of states, Georgia calculates AYP based on several components, one of which is the percentage of students who perform at or above a specific academic performance level each year.

This method of AYP determination provides valuable information about the year-end achievements of our public schools (e.g., did the majority of children pass or fail the 3rd grade reading test?), yet it does not account for the progress educators make with students over time (e.g., did students make progress in their ability to read?). The next step toward a more reliable and robust accountability system for our public schools is the adoption of "growth models" that measure students' progress toward standards, not just their rates of pass-or-fail on annual assessments.

The Georgia Partnership supports growth models, as they are an important next step toward an accountability system that holds high expectations for all our students and schools yet also measures and acknowledges continuous improvement. The growth model is a strategy picking up speed across the country, as 11 states are now using some type of growth model for their school accountability systems. This model could be one that is given precedence when the federal No Child Left Behind legislation is reauthorized in the near future.

Crafting a high-quality growth model, however, is an extremely difficult task that takes a great deal of time and expertise. Getting the model right requires that states have annual assessments in successive grades; unique student IDs that allow for data on individuals to be followed across time and schools; vertically aligned assessments and grade-specific performance standards; and at least two-years of data. Development of the model should be led by policy and data experts



and informed by the input of a broad array of stakeholders including teachers, school leaders, district administrators, legislators, members of the state and local boards of education, parents, the business community, and advocacy groups.

The challenge of designing an effective growth model cannot be understated. Consider the examples of many states when the United States Department of Education launched a pilot program in 2005 encouraging the submission of growth model accountability plans. Of the 20 states who initially submitted proposals, only two were approved in the first round. Before rushing to legislate a growth-based accountability system, Georgia's leaders should study the processes and models of states such as North Carolina and Tennessee – the first states to gain federal approval of their growth-models.ⁱ

As the conversation about growth-based accountability continues in Georgia, there are multiple challenges of implementation that must be resolved. In any high-quality growth model, the following elements are crucial:

- Vertical alignment of assessments, which ensures that exams from one grade to the next are related and comparable to one another. Our current set of state assessments are not designed for this purpose. For example, it is impossible to draw a meaningful comparison of performance on End of Course Tests in grades 9-12 (EOCT) to performance on Criterion Referenced Competency Tests in grades 1-8 (CRCT). Nor can accurate comparisons be drawn between different grade-level CRCT assessments.
- A focus on student subgroups and the achievement gap. Any accountability system that fails to consider the performance of racial and economic subpopulations and students with disabilities is a move in the wrong direction.
- Appropriate rewards and sanctions. While monetary awards for high performance can be a welcome bonus and incentive for schools, the distribution of any financial reward must be carefully crafted so that the state does not create a system in which “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”
- Effective communication to all stakeholders. Any change to the existing accountability structure must be accompanied by a communications strategy that ensures all involved – teachers, schools, parents, and communities – fully understand the new system.

Separate from the issue of growth models for accountability is the concept of assigning letter grades to public schools. Florida began this practice in 1999, and it remains the sole state to grade schools. A very limited number of empirical studies have suggested that the pressure of Florida's grading system may have spurred failing schools to intensify their improvement efforts. Yet in the words of one researcher, “it is premature to outline a prescription for the improvement of low-performing schools based on these findings, particularly since we do not observe student performance along all relevant dimensions.”

Georgia's current system of accountability already has a system of support built for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress. The success of this work can be seen in the decreasing number



of schools classified as Needs Improvement over the past five years. In fact, a December 2009 report by the national Center on Education Policy recognized Georgia as one of six states with an exemplary policy on the restructuring of low-achieving schools.

Students, parents, and community leaders already have a wealth of information at their fingertips that allow them to know how well a school is performing. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement maintains a user-friendly, comprehensive website that contains *Report Cards*, *Georgia's Education Scoreboard*, and a plethora of data about school performance. Adding a letter grade to the mix will not necessarily provide stakeholders with any new information. Just as one letter grade at one point in time does not give us the complete picture of a student's academic success, neither will one annual grade reveal the full picture about any public school.

On measures of high school graduation and NAEP scores, Georgia is being outpaced by many other states besides Florida. As we continue our efforts to lead the nation in improving student achievement, let's look at what North Carolina, Tennessee, Delaware, and other high-performing states are doing to get results. The best reform strategies for any state to consider are those that improve teaching and learning in every classroom, not the bestowing of scarlet letters on our school doors.

¹ The Council of Chief State School Officers. (2009). *Guide to United States Department of Education Growth Model Pilot Program: 2005-2008*. Washington, DC.