

New ways to rate schools' success; it's not just the test scores anymore

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff, 04.18.17

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Schools will be getting some new tests to see whether they are serving students well. How often do students miss school? Are they ready for college? Are they physically fit? Is their school a welcoming place?

States are beginning to outline new ways to assess the quality of their schools. The measures will do more than relying on traditional standards such as test scores.

The plans are required under a federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act. It was signed by former President Barack Obama in 2015 and takes effect in the coming school year.

Under the new law, states are focusing more on academic growth. They will look at not just whether students have achieved a certain academic level in reading and math, but whether they have improved over time.

New Law Is "A Fairer Way"

Mike Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said that's a big change from the No Child Left Behind Act, the previous version of the education law. "Schools and educators should feel good about that; that will be a fairer way to measure school quality," he said.

But while most experts praised the flexibility and updates offered by the new law, some think that the absence of federal guidelines could bring difficulty for some students. They fear that some states may overlook groups of students who need additional support, such as minorities, students with disabilities and English-language learners. The Republican-controlled Congress moved swiftly this year to cancel key federal accountability guidelines. The guidelines had been passed by Obama's administration to help states implement the new law.

So far, nine states and the District of Columbia have submitted their accountability plans to the national Education Department for review, and seven states are completing their blueprints. The remaining states will submit their plans in September. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos will decide whether to accept or reject the new plans. She has said her goal is state and local flexibility in education and indicated that she might use the process to advance laws involving school choice. These laws would allow parents to use government coupons to pay for whatever school to which they want to send their kids.

When evaluating school quality, states are experimenting with new indicators. Almost all of the first-round states have adopted ongoing absenteeism, or how many students miss more than 10 percent of the school year, as a key measure.

SAT Scores Evaluated

Connecticut and Delaware, among others, also will be tracking college readiness. They look at whether high school students are taking advanced classes and how successful they are on college admission tests like the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT).

Tennessee wants to give every public school in the state a grade from A to F, which state Education Commissioner Candice McQueen says would give parents better information about schools. The grade will take into account such things as how well English language learners are doing and whether disabled students are

being served. The schools will also be graded on absenteeism rates, and if students are ready for college or the military and whether traditionally underserved students are performing well. Graduation rates also will count.

Nevada outlined a system that focuses on student growth measures, including test scores, English language proficiency, and graduation rates. Massachusetts will be paying attention to academic results in ninth grade.

In New Mexico, the state will begin tracking the need for additional tutoring in college and linking those back to high schools where the students studied. The state also will look at how students do in science in ranking schools.

Some states are getting creative. Vermont and Connecticut want to make physical fitness another sign of school quality, while Connecticut also believes access to arts education should be another measure. Illinois wants to survey students to ask whether they feel they are in a safe and welcoming environment.

They Won't Just Measure Test Scores

"There is a lot more than just tests that matter for student success," said Natasha Ushomirsky with the Education Trust. The trust is a nonprofit organization that promotes academic achievement for all students. "Tests are important and looking at progress is important, but states are getting a better picture of how schools are serving students."

In another common thread that has emerged from the first round, states are doing a better job of involving parents, teachers and community activists in the process.

But Marc Magee, chief executive officer of 50Can, an education nonprofit, expressed concerns. He said that "if everybody doesn't hold up their end of the bargain, we could go back to that era where certain populations of students become invisible inside schools even if they are struggling mightily."

Lindsey Tepe is a senior education policy expert at New America, a research group. She said there is so much variation in how states want to examine their schools that national comparisons could be difficult. "Without the guidance, there isn't really a recipe to follow," said Tepe.

Directions for Response:

This week you need to write a response of TWO paragraphs. This should be done on a separate sheet of paper and follow this format:

- 1) **1st Paragraph:** Write a summary of the article. Make sure you:
 - a) Use your own words
 - b) Choose only the most important details
 - c) Pay attention to the order of the details you include
- 2) **2nd Paragraph:** Respond to what you read with YOUR own thoughts. You can follow ONE of the strategies we've been using:
 - a) **DISAGREE** with something (ex., Test scores should be a major part of scoring schools)
 - b) **AGREE** with something and provide additional reasoning (ex., The atmosphere of a school is just as important as how high test scores are)
 - c) write a **DEFINITION** (ex., What a "good" school is like)
 - d) **SHARE** a personal experience and how it shaped your thinking on the issue (ex., How would you rate Schurz High School?)