

# Selecting ESSA's 5th Indicator for Colorado Teachers and Students: A Qualitative Approach



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## +++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

In addition to the four main indicators of school quality or student success used for accountability, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides each state with the opportunity to select a fifth indicator. This indicator must meet the following criteria:

- + Measures the performance of all students in all public schools (including charters)
- + Allows for comparisons between subgroups of students
- + Demonstrates variation across schools in the state
- + Is likely to increase graduation rates or academic achievement<sup>1</sup>

The fifth indicator offers schools an opportunity to be measured on non-academic characteristics such as student engagement, access to higher-level courses, or arts classes. As Colorado develops its state ESSA plan, the fifth indicator is an opportunity for schools and districts to select a measure that is both meaningful and useful to teachers and can have an impact on student achievement.

As Colorado Teach Plus Policy Fellows who teach in public schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas in our state, we believe that the fifth indicator provides an opportunity to move beyond test scores and graduation rates and recognize the whole child. To gauge what Colorado teachers believe will be the most effective fifth indicator, we conducted focus groups during January of 2017 with teachers throughout the state. The results from the focus groups informed our recommendations.

## +++++ RECOMMENDATIONS +++++

- 1 The state should use student engagement and chronic student absenteeism as two options for the fifth indicator.
- 2 The state should pilot the indicators over a period of a year and make adjustments to the implementation based on the results.

## +++ FOCUS GROUPS: METHODOLOGY AND TAKEAWAYS +++

To gather teacher feedback on the fifth indicator, we conducted focus groups with 54 teachers across the state. The teachers' schools represented a variety of educational settings and demographics.

## Schools represented in the survey:

<u>CENTURY MIDDLE SCHOOL</u> , Adams 12 School District + International Baccalaureate School + 38% of students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch	<u>KIPP SUNSHINE PEAK ACADEMY (Middle School)</u> , Denver Public Schools District + Charter School + 97% of students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch	<u>HIGHLANDS RANCH HIGH SCHOOL</u> , Douglas County School District + 5% of students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch	<u>PALISADE HIGH SCHOOL</u> , Mesa County School District + International Baccalaureate School + 44% of students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch	<u>POLARIS AT EBERT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</u> , Denver Public Schools District + Gifted & Talented Magnet School + 4% of students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch
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In our focus groups, we asked teachers to respond to an open-ended question: "What do you suggest for the fifth indicator?"<sup>2</sup> Top responses included access to special programming (e.g. arts and science education, IB, AP programs), school climate, attendance, student engagement, and teacher retention. We then asked for feedback on seven specific indicators being considered by the state of Colorado.

### The following indicators were the most favorable by rank:

- + Student Engagement (20 teachers)
- + Student Attendance Rate and Chronic Absenteeism (15 teachers)
- + Social/Emotional Skills (13 teachers)
- + Access to Arts and Science Education (13 teachers)
- + School Climate (11 teachers)
- + Access to Advanced Coursework (7 teachers)
- + Teacher Retention (5 teachers)\*
- + Suspension/Expulsion Rates (0 teachers)

*\*Teacher retention was not offered as a specific indicator choice, but was a response to the open-ended question.*

Within our focus groups, we asked teachers to address the strengths and weaknesses of each indicator. Teachers responded favorably to many of the choices, although some expressed concerns about the indicators' reliability and fairness, and the teachers' ability to directly impact the various indicators.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, teachers in the focus groups wanted to know that the chosen indicator would both reflect and have a direct impact on their everyday work with students. For this to occur, the teachers felt that the indicator needs to provide data that is actionable.

Teachers also preferred multiple options for the fifth indicator. This would allow school communities to focus on goals that are key to their students' success, while still providing disaggregated data that ensures all students are being treated equitably. The use of multiple indicators would also recognize a "whole child" approach to accountability.

Below are summaries of the teachers' views on each of the indicators being considered by the state:

## Student Engagement

Student engagement was the highest-rated measure among the focus group participants because it focuses on student-to-teacher relationships and the positive influence these have on student success. A high school teacher in Palisade commented, *"The more students are involved, the more we are successful."* Teachers noted that external factors can make using this indicator more challenging for certain student populations and methods used to evaluate student engagement need to be carefully vetted. That said, teachers had the most confidence in their ability to impact this indicator. Surveys such as the Harvard Tripod Survey ask students questions that relate to the learning environment in classrooms and the relationships between teachers and students.<sup>4</sup> This differentiates student engagement from school climate.

## Student Attendance Rate and Chronic Absenteeism

Attendance was highly ranked by many participants because of its essential role in student learning. As one teacher in Thornton put it, *"If they're not here, they can't learn."* Some teachers in the focus groups did not feel that attendance would be a fair measure because it can be outside of their realm of influence. According to a teacher at a high-poverty middle school in Denver, *"We can't control that. One student has been out for three weeks, and we've done everything we can do."*

## Social/Emotional Skills

Another highly-ranked indicator was social/emotional skills. Teachers had varying responses on what they could do to influence this. A teacher at a low-poverty school in Denver remarked, *"We can control this."* By contrast, a teacher at a

high-poverty school in Denver commented, *"This would unfairly hurt schools in urban areas where kids are prone to poverty."*

## Access to Arts and Science Education

Teachers felt that arts and science education was something that all students needed access to, and that it could be particularly beneficial to certain populations. Teachers noted that it may not be possible to judge this fairly across different schools, since access can vary depending on a school's resources. Some elementary schools may not currently offer science and arts instruction for non-tested grades and all schools would need to offer them if the indicator were to be used equitably.

## School Climate

School climate was perceived positively as a fifth indicator. *"Happy teachers and happy students in a happy environment tend to show increases in test scores - happy learning!"* expressed one teacher in Thornton. Some teachers in the focus groups raised concerns about the reliability of survey data and whether or not this indicator can be measured objectively.

## Access to Advanced Coursework

Advanced coursework can be highly motivating to many students. A teacher in Highlands Ranch responded favorably since she felt it could *"motivate certain students."* Ensuring adequate resources to provide these courses would be an essential component of the implementation of this measure.

## Teacher Retention

Although this was not listed as a specific indicator choice, teachers in both focus groups in Denver mentioned the importance of using teacher retention as a

fifth indicator. A teacher at a low-poverty school in Denver remarked, *"I think the fifth indicator should be the 'happiness' of your teachers and retention of your teachers, because I think that contributes to all four of those indicators."*

## Suspension and Expulsion Rates

Across all focus groups, participants expressed concerns over suspension and expulsion rates. Teachers felt that schools could just change the conditions and policies under which students are suspended or expelled without providing alternative policies and actions to handle disruptive students.

# +++++++ RECOMMENDATIONS ++++++

- 1 The state should use student engagement and chronic student absenteeism as two options for the fifth indicator.

In order for the local districts in Colorado to provide relevant information for their specific community's educational goals and comparable data across all districts, we recommend that the state use student engagement and chronic absenteeism as options for the fifth indicator. Teachers rated these indicators as their top two choices. Research is clear on the impact that attending class has on student achievement. While there are a variety of reasons students do not attend, using student engagement as another indicator might provide actionable information on whether or not students' attendance is based on their engagement in their school's learning environment.

- 2 The state should pilot the indicators over a period of a year and make adjustments to the implementation based on the results.

We recommend that the state establish a set of measurable goals for each indicator and survey teachers as the indicators are piloted. The goals of the survey should be to ensure that the fifth indicator is reliable, actionable, and relevant to the everyday work of teachers. In order to ensure that teachers trust the indicator to accomplish this, the state should pilot the indicators over a period of a year. As the indicators are piloted, the state should monitor their effectiveness and support in schools by analyzing the data and surveying teachers.

## +++++ CONCLUSION +++++

As we gathered teachers' perspectives and opinions on the fifth indicator, we found that teachers did not reach clear consensus on a single indicator. However, it was very clear that teachers would like their students and schools to be measured on an indicator that they can impact as educators. Chronic absenteeism and student engagement are two such indicators that were highly rated by some of the focus group participants. If the school finds itself with high chronic absenteeism, a measure of student engagement could help paint a broader picture and clarify the next steps for the school.

It is essential that the fifth indicator be piloted before it is fully implemented. Teacher feedback should be gathered during these pilots to ensure that the indicator measures are fair, accurate, and useful. If teachers trust the indicators they are more likely to support being held accountable to them.

The fifth indicator recognizes the direct role that non-academic variables have on school quality and student success, and offers the opportunity for schools to be measured more holistically. Teachers are already highly aware of all of the variables involved in school quality and student success. Multiple indicators can provide them with an additional focus that can ultimately be used to grow student achievement.

## +++++ ENDNOTES +++++

1. The relevant statutory language for the school quality or student success indicator can be found in subsection (c)(4)(B)(v) of Section 1111 of ESSA. For a detailed summary and analysis of the 5th indicator see Council of Chief State School Officers Identifying a School Quality/Student Success Indicator for ESSA: Requirements and Considerations January 2017 <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2017/ESSA/CCSSOIdentifyingSchoolQualityStudentSuccessIndicator1242017.pdf>

2. Some teachers had multiple responses for their top choice.

3. Question 1: In addition to the existing measures of school quality and student success, what do you suggest as an additional indicator?

Question 2: Do you feel these measurements would be effective for evaluation of school quality/student success? Why or why not?

Question 3: Which measurable indicators would you like to see used in evaluating your school?

Question 4: Are there any measurable indicators you specifically do not like or do not believe would be fair in evaluating your school?

Question 5: Which of the measurable indicators do you think are the most important in measuring school quality or student success?

Question 6: Please rank the indicators below in terms of importance (1=most important)

Question 7: Would you like to see one factor or multiple factors used in the evaluation process?

What final thoughts do you have to contribute regarding the 5th indicator for ESSA? Do you have any questions or further issues for consideration?

4. For an example of a field tested student engagement survey see the Tripod Survey at <http://tripoded.com>

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