

Introduction

The Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows are a diverse group of general and special education teachers who teach in rural and urban areas across the state. We believe that educator, family, and student voices should be elevated in the conversation surrounding how quality schools are evaluated at the state and federal level.

Colorado recently completed an audit of the current school accountability system which the state legislature mandated in the Spring of 2021. Based on the results, policymakers are positioned to bring changes to how we hold schools accountable. Before debating the validity of the school accountability framework, we must first establish the purpose of public schools and what teachers believe a quality school looks like. In this memo, we present ten principles of school quality, ranked by Colorado educators in order of importance.

Teacher School Quality Survey: Methodology

Our research was driven by two essential questions: What does a quality education look like according to our educators? Are the current indicators in our school accountability framework aligned with this? To better understand school quality, we [researched](#) federal and state regulations for determining it as well as other expert beliefs on school evaluation systems. After identifying ideas around the purpose of schools, we created ten principles centered on the purpose of high-quality public education. We then conducted a survey asking teachers to rank a series of ten principles of school quality in order of importance. This online survey was administered through the Teach Plus Colorado network and included both quantitative and qualitative data.

Seventy-two teachers with varying levels of experience, representing both urban and charter schools across Colorado, responded to the survey. Eight percent of respondents had less than 4 years of teaching experience, 37% had between 5 and 15 years of experience, and 55% percent had more than 15 years of experience. The majority of participants teach in suburban (69%) or urban (30%) areas, while 1% of respondents work in rural districts.

Principles of High-Quality Schools

A high-quality school provides all students with:

1. The opportunity to develop their character, talents, and interests, while receiving support to address individual learning needs.
2. Opportunities that prepare them to succeed in the future of work including community partnerships, mentorships, and career exploration opportunities.
3. Opportunities that prepare them to fully participate in American democracy.
4. A safe and healthy environment that is conducive to academic learning.
5. Access to caring adults with expertise in creating quality learning environments and experiences.
6. Instruction and tasks that are worthy of their effort, aligned to state standards, and relevant to the skills they will need to succeed in life.
7. Tools and support to discover their purpose.
8. Prepares students to contribute meaningfully to the world economy
9. Helps students understand that people can see things differently—and that those differences merit respect rather than persecution.
10. Supports student emotional regulation and mental wellbeing.

Top Principles of High-Quality Schools

Colorado educators named the following three as the top principles of a high-quality school:

1. A quality school provides all students with a safe and healthy environment that is conducive to academic learning. (Principle 4)
2. A quality school provides all students with the opportunity to develop their character, talents and interests, while receiving support to address individual learning needs. (Principle 1)
3. A quality school provides all students with access to caring adults with expertise in creating quality learning environments and experiences. (Principle 5)

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. Reevaluate the weighting of each ESSA indicator.

According to the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), school quality is measured based on five indicators: 1) student achievement on standardized assessments; 2) student growth on those same assessments; 3) multi-language learner language proficiency; 4) high school 4-year graduation rates; and 5) state-chosen student success/school quality indicators. The assessment-based indicators are generally weighted around 30-40%, language proficiency is weighted at around 10-15%, and the state-chosen school quality/ student success indicator is approximately 8-15%. In Colorado, chronic absenteeism is our fifth ESSA indicator. This means that 8-15% of school ratings are based on school attendance rates.

The current weighting of the five ESSA indicators does not align with the priorities of the Teacher School Quality Survey. Given educators' top priorities, rebalancing the weights could include reducing the percentage assigned to assessment-based indicators and increasing the percentage connected to the school quality/student success indicator.

2. Change the fifth ESSA Student Success/ School Quality indicator in Colorado to one more aligned with Principle 1: A quality school provides all students with the opportunity to develop their character, talents and interests, while receiving support to address individual learning needs.

In Colorado, 37.5% of schools already use a mental health screener to assess students' social-emotional needs. The opportunity exists to use the screener results as our fifth school quality indicator. Expanding these screeners to more schools is an essential next step in order to start establishing how we can measure safe and healthy learning environments as aligned with Principle 1.

3. Create opportunities for further conversations with educators and other stakeholders to better understand the priorities of quality schools using the principles as guidance.

Policymakers should conduct further conversations with stakeholders around the meaning of "safe and healthy" from multiple perspectives to create more clarity on what this looks like and how it could be measured nationwide. Also, further conversations can help to identify ways to evaluate school quality, such as determining when to use inputs (number of qualified teachers for example) versus outputs (results of assessments).

Conclusion

We recommend reevaluating the current weighting of each ESSA indicator, updating our current school quality/ student success indicator, and conducting stakeholder conversations to better understand the results of the Teacher School Quality Survey. By sharing our findings and recommendations, we hope to bring more awareness to understanding school quality and our current school accountability system and to offer new effective methods of evaluation that will establish relevancy and true measures of school quality moving forward.