

Spring 4-23-2015

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Recommended Citation

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Evaluation of Gifted Education using A-F School Grading Accountability Systems

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A recent trend in accountability systems in the United States has been grading schools on an A-F scale. Some of the evaluation components included in these systems are standardized test proficiency rates and student growth measures. Traditionally, these systems have not emphasized accountability for gifted education programming or services. The accountability systems of the sixteen states in the U.S. under these A-F systems were analyzed for indicators that involve gifted education, which does not yet have a federal mandate or centralized decision-making. The frequency of evaluation components were compared at the high school and elementary school levels. The only gifted education-specific components were based on AP and IB testing in high school. The lack of gifted education inclusion into these systems represents the current climate for gifted education in the United States.

Introduction

Education in the United States is in an era of declining budgets and increasing accountability at the local, state, and federal levels. A-F school grading is a recent accountability initiative that is becoming more prominent in the United States. Legislators have passed these accountability systems in sixteen states, primarily located in the southern U.S. Other states have passed similar measures that give schools numerical scores rather than letter grades. Through these systems, states grade their individual school districts based on specific evaluative measures

such as reading and math proficiency on standardized tests, year-over-year growth, graduation rates, career and college preparatory test-taking rates, and AP or IB test participation or performance rates. These components vary by state according to each state's individual needs.

In contrast with the growth of this type of evaluation system, gifted education programs nationwide have been plagued by decreasing budgets, decentralized decision-making, and vague definitions of giftedness (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted (CSDPG), 2013). There is no federal mandate for gifted education, creating a disparate system of identification procedures, programming, and services for gifted students that varies by state, along with an overall lack of funding. Inclusion of gifted education components in these A-F school grading systems would demonstrate an augmented priority for gifted programming and services at the state and federal levels. Furthermore, a federal mandate would facilitate greater funding and resources to be given to gifted education programs across the nation. Thus, it is critical for gifted education evaluative components to be included in the A-F school accountability systems currently being passed.

The NAGC estimates that approximately three million gifted students are currently enrolled in grades K-12, representing about six percent of the entire student population in the United States (NAGC, 2014). In response to the standards-based education on which standardized tests are based, these students are becoming deemphasized in comparison to other students who require more attention to meet testing goals. Though gifted students have great potential to effect change in society and develop their talents, they are often forgotten in policy decisions at the federal, state, and local levels of the education system (Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2002). Therefore, it is important to investigate these accountability programs to

understand the breadth and depth of the problems with gifted education in this country.

States that have passed A-F school grading accountability legislation are an important starting point in this investigation. All sixteen states following this accountability system passed their legislation within the past fifteen years. As a result, the laws reflect the most recent policymaking and leadership. In analyzing these documents, the authors can determine the value being placed on gifted education through the evaluative components that either included or excluded from the accountability measures.

The authors of this study seek to (1) compile each state's accountability indicators and analyze them with respect to each other, (2) analyze the amount of gifted education programming and services featured in this legislation, and if the amount of gifted programming is found to be lacking in these A-F school grading legislation pieces, (3) analyze the probable reasons for a lack of priority in gifted education, both at the macro scale of general education policy and at the micro scale of gifted stereotypes and perceptions.

Review of Literature

This study begins by providing a general overview of literature on accountability systems and gifted education. First, we revisit major aspects of gifted education policy and legislation in the past thirty years and connect changes in these programs to corresponding changes in mandated definitions of giftedness. As these A-F school accountability systems are a recent phenomenon, there remains little research on the topic. Thus, we review responses to recent accountability measures such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and relate them to A-F school grading accountability systems. Finally, we explore current research on excellence gaps and perceptions of gifted students, which may aid us in explaining any lack of emphasis on gifted education in the United States today.

Identification, Programming, and Services

The services and programming provided to gifted and talented students vary by state and region, depending on the area's resources and geographic location. Supervisors of gifted education of twenty-six states reported that programming and services were included in their state mandates for gifted education. However, few of the supervisors mention specific components, such as differentiated instruction or acceleration, in their state mandates (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013). In an analysis of five states' policies, none explicitly specifies the services that they would provide, and overall, they include little mention of options such as grouping, differentiation, and contact time (Brown et al., 2010). Programming options such as enrichment, acceleration, and differentiation have transitioned over time to reflect the changing definition of giftedness, as well as amendments to funding. In a case study of South Carolina's gifted policy, Swanson and Lord (2013) found that South Carolina had approved governor's schools, special classes, and resource rooms as options for gifted education. These options provide alternative contexts in which the more traditional options of enrichment and acceleration can be applied.

Acceleration and enrichment are common approaches for school districts to take for gifted students. These two options differ with regard to depth of the material being taught. Acceleration programs decrease the amount of time that the student spends at a specific level. For example, gifted students can skip grades or dual enroll in high school and college classes simultaneously (Gallagher, 2002). Acceleration programs are based on the premise that gifted students learn more quickly than their same-age peers. Conversely, enrichment programs increase the depth of the content or introduce topics that would not otherwise be taught to these students (Subotnik et al., 2011). Many students take part in acceleration programs through Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, early college admission,

tutors, and grade skipping. Most accelerated students report positive social and emotional development, and were satisfied by their experience of being accelerated in school (Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, 2001). Despite the success of accelerated students, this method of further educating gifted students is used less often than its effectiveness might predict (Gallagher, 2002). Despite their differences, acceleration and enrichment programs can both be used to engage gifted students.

Identification procedures, similar to gifted programming and services, vary among local education agencies (LEAs) (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013). However, this becomes problematic for students who move among school districts with different eligibility requirements. Most states leave the decision of transferring eligibility to their LEAs, meaning that there is no guarantee that a student considered gifted in one area will have that same label in another area. The identification procedures in each state and local municipality are dependent upon the definition of giftedness assigned to the gifted education mandate. When attempting to narrow this definition to provide precision, each LEA must still be careful to give equal opportunity and access to each subpopulation in the district (Brown et al., 2010).

The first step of the identification process for gifted students involves screening the students, which includes parent and teacher referrals, testing data, grades, and student work (Ohio Department of Education, 2000). As teacher nominations are a potential gateway for entry into gifted and talented programs, they might become a limiting factor for gifted students who have not yet been identified as gifted by their teachers. Although Callahan, Hunsaker, Adams, Moore, and Bland (1995) recommend using more than one measure to identify students for further testing into gifted education programs, students who are not identified by their teachers as gifted may not be given the opportunity to complete these additional measures. Since teacher

referrals are gateways for further testing, it is important their reports be objective and unbiased.

The effectiveness of these nominations is conflicting, however, as it is difficult to separate the stereotypes of gifted students from teachers and their experiences. These biases may cause teachers to over-identify a particular characteristic or ethnic group as gifted, depending on whether those assigned qualities are congruent with their internal schema of giftedness. A teacher's prior experience with gifted students has been associated with favorable attitudes about gifted students. Another testament of experience is that in-service teachers hold fewer stereotypical thoughts than pre-service teachers (Carman, 2011).

In addition to the flaws in the identification process due to the subjective nature of teacher referrals, there remains a disconnect between children identified as gifted and those who grow into eminent adults. Gifted students identified during primary and secondary schooling are not necessarily those who positively contribute to society later in life. This disparity underscores the importance of gifted education as a resource for students who need additional engagement. If given the opportunity to develop their interests and talents, perhaps more of these students would become eminent adults. Subotnik et al. (2011) recommend that identification procedures should be altered to enable students to develop talents in specific domains. These changes would allow students to foster greater ability in their areas of interest, potentially increasing their opportunity of reaching eminence.

A broadening definition of giftedness has brought about changes in identification procedures over the past few decades. Definitions of giftedness have transitioned over a few decades to place a greater emphasis on other components of intelligence and performance, rather than solely intelligence quotient (IQ) scores or overall cognitive ability. These new changes in the definition imply greater inclusion of all ethnic groups and students with disabilities

(Gallagher, 2002). Beginning in the 1970s, the IQ model of giftedness gradually incorporated new components like leadership, creativity, and domain-specific academic aptitude. Other contemporary models include Renzulli's three-ring model of giftedness (above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity), Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, and Sternberg's triarchic model (analytical, practical, and experiential; Schroth & Helfer, 2009).

Traditionally, intellectual ability, pioneered by educational psychologists such as Alfred Binet and Lewis Terman, has been the de facto definition for giftedness and has been evaluated through cognitive tests such as IQ tests (Terman, 1916). However, academic achievement requires more than this intellectual ability. Instead, modern definitions focus on gifted students' unique emotional and social needs, creative processes, extracurricular domains such as the visual arts and athletics, and unequal access to opportunities and practice (Subotnik et al., 2011). However, this conflict between traditional and contemporary views of giftedness creates confusion at the classroom level concerning identification of individual students. The surveying of administrators, gifted education specialists, and regular education teachers reveals high levels of this confusion, with preference given to traditional measures (Schroth & Helfer, 2009). Current state statutes containing their own definitions of giftedness address intellectual, academic, and creative giftedness, but place a greater emphasis on the cognitive intelligence indicated by IQ tests (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013).

The inconsistent definition of giftedness fails to incorporate specific populations of gifted students based on the identification criteria. The exclusive preference to intellectual ability may cause teachers to overlook students with other talents or abilities (Schroth & Helfer, 2009). Incongruence in gifted education programming, services, and identification procedures results from the lack of a uniform definition, ultimately leading to difficulties when gifted students

move across town and state boundaries.

Gifted Education Policy

Major policy and legislation in education tend to follow one of three overarching goals: horizontal equity, fiscal neutrality, and vertical equity. Horizontal equity focuses on providing each individual student with similar educational environments by standardizing funding per student across school districts (Baker & Friedman-Nimz, 2004). This provision of equal opportunity is important in low income and low resource schools that would otherwise lack the capability to provide an equivalent education. Fiscally neutral legislation has no relationship between resources of the school and the funding that it is provided. Vertical equity treats students differently based on their specific academic and social needs. In the instances of exceptional students (e.g., gifted and special education), vertically equitable policy legislation is able to provide these students with differentiated opportunities. With these alternative provisions, students are given an unequal amount of funding.

Most education policy is focused on horizontal equity and fiscal neutrality rather than vertical equity. Schools that lack adequate money are forced to cut back on vertically equitable programs, such as gifted education. Consequently, schools with greater percentages of children of low-income families are less likely to offer gifted education programs (Baker & Friedman-Nimz, 2004). Without strong policies and mandates, gifted education programs are more likely to be eliminated, especially in response to budget cutbacks from all levels of funding and the increased value given to horizontally equivalent rather than vertically equivalent programs (Brown et al., 2010).

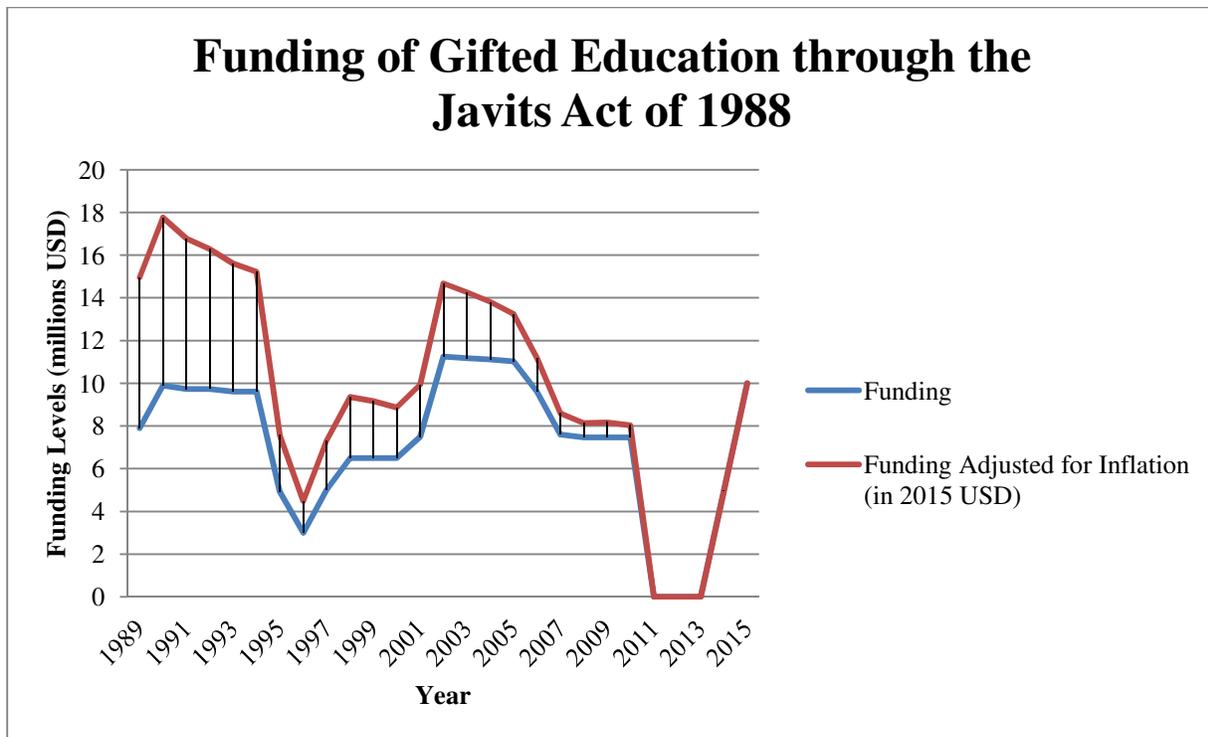


Figure 1 – The funding of gifted education programming and services nationwide through the Javits Act of 1988 between 1989 and 2014.

The most important piece of gifted education legislation in the past thirty years is the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988. This law allocated a small amount of funding to serving gifted minority students, including those with limited English proficiency, cultural diversity, and economic disadvantage. Furthermore, it created the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented as an opportunity for collaboration among universities, state departments of education, public schools, and private entities (Gallagher 2002). However, funding levels for the act continue to be minimal. The maximum amount of funding since the law’s passage was \$11.25 million in 2002, an amount that declined over time until the program was defunded from 2011-2013. Funding was raised to \$5 million in 2014 in response to gifted education advocates and the Senate Appropriations Committee chairperson Barbara Mikulski (NAGC, 2014).

Gifted programs are often included in legislation under the category of exceptional children, which is partially beneficial because as funding increases for children with disabilities, there are some gifted programs that also receive a corresponding increase in their funding. However, programs that fall under this category are required to follow the same rules as special education programs. In other words, gifted education programs in states in which this occurs are required to fill out Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for each eligible student (Gallagher 2002).

Although students with disabilities and gifted and talented students are considered exceptional, there remains a disparity between the funding and policies in each case. Special education legislation such as IDEA provides school districts with billions of dollars for students with disabilities. However, very little funding is available at the federal level for gifted education programs (Gallagher, 2002). Due to the lack of federal funding for gifted and talented programming and services, these programs are instead reliant upon state and local funding. Most funding occurs at the local level, as most state mandates do not fully fund these programs (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013). For example, gifted education in South Carolina is mandated, but not fully funded, and funding has decreased recently, even as the number of students served through the programming has increased during the same period (Swanson & Lord, 2013).

There is no federal mandate for gifted education, leaving all decision-making to state and local officials. While this allows each local entity to mold its policy out of its particular needs, there remains a disparity of gifted education programming and services across state and local boundaries. A federal mandate would encourage policymakers to provide adequate vertical equity for students who require differentiated instruction. Thirty-two states have a gifted and talented education mandate for either identification or services (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013).

A federal mandate would partially solve the matter of funding, allow for increased accountability for gifted and talented programs nationwide, and provide resources for teachers to better adapt to their students' needs through differentiated instruction. A decentralized education system that leaves most of the decision-making to the states gives each local municipality autonomy and allows for checks and balances of power. However, the lack of cohesion due to the disparity in policies creates unforeseen negative outcomes (Brown et al., 2010). At the state level, most gifted education program supervisors indicated that such a mandate was important to addressing the underrepresentation of minority students, providing increased opportunities for currently enrolled gifted students, and standardizing the definition of giftedness and its identification (Baker & Friedman-Nimz, 2004; NAGC & CSDPG, 2013).

With little attention to gifted education at the federal level, state and local governments need to meet the special considerations of gifted learners. Four general policy categories include (a) identification, (b) curriculum and services, (c) personnel preparation, and (d) program management, assessment, and evaluation. In the case of South Carolina, there was agreement in the 1980s that there needed to be widespread improvement of their public education system, including a focus on gifted and talented students. The Education Improvement Act of 1984 was passed with the purpose of accomplishing these goals (Swanson & Lord, 2013).

Another problem facing gifted education advocates is the lack of professional development and training that both general education teachers and gifted education program supervisors receive. Few teacher preparation programs require coursework in gifted education, and few states and LEAs require their faculty to have the corresponding certification. Compared to special education, there are far fewer support services available to teachers working with gifted students. This is due to the lack of preparation in the area at the university and professional

development levels, and the lack of funding for each school to encourage personnel preparation (Gallagher, 2002). In the analysis of gifted education programs in five states, Brown et al. (2010) found that the option to receive endorsement or certification in gifted education was mentioned in the policies, but in at least two of these states, this option had not been enforced. In revising its gifted education legislation, South Carolina increased availability of basic gifted education endorsement courses and compromised with a requirement of six hours of graduate coursework for the endorsement (Swanson & Lord, 2013).

Only one state, Kentucky, requires all general education teachers to receive pre-service training in gifted education (NAGC, 2013). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 established a set of standards for the professional development of all teachers in the field of gifted education (Johnsen, 2012). However, few teachers report receiving professional development in this area, perpetuating the problem of inadequate preparation. Even though most gifted education services are provided through general education classrooms, especially in elementary and middle schools, most of these educators have little experience meeting the needs of gifted and talented students (Nowikowski, 2011). Seventeen states require specialized gifted education coordinators to earn a certificate or endorsement in the area. In other words, in most states, one can become a gifted education coordinator even without receiving an indication of prior coursework in field (NAGC, 2013).

Excellence Gaps

One lingering problem of gifted education programs is the underrepresentation of minority populations, including Latino, African American, and Native American populations as well as students with disabilities and students of low socioeconomic status (Carman, 2011). The majority of court decisions on gifted and talented education involve charges of discrimination of

gifted minority students through their identification and placement (Gallagher, 2002). The resulting disparity in representation is often termed the “excellence gap.” Most research fails to connect this underrepresentation to the general achievement gap that is indicated in most measures of achievement. Potential causes for this gap include a lack of access to resources, poor quality schools, lower levels of parental involvement, negative peer influences, and cultural differences. Furthermore, in the case of African American students, the cultural ecological theory proposes that they resist high achievement in school in order to preserve their Black identity (Ogbu, 2004; Subotnik et al., 2011).

The implementation of No Child Left Behind has brought into focus achievement gaps between white and minority populations of students. While these achievement gaps have slowly declined over the past three decades, the focus on students meeting a minimum threshold or competency has limited achievement of high ability learners of minority populations. As a result, remediation of excellence gaps is not prioritized as highly on the national level as achievement gaps (Plucker et al., 2010).

The South Carolina Office of Civil Rights (OCR) determined that previous identification methods of gifted students in the state requiring teacher referral, testing scores, and grades did not provide equal opportunity for all students (Swanson & Lord, 2013). The legislation was later revised such that students were screened through parent, peer, and self-nominations, with teacher referral no longer being the "gatekeeper" for these gifted programs. As a result, minority populations became more highly represented in gifted and talented programs, suggesting that teacher perceptions and negative expectations are at least partially responsible for the asymmetrical identification of these minority students.

Perceptions of Gifted Students

Perceptions of gifted and talented students are perpetuated by teacher expectations and cultivated internally through familial and societal values. In this way, gifted student behavior may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that students are more likely to behave in a manner in which they expect themselves to act. This is especially true concerning social competency because it is a notable stereotype of gifted students (Schroth & Helfer, 2009). Lee et al. (2012) found that in two populations of gifted students, one each from South Korea and the Midwestern United States, the gifted students had greater perceived interpersonal ability than their non-gifted peers. In contrast, Vialle et al. (2007) determined that gifted students were more likely to feel sad and isolated than their peers. Thus, there is conflict when examining whether gifted students are more or less socially competent than their non-gifted peers.

As described by the two contradictory findings, there are two opposing stereotypes concerning gifted students—either they are considered highly socially competent and superior intellectually or face social and emotional deficiencies. The latter view is pervasive in popular culture, which usually emphasizes the quality of social ineptitude. Educators may view gifted students as more open to new experiences, more introverted, less emotionally stable, and less agreeable, even though these students may not be less adjusted than their non-gifted counterparts (Baudson & Preckel, 2013; Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2011). Often, individuals view gifted students as arrogant, unfriendly, nerdy, and socially inept, among other descriptors. These unwelcome perceptions affect whether students take their academic work seriously and strive to be high achieving (O'Connor, 2012). Furthermore, the assumption of lack of effort also makes those who are high achieving less likely to put forth maximum effort (Subotnik et al., 2011).

Even though there are numerous complaints about the lack of American academic

achievement compared internationally, there are negative connotations to gifted and talented student and the programs that serve them (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007). The American educational system is based on two tenets: educating each student to their maximal potential, and yet, addressing the needs of more vulnerable students (Subotnik et al., 2011). However, in most circles, gifted students rarely are seen as vulnerable, and are instead assumed to perform well in most learning environments. Our culture has a pervasive belief that giftedness is equivalent to effortless performance, which undermines their likely high motivation and time commitment in their academic work. Another widespread belief is that gifted education programs solely seek to benefit those of high socioeconomic status and certain ethnic groups.

These beliefs function to limit our collective effort to provide gifted and talented students with a challenging and engaging public education. In a time of rapid globalization and the rise of developing countries, the superiority of the United States, especially in the realm of education is gradually decreasing. Our attitudes and stereotypes of gifted students perpetuate the lack of attention that they are given at the state and federal levels. Studying accountability systems with a focus on gifted education policy is important in demonstrating the problem and developing hypotheses about its cause.

Accountability Systems and Gifted Education

Academic achievement variation among states may be due to differential implementation of federal legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind) or varying standards and measurement through accountability systems. With greater emphasis on data and technical measures, schools face greater pressures to improve. Each state may have its own standardized testing, but the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) helps provide a reliable method of comparison among states. In reaction to most federal education policies, such as No Child Left Behind

(NCLB), there are two distinct groups of states--those that attempt to follow the law and others that lower their standards to make it seem as though they are following the law and making progress. Neither of these progressions, however, produced significant gains in student proficiency according to the NAEP tests (Lee, 2010). Legislators and policymakers must consider these two reactions when developing any further federal legislation on gifted education.

At the state level, only employees at the state department of education are able to supervise developments at the local level. Without these supervisors, there would be little framework for accountability of gifted education programs, and consequently, an inability to advance gifted education issues on a widespread basis due to a lack of advocacy. Individual districts, however, typically have no evaluation or accountability components as part of their gifted and education programs (Brown et al., 2010).

Federal accountability of general student proficiency has stymied teachers' efforts to engage their students through differentiation and in material that is beyond the scope of standardized tests and baseline curriculum (Gallagher, 2002). Due to these accountability procedures, individual districts are coerced into focusing on making annual yearly progress. From the perspective of the school districts, it is more effective and efficient to focus all resources on those students who are just below or above threshold to sustain and increase proficiency rates on standardized tests. In this way, students who are far above or below the threshold receive less attention because their success or failure is not as malleable. Thus, a school's focus on the education and differentiation of gifted students is prioritized less than the education of those students whose success would allow the school to pass federal accountability and evaluation measures.

Ten states publish an annual report on gifted education. Among some of the other

indicators that are included in district report cards are the availability of Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes and the specific achievement or performance of gifted students in the district. Most states require their local school districts to report their gifted and talented programming and services through surveys, programming plans, or reports (NAGC & CSDPG, 2013).

Purpose of this Study

A recent trend in state accountability systems is school grading based on an A-F system. According to this model, schools meeting all specified criteria would receive an “A” from the state, whereas an underperforming school would receive a correspondingly lower grade. Each state defines its own evaluative components based on their own specific needs. Some of these components include graduation rates, college and career readiness, and standardized test or end-of-course exam proficiency and growth. With the recent passing of similar legislation in sixteen states as of the writing of this article, there is a paucity of research associated with A-F school ratings through the perspective of policy. Thus, our first goal was to analyze these systems and the frequency of specific evaluative indicators.

Once these systems were analyzed, we wanted to determine the degree at which gifted education was represented in these systems, giving a rough description of the climate of gifted education in the current United States. A close examination of the state of gifted education in this country through the review of literature reveals a lack of emphasis relative to the needs of other subgroups of students. Thus, it is essential that we identify this national problem more closely in these states that have the A-F school grading system with the consideration that these systems reflect the recent changes in accountability systems.

Methods

An investigation of the rise of A-F school grading into prominence as a state accountability system requires a compilation of individual system components from the states that have already passed legislation. Thus, these individual state evaluation systems were collected via publically available technical manuals and descriptions found on their corresponding education department or agency websites. States that had only just passed the legislation with no available evaluation information were omitted from analysis.

After these evaluative indicators were collected, they were analyzed for provisions based on gifted and talented education. If no gifted and talented components were found, our goal was to attempt to explain the lack of emphasis on gifted education nationwide relative to other important education issues, both at the levels of state policy and individual schools and communities through local newspaper articles and government press releases.

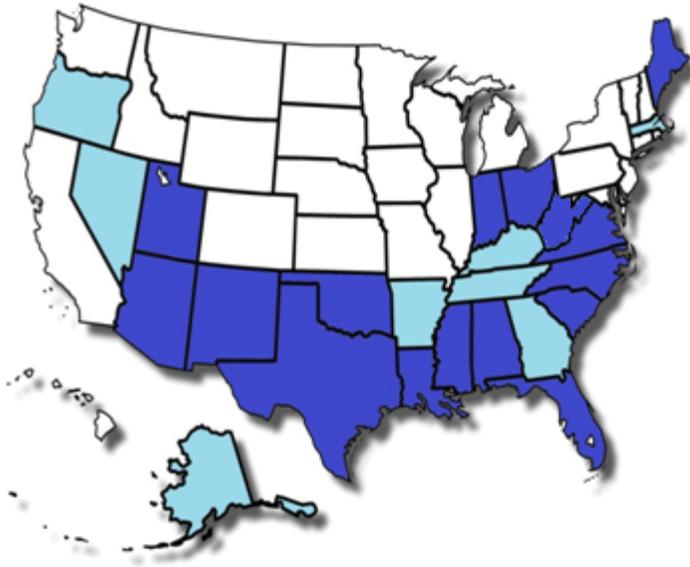


Figure 2 – The distribution of U.S. states with school accountability systems with A-F grade outputs (dark blue) and numerical scoring (light blue).

Results

In the sixteen states with A-F school grading systems that were analyzed in this study, there were few examples of gifted education evaluative components in any of the systems. Only five states, Indiana, Florida, Louisiana, Ohio, and Oklahoma, contained indicators emphasizing gifted education programming in the form of acceleration, often represented in terms of performance and participation indices of Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) examinations. Although AP and IB testing is often funded via gifted education programs, it is not universally considered exclusively gifted education programming. Although the use of these indices in accountability systems may appear to incorporate gifted education, these tests do not benefit gifted students who do not have access to the tests or courses as well as accelerated students in elementary and middle school settings. Beyond participation and performance on these tests, there are few components focusing on gifted students.

The featured performance indices focus on measuring the number or percentage of students scoring above a certain threshold on end-of-course or state standardized exams.

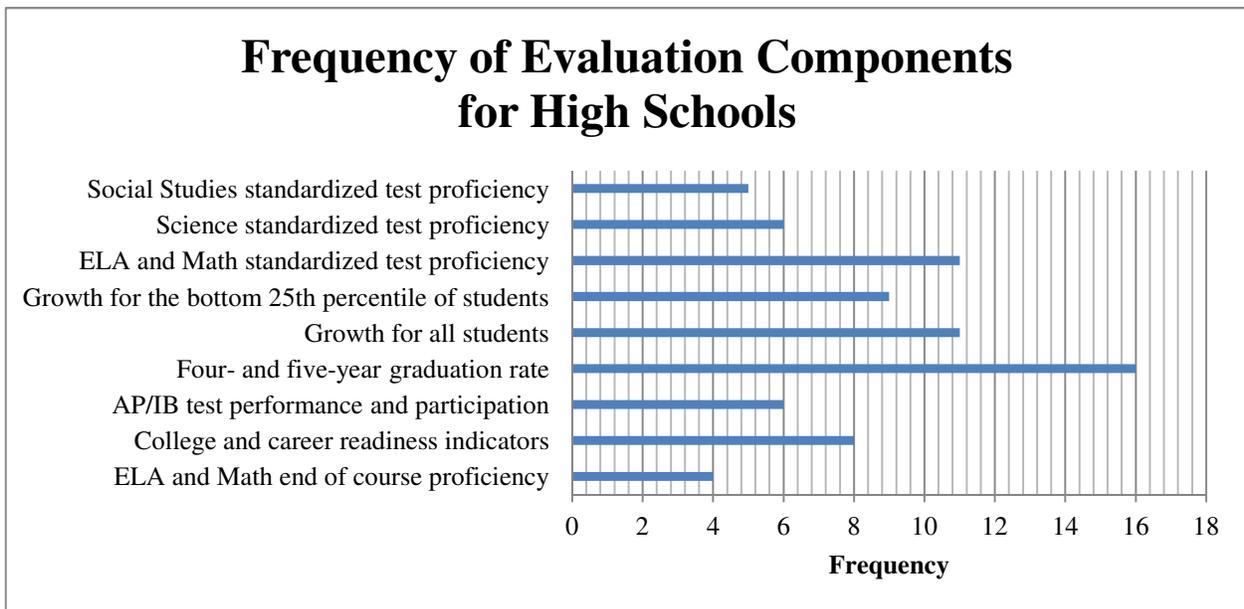


Figure 3 – A summary of the evaluation components featured in each state’s accountability legislation for high school based on the frequency.

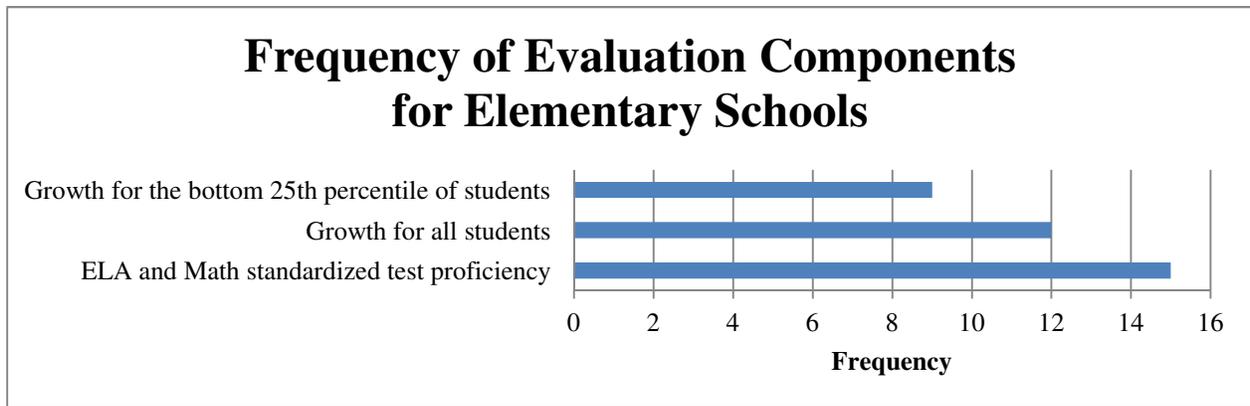


Figure 4 – A summary of the evaluation components featured in each state’s accountability legislation for elementary school based on the frequency.

However, gifted students who are already scoring above this threshold without any additional intervention may become deprioritized in favor of students directly above or below the threshold. Although states have also incorporated year-over-year growth measures of state standardized exams or end-of-course test scores, most of these indices emphasize the growth of the bottom twentieth or twenty-fifth percentile of students.

All sixteen states containing these accountability systems had components evaluating schools based on their graduation rates and English and mathematics proficiency rates. There were fewer measures of science and social studies proficiency rates, college and career readiness indicators (through the SAT, ACT, and ACT WorkKeys), and the accomplishment of annual measurable objectives. Although most proficiency and growth measures were based on standardized test scores, some states instead included end-of-course exam scores. A full listing of these evaluation components with supplemental legislation information can be found in Appendix 1.

There are even fewer evaluation criteria of gifted education featured in elementary schools than are included in the framework for high schools. In high schools, there are Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate test indicators often included that incorporate the

performance of gifted students. However, these indicators are not included in elementary school accountability components. Thus, there are no measures of gifted education beyond student growth and these growth measures prioritize students in the lower percentiles over those who are above the proficiency threshold.

Arizona

The Arizona A-F school grading legislation was first passed in 2010 and adopted in 2011. A publically available guide directed at parents provides a rationale that grades of each individual school will empower parents to make better educational decisions. The guide differentiates the A-F system from the previous system by stating that it includes growth in addition to proficiency components, allowing for a more complete view of a student's education and school's progress (Arizona Department of Education, 2013).

The legislation passed in Arizona primarily featured three evaluation indicators:

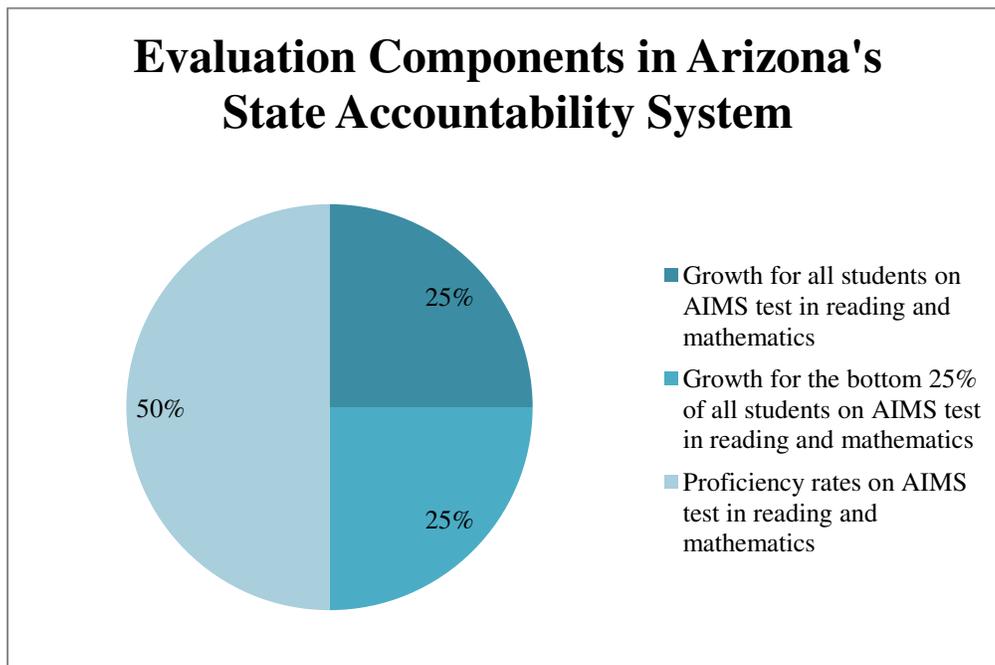


Figure 3 – A summary of the evaluation components included in Arizona A-F school accountability legislation for high schools. In addition to these measures, there are opportunities for schools to receive bonus points for dropout rate reduction, graduation rate increase, and reclassification of ELL students.

proficiency rates on the AIMS test (Arizona's state standardized test), growth rates for all students on the AIMS test, and growth rates for the bottom twenty-fifth percentile of students on the AIMS test. There were also opportunities for schools to receive additional points based on the reclassification of English language learners, reduction of students who fall far below thresholds, reduction in dropout rate, and an increase in graduation rate (Arizona Department of Education, 2013).

Arizona was not a state that included advanced curricula or other components related to gifted education. Upon passage of A-F school accountability legislation in Arizona, a press release summarized the evaluation components and discussed positive aspects to the new system. Points that were highlighted include empowering parents to make informed decisions, driving schools to improve by pinpointing weaknesses, and higher academic results due to increased accountability (Arizona Department of Education, 2011; Ruddock, 2013).

However, when covering the rollout of this new system, journalists emphasized the struggles of low-performing students and the necessity of tracking the growth of the bottom twenty-fifth percentile of students (Kossan & Dempsey, 2012). There was no mention of high-performing students and the lack of advanced curricula or gifted education services in the articles and the government press release, indicating a lack of priority relative to the education of other subgroups of students.

Florida

The first piece of A-F school grading accountability legislation in the United States was passed in 1999 in Florida. Since being passed, several criteria have been added to the accountability system, culminating in the 2013 system that is featured in this study. However, a more simplified 2014 system has been passed, returning to a basis of proficiency, growth, and

graduation rates, components that are almost universally included in the sixteen states examined through this study (Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2014). Certain components have been eliminated or changed, including the at-risk and five-year graduation rates, the combination of reading and writing into English/Language Arts, and college readiness through SAT, ACT, or PERT scores (Stewart, 2014).

Florida's former Governor Jeb Bush has credited the state's A+ plan in school accountability in helping to improve student achievement and school rankings over the previous fifteen years that the legislation has been enacted. These accomplishments include a narrowing achievement gap, increases in graduation rates, increasing AP test participation, and inclusion in various national rankings (Foundation for Florida's Future, 2014). The newly passed 2014 plan has been described as more transparent and balanced in measuring learning gains and objective student performance than its predecessor (Foundation for Excellence in Education, 2014).

Florida's old plan from 2013 contained many components that are not often featured in other state's systems. Their system included college readiness according to SAT, ACT, CPT, or PERT test results, the graduation rate of "at-risk" students, and performance and participation rates in accelerated programs such as AP testing (Florida Department of Education, 2013). Interestingly, during revision, the other unique indicators of Florida's plan were removed, with the exception of accelerated curricula. The inclusion of acceleration programs in the new 2014 plan is beneficial for gifted students and educators because it indicates the high value that the state places on that aspect of their public education. Just as Florida's initial A-F school accountability plan in 1999 has been used as the standard for other states passing similar legislation, their high value in gifted education may also model further action in states across the country.

New Mexico

The state legislature of New Mexico passed the *A-B-C-D-F Schools Rating Act* in 2011 as a revision to previous school accountability systems that required AYP to be made in order for federal funding to be disseminated (Amador-Guzman, 2013). Included in the system are indicators that have not been featured in other states’ systems. In addition to the measures of proficiency rates, graduation rate, and college and career-readiness, the legislation separated student growth into two categories: the highest 75% and the lowest 25% of students (Skandera, 2014). In the majority of other states’ systems, the growth of all students is measured along with an emphasized category solely for the bottom twenty-fifth percentile of students.

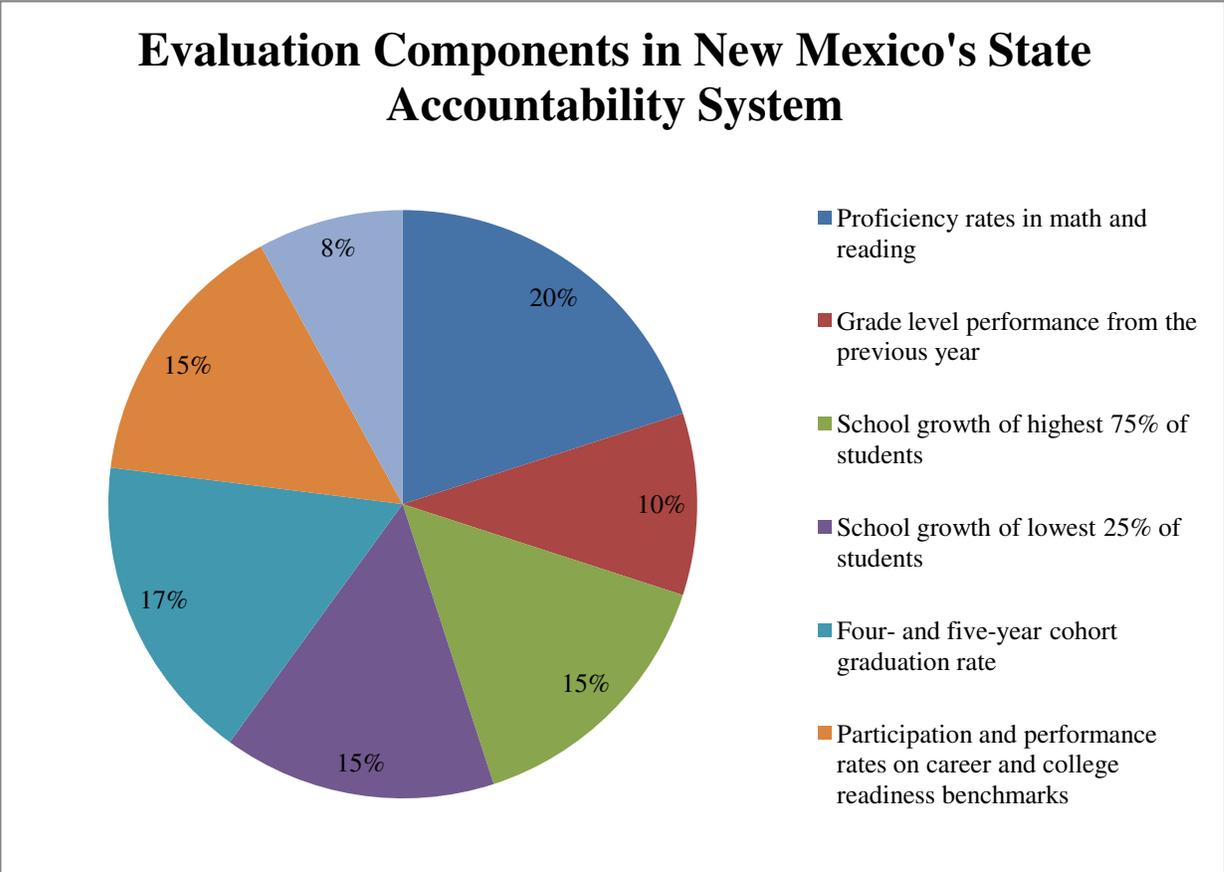


Figure 4 – A summary of the evaluation components included in New Mexico’s A-F school accountability legislation for high schools. New Mexico offers an alternative indicator for student growth, incorporating both the growth of the lowest 25% and highest 25% of all students.

Though the growth of lower achieving students is still prioritized as a separate indicator in New Mexico's system, which is important for reducing the extent of achievement gaps in the state's school districts, these students are not incorporated into both growth measures (Mozzone, 2014). Alternatively, in a state such as Arizona, these lower achieving students are calculated with the growth of all students in addition to having a separate category. Although there have been claims that the system has perpetuated inequality in funding distribution, the Public Education Department Secretary Hanna Skandera has cited improvements in graduation rates and Advanced Placement participation and performance rates as directly resulting from the legislation (Ujifusa, 2014).

Virginia

In 2013, under the direction of former Governor Robert McDonnell and his administration, the Virginian General Assembly passed a bipartisan bill that adopted an A-F school grading system after being granted an ESEA flexibility waiver from the U.S. Department of Education. The accountability system included passing rates in English, Mathematics, Science, and History courses as well as graduation rates in calculating a school district's grade (Virginia Department of Education, 2013).

However, in March 2015, Governor Terry McAuliffe signed another bill that repealed the accountability system that McDonnell had enacted previously (Associated Press, 2015). Virginia State Representative, Richard Black introduced the bill into the legislature as a result of the negatively labeling of schools based upon poor letter grades, which would have consequences with regards to funding and teacher recruitment (Wagner, 2015). Supporters of McDonnell's system rebut that A-F school grading systems measure both proficiency and growth, which challenges the notion that these systems only indicate the failures of a particular school district

(Peshek, 2014). Maintaining the system amidst changing political guard remains a large difficulty, as demonstrated by Virginia, and will continue to be challenged even as A-F school grading legislation spreads throughout the country.

Conclusion

With no explicit components relating to gifted education in these state accountability systems, there remains no clear framework for gifted services and programming at the local level. Although performance and participation indices for AP and IB tests are included in five out of the sixteen states studied, these do not exclusively hold the gifted education programming and services at the local school district level accountable. Instead, the growth of low-performing students and the performance of students above and below proficiency thresholds are instead included as evaluation components. As a result, teachers are pressured to focus on students who are just below or above specific thresholds on standardized test scores. Exceptional learners far above or below these marks do not receive this attention.

The increasing use of standardized testing as measuring sticks for student progress and accountability has exacerbated this disparity in attention. As described in this study's review of literature, the negative perceptions of gifted students and educators underlie all decision-making at local levels. Consequently, gifted students do not want to be identified as such due to negative stigmas and these negative perceptions shape the expectations of educators, biasing their identification of gifted students. At a much larger scale, policymakers refrain from using our government's limited resources to help gifted students, who in their view, will succeed with or without any intervention, a view which serves as a distinction against other subgroups of students in this country.

Gifted education is often ignored at the local, state, and federal levels of government and

education. Policymakers and the public often assume that gifted students do not require alternative coursework or instruction and the negative perceptions of gifted students become pervasive in individual classrooms (Subotnik et al, 2011; Vialle et al, 2010). This study is meant to better describe the current climate concerning gifted education by analyzing recently passed accountability legislation. The goal of the authors is to initiate a substantive conversation that uses the description of this climate as a starting point for action.

As a government and society, we tend to hold accountable those ideas and systems that reflect our greatest priorities. Thus, studying accountability systems in the United States is an important step in determining the priority that we place as a country in gifted education. Inclusion of gifted education evaluative components in these systems would reinforce the importance of gifted education to all stakeholders and encourage additional funding to related programming and services.

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Appendix

State	Legislation Information	Evaluation Components for Traditional Schools	Source
Alabama	Passed in 2013 as the Alabama Accountability Act of 2013	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of course exam scores on English 10 and Algebra I • College and career readiness through ACT, AP, IB exam performance, dual enrollment, ACT WorkKeys, and industry certification exam performance • Graduation rate <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State assessment results in reading and mathematics • Attendance rate 	Southern Regional Education Board. (2013). Alabama: 2013 accountability profile. Montgomery, AL: Author.
Arizona	Passed in 2010 through Arizona Revised Statute §15-241; adopted in June 2011	<p>High and Elementary Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth for all students (25%) and the bottom 25th percentile of students (25%) according to Student Growth Percentiles (norm-based) in reading and mathematics • AIMS Reading and Mathematics test proficiency rates (meeting or exceeding standards) (50%) • Bonus: 23% or greater reclassification rate of English language learners; growth or maintenance of high five-year graduation rate over 90%; 3-year average dropout rate less than or equal to 6% 	Arizona Department of Education. (2013). <i>2013 A-F Letter Grade Accountability System Technical Manual</i> . Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Department of Education Research and Evaluation.
Florida (2013)	Passed in 1999 under Florida statute §229.57; last amended in 2013 under statute §1008.34	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAA and FCAT proficiency rates on reading, math, writing, and science tests (25%) • Learning gains for all students (12.5%) and the bottom 25th percentile of students (12.5%) on the reading and math sections of the FAA and FCAT tests (12.5%) • Participation (9.375%) and performance (9.375%) rates in accelerated curricula sufficient to earn college credit • Four and five-year graduation rate of all students (12.5%) and “at-risk students” (6.25%) • Reading and mathematics college readiness according to SAT, ACT, CPT, or PERT results (12.5%) 	Florida Department of Education. (2013). <i>Grading Florida’s High Schools 2013</i> . Tallahassee, FL: Author.

		<p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAA and FCAT proficiency rates on reading, math, writing, and science tests (50%) • Learning gains for all students (25%) and the bottom 25th percentile of students (25%) on the reading and math sections of the FAA and FCAT tests 	
Florida (2014)	Passed Senate Bill 1642 in 2014, revising previous plan	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates on English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies on state standardized tests • Learning gains for all students and the bottom 25th percentile of students in English/language arts and mathematics • Four-year graduation rate of all students • Performance rates in accelerated curricula sufficient to earn college credit <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates on English/language arts, mathematics, and science on state standardized tests. • Learning gains for all students and the bottom 25th percentile of students in English/language arts and mathematics. 	Stewart, Pam. (2014). Proposed state accountability plan. Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education.
Indiana	Passed P.L. 221 in 1999 and revised in 2005, initially with numerical outputs; later revised to grades during the 2010-2011 school year	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance and improvement of English 10 (30%) and Algebra I (30%) end of course assessment scores • Four year graduation rate (30%) • Percentage of high school graduates receiving passing scores on AP/IB exams, college credits, or industry certification (10%) <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates on ISTEP+, IMAST, and ISTAR in English/language arts and mathematics • Growth of all students and the bottom 25th percentile of students • State standardized test participation 	Indiana Department of Education. (2013). <i>A-F Basic Summary</i> . Indianapolis, IN: Author.
Louisiana	Began issuing School Performance Scores in 1999; later	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement on the ACT (25%) • Student achievement on end of course assessments (25%) 	Louisiana Department of Education. (2013). School letter grades. Retrieved from http://www.louisianab

	revised to grades in 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation index based on AP and IB credit and other similar achievements (25%) • Cohort graduation rate (25%) • Bonus: Growth of low performing students on the ACT <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement on annual assessments in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (100%) 	elieves.com/accountability/school-letter-grades
Maine	Developed during 2012-2013 and launched in May 2013	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math and reading proficiency rates on MHSA and PAAP • Math and reading progress (based on three-year average) • Four and five-year cohort graduation rates • Assessment participation <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math and reading proficiency rates on standardized tests • Growth of all students and the bottom 25th percentile of students in mathematics and reading • Assessment participation 	Maine Department of Education (2013). <i>Maine school performance grading system: A-F report cards for schools</i> . Augusta, ME: Author.
Mississippi	Passed in September 2012	<p>High and Elementary Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of Distribution Index: Student performance on the MCT2, SATP2, MST, and MAAECF (includes Algebra, Biology, English, and U.S. History) • Annual Yearly Progress Proficiency Indices in Math and Reading/Language Arts • Score growth on the MCT2 and SATP tests using a multiple regression model • Completion Index measuring graduation and dropout rates (<i>High school only</i>) 	Mississippi Department of Education. (2012). <i>Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards, 2012</i> . Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Education Office of Educational Accountability.
New Mexico	Passed in 2011 and launched for the 2012-2013 school year	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates in math and reading (20%) • Grade level performance for the previous year (10%) • School growth of highest 75% (15%) and lowest 25% (15%) of individual students • Four- and five-year cohort graduation rate (17%) • Participation and performance rates on career and college readiness benchmarks (15%) 	New Mexico Public Education Department. (2012). <i>Understanding the New Mexico A-F school grading system</i> . Albuquerque, NM: Author.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School attendance and classroom surveys (8%) • Bonus: Student and parent engagement <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates in math and reading (25%) • Grade level performance for the previous year (15%) • Grade level performance for the past three years (10%) • School growth of highest 75% (20%) and lowest 25% (20%) of individual students • Four- and five-year cohort graduation rate (17%) • School attendance and classroom surveys (10%) • Bonus: Student and parent engagement 	
North Carolina	Envisioned first in 2008 and adopted in the fall of 2014	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student performance, growth, and AMO on end-of-course English, Biology, and Math tests • Percentage of students meeting ACT score of 17 • Four- and five-year graduation rate • Percentage of graduates taking and passing higher-level math courses (e.g., Algebra II, Integrated Math III) • ACT Workkeys (For Career and Technical Education concentrators) <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student performance, growth, and AMO on end-of-grade assessments for reading, mathematics, and science 	North Carolina Department of Education. (2013). <i>2013 READY Accountability Background Brief</i> . Raleigh, NC: Author.
Ohio	Overall grades will be released beginning in August 2015	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Indicators measuring proficiency rates on state tests • Performance Index measuring the achievement of each individual student • Growth of student state test scores, including gifted students, students with disabilities, and students in the lowest 20% percentile of statewide achievement • Four- and five-year graduation rates • Annual measurable objectives (AMOs), measuring the academic performance of minority groups with the goal of eliminating 	Ohio Department of Education. (2013). <i>Understanding Ohio's New Local Report Card System</i> . Columbus, OH: Author.

		<p>achievement gaps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No grade, but still reported: Participation rates on college admission testing, dual enrollment credits, industry credentials, Honors diplomas, AP/IB participation and performance <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Indicators measuring proficiency rates on state tests • Performance Index measuring the achievement of each individual student • Growth of student state test scores, including gifted students, students with disabilities, and students in the lowest 20% percentile of statewide achievement • K-3 literacy improvement • Annual measurable objectives (AMOs), measuring the academic performance of minority groups with the goal of eliminating achievement gaps 	
Oklahoma	Adopted in 2011; grading began during the 2012-2013 school year	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student performance (proficiency) based on scores from the OSTP (includes English, Math, Biology, and History) (50%) • Student growth, including overall growth (25%) and bottom 25th percentile growth (25%) • Bonus: 90% or greater graduation rate; Advanced coursework participation index greater than or equal to 0.70 and performance index greater than or equal to 0.90; college entrance exam participation and performance indices greater than or equal to 75%; Growth of low performing eighth grade cohort and graduation; 80% or greater of graduates scoring proficient or advanced on EOI assessments <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student performance (proficiency) based on scores on the OCCT or EOI (includes mathematics, reading, science, social studies, and writing) • Student growth, including overall growth and bottom 25th percentile growth • Bonus: attendance rate of $\geq 94\%$ 	Oklahoma Department of Education. (2014). <i>2014 A to F Report Card Guide</i> . Oklahoma, OK: Author.

South Carolina	ESEA Waiver submitted and approved during summer 2012	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> English/Language Arts (22.5%), Math (22.5%), Science (5%), and Social Studies (5%) proficiency rates English/Language Arts (7.5%) and Math (7.5%) percentage of students tested Graduation rate (30%) <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> English/Language Arts (35%), Math (35%), Science (5%), and Social Studies (5%) proficiency rates English/Language Arts (10%) and Math (10%) percentage of students tested 	Foundation for Excellence in Education. (2012). <i>South Carolina A-F Grading (via ESEA Waiver, 2012)</i> . Tallahassee, FL: Author.
Texas	House Bill 5 passed in June 2013; ratings began in August 2013	<p>High and Elementary Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student achievement, satisfactory performance on TAKS tests Student progress to satisfactory or advanced performance Closing performance (achievement) gaps Postsecondary readiness, based on STAAR assessments and four- and five-year graduation rates (<i>high school only</i>) 	Texas Education Agency. (2013). <i>Overview of Performance Index Framework</i> . Austin, TX: Author.
Utah	State statute 53A-1-1101-1113 passed in March 2011	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growth of all students (33.3%) and below proficient students (16.7%) Proficiency rates (25%) Graduation rate (25%) <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growth of all students (33.3%) and below proficient students (16.7%) Proficiency rates (50%) 	Utah State Office of Education. (2012) <i>Guide to the Comprehensive Accountability System (UCAS) Framework</i> . Salt Lake City, UT: Author.
Virginia	ESEA waiver granted in March 2013; ratings began during 2013-2014 school year	<p>High School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75% pass rates or greater in English and 70% pass rates or greater in math, science, and history Greater than or equal to 85 points on the graduation and completion index (GCI) (Diploma, GED, still in school, certification of program completion) <p>Elementary School:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass rates in English ($\geq 75\%$), mathematics ($\geq 70\%$), science ($\geq 70\%$), and history ($\geq 70\%$) 	Virginia Department of Education. (2013). <i>Accountability and Virginia Public Schools</i> . Richmond, VA: Author.
West	Legislation	High and Elementary Schools:	A Process for

<p>Virginia</p>	<p>passed during 2014; schools will be assigned grades starting in Fall 2015</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency rates on state summative assessments in mathematics (16.67%) and ELA (16.67%) • Growth for all students in mathematics (8.33%) and ELA (8.33%) • Growth for the bottom 25th percentile of students in mathematics (8.33%) and ELA (8.33%) • Adequate growth to the standard in mathematics (8.33%) and ELA (8.33) • 4- and 5-year adjusted cohort graduation rates (16.67%) 	<p>Improving Education: Performance Based Accreditation System, Pub. L. No. 126-013, § 5, Stat 29A-3B-1 (2014);</p> <p>West Virginia Department of Education. (2014). <i>West Virginia's A Through F School Grading System FAQs</i>. Charleston, WV: Author.</p>
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