

Promising Opportunities for Classroom Measures Within ESSA

By Ryan Balch, Ph.D.

This white paper is a special topic within a series on student surveys by Ryan Balch, CEO/Founder of My Student Survey (www.mystudentsurvey.com). My Student Survey is a leading provider of stakeholder surveys for schools and districts across the country. With the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, states are seeking guidance for how to structure accountability plans in a way that supports growth in student outcomes and this special topic is designed to assist with the development of those plans.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states the opportunity to envision and create an accountability plan with greater flexibility, one that moves beyond just test scores to consider the many aspects of student learning that comprise a high-level, quality education. Within the new law, states are required to include one of the following measures of ‘Student Success and School Quality’:

- Student engagement
- Educator engagement¹
- Student access to and completion of advanced coursework
- Postsecondary readiness
- School climate and safety

The enhanced flexibility within ESSA allows the question to change from ‘what do we have to do?’ to ‘what new opportunities exist?’ as states can now design their accountability systems to accomplish their own goals rather than complying with federal demands. As states consider the wide variety of measures available for these non-academic factors, it is important to prioritize the inclusion of classroom level indicators. While the safe option might be to use existing school-

¹ Note: All measures need to be broken down by student subgroups, so a measure of educator engagement would not meet this criteria.

level data because it's readily available, school-level data ignores important ways that performance varies within the school and that can lead to one-size-fits-all interventions that don't address the underlying issues.

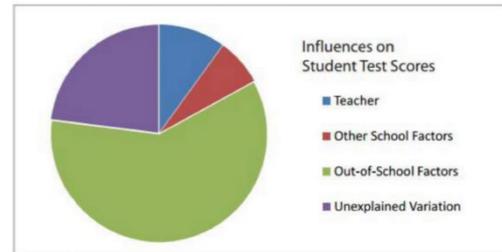
One of the few consistent findings from education research is that the teacher has a greater impact on student outcomes than any other school factor (See [HERE](#), [HERE](#), and [HERE](#)). If we think of school as a vehicle, the true engine for change in education is classroom level instruction. We can change paint colors or measure the emissions or acceleration as

much as we want to, but ultimately the car will only perform differently if strategic enhancements are made within the engine. Why then, are we continuing to focus on school-level measures and subsequent school-level interventions?

While there are several functions of an accountability system, there are two that are particularly relevant for state policy makers to reflect on during the creation of a plan for ESSA. The first function is for a system to simply measure progress. This dipstick approach allows schools to get a better understanding of where their students and subgroups are in comparison to other schools. The second function is to incentivize and support actions that lead to progress.

Ultimately, the types of measures that a state chooses will dictate the utility of that system for each purpose. Previous systems of accountability under No Child Left Behind and ESEA waivers have favored more of the first function, often resulting in collecting data that is irrelevant to the classroom and subsequently having individual teachers uninvolved in resulting interventions. If, however, a system of accountability is intended drive actions that impact students the most, the data collected from these measures must inform a wider range of decisions.

How Much Variance in Student Test Score Gains Is Due to Variation Among Teachers?



The collection of classroom level data that can inform instruction allows for feedback reports and professional development plans to be individualized. Supporting this proposition is the line of

“In short, research shows very large differences in teacher effectiveness. Moreover, variations in teacher effectiveness within schools appear to be much larger than variations between schools”
-E. Hanushek (2016)

research showing as much variation between classrooms as there is between schools (see [HERE](#)). The professional development needs of a beginning science teacher are likely different than those of an experienced art teacher in the same

school. Principals and instructional leaders in the school need to be able to draw upon this differentiated data to suggest tailored improvements and strategies for each teacher that are informed by reliable data. Further, these data can be combined with school-level measures to gather a more complete perspective of how the school is performing.

There is evidence of the powerful impact of classroom level data from the use of interim assessments and benchmark tests by teachers (see [HERE](#)). Instead of relying on school level interventions (such as implementing double class periods for math based on low school performance), teachers use classroom data to know exactly what objectives are not yet mastered by their particular students and they can take more of a targeted, data-driven approach to interventions. The comprehensive approach of implementing both school level AND classroom level strategies can allow for more effective outcomes.

Examples of classroom level measures that inform instruction include classroom level student surveys of teacher practice, student self-reported measures of engagement, and independent observations of classroom student engagement. Classroom level student surveys ask questions about a specific teacher’s instruction (e.g., ‘My teacher reviews before the end of the lesson’, ‘We are learning or working during the whole class’, etc.) or about a student’s reported level of engagement. We’ve seen in the research that these measures predict both student achievement and other important outcomes such as student self-efficacy (see [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)). Observations of student engagement from certified administrators can serve to triangulate this student perception data in order to identify practices that are in need of immediate intervention. Data

from these measures can be aggregated to the school level for inclusion within the accountability system, with measures being weighted by student to ensure representation and fairness.

Importantly, teachers need access to personalized data that can support adjustments to a teacher's individual instruction. When combined with the necessary supports to implement changes suggested by the data, that's the sound of an engine that's revving.

As states develop plans for non-academic measures within ESSA (measures of School Quality and Student Success), there are a variety of considerations that should be discussed:

Readiness Questions:

- What current indicators of School Quality and Student Success (e.g., student engagement, school climate, etc.) are you already measuring?
- What data within your schools and districts is currently collected at the classroom level?
- How do teachers within your schools and districts use classroom-specific data (e.g., achievement data, data about teacher practice, etc.) to drive instructional decisions? Are there any models that you could learn from?
- Are there professional development or support available to help teachers learn how to use classroom level data to drive instruction?

Next Steps:

- Decide what indicators of School Quality and Student Success align with your state's vision and mission.
- Develop a plan for extending these indicators to the classroom level so that data can be disaggregated by teacher.

- Investigate various feedback report structures that allow teachers to access and take action on classroom level data
- Develop a training for instructional coaches and principals on how teachers can create actionable next steps based on classroom data.

About Ryan Balch



Ryan Balch is a national thought leader on using student surveys at the elementary and secondary level has expertise in measurement development. Before founding My Student Survey, Ryan Balch completed his Ph.D. in Education Policy at Vanderbilt University as an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Fellow, where his dissertation focused on the development and validation of student surveys on teacher practice. He was the principal investigator for the student survey pilot of more than 15,000 students in 7 districts as part of Georgia's Race to the Top initiative and worked for the National Center on Performance Incentives. In addition, Ryan was the director of teacher and principal evaluation for Baltimore City Schools. During this time, he oversaw the creation and implementation of the district's new systems of evaluation. Previously, Ryan worked as a science teacher and administrator for seven years at Riverwood High School in Atlanta, Georgia. He has a B.A. in Psychology from Duke University and a M.A. in Science Education from Georgia State University.