

**Testimony of**

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**before the  
District of Columbia State Board of Education  
Public Meeting  
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Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Board today about accountability measures in the context of the District of Columbia's transition to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

My name is Michael Katz, and I am a research associate at the Urban Institute. The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy research. The views I present today are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

The passage of ESSA provides an exciting opportunity to focus on school quality and student success. A key component of this act is the state's flexibility to develop and use at least one "non-academic" indicator to measure school quality or student success. To develop an effective accountability framework that remains flexible and focuses on transparency and performance, it is important to address context and audience, measurement and reporting, and continuous improvement.

DC is a model of a choice-rich school public system. However, having so many options also has its challenges, one of which is collecting, analyzing, and reporting standardized measures across two sectors (public schools and public charter schools). The differences in measures and reporting mechanisms can make it difficult for policymakers, parents, researchers, and others to compare schools across sectors and assess school progress and improvement.

The DC Equity Reports are an excellent example of how collecting and reporting standardized measures can be powerful for many different audiences. These school-level reports provide data on attendance, enrollment, student mobility, and discipline. By analyzing these data, the Urban Institute found that the percentage of students receiving suspensions decreased

significantly across District high schools and middle schools in the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years.

In many ways, the Equity Reports provide an important model of what transparent measures look like and how these data can facilitate important conversations and decisions for parents, schools, local educational agencies (LEAs), and the District. These reports provide essential information to parents as they compare schools and go through the lottery process. They also help policymakers and school leaders assess progress on these key measures over time, highlighting areas for improvement and progress toward a more equitable school system.

Looking toward the Equity Reports as a model brings up three important considerations for developing and assessing measures in the new system that can meet the needs of multiple different actors.

One, it is important to think through the purpose, audiences, and challenges of the measures. Other researchers focused on this area<sup>1</sup> (Hargreaves and Braun) have underscored the need to develop “improvement-based (compared with punitive) accountability systems.” This is often a difficult balance: we need to use measures for quality classifications and even consequences, but we also need them to provide valuable information for many actors about areas for school improvement. Given this balance, a few crucial questions are worth considering:

- How does this measure address key State Board of Education goals around equity and student growth? How does it fit with school quality, as defined by different stakeholders?
- What do we know about the associations between this measure and other academic indicators based on research and the experience of other districts? How can we use this information to inform and target interventions and to address issues at the school and child level before they grow?
- How can we mitigate the risk of a potentially corruptible measure, especially one that is self-reported?
- How do we plan on reporting this measure, and how will it likely be used by different stakeholders (i.e., schools, district administrators, policymakers, families)? How do we

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott Marion, “[Considerations for State Leaders in the Design of School Accountability Systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#)” (Dover, NH: National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, 2016) and Andy Hargreaves and Henry Braun, “[Data-Driven Improvement and Accountability](#)” (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2013).

plan on using the outcomes from this measure to assess school quality and inform improvement and intervention plans?

An important place to start answering many of these questions is with other districts that have already implemented such indicators and researched their impact and validity. For example, many districts across the country have started measuring school climate, an indicator that has been linked to higher achievement (Kraft et al. 2016).<sup>2</sup> Since this indicator is well documented, districts including New York City and Los Angeles have begun using school climate measures in school quality report cards and to inform parent decision-making. These districts use an index of selected questions on a given topic (e.g., rigorous instruction, supportive environment, strong family and community ties) and targeted questions for students, teachers, and parents to measure accurately and mitigate biases. Districts have also elicited feedback on these surveys and produced reports focused on whether the survey instruments are generalizable, reliable, and valid to assess updates to the instrument.

Two, room for adaptation and continuous quality improvement should be built into the development of measures—and an accountability system more broadly. New measures should be researched quantitatively and qualitatively, especially as they are first being implemented. Though it is important to record similar information from year to year in order to assess progress and growth, measures need to be evaluated for effectiveness and adjusted accordingly to meet the ongoing needs of students, schools, and LEAs.

Three, the development of additional school quality measures should take into account the potential burden placed on schools and LEAs. For example, student surveys could take away from learning time, and the collection of new data could increase the time spent on school administration. This concern could be mitigated by aligning accountability measures with federally reported measures (such as information provided to the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights) and assessing current reporting systems.

The risk of potentially corruptible accountability measures—those that rely on school- or LEA-reported data—could be mitigated by using overlapping measures of school quality. For example, parent surveys could ask if their student was ever suspended from school as a check on school-reported discipline statistics.

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Kraft , William H. Marinell, and Darrick Yee, "[Schools as organizations: Examining School Climate, Teacher Turnover, and Student Achievement in NYC](#)" (New York, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2016).



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The new ESSA regulations provide an exciting opportunity to build upon the important work of DC's education partners in standardizing measures and collecting and reporting data transparently. To further this work, it is important to ground the development of new measures in broader education goals, consider key questions around the collection and reporting of such data, and develop ways to constantly assess, evaluate, and improve such measures.