Walker Middle School serves 320 students, about 70 percent of whom are white, 20 percent are African American, and 10 percent are Latino. About one-third of the students come from low-income families.

At first glance, Walker Middle seems to be a high-performing school. Eighty percent of its students are on grade level in math, according to the state assessment; 78 percent are on grade level in reading. When we peel back these averages, however, we see a more complex picture: While the school is getting 91 percent of its white students to grade level in math, for example, it’s getting only 53 percent of black students to grade level. And while the school prepared 88 percent of higher income students to state standards, it did the same for only 60 percent of low-income students. Walker Middle nonetheless received an A grade from its state.

Walker is a fictional school. But the patterns are real and all too common. In schools and districts around the country, low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners often face drastic inequities in resources and supports, which in turn lead to lower outcomes for these groups. Yet these inequities are too often masked by overall averages.

Strong school accountability systems can be a powerful tool for turning these patterns around—for sending a clear message that achievement of all groups of students matters and that to be considered good, a school must serve all groups of students well. But in recent years, many states put in place accountability systems that do just the opposite. These systems mask disparities in opportunity and achievement rather than highlight them. Too often, these systems give A’s to schools like Walker Middle that might look just fine on average but that year after year underserve some groups of students.

By giving A’s to schools with significant opportunity and achievement gaps, states are communicating to parents and communities that these gaps are OK. And they are depriving students in these schools of the attention they need and deserve.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states the opportunity to change this, to refocus accountability systems on improving achievement for all student groups, especially those that have been underserved for far too long. The law includes key requirements that push for a focus on equity in school accountability. States, for instance, have to measure how schools are doing for each group of students on each of the indicators in the system. And states must identify any school that is consistently underperforming for any group of students for support and improvement.

But the law also leaves many key decisions up to states: what to measure, how to communicate how schools are doing on those measures, and how to identify when a school needs to take action to improve for any group of students.

The decisions states made as they put together their ESSA plans over the past year signal whether they will continue on a harmful path of masking inequities or whether they will tackle them head on. As states move from designing their new accountability systems to implementing them, state boards of education will need to closely monitor the impacts of these policies and push for any needed course corrections to maximize improvement for all groups of students.

So what questions should state boards of education ask about the decisions reflected in state ESSA plans? Below, we
walk through three questions that are especially important for determining whether the state’s accountability system is likely to prompt schools to focus attention on all groups of students. For each question, we highlight what to look for—and what to watch out for—in state plans.

**Does the state keep student learning front and center?**

ESSA provides states with more flexibility on what to measure as part of the school accountability system than did its predecessor, No Child Left Behind. The law requires states to measure state assessments results, graduation rates, and progress toward English language proficiency for English learners. These measures together have to count the most. But the law also requires states to choose at least one additional measure of school quality or student success. Importantly, all indicators must be measured for each group of students, meaning students from major racial/ethnic groups, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners.

What the state chooses to measure as part of its accountability system is critical because one of the key things accountability systems do is communicate expectations. If states measure the wrong things, they risk setting the wrong expectations. If states measure too many things, they risk setting too many expectations—and so having none of them matter. And if states measure things that cannot be measured for each group of students, they risk taking attention away from how the school is serving those student groups.

So what should state boards look for in their state plans? First, look for indicators that are focused on student learning and that research shows are related to preparing students for postsecondary success. Examples include chronic absenteeism, participation and success in advanced coursework, and other measures of college and career readiness. Measures that are not focused on students—like teacher satisfaction—can be important for understanding how to help a school improve but should not affect the rating the school receives.

Make sure that all indicators can be measured for each group of students. What does this mean? Consider, for example, two potential indicators of access to advanced courses. One is the number of AP classes offered in a school. The other is the percentage of students participating in at least one AP course. The number of classes offered is impossible to disaggregate—it cannot be measured separately for low-income students or for students with disabilities, for example. Participation in at least one AP course, on the other hand, can.

Based on our review of the first batch of state ESSA plans, indicator selection is an area where states seem to be excelling. Most of the states that submitted their plans in April selected solid measures that are focused on student learning. Many, for example, are supplementing assessment results and graduation rates with useful measures such as chronic absenteeism and college and career readiness.

**Do school ratings reflect how schools are doing for all groups of students?**

Whether they are labels—such as 1 to 5 stars, or “excellent” to “in needs of improvement,” or A-F grades—school ratings communicate to schools, families, and the public whether a school is meeting expectations. Ratings that are based on how schools are doing for low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners can send a powerful signal that the achievement of all students matters and that schools have a responsibility to serve all students well.

Here are some key things to look for to make sure the accountability system communicates that the results of all students matter:

- **Ratings should be based in large part on how schools are doing for each historically underserved group.** One way to do this is to weigh all groups of students, including the all-students group, equally. In other words, if a school serves low-income students, African American students, white students, and students with disabilities, its results for each of these groups would count for 20 percent of the rating, with the all-student average counting for the last 20 percent.

- **At minimum, if a school is consistently underperforming for any group of students, that school should not be able to get a high rating.** A state can bar a school that is consistently underperforming for any group of students.
from earning A’s or B’s. Or it can lower the school’s grade by one level.

Unfortunately, most of the states that have submitted their ESSA plans proposed rating criteria that do not pay much, if any, attention to schools’ performance for individual student groups.

Here are some of the most common challenges in the spring batch:

■ In many states, schoolwide averages carry all or the vast majority of the weight. Results of individual student groups don’t count at all—or count for very little.

■ Instead of looking at results of each individual student group, states are combining students from multiple historically underserved groups together into “supergroups.” In some states, for example, this means a “high-need supergroup,” which includes any student who is low-income, an English learner, or a student with a disability. Such supergroups not only allow the results of one group of students to mask those of another but ignore the different needs and civil rights protections afforded to each individual student group.

■ A school can get a high rating even when it is consistently underperforming for a group of students. In many states, there is no connection between school identification because of consistent underperformance for a student group and the rating the school receives.

Under many of these proposed systems, schools will likely be able to get high ratings despite low outcomes for one or more groups of students. Schools may get A’s or B’s even when they systematically underserve their low-income or African American students, for example, sending a dangerous message to educators, parents, and students that such inequities are perfectly acceptable. Instead of clearly signaling that all students matter, these states’ rating criteria do the exact opposite.

State boards of education have a critical role to play in monitoring whether ratings reflect how schools are doing for all groups of students that they serve—and pushing their states to modify rating criteria if ratings are concealing disparities in student outcomes. When the state education agency releases new rating information for each school, board members should request an analysis of how schools receiving each rating are doing for each group of students. If “high performing” schools systematically demonstrate lower outcomes for some groups of students and are not showing substantial improvement for those groups, state leaders should revisit the rating criteria.

Is the state being honest about which schools need to take steps to improve?

When is performance for a group of students so low that it requires attention and action? ESSA requires states to identify any school in which one or more groups of students is consistently underperforming for targeted support and improvement. States, however, get to decide what “consistently underperforming” means.

The definition matters because how a state chooses to identify schools for targeted support communicates expectations. Identification criteria define the minimum level of performance that is acceptable or high enough for a school not to require intervention.

Moreover, while the law leaves most decisions about supports and interventions up to states, it does require schools identified for targeted support to take certain steps—including putting together and implementing an evidence-based improvement plan with input from parents and the school community. If the school does not improve, its district has to take additional action. The state, too, has to examine its resource allocations to districts serving large numbers of schools identified for improvement. In other words, identification drives attention and support.

Many of the states that submitted their plans in April set their expectations too low.

Ryan Smith is executive director of The Education Trust–West, and Lillian Lowery is Education Trust’s vice president for P-12 policy and practice.
students, students of color, students with disabilities, or English learners has to take steps to improve. Here are some of the common trends:

- Some states are identifying schools as consistently underperforming only if they are performing as badly for a group of children as the absolutely lowest performing schools (the bottom 5 percent) in the state are doing for all kids. Schools that are doing only slightly better are considered just fine.

- Even worse, some states are identifying schools only if their performance for a student group is in the bottom 5 or 10 percent of results for that group. This scheme does not just set very low expectations, it sets different expectations for each group of children. Under this definition of consistent underperformance, a school where only 20 percent of white students are on grade level could have to take action to improve, but a school where only 20 percent of black students are on grade level could not.

As states move from planning into implementation, state boards of education can help shift the conversation from how to minimize the number of identified schools to how the state will ensure that any school that is under-serving any group of students is taking steps to improve. How will the state support schools that are struggling for all their students? And how will it prompt improvement in schools that are doing well on average but have for years underserved their low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, or English learners? Many such schools have substantial resources at their disposal and face a far narrower set of challenges than the lowest performing schools in the state. How will the state ensure that these schools—and their districts—look carefully at how they can use their resources and capacity to eliminate disparities in opportunity and achievement?

The Education Trust identified key state levers for school improvement in its report “9 Ideas for Stimulating School Improvement under ESSA.” And it has joined with a range of partners from the business, civil rights, disability rights, and education reform communities to develop easy-to-use materials on a range of key questions related to school accountability and improvement—from what indicators to select and how to ensure all groups of students matter in ratings to measuring and setting goals for English proficiency and beyond. These materials have served as the basis for a series of ESSA Boot Camps that Ed Trust and its national partners have hosted for over 190 state and local advocates. At these meetings, members of the business, civil rights, disability rights, education reform, teacher voice, and parent advocacy communities dug deep on key policy questions and discussed concrete steps to get involved in ESSA plan development and implementation.

We hope state board members will take advantage of these materials as they work to ensure that their state accountability system maintains a laser-sharp focus on equity and improvement. And we urge them to keep meaningfully engaging with diverse stakeholders, especially those representing the interests of historically underserved communities who have the most to gain—or lose—in this process. Low-income students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities should not have to wait any longer for schools and systems to set high expectations and support them in meeting those expectations.


4These materials are available at www.studentscantwait.org.