



INNOVATIONS IN ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES & PROCESSES

Three Case Studies for
Alternative Education

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Introduction

As states continue to grapple with the most appropriate ways to hold schools accountable under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there is a lack of consensus on how alternative settings should fit into accountability systems and whether those systems should be separate from or included in accountability systems for traditional schools. AYPF has been working with states across the country to get a better understanding of the ways in which accountability systems can be inclusive of alternative settings. To provide more clarity on how states have approached the issue, AYPF recently released a policy brief entitled [*“Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education”*](#) that explores state definitions of alternative education, accountability systems, accountability measures, and mechanisms for continuous improvement.

To complement this work, AYPF has compiled three short case studies to provide a deeper look into innovations in accountability across the country. The state strategies profiled below – Wyoming, Georgia, and Louisiana – illustrate that one size does not fit all for accountability and certainly not when it comes to accountability for alternative settings. Innovations happen within traditional accountability systems that apply to all schools, as well as with separate and distinct systems of accountability that apply only to alternative settings. Some states have developed innovative system structures within and outside of ESSA, and others have gotten creative with the accountability indicators themselves. Regardless of the approach, it is important to note that accountability both predates and transcends ESSA, and many states across the country have long worked to ensure schools are serving their students well. The three case studies included in this document illustrate some of the innovative steps states have taken to ensure their priorities for youth are reflected in their accountability systems for *all* schools, including alternative settings, both within and outside of ESSA’s framework.



Wyoming: Pilot Program for Alternative Education Accountability

What Is Happening: Since 2015, the Wyoming Department of Education has been working toward the [goal](#) of developing an accountability model that more accurately reflects alternative school performance than the state's current accountability model for all schools. In pursuit of this goal, Wyoming has been operating under a [pilot accountability program for alternative education](#) that is designed to support a deeper research base on what is important in measuring the quality of alternative education settings. This program will inform the process of designing a more official system of assigning target levels and performance levels to alternative schools.

How It Works: Wyoming has been utilizing its pilot program for alternative school accountability to collect information through a wide range of measures to inform future design of the state's accountability for alternative high schools. Some of the most innovative measures include:

- [School Climate](#). A mandatory 20-question student survey was included in the pilot program for the first time in the 2016-17 academic year. The measure of school climate aims to measure students' feelings of support, trust, high expectations, and respect from peers and staff.
- [Extended Year Graduation Rates and Completer Rates](#). Inclusion of extended year graduation rates and completer rates¹ incentivizes and encourages schools to serve students even if they will not graduate in four years or if they leave the school system to pursue a high school equivalency certificate.
- [Career or Industry Certification](#). This measure is based on the percentage of students who pass at least one [NOCTI](#) or industry certification exam. For the 2016-17 school year, information will only be available for schools receiving a Carl D. Perkins grant, as this information is already required for grant recipients.
- [Postsecondary Credit While in High School](#). For the 2016-17 pilot year, enrollment data for AP and IB classes was provided by the College Board and the International Baccalaureate. Moving forward, this information will be gathered from student transcripts and will also include dual enrollment data.

How This Fits Within ESSA: ESSA has two mechanisms for identifying schools for support and improvement. A state must identify the bottom 5% of schools based upon the accountability indicators included in its ESSA plan, as well as any high school that fails to graduate at least two-thirds of its students. At this time, Wyoming is using the accountability pilot for alternative schools to collect information and inform decisions at the state level, but the pilot framework is not incorporated into Wyoming's [ESSA state plan](#) (i.e., the pilot framework is not used for federal accountability purposes). In the future, Wyoming's pilot program could be fully implemented as a separate system of identifying alternative schools within the ESSA framework, but as the pilot framework is currently not included in the state's ESSA plan it will not affect how alternative schools will be identified under ESSA. For now, the pilot is a useful tool to collect information and knowledge on areas of effectiveness and areas in need of improvement in alternative settings.

¹ Completer rates include students who have earned a GED or another equivalency diploma.



General Considerations:

- Should accountability measures focus on school inputs or school outputs? For example, the availability of AP/IB classes could be considered an input that some states have included in their accountability systems, while an output measure could consider how many students actually earn college credit.
- Currently, the school climate measure in Wyoming is only mandatory for alternative schools. However, some traditional schools asked to participate in the measure as well, to assist in school improvement activities. This demonstrates the value of piloting measures to potentially inform how accountability can be flexible and adaptable for all educational settings.

Considerations for Alternative Education:

- While state accountability systems may not be able to completely solve the issue of over-identification of alternative schools in the bottom 5%, Wyoming may have some innovative state practices that can help mitigate the issue. Wyoming is currently developing supports and interventions for alternative schools that fit their unique settings, as opposed to a one size fits all approach to intervention that is designed primarily for traditional schools. These interventions include:
 - o Data retreats, where Department of Education staff convene with educators from an alternative school to discuss improvement strategies together.
 - o Examination of access to the [Hathaway scholarship](#), a state level scholarship available to students pursuing postsecondary options within the state.
- The pilot program currently does not include the “Progress in Achieving English Language Proficiency (ELP) Indicator” that is required under ESSA. However, if Wyoming eventually chooses to move beyond a pilot and officially incorporate these measures into a distinct system of accountability for alternative schools under ESSA, a measure addressing English learner progress will need to be included. Like most states, Wyoming will need a better understanding of how and at what rate English learners are served in alternative settings.
- Wyoming’s pilot program has the potential to expand the research base on accountability for alternative education settings, which could shape policy design in Wyoming, as well as other states nationwide.

HELPFUL RESOURCE

To learn more about Wyoming’s pilot accountability program for alternative settings, we recommend reviewing the state’s [implementation handbook for alternative school accountability](#).



Georgia: School Climate Ratings

What Is Happening: In 2012, Georgia passed legislation mandating that all schools receive annual [school climate ratings](#) to assist in school improvement. The climate ratings first were gathered and made available after the 2013-14 academic year.

How It Works: The climate rating includes a student survey, parent survey, teacher survey, the attendance rates of both students and staff, the student suspension rate, and the rate of student discipline incidents. All of these measures are collected to give each school an overall rating out of five stars. The goal of the school climate star rating is to support school improvement through providing information about the social, emotional, and physical safety that students experience at school.

How This Fits Within ESSA: Georgia's [submitted ESSA state plan](#) includes the five star climate rating as a component of their strategic plan fulfilling the U.S Department of Education's [template, item 6: school conditions](#). This template item asks states to describe their plan to provide supports for schools receiving Title 1 (A) assistance to improve school conditions through reducing bullying, harassment, and the overuse of disciplinary practices that remove students from the classroom. It is worth noting that Georgia was utilizing their climate star rating prior to ESS being signed into law. It is possible that Georgia could eventually use the five star school climate rating to fulfill the requirements of ESSA's School Quality or Student Success or "non-academic" indicator in identifying schools for support and improvement, but is not currently doing so.

General Considerations:

- Some other states currently use school climate measures for accountability and/or continuous improvement purposes, but the methodology varies considerably across states. Some states' school climate indicators rely solely on suspension and/or attendance rates. Those quantitative measures are also a component of the Georgia model, in addition to the robust, qualitative surveys of parents, teachers, and students.
- It is important to note that any school climate survey is subjective, as responses are self-reported from students, parents, and teachers. If climate surveys are to be used for accountability purposes, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that these surveys are providing the most reliable information possible?

Considerations for Alternative Settings:

- Information collected from school climate surveys may be particularly useful in alternative settings, primarily because these settings are designed to provide "at-risk" youth with alternative learning environments that are suited to meet their needs. All students should be educated in supportive learning environments, but it is especially important for alternative schools to create climates that are sensitive to the circumstances of their student population. Georgia's system encompasses all schools as a means to better understand the ways in which they can be accommodating and supportive of student needs, with the understanding that positive, supportive school climates can help reduce the risk factors that affect students in all settings.



- Georgia's alternative schools participate in climate surveys, but alternative *programs*² do not. This is because Georgia's alternative programs may be housed within traditional schools and may have students transferring in and out of the program with greater frequency.
- Alternative settings in Georgia and elsewhere face a particular challenge in accurately measuring school climate due to student mobility. These differences in school and program structure highlight the importance of clearly defining alternative settings and accountability measures associated with each setting.
- Alternative schools in Georgia are currently exempt from automatic, standards-based interventions. Instead, the Georgia Department of Education is handling alternative school accountability on a case-by-case basis and identifying areas for intervention as necessary in the short term. School climate is a consideration for the type of support and improvement actions that may be taken in both alternative schools and traditional schools.

HELPFUL RESOURCE

For a deeper look into Georgia's School Climate Star Rating, including how the rating is calculated, we recommend visiting the Georgia Department of Education's [information page on school climate](#).

² Alternative settings can be defined as schools or programs, a distinction that each state has the choice to make. Georgia is one of a number of states that has included both programs and schools in their definition of alternative education. Georgia's definitions for both schools and programs can be found in [GA 160-4-8-.12](#)



Louisiana: Credentials as Part of “Strength of Diploma”

What Is Happening: Louisiana’s [strength of diploma index](#) measures not just whether a student receives a diploma, but the strength of the diploma received. This data informs the state’s indicator of School Quality or Student Success (SQSS) in their federal system of accountability under ESSA. The strength of diploma index awards points to schools based on college and career credentials or certificates that students earn.

How It Works: The strength of diploma indicator uses a point-based index to measure the quality of the diploma earned by each 12th grade student. Schools earn the average of points awarded to each student in a graduation cohort, ranging from 0 to 160, depending on the diploma and additional coursework or credentials earned. The index has a small reward for providing access to additional coursework or credentials to ensure doors of opportunity are opened for students and heavily rewards success in attainment of those credentials. Ultimately, the index measures the extent to which a school has prepared its students for college or careers, and [values both equally](#).

Components of the strength of diploma indicator include:

- For any graduate, a school earns 100 or an “A”.
- For a graduate who passes an AP, IB, or DE course, a school earns 110 points.
- For a graduate who takes an AP/IB/[CLEP](#) course and earns a 3+/4+/50+, respectively, a school earns 150 points or an “A+”.
- Schools earn fewer points for graduating students in five or six years than for doing so in four years, but still benefit (for accountability purposes) from ensuring that students graduate, even if extra time is required.
- Schools receive fewer index points for students achieving a high school equivalency, rather than graduating with a traditional high school diploma. [Louisiana uses HiSet®](#) as a high school equivalency certificate.
- Beginning in 2017-2018, ESSA permits states to count the diploma earned by students who participate in alternative assessment as regular, on-time graduates. These students also earn the same points in the strength of diploma index that students on a regular diploma pathway earn.
- Finally, the indicator equally values high-wage, high-growth job credentials validated and approved by the [The Louisiana Workforce Investment Council](#) based upon the value of the credential for a student either pursuing full-time employment after high school, or stacking credentials to improve earning potential alongside a two- or four-year college degree.
 - o For any graduate who earns a “Basic” Jump Start Credential, a school earns 110 points.
 - o For any graduate who earns an “Advanced” Jump Start credential, a school earns 150 points.



How This Fits Within ESSA: Louisiana developed the strength of diploma index to hold schools accountable for ensuring that students have access to early college and career experiences that will help them be successful post-high school. This indicator supports the priorities of ESSA and is now included in the state’s [submitted ESSA state plan](#), fulfilling the requirements of the SQSS indicator for high schools. Louisiana has also included an “Interests and Opportunities” measure within the SQSS indicator for high schools. The inclusion of these measures within Louisiana’s accountability system allows for more meaningful differentiation between schools across the state based upon how well they prepare students for life after high school, rather than solely relying on graduation rates.

General Considerations:

- In many states that currently consider dual enrollment as part of their accountability system, the measure only considers whether such classes are available or whether students take the course. Louisiana goes further by rewarding schools whose students obtain credit for the course.
- The development and implementation of Louisiana’s Jump Start program, an innovative career and technical education program, along with its supporting accountability system for high-wage high-demand industry-based credentials was the result of inter-agency collaboration. This type of collaboration is rare among state career and technical education programs, yet it ensures alignment of Louisiana’s K-12 strategy with the state’s economic development strategies. The program’s first graduating cohort will be the class of 2018, so outcome data is not yet available for this program.

Considerations for Alternative Education:

- The strength of diploma index is used for all schools in Louisiana that have a grade 12. Whether settings are alternative or traditional, the measures highlighted above incentivize schools to provide a robust and high quality education, regardless of the time it takes to complete high school or whether the end result is a traditional diploma or a HiSET® equivalency.
- The metrics within the strength of diploma index can be important for all schools. However, the indicator is a particularly valuable tool for [alternative schools in Louisiana](#), as it incentivizes serving *all* students, even if they do not graduate in four years.
- Louisiana currently has a working group that recently delivered [recommendations](#) to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) regarding improving alternative settings. Many elements of the strength of diploma index, such as the value of workforce certificates and other credentials outside of a four-year diploma, are mentioned for consideration in this report.

HELPFUL RESOURCE

To learn more about Louisiana’s state policies and tools, including the Strength of Diploma indicator, we recommend reviewing [Louisiana’s High School Planning Guidebook](#), which outlines several key state strategies and the associated implications for accountability.



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