



Considerations for ESSA's Non-Academic Indicator:  
Bridging Research, Practice, and Policy

AYPF Forum Summary  
September 23, 2016

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and its requirement to include a fifth, non-academic measure in state accountability systems, states have an unprecedented opportunity to consider the various elements that contribute to student success. As we consider potential non-academic indicators, policymakers and thought leaders should draw upon the research around positive youth development which states that positive experiences, relationships, and environments contribute to many desired youth outcomes. This forum explored what we know about developing these experiences both inside and outside of school through social and emotional learning (SEL) practices, youth engagement, and school climate. Following presentations from leading researchers in these fields, a moderated panel engaged in questions about potential non-academic indicators and whether they might be ready and appropriate for inclusion in state accountability systems.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Research demonstrates the quality of school environments and students' relationships with adults play important roles in fostering SEL.
2. Developmental factors, like age, are important to consider when assessing students' SEL skills.
3. Personal factors that affect youth development, such as the impact of trauma and discrimination, are important when measuring students' SEL skills.
4. Afterschool programs are an evidence-based practice which can help schools build students' SEL skills.
5. In the short term, school climate measures may be the most appropriate non-academic indicator for states to adopt under ESSA.

#### Research Presentations

*Dr. Stephanie Jones, Associate Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education*

With her research aimed at understanding SEL competencies, programs, and pedagogy designed to integrate social and emotional and academic learning, Jones' presentation focused on exploring three main questions: (1) what exactly are these SEL skills, (2) what role do these skills play in obtaining desired youth outcomes, and (3) what is effective practice to foster these skills? Jones acknowledged that, in defining SEL skills, there are many frameworks and terms that overlay with other fields, and that skills are defined differently based on the research tradition. Jones explained that knowledge, skills, and dispositions exist in three domains of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies, and that these



skills are developmental and emerge and change over time.

Jones stressed the importance of the school context or environment, adults modeling behavior, and clarity with the terms used to describe teaching and learning SEL skills.

According to Jones, these skills are not going to develop in an unsafe or dangerous space or with a lack of modeled action, nor will they develop out of a 30-minute lesson on emotions once a week. Rather, effective practice takes time and coordination, and adults within schools must be socially and emotionally supported to effectively support students. When fostered effectively, SEL skills including self-control and social

competence are shown to increase the likelihood of high school graduation, improve health outcomes, reduce involvement in the criminal justice system, and increase enrollment in postsecondary education. Research has demonstrated that these effects are particularly strong for vulnerable subgroups.

*Dr. Jean Baldwin Grossman, Senior Research Fellow, MDRC*

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*“Positive adult support across the board is the most important... [but] positive adult support was really important during middle and high school” –Dr. Grossman*

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Grossman’s research considers the effect of mentoring and out-of-school time programs on young people’s social and emotional, behavioral, and school outcomes. Her presentation focused on how SEL skills are developed within the context of a school and other environments along with the impact of different, interrelated factors. Grossman stressed that students’ interactions with peers and adults matter, as do the environments in which students learn. It is also critical to account for the natural development of these skills as students mature and encounter new and different obstacles over time. According to Grossman, it is important to account for the age of students in measures of SEL growth because students naturally tend to exhibit

declines in certain SEL skills at certain developmental milestones. She used the example of the transition to middle school, specifically, which is often a challenging point in adolescence developmentally.

Grossman also emphasized that quality relationships between students and adults drives youth engagement, perceived learning, and enjoyment. Her research found that positive adult support was especially important during middle and high school, compared to younger grades. According to Grossman, “in middle school, as young people are trying to expand their world, non-parental adults become extremely important.” Finally, Grossman stressed that school accountability measures ought to take into account natural factors like age, and that data should be used as knowledge for improvement, not to punish schools. Such measures could examine school climate or what’s happening in learning environments (e.g., what teachers and staff are practicing), or ask students to talk about their relationship with a teacher or sense of belonging at school.

*Dr. David Osher, Vice President and Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research*

Osher’s research spans a range of youth-focused fields, including conditions for learning and school climate, youth development, supportive school discipline, cultural competence, family engagement, and

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*“We know skills are developmental, that they emerge and change over time... Not everything is important all the time, but things are emerging and being worked on at different times.” –Dr. Jones*

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mental health. His presentation focused on elements of the school environment that can either “help students thrive or undermine thriving.” Osher stressed the importance of “competencies and conditions” or attributes and environments to improve educator capacity and promote learning and development. He cited four buckets of conditions and competencies for youth learning, engagement, and wellbeing: (1) safety, (2) support, care, and connection, (3) engagement and challenge, and (4) the role of other peer and adult SEL competency. Osher emphasized the importance of attending to

issues of equity and recognizing that all students do not arrive to school in the same way, whether because of trauma or discrimination or other factors. He honed in on safety (physical, emotional, and intellectual) noting that a presence of unsafety makes engagement less possible and affects the ability of both students and teachers to engage. Thus, Osher encourages us to work towards making all environments universally trauma sensitive.

*Dr. Charles Smith, Founder and Executive Director, David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment*

Smith’s work is focused on the development of standards and performance measures for programs focused on SEL for adolescents, and his presentation focused on the important role

afterschool plays in building SEL skills. Reiterating what others said prior, Smith noted that in order for SEL to occur, youth must feel safe, interested in the environment, and valued in that context. Smith continued that ESSA provides an opportunity to think about accountability differently, prioritizing continuous, incremental improvement. He stressed that the afterschool space can be a “prototype” of what continuous improvement can look like for accountability, and that lessons learned can be modified to fit the K-12 context. He noted that to do this, lower performing schools should receive more support to build SEL skills. Smith stressed school-level data and not student-level data should be utilized for accountability purposes, but within the classroom, student data can be used to improve youth outcomes.

*Dr. Livia Lam, Senior Policy Advisor, Learning Policy Institute*

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*“ESSA moves to a more holistic approach to accountability... designed to leverage improvement, advance equity and quality, not just label or sanction schools.” –Dr. Lam*

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With her work focused on developing federal legislative and regulatory strategy, Lam provided an overview of ESSA and the “5<sup>th</sup> nonacademic indicator” that states are charged with incorporating into their new accountability plans. According to Lam, “ESSA moves to a more holistic approach to accountability... designed to leverage improvement, advance equity and quality, not just label or sanction schools.” ESSA requires five measures, at least one of which must be an indicator of school quality or student

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*“If we want things to work, we need to attend to conditions and to how we can develop the social and emotional competence needed to attend to youth and adult wellness” –Dr. Osher*

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*“Afterschool settings are uniquely positioned to nurture social and emotional skills” –Dr. Smith*

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success. Lam stressed that the five accountability measures are “a floor and not a ceiling outlined in the law,” and that states can eventually work toward the inclusion of a 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> indicator. These can include measures of student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, school climate and safety, and/or any other indicator a state chooses. Drawing from a [recent report](#), Lam discussed three buckets of potential indicators for an accountability system: academic outcomes (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, etc.), opportunities to learn (e.g., rigorous curriculum, school safety, etc.), and engagement and responsiveness (e.g., school discipline rates, SEL, parent engagement, etc.). Lam closed by highlighting five considerations for designing new accountability systems: (1) What is the indicator’s purpose within the state accountability system? (2) What is worth measuring? (3) Who should be at the table when designing systems and selecting indicators? (4) What behaviors should be system-incentivized? (5) Does the accountability system allow for the inclusion of additional indicators as they are developed?

### Moderated Panel Discussion

Caitlin Emma, an education reporter for Politico covering federal K-12 education policymaking and politics, proposed the following questions to the panel:

*What does SEL look like in practice? What are some promising practices in states and districts that develop students’ SEL skills?*

Osher shared what a school district in Cleveland, Ohio has adopted to improve SEL and school climate following a 2008 school shooting. Since then, the district has focused on school reports on the conditions for learning as part of the accountability and public transparency system, as well as for continuous improvement in the district, using school climate surveys three times a year.

Lam discussed the [CORE Districts](#) in California, a consortium of nine school districts that developed a school quality improvement framework inclusive of SEL and student climate data. Using a “3 M’s framework,” surveys capture information that is meaningful, measurable, and malleable for accountability and school improvement purposes.

Smith noted that many high-quality afterschool programs focus on developing youths’ SEL skills and provide good examples of what this type of learning looks like.

*Some may feel that SEL measures are not the most appropriate measures to incorporate into an accountability system. What are your thoughts?*

Osher commented that while measuring SEL is really important, some districts have much more experience measuring school climate and districts should perhaps start there, noting that data on chronic absenteeism, for example, should be viewed as a floor and not a ceiling.

Following Osher’s comment, Jones commented that “doing good SEL drives attendance and engagement.” She also noted a problem to advancing this work is that much is still ill-defined. Questions must be asked regarding what is the assessment about, what are we trying to do, what is it connected to? Jones went on to say that “a system of assessment disconnected from a system of action is



dangerous,” meaning what gets assessed doesn’t always get addressed in the right way (e.g., high-stakes testing). She stressed that educators must constantly consider the desired action steps associated with any assessment.

Agreeing with Jones, Smith added that “really great data can be attached to the wrong action plan,” and that schools should consider observational data as an important piece for rating teachers.

Lam noted that worries about gaming accountability systems are important to consider, but that under ESSA, academic indicators must weigh more than nonacademic indicators. She questioned, “how can we game a system when it means so little compared to academic indicators?”

*Are states ready to adopt this new accountability system in the short term, and if not, what do they need to get there?*

Grossman started by noting that schools are unique institutions that recognize that students have different developmental needs (e.g., kindergarten is not the same as first grade). Grossman went on to say she has faith that schools are ready for new accountability systems that incorporate SEL because teachers and staff have a great deal of training in youth development.

Reiterating a point made earlier by Osher, Jones commented that, at the individual level, understanding students’ SEL is complex, but that the school climate work is further ahead. She noted that states could be thinking about accountability more at the school climate level, rather than the student level because it is important to start with what we know.

Osher pointed to free technical assistance support from organizations like the [American Institutes for Research](#) and [Learning Policy Institute](#) that can help states meet ESSA’s requirements quickly.

*What should states not do when designing new accountability systems?*

Grossman cautioned against solely using observation data as a measure for good classroom management. Her research found that classroom observers and students viewed classroom management very differently, whereby adults like to see order, listening, and control, while students find an emphasis on control disengaging.

Osher and Jones emphasized the need for support and that states should not mandate in a way that results in students carrying the weight. In other words, we cannot ask students to develop a set of skills *despite* the environments they are facing.

Smith cited that confidentiality is important in order to build trust and to avoid “shaming” schools into action. Data should be used for improvement at the school, not for the newspaper.

*What skills matter for students and for what purpose?*

Smith discussed the cognitive (not non-cognitive) skills of emotion management and empathy. He mentioned the importance of knowing how to control and use emotions effectively, as well as the ability to relate to others and put oneself in another person’s shoes.



Echoing Smith’s point, Jones listed self-regulation skills, as well as cognition, behaviors, motivation, and meta-cognition or the ability to think about thinking.

Referencing issues of race and peace building across the country, Osher stressed skills of self-awareness and humility.

Grossman expressed worry that the skills mentioned will be viewed as what should be measured all the time. Reiterating points made earlier, she stressed that different skills are important to measure at different ages for developmental reasons.

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*“A system of assessment disconnected from a system of action is dangerous” –Dr. Jones*

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### Audience Q&A

One participant asked what is the one additional indicator states should be measuring under ESSA, and the panel said school climate, student engagement, opportunities to learn, and observational data, and that states should consider piloting an additional measure to perhaps later incorporate into the accountability system.

One participant asked a clarifying question about the relationship between students and adults. Grossman referenced a study that found that teachers with support from principals were more likely to support students. Osher mentioned a study that found that strong relationships and trust between students, parents, teachers, and administrators led to low-performing schools being more likely to turnaround.

A participant asked how ESSA’s additional 5<sup>th</sup> indicator promotes college pathways and what it means for the pending reauthorization for the Higher Education Act (HEA). Lam clarified that, under ESSA, states can choose a college and career readiness indicator, such as completion of Advanced Placement courses. According to Lam, the intent of ESSA is to promote college and career readiness and she stressed that it is important for all the indicators “talk to each other” and work together to get students ready for school and/or the workforce. Osher mentioned [Linked Learning](#) sites in California, like the Oakland Unified School District, where students are being prepared for college and career and there are deeper discussions of SEL and deeper learning taking place, not in isolation, but in complement to each other.

To close the discussion, Jennifer Brown Lerner, Deputy Director of AYPF asked the panel to share the one burning question they still have about ESSA’s 5<sup>th</sup> indicator. Lam said she would like to learn more about what assessments will look like and how states will continue to develop them. Smith asked, how this is going to impact low-performing schools? Osher raised considerations of race, culture, and language and the impact of student reports. Grossman asked about how the right measures will be chosen given problems in measurement across different ages. Jones asked, how are states going to ensure that what is assessed is tied to logical and relevant actions? Emma wanted to know about the role of the media in writing about this topic in a smarter, more nuanced way.