

November 16, 2016

**D.C. State Board of Education Hearing  
A Better Way to Rate Schools?**

Testimony of Gary M. Ratner

Good evening. My name is Gary Ratner. I'm the founder and executive director of Citizens for Effective Schools, a national citizens' school reform advocacy organization, [www.citizenseffectiveschools.org](http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org), and have an education blog in *Huffington Post*, [www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/). I was heavily involved for many years in lobbying Congress to overhaul NCLB, including urging adoption of a school quality indicator for accountability similar to what was enacted in ESSA.

I'd like to testify about all three main issues. Since the statute governing how much weight should be given to test and growth indicators treats them together, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1111(c)(4)(b)(C), I'd like to do the same.

I agree with "DCSBOE's Response to OSSE's initial ESSA Strawman draft" that growth in a school's student achievement should be given substantially more weight in D.C.'s accountability system than the percent of students who are proficient. Not only would this wisely reward schools for improving student learning, but it should help to reduce the destructive impact of focusing on raising test scores as an end in itself.

If low-achieving schools are recognized for being on a positive trajectory, it will relieve pressure on principals and teachers to drill and kill to reach a fixed and artificial test score goal. It will better enable them to focus on making the changes that low-achieving schools, with district support, need to make to turn themselves around. See "Common Elements of Successful School Turnaround: Research and Experience" (May 14, 2010), [www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf](http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf)

If schools make the necessary changes in the elements of leadership, instructional improvement, curriculum, school climate and parent and community involvement and support, they will become much better schools. Children will be engaged in challenging curriculum and the test scores will take care of themselves.

For the same reasons, I would oppose the proposal to have test scores –proficiency and growth together – constitute anything like 70% or 80% of a school's total accountability rating. The total weight given to test scores and graduation rates should be the least it can be and still comply with the statute's mandate that these factors "in the aggregate" be given "much greater weight" than the "school quality or student success" indicators. 1111(c)(4)(C)(ii)(II) .

Maximum weight, perhaps 45%-46% of the total rating, should be given to "school quality" indicators. If well chosen, these indicators would provide valuable insight into how much, and what kind of, support each school needs. Moreover, they would help guide each school toward making the concrete changes in expectations, beliefs and practices it needs to make to significantly improve student learning.

While I agree with SBOE that “[t]here should be a broader set of metrics for determining quality,” as it recognizes, the question then becomes: which metrics? To answer that first requires determining: what purpose are these metrics to serve?

Here, ESSA itself provides a critical answer: accountability indicators (including school quality) must be used to “inform” “comprehensive ... plan[s]” for improving schools under 1111(d). See 1111(d)(1)(B)(i). That is, under ESSA, indicators are not just for the purpose of more carefully differentiating between low-achieving schools to identify certain ones for intervention, but for the purpose of helping the identified schools improve.

That Congressional purpose for indicators has profound consequences for which metrics SBOE should select. There are many potential school quality metrics that could help to differentiate between schools. But there’s one school quality instrument that was specifically designed for the purpose of helping schools improve and, in multiple respects, is the best indicator for this purpose, [http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/Comparison and Efficacy of the ASSC SCAI.pdf](http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/Comparison_and_Efficacy_of_the_ASSC_SCAI.pdf) – the School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) from California State University, Los Angeles. [http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/school\\_survey.html](http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/school_survey.html)

SCAI is unique among school climate surveys in three major respects that make it so useful for school improvement: 1) unlike Likert, for each question describes three different conditions from least to most educationally effective; 2) has highest predictive validity/correlation with student achievement – about 0.7; 3) embodies comprehensive conceptual framework for what works to improve schools. [http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/resources/change\\_from\\_inside.html](http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/resources/change_from_inside.html)

SCAI is valid and reliable, [www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/school\\_climate2\\_0.pdf](http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/school_climate2_0.pdf), and satisfies the other ESSA requirements for quality indicators, 1111(c)(4)(B)(v)(I)(aa)(bb). Its student surveys meet the disagreeability requirement for accountability measures, 1111(c)(4)(B). It’s teacher/staff survey also needs to be administered, to gather essential information on leadership and teaching, and the parent survey, to get parents’ vital perspectives.

SCAI’s a comprehensive indicator, covering eight categories: physical appearance; faculty relations; student interactions; leadership/decisions; discipline environment; learning/assessment; attitude and culture and community relations. It not only gathers key information on each school’s strengths and weaknesses, and allows differentiating between schools, but guides stakeholders to make concrete changes to improve their school.

I strongly support SBOE’s belief that it’s vital to include metrics of “school culture/climate that promotes learning”. While I understand that SBOE is considering also adopting various *ad hoc* metrics such as “evidence of career preparation,” I’d encourage it to evaluate first whether collecting such data would help schools develop and implement their comprehensive plans, as Congress intended. I believe there would be a substantial advantage in focusing all stakeholders on a comprehensive indicator for school improvement, rather than diverting attention from it to other *ad hoc* measures that may not directly help schools improve.

Thank you.