Background Paper: Measures of School Quality or Student Success

ESSA requires each State Education Agency (SEA) to create a state accountability system with at least one measure of school quality or student success. Examples of measures of school quality or student success listed in ESSA include measures of school climate and safety, such as chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence. Given that state accountability systems define the goals and activities of a number of Title I programs, the inclusion of a measure of school quality or student success in these systems presents an important opportunity to elevate the connection between health and learning and ensure SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) are held accountable for supporting the whole child. The U.S. Department of Education's (ED) proposed regulations on accountability and state plans specify the following criteria for a state accountability measure:

- Is valid, reliable, and comparable across all LEAs in the State;
- Is calculated the same for all schools across the State, except that the measure or measures selected within the indicator of Academic Progress or any indicator of School Quality or Student Success may vary by grade span;
- Can be disaggregated for each subgroup of students; and
- Includes a different measure than the State uses for any other indicator.

In addition, according to the proposed regulations, SEAs would be required to ensure that each measure it selects to include as an Academic Progress or School Quality or Student Success indicator is supported by research finding that performance or progress on such measure is likely to increase student academic achievement or, for measures used within indicators at the high school level, graduation rates. Finally, under proposed regulations, SEAs would be required to ensure that each measure it selects to include as an Academic Progress or School Quality or Student Success indicator aids in the meaningful differentiation among schools by demonstrating varied results across all schools.

Healthy Schools Campaign and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation have identified the following measures which meet these criteria: chronic absenteeism, school climate, social and emotional learning, school discipline and school connectedness. The purpose of the discussion on accountability systems will be to determine if these measures are strong candidates for inclusion in state accountability systems and if there are other measures of school quality or student success that should be considered. Discussion questions include the following:

- Do the metrics presented meet ED's requirements for inclusion in state accountability systems? Do you see any unintended consequences of using these measures?
- What other measures of school quality would you recommend? Do these measures meet ED's requirements? Do you see any unintended consequences of using these measures?
- Should the metrics we shared also be recommended for inclusion on state report cards? Do you see any unintended consequences of including these measures on state report cards?
- What other measures do you recommend for inclusion on state report cards? Do you see any unintended consequences of including these measures on state report cards?
- What guidance do states need for selecting health and wellness measures for their state accountability plans and school report cards?

An overview of each potential measure is provided below.

Indicators of School Quality: Chronic Absenteeism

What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is most commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, excused or unexcused. Chronic absenteeism is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multi-fold, research shows that student health and a school's health and wellness environment are key factors that can contribute to a student being chronically absent.

Why is chronic absenteeism important?

A new analysis from ED shows that chronic absenteeism impacts students in all parts of the country and is prevalent among all races, as well as students with disabilities. The first-ever national comprehensive data collected on chronic absenteeism reveal that more than six million students—or 13 percent of all students—missed at least 15 days of school in the 2013-14 school year [i] While this data shows that chronic absenteeism impacts students in all parts of the country and is prevalent among all races, as well as students with disabilities, significant disparities exist. Compared to their Caucasian peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are over 50 percent more likely to to be chronically absent, African American students are 30 percent more likely to be chronically absent and Hispanic students are nine percent more likely.

Frequent absences can be devastating for a child's school success. For example, children who are chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level by the third grade [ii] Students who are not reading at grade level by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school [iii] By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes one of the leading indicators that a student will drop out of high school [iv]. By high school, attendance is a better dropout indicator than test scores.

How is chronic absenteeism measured?

State by state definitions of chronic absenteeism vary significantly and, as a result, the measurement of chronic absenteeism varies as well. The use of a percentage definition of chronic absenteeism, such as 10%, rather than a number of days promotes earlier identification of students to trigger intervention. Using a percentage allows for the identification of students who are on track for chronic absence at any point during the school year even if a student only misses two or three days each month. A school's chronic absence rate is the percentage of students who are chronically absent. While advocates believe the use of a percentage is a stronger way to measure chronic absenteeism, ED currently defines chronic absenteeism as missing 15 days or more of school for any reason.

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

ED requires public schools across the country to report their rates of chronic absenteeism as a part of the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). The inclusion of chronic absenteeism was a new requirement for the 2013-2014 CRDC, which means that the 99.5% of schools across the country that complete the CRDC are now measuring and reporting chronic absenteeism as a part of the CRDC.

Several states have already begun using chronic absenteeism as an accountability metric. New Jersey, Hawaii and Oregon added the measure through waivers to the prior federal education act. California requires local districts to report on chronic absence in their local funding plans; Connecticut has built it into its school improvement process; and Georgia makes it part of its school climate work.

Under ESSA, states are now required to include chronic absenteeism on their state report cards. Title I of ESSA requires that both state and LEA report cards include rates of chronic absenteeism, defined by ED as missing 15 days or more of school for any reason in a school year. Given the connection between student health and chronic absenteeism, requiring states and LEAs to report their rates of chronic absenteeism is a key strategy for elevating the importance of student health and raising awareness about chronic absenteeism.

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[i] U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2013-2014 Data Collection. Available at http://ocrdata.ed.gov/.

[ii] Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., and Allensworth, E. M. Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools: relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences: Research summary. The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform, 2013. http://bit.ly/1nGtqg

[iii] Hernandez, D. Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation. Baltimore:The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011 April. p. 3.

[iv] Balfanz, R., Herzon, L., and Mac Iver, D. J. Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. Educational Psychologist, 2007; 42(4),223–235.

Indicators of School Quality: School Climate

What is school climate?

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions. School climate reflects how members of the school community experience the school and sets the tone for all the learning and teaching done in the school environment. School climate includes factors that serve as conditions for learning that promote physical and emotional safety, connection and support, and engagement. A positive school climate reflects attention to providing support that enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards as well as encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community.

Why is school climate important?

The way students, families, teachers, and other school staff experience the school and school-related activities is predictive of students' ability to learn and develop in healthy ways, affecting student attendance, learning, and achievement. Over the last three decades there has been a growing body of research that attests to the importance of school climate, as it directly impacts telling indicators of success such as increased teacher retention, lower dropout rates, decreased incidences of violence, and higher student achievement.[i] Similarly, the ways in which teachers experience the climate of the school impact their levels of stress and burnout.[ii] Changing a school's climate for the better is associated with increases in student performance in reading, writing, and mathematics.[iii][iv] Students who experience positive learning environments that are safe, supportive, and engaging are more likely to improve academically, participate more fully in the classroom, and develop skills that will help them be successful in school and in life. In addition, students who experience positive school climates are less likely to participate in disruptive behavior. [v]

How is school climate measured?

School climate is best measured through surveys that recognize student, parent and school personnel voice. The National School Climate Center defines climate surveys as a comprehensive school climate tool that provides data that is used as a springboard for community-wide understanding, unified improvement planning, and implementation efforts as well as accountability. Research demonstrates that utilizing a climate survey tool recognizes the unique nature of each school's history, strengths, needs and goals, and provides benchmarks as well as a road map for school improvement efforts.

A compendium of available school climate surveys is available through ED's Climate Surveys platform. This platform also provides a free resource to help collect, analyze and report school climate data. Survey measures of school climate that states and schools might include in accountability systems include percentage of students who report attending school with a positive school climate; percentage of students who report that discipline policies are applied fairly and equitably to all students; percentage of students that report that teachers and other adults have high expectations for them.

Additional indicators that can be used to measure school climate that do not require school climate surveys include those based on incident data, such as tracking disciplinary incidents or bullying

incidents, or crime/safety data, such as the percentage of students who attend schools with ongoing safety or crime (based on thresholds established by the state).

How has the school quality measure been used to date?

Schools are currently required to report on a number of school climate measures as a part of the ED's Office for Civil Rights Data Collection. These include measures related to bullying and harassment, such as the number of allegations of harassment or bullying and the number of students who were reported as harassed or bullied, and the number of instructional aides, administrative staff, nurses, counselors, security guards, and law enforcement officers on site.

Many states have also taken steps to prioritize school climate by adopting statewide policies and programs that support efforts to improve school climate. For example, 22 states have integrated school climate policy into their school improvement and accreditation systems.

ESSA recognizes the importance of school climate data in measuring school success. Measures of school climate and safety, such as chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence, are highlighted as allowable examples of measures of school quality or student success in state accountability systems. In addition, states and school districts are required to include the following measures of school quality, climate and safety in their report cards: rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment.

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[i] Thapa A., Cohen J., Guffey S., and Higginsk-D'Allessandro, A. A review of school climate research. Review of Educational Research, 2013; 83: 357-385.

[ii] U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. Quick guide on making school climate improvements. Washington, DC: Author, 2016. http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/SCIRP/Quick-Guide

[iii] Spier E., Cai C., and Osher D. School climate and connectedness and student achievement in the Anchorage School District. Unpublished report, American Institutes for Research, 2007, December.

[iv] Spier E., Cai C., Osher D., and Kendziora, D. School climate and connectedness and student achievement in 11 Alaska school districts. Unpublished report, American Institutes for Research, 2007, September.

[v] Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2007). *School climate research summary*. New York: Author. Available: http://nscc.csee.net/effective/school_climate_research_summary.pdf

Indicators of School Quality: Social and Emotional Learning

What is social and emotional learning (SEL)?

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. Although SEL is not a program, many available programs provide instruction in and opportunities to practice, apply, and be recognized for using SEL skills. Competence in the use of SEL skills is promoted in the context of safe and supportive school, family, and community learning environments in which children feel valued and respected and connected to and engaged in learning. SEL is fundamental not only to children's social and emotional development but also to their health, ethical development, citizenship, motivation to achieve, and academic learning as well.[i], [ii]

Why is SEL important?

Research shows that large numbers of children are contending with significant social, emotional, and mental health barriers to their success in school and life. In addition, many children engage in challenging behaviors that educators must address to provide high quality instruction. Providing children with comprehensive social and emotional learning (SEL) programs characterized by safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments and instruction in social and emotional skills addresses many of these learning barriers through enhancing school attachment, reducing risky behaviors and promoting positive development, and thereby positively influencing academic achievement.

SEL can have a positive impact on school climate and promote a host of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. Well-implemented SEL programming is associated with the following outcomes:

- **better academic performance**: achievement scores an average of 11 percentile points higher than students who did not receive SEL instruction;
- **improved attitudes and behaviors**: greater motivation to learn, deeper commitment to school, increased time devoted to schoolwork, and better classroom behavior;
- **fewer negative behaviors**: decreased disruptive class behavior, noncompliance, aggression, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals; and
- **reduced emotional distress**: fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal.[iii}

As a result, effective social and emotional learning programming involves coordinated classroom, schoolwide, family, and community practices that help students develop the following five key skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, positive decision making.

How is SEL measured?

The most commonly used measures of social and emotional skills are student self-reports and teacher reports on students, such as rating scales of students' social-emotional competence. These survey-based measures may be subject to various biases, including the tendency for respondents to

report what they think others want to hear and the challenges of interpreting survey questions and the data produced from them. Although there are concerns with the validity and reliability of student self-reports, many experts believe it is important to acknowledge the students' perspective in the assessment of their SEL competencies starting in third grade.

Other data that can potentially be used to assess SEL include proxy measures based on data states are already collecting including absenteeism, suspension, disciplinary actions, truancy, dropout rates, and other nonacademic indicators, but have found it difficult to decide which are appropriate. However, the concern is that these measures do not assess the actual skills and competencies that are core to SEL.

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

To date, one of the primary examples of SEL measures being used in accountability systems comes from California's CORE districts - a collaboration of 10 California school districts representing more than one million students. A key component of the CORE districts accountability framework is the School Quality Improvement System which is a measure of school performance used for accountability and continuous improvement. The School Quality Improvement System has two main domains: an academic domain and a social-emotional/culture-climate domain. Within the academic domain, the accountability metrics include assessment results (both current performance and growth), a high school readiness indicator that captures the percentage of 8th graders who meet a set of criteria that predict they are likely to graduate high school on time, and graduation rates. The social-emotional and culture-climate domain includes a chronic absenteeism rate, suspension and expulsion rates, school climate survey responses, and student self-responses on surveys that ask about their social and emotional skills. For the student surveys, students in grades five to twelve are asked to self-report on a series of behaviors (e.g., coming to class prepared, following directions) and beliefs (e.g., whether it is more important to be talented or to put forth a lot of effort), that, taken together, have been validated as indicators of social-emotional skills.

It is also important to note that only three states (Illinois, West Virginia and Kansas) have SEL standards that span all grade levels. While work is taking place to support additional states in developing SEL standards for K-12, a significant amount of work remains to be done.

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[i] Durlak J. A., Domitrovich C. E., Weissberg R. P., and Gullotta T. P. (Eds.) Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2014.

[ii] Durlak J. A., Weissberg R. P., Dymnicki A. B., Taylor R. D., and Schellinger K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 2011; 82: 405-432.

[iii] Durlak J. A., Domitrovich C. E., Weissberg R. P., and Gullotta T. P. (Eds.) Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2014

Indicators of School Quality: School Discipline

What are school discipline measures?

School discipline indicators measure the percentage of students subjected to different types of disciplinary actions, such as suspensions or expulsions. States and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) are required by ED's Office for Civil Rights to report annually by measures of school quality, climate, and safety, including rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, chronic absenteeism, and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment. These indicators are part of the discipline data reported in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).

Why are school discipline measures important?

Research shows that exclusionary discipline practices that remove students from instruction – such as suspension and expulsion -- place students at greater risk for numerous academic and personal consequences, including behavior problems, lower achievement, disengagement from school, and increased risk of dropping out. Additionally, exclusionary and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies show no evidence of improvements in student behavior or increases in school safety [i].

In addition, exclusionary school discipline practices have a clear connection to what is commonly referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline." That pipeline goes from unmet academic and social emotional needs, leading to challenging behaviors, disciplinary action, disengagement from school, failure to graduate, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. A recent study from Texas noted that students who are suspended or expelled are nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the next year [ii].

Research also shows that positive approaches to school discipline at all ages can actually improve students' academic performance, and those students are less likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system or have need for behavioral services.

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

As is described above, the CRDC includes a number of measures on school discipline. In addition, some states have integrated discipline related measures into their state accountability systems in order to encourage schools to use in school suspensions when possible rather than out-of-school suspensions. For example, Vermont's state accountability system reflects the percent of students excluded from school for out-of-school suspension at least twice during the school year.

In addition, many school districts across the country collect and make public school discipline data. For example, Buffalo Public Schools shares data on the length of suspension and incident reason by school and student characteristics (race/ethnicity, disability status, sex) on their homepage. This allows teachers, parents, students and community members to compare schools and groups of students to ensure fairness and identify areas of concern. In addition, Oakland Unified School District provides "data snapshots" under the state's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) for different groups of students which include suspension data.

Under ESSA, states and school districts are now required to include a number of measures of school discipline on their report cards including the following: rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement and chronic absenteeism.

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[i] Russell Skiba et al. (2006). “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations, ”American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force.

[ii] The Council of State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute, “Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study of How Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement,” July 2011.

Indicators of School Quality: School Connectedness

What Is School Connectedness?

School connectedness has been defined as the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. This is influenced by their peers as well as by adults in the school community. School connectedness is akin to social bonding. When students feel connected to school, they are able to develop positive relationships with adults, increase involvement in positive behaviors, avoid behaviors that harm their health, and buffer the effects of risky environments such as violence or drug use at home. The ability of teachers and staff to connect with students, with each other, and with families contributes to student well-being, engagement and academic achievement. School connectedness intersects with school climate in that without a warm and welcoming school climate, students are not likely to feel connected to others and, conversely, school connectedness ultimately reinforces a positive school climate.

Why Is School Connectedness Important?

Students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically when they feel connected to school. Students who have a sense belonging and identification feel connected to their school community and want to participate, thereby supporting school completion and preventing dropout [i]. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health looked at the impact of protective factors on adolescent health and well-being among more than 36,000 7^{th} -12^{th} grade students. The study found that family, school, and individual factors such as school connectedness, parent-family connectedness and high parental expectations for academic achievement were protective against a range of adverse behaviors. School connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (e.g., drinking and driving, not wearing seat belts). In this same study, school connectedness was second in importance, after family connectedness, as a protective factor against emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation and attempts [ii].

How is school connectedness measured and how has this school quality measure been used to date?

The primary way in which school connectedness is measured is through student surveys. Questions to measure school connectedness include asking students to share whether or not they feel part of their school, whether or not they feel safe at school, whether or not they feel they are treated fairly by school staff and administrators and whether or not they are happy to be at school. Questions regarding school connectedness are often integrated into school climate surveys.

A number of states currently include measures of school connectedness on student surveys, including statewide school climate surveys. For example, Alaska's "School Climate and Connectedness" survey includes a question regarding whether or not students feel that there is an adult in the school that cares about them. Connecticut administers a statewide school connectedness survey.

[i] Reschly, A., & Christenson, S. L. (2006). School completion. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention (pp. 103–113). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

[ii] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth.* Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2014. http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf