

Report Highlights

Background

Colorado's statewide education accountability system includes a statewide system of standards and assessments and a system for accrediting schools and districts that are primarily designed to (a) provide valid and actionable information regarding the progress of all students toward meeting academic standards and (b) prioritize support for schools and districts identified for improvement. All public school students enrolled in Colorado are required to take a standards-based assessment (commonly referred to as standardized tests) each year. These statewide assessments are administered in specific subjects and grade levels and help students and their families know whether they are meeting grade-level expectations, how they are performing compared to their peers statewide, and how they have grown academically over time. The statewide assessments are also a primary means for helping local school and district leaders, the State Board of Education (State Board), the Colorado Department of Education (Department), policymakers, and the public evaluate overall student learning, progress, and proficiency against grade-level expectations and statewide instructional priorities.

Annually, the Department reviews the performance of public schools and districts and issues performance ratings. This performance rating process helps the Department and the State Board to identify high-performing schools and districts for understanding and disseminating best practices, as well as low-performing schools and districts for directing additional resources and supports or, if low performance persists over time, initiating corrective action.

The Department uses quantitative data for three performance indicators when determining school and district performance ratings: Academic Achievement (mean scale scores from statewide standardized assessments), Academic Growth (student progress from one year to the next based on median growth percentiles), and Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (factors such as graduation rates, average scores on college entrance exams, and enrollment for college or other postsecondary options).

School and District Performance Ratings

Overall, we found that the performance indicators and measures used in Colorado's statewide education accountability system provide a reasonable and appropriate basis for objectively measuring the performance of districts and public schools. We did not identify any significant gaps in the design of the accountability system. Our analysis showed that schools and districts are assigned performance ratings consistent with their underlying performance indicator scores.

Disaggregated Student Groups

A major component of the analysis required for this evaluation involved examining whether and to what extent a relationship exists between school academic performance and concentrations of different student groups within Colorado schools (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status). We found statistically significant differences in academic outcomes among some student groups. Specifically, schools with higher proportions of Hispanic or Black students, schools with higher proportions of students receiving free or reduced lunches, and schools with higher proportions of students with disabilities generally had lower overall academic achievement (mean scale scores on statewide student assessments) and academic growth (median growth percentiles) outcomes. We also found that even among the highest

performing schools, some percentage of these schools had students in an underrepresented student group who did not meet academic achievement or growth expectations.

However, we caution against over-interpreting the results of our analysis—differences in academic outcomes for student groups could indicate the presence of unintended barriers or obstacles affecting their performance, but these differences could also be attributable to other factors, such as the quality of the educational services provided to these student groups, something that the accountability system is specifically designed to help identify.

Effect of Low Performing Schools' Participation in State-Supported Intervention Programs

Overall, our analysis showed that lower performing schools that participated in one or more of the intensive state-supported interventions designed to help participants implement research-based strategies and best practices for improving student outcomes generally experienced more gains or fewer losses in academic achievement, academic growth, and graduation rates than non-participating schools.

Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness

Student learning opportunities targeted at building postsecondary and workforce readiness skills are important since some students will seek higher education upon graduation, some will seek career or technical training to pursue a particular vocation, and others will immediately seek to enter the workforce. Overall, we found that high schools with a higher number of Advanced Placement course offerings or a higher percentage of career and technical education graduates tended to have better student academic achievement, academic growth, and postsecondary and workforce readiness outcomes. In terms of student groups, schools serving higher proportions of students receiving free or reduced lunch tended to have fewer Advanced Placement opportunities (i.e., the number of Advanced Placement courses for which examinations were given decreased) or did not have International Baccalaureate programs.

Understanding and Use of Accountability Data

The results of our Educator and Parent Surveys, as well as our interviews with district and school administrators and teachers and other stakeholders, indicate that accountability data are being used to help inform decision making in support of students' educational outcomes. However, the results also indicate that these data need to be made more accessible, understandable, and useful, especially for parents. For example, 92 percent of responding educators reported that they use academic achievement and growth data either somewhat or to a great extent to inform student-level instruction, and 88 percent of responding educators reported that they use these data either somewhat or to a great extent to provide targeted assistance to student groups. However, in terms of parents, 58 percent of responding parents indicated that the statewide student assessment results were not helpful for understanding how well their child is achieving academically, and about 30 percent of responding parents disagreed or strongly disagreed with a statement that the student assessment score reports use plain language they can understand.