Extensive research on child development has shown that the years from birth through age eight matter enormously to a child’s long-term educational outcomes, but until now, state education accountability systems were pushed by federal law to ignore those years. That has changed with passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which gives states new opportunity to hold districts and schools accountable for the quality of their work with students prior to 3rd grade. States can use that opportunity to improve the early elementary grades—and even pre-kindergarten education—by ensuring that those years are meaningfully weighted in their accountability systems and by using metrics of school quality that support best practices in those critical years.

State accountability systems are potentially significant drivers of local behavior. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), state accountability systems focused heavily on test scores in 3rd grade and later, meaning that schools under pressure to show immediate improvement focused their efforts on those years. But data on the achievement gap is quite clear that it has opened well before 3rd grade—indeed, in many places, it has opened before kindergarten. Even though improving education in the years before 3rd grade might have long-term value, short-term pressures from state accountability systems discouraged local leaders from directing their limited time and money to improving education in the early years.

But the ESSA opens up new possibilities for elementary school accountability that were not previously included in federal law. Federal statute now requires states to incorporate multiple types of test results and a new “indicator of school quality or student success” (referred to below as the School Quality Indicator). The School Quality Indicator language pushes states to develop meaningful indicators of performance that are not based on test scores, and it gives states broad parameters in which to do so. There are two primary strategies states
should use in designing their School Quality Indicator to make sure that educators have incentive to focus on the years before 3rd grade:

> First, states should use the School Quality Indicator to focus on instructional quality and the key systems behind it. What matters most to children in the early elementary grades is the quality of their interactions with teachers, and accountability systems should include measures of the quality of interaction in the School Quality Indicator. In addition, the School Quality Indicator should include other measures of systemic quality and organizational conditions that have been linked to practices that are most important for students’ learning.

> Second, states should make the early years count by weighting those years separately in the School Quality Indicator. One of the successes of NCLB that was carried into ESSA is a focus on disaggregating data when aggregated data might mask disparities in performance among different groups of students. Analogously, states should require the disaggregation of data within the School Quality Indicator to highlight the quality of education that schools are delivering at each grade level. Doing so will allow for the implementation of an accountability system that places sufficient weight on the quality of education in the early elementary years to make them meaningful to the school’s overall rating—and incentivize high-quality instruction for the youngest students. For example, if the state determined that the School Quality Indicator would count for 30% of an elementary school’s accountability score, it could choose to count each grade K–5 as 5% of the school’s grade.

States might also choose to place additional weight on the K–2 years in the School Quality Indicator because unlike in later years, the School Quality Indicator is the only measure of school performance in those years. States should also consider whether elementary schools should be held accountable for the quality of their preschool classes.

The early years matter to a child’s success in real life, but they did not matter to school accountability under NCLB. Faced with NCLB’s ongoing pressure to increase test scores, district and school leaders by and large made the rational choice to focus their improvement efforts on the tested years. Now, ESSA gives states the opportunity to change the paradigm in which district and school leaders operate. As states design next-generation accountability systems, they should ensure that their systems take advantage of new federal flexibility to include measures for the years prior to 3rd grade. If states take the right steps to make the early years matter, they can encourage districts and schools to focus on those years in a manner that leads to long-term improvement for schools and long-term positive outcomes for children.

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