

School and District Assessment

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA) is a public school advocacy organization of school district leaders who represent over 225,000 Wisconsin students in 30 school districts in the Milwaukee region. We are a nonpartisan voice for student success, school growth and long-term economic vitality through research, advocacy, public policy and effective communications.

SWSA school district leaders are eager to embrace new and more effective methods to assess school success, to communicate those assessments to our public, and to use those assessments to improve instruction; all in a focused effort to improve outcomes and opportunity for all students. We oppose school accountability proposals that neglect to improve outcomes for students or are imposed unevenly. We welcome the opportunity to collaboratively develop a meaningful school accountability system that matches our vision.

Members of the Southeast Wisconsin Schools Alliance, SWSA, believe that school and district assessment presents a unique opportunity, and that in establishing school and district-level assessment policies, six important principles should be followed:

- * **Scientifically meaningful**
- * **Universal accountability**
- * **Transparency**
- * **Flexibility**
- * **Recognition of need**
- * **Non-punitive**

Scientifically Meaningful: School assessment must be done using measures that are agreed upon, scientifically meaningful, widely understood, and applied equitably across all publicly funded schools and school services. Historically, schools have been graded and ranked using informal, superficial and inappropriate displays which lack scientific basis. Such measures are counterproductive and often confusing to the public.

Universal accountability: The advent of new types of publicly-funded schools, including charter and choice schools, has led to the application of a wide variety of different criteria and measures of educational accountability. In the future, it is critically important that all publicly funded schools be held accountable in the same way, using the same measures and the same reporting processes.

Transparency: Community members must understand how school performance is measured and what tools and criteria are used to gauge success. School and district report cards provide an opportunity to engage parents and other community members in a district's continuous improvement efforts and performance, based on clearly defined measures and goals.

Flexibility: Wisconsin has 425 school districts of varying size, ranging from small one-building districts to large urban districts that comprise dozens of schools. While there are measures that should be universal across all schools, it is critically important to recognize that in Wisconsin, a "one size fits all" accountability system cannot work.

Instead, local education leaders should be allowed the opportunity to supplement state-level accountability measures in a way that allows community members to be a part of their own district's continuous improvement efforts.

Recognition of need: Just as the state's accountability system must recognize best practices and exemplary schools and districts, it must also raise awareness of schools and districts that are underperforming, and facilitate the provision of additional services to these schools.

Non-punitive: The educational achievement gap that exists between students of color and economically disadvantaged students and their peers is well-documented, as are the challenges that Wisconsin school districts have faced in overcoming this gap. The punitive nature of the No Child Left Behind Act, including provisions that essentially withdraw federal funds from low-performing schools, has hurt rather than helped such schools that need help most. Instead of punishing low-achieving schools, we must hold them accountable while providing the additional assistance that they need to improve.

To achieve this, school and district-level grading policies should:

- **Engage the public:** Central to educational accountability is community members' understanding of the educational goals that schools and districts are measuring, and of the criteria that are being used. Keeping community members informed means engaging in ongoing discussion.
- **Eschew letter grades and the school rankings:** Overly simplified reporting tools provide a false sense of transparency to parents and the public, undermine the state's school accountability efforts and run counter to calls for increased transparency. Meaningful school accountability requires careful consideration on the part of parents and other community members. The use of letter grading and other simplistic ranking systems distorts and distracts from what could be a meaningful expression of school growth and student opportunity.

- Apply to all publicly-funded schools: In Wisconsin, taxpayer funds are used for the education of students in a variety of schools, including private schools and private education services funded by taxpayers.
- Recognize excellence: The Wisconsin school accountability system should recognize outstanding schools and districts that meet specific goals.
- Be used to find best practices: A robust accountability system should allow for the discovery of new best practices and for their dissemination across the state.
- Determine which schools require additional assistance: The educational accountability system should allow for the identification of schools and districts that are underperforming, and clearly indicate the specific areas where additional support is needed. The system should address areas of traditional underperformance head-on.

Wisconsin public schools and those publicly funded private schools and school services are moving quickly to a more robust and engaging system of accountability. Members of the SWSA support moving at a swift pace, guided by the principles outlined above, to develop a statewide accountability system that increases student achievement and promotes and supports school improvement across the state.

SWSA March, 2012