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SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY: ENSURING EVERY STUDENT IS ON TRACK

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Why Accountability Matters

Strong school accountability systems are essential to ensuring students graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in life, contribute to their communities, pursue higher education if they so choose, and succeed in the workforce. They provide parents, educators, policymakers, and taxpayers with a clear picture of how well schools are serving students and whether public investments are producing results. They also empower parents with critical information about campus and district performance so they can make informed decisions about their children's education. Without transparent measures of performance, it becomes far more difficult to identify challenges and successes, direct support where it is needed most, and ensure every student has access to a high-quality education.

The Federal Backstop is Critical

Federal requirements are at the heart of providing every student with a quality education, regardless of where they live, their family income, or their race or ethnicity. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) establishes minimum requirements for school accountability, and leaves states in control of most of the decision-making for educating students.

This federal backstop plays a critical role in ensuring that all children are given the opportunity to learn by requiring that states:

- Administer annual statewide assessments and transparently report results publicly and by student subgroup.
- Have a school accountability system in place that includes academic achievement as a central component.
- Identify and intervene in schools needing additional support.

As federal policymakers consider the 2027 budget, they should ensure the necessary provisions are in place to maintain these requirements. Notably, current ESSA language includes a trigger amount of \$369.1 million for State Assessment Grants, which, if not met, waives the requirement that states administer statewide assessments.

American Student Achievement in Decline

Our rapidly evolving economy and advancements in technology make it more important than ever to ensure that every student is ready for 21st century opportunities, which requires transparent information about student learning and strong accountability for schools.

American students are falling behind. Based on 2023 results from the International Mathematics and Science study (TIMMS), an assessment of student skills for 64 countries, American students' math performance declined in both fourth and eighth grades, placing them behind their peers in China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and many European nations. Likewise, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which assesses American student performance for various subjects shows that only one-third of students nationwide are reading at grade-level.

Decline in TIMSS Scores Grade 4	Decline in TIMSS Scores Grade 8	NAEP Grades 4, 8, and 12
-18	-24	33%
The decline for U.S. fourth graders between 2019 and 2023 in math on the TIMMS.	The decline for U.S. eighth graders between 2019 and 2023 in math on the TIMMS.	The percentage of American students reading on grade level according to the 2024 NAEP.

GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective, outcomes-oriented systems of accountability are crucial to ensuring every student has access to a quality education. The systems provide important information to parents, leaders, policymakers, and communities about how well schools and districts are delivering on this promise. They also identify strong performers and how best to target additional resources to support the students falling behind.

Federal policymakers should continue to require states to have an accountability system in place

Federal accountability requirements are at the heart of providing every student with a quality education, regardless of where they live, their family income, their race or ethnicity, or other factors. States rightly control most of the decision-making for education policy, but the federal government provides an important backstop to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to learn and succeed.

Federal policymakers should continue to mandate that states intervene in their lowest-performing campuses

Federal policymakers should also meet their responsibility in ensuring states comply with the basic requirements of ESSA to have improvement plans for the lowest performing 5% of schools in place. These campuses are far more likely to have Black and low-income students. Currently, fewer than half of school improvement plans meet the basic federal requirements, leaving thousands of children languishing in failing schools around the country.

Congress should ensure provisions to maintain the current federal requirement that states continue to administer annual statewide assessments

Current federal policy requires states to administer annual assessments in third through eighth grade and once in high school, providing consistent measures of student learning and progress each year and over time. While states rightly control most education policymaking, this federal requirement serves as an important safeguard to ensure that all students are counted, their performance is visible, and schools remain accountable for providing every child access to a high-quality education.

ESSA requires that states release assessment results by campus and district, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, special education status, and English-language learners. Trendlines over time demonstrate which students are on track and which students, schools, and districts are struggling. Policymakers can use this information to allocate additional resources and support, or to determine when a campus or district requires direct intervention.

As federal policymakers consider the 2027 budget, they should ensure the necessary provisions are in place to maintain the requirement for annual statewide assessments. Notably, current ESSA language includes a trigger amount of \$369.1 million for State Assessment Grants, which, if not met, waives the requirement that states administer statewide assessments.