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Report Cards Are Out

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The latest school report cards are out, and confusion abounds. It is clearly time for Ohio and policymakers in Washington to design a more coherent, less confusing system of accountability for individual schools and school districts.

The current system, a combination of state and federal measures, is confusing to parents and the public. And it doesn't offer a sound method for determining when the state should intervene in failing districts.

Here's why:

Ratings created by the state are based primarily on scores and the percent of students proficient on statewide assessments taken in different subjects at different grade levels. Except for 11th-grade pass rates on the Ohio Graduation Test, schools and districts meet the standard if 75 percent of students receive "proficient" scores on an assessment.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schools and districts must make "adequate yearly progress" on math and reading in grades 3-8 for all students, as well as each of 10 student subgroups classified by race, language, income and learning disabilities.

Under the federal law, 100 percent of students in all categories are expected to be proficient by 2014, with the annual targets increasing until that year.

The performance of schools and districts is moving in opposite directions on state and federal measures. Except for the most recent school year, when results were adversely affected by new science and social studies tests, scores and results on the statewide assessments have been steadily improving.

This year 80 percent of Ohio districts are rated in the top two categories, either "excellent" or "effective." The performance index, which measures the scores of all students on all tests, has risen from 73.7 percent to more than 90 percent during the past eight years.

In contrast, the trend line for the federal standard has been declining.

Four years ago, two out of every three districts in Ohio made "adequate yearly progress." This year fewer than one out of three met the target. In the Dayton region, the number of districts meeting the standard has plummeted almost by half, from 42 four years ago to 24 this year.

More and more districts are likely to fall short next year and thereafter as the goals ratchet up toward 100 percent in 2014. For example, the target student pass rate on third-grade reading will rise from 71.2 percent this year to 77 percent next year. There also will be more tests subject to "adequate yearly progress" targets next year.

Ohio's efforts to partially integrate the federal standards into its school district rating system can produce results that are also confusing. For example, due to its "adequate yearly progress" performance for two subgroups, Worthington, a district near Columbus, was downgraded two levels this year, from "excellent" to "continuous improvement."

This occurred even though Worthington met 29 of 30 indicators under the state system, with more than 90 percent of students proficient on the majority of assessments.

Consequences for failure differ between the state and federally mandated systems, as noted in a recent assessment of Ohio's school reform progress by Achieve Inc. Under the state's rating system, the state will not intervene unless a district is stuck in "academic emergency." No districts are currently in that status, yet 47 districts are in federal "corrective action," which calls for strong state intervention. These are schools that have not met "adequate yearly progress" for four straight years.
As a single indicator based on the somewhat arbitrary 2014 federal goal of 100 percent proficiency for all student groups, the federal standard is not necessarily the best method of triggering state intervention.

Now is the right time to create a better system of holding schools accountable for results. Congress is rewriting the No Child Left Behind Act, and the state is implementing a more precise measure of student progress within a given school year. This "value added" yardstick should be a central part of a new system of accountability.

—Former Ohio Gov. Bob Taft is a distinguished research associate at the University of Dayton.