

## **SB19-204 “Public School Local Accountability System” Analysis**

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Senate Bill 19-204 “Public School Local Accountability System” concerns the methods for evaluation of public schools in Colorado. It would allow for the creation of local accountability systems to be administered in a supplemental capacity to the state-wide evaluation system already in place. Local accountability systems may introduce new measures of evaluation of both school performance and the effectiveness of existing state performance indicators but cannot alter district accreditation ratings. The Colorado Department of Education will review applications for local accountability systems and pass along recommendations to the state board of education.

The bill proposes the creation of a grant program, totaling nearly \$500,000, to be distributed by the State Board of education to single or groups of local education providers for the development and implementation of local accountability systems. Grant money may be used to fund evaluation from a third-party evaluator which could include a public (or private) institution of higher education or a private nonprofit entity. The bill requires that between \$25,000 and \$50,000 must be allocated to each local education provider or under \$75,000 to groups of local education providers. SB19-204 also requires that at least one grant must be allocated to a rural education provider.

Reports detailing findings from local accountability systems must be submitted yearly to the Colorado Department of Education who will hold a yearly meeting with purveyors of local accountability systems to discuss findings and effectiveness.

The purpose of SB19-204 is to support the accurate evaluation of all Colorado public schools by allowing them to implement accountability standards that take into account their specific student populations. Currently, under a statewide accountability system in which all schools are evaluated under the same accountability standards, holding constant a school's socioeconomic, demographic and geographic profile, public schools in underprivileged or isolated areas find themselves at a disadvantage in their ability to reach accountability standards. This also applies to schools with unique student populations such as AEC's (Alternative Education Campuses) which contain high numbers of at-risk students.

From an economic perspective, allowing schools to supplement state accountability standards with standards specific to their student populations mitigates an existing market failure: an information deficit. In Colorado's market for education, promoting more accurate school evaluations by internalizing factors specific to local student populations provides consumers (parents) better information with which to choose their children's school. It also provides suppliers (schools) with more accurate data regarding the effectiveness of their product on their specific clientele, and the areas that most demand improvement. This initiative promotes the market's efficiency and is therefore a legitimate government activity worthy of ratification.

Statewide accountability systems, originally implemented as a result of the "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001, have historically relied heavily on standardized test scores with the intent of providing a standard baseline from which to measure school effectiveness relative to both state and national averages. Although these systems did enhance understanding of school achievement, educators felt "that these tests alone could not address the broad set of skills necessary for post-secondary success," and that, "simply relaxing state and federal accountability

is unlikely to lead to better outcomes, particularly for students of color, low-income students, and English learners.” (Forman 3)

To remedy these issues, Federal Law makers passed the ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) in 2016. This law requires that states “incorporate at least one nonacademic indicator into their accountability systems.” (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA 2) This provides states with some agency in measuring factors they deem important. Although it was a step in the right direction, research has shown that the ESSA has done a poor job in encouraging states to factor disadvantaged student subgroups into accountability standards (Klein 2018).

Colorado’s current ESSA plan incorporates two new nonacademic indicators into the state accountability system: dropout rates and chronic absenteeism. The Colorado ESSA State plan states that, “The submission includes the reporting of the number of chronically absent students by school, overall and disaggregated by ethnicity/race, gender, special education, English language learner status, and homeless status.” (Colorado ESSA State Plan 61) The plan also states intentions to add students on free or reduced lunch programs to this list of subgroups but has yet to do so. The limiting factor for the inclusion of these subgroups however, is the population threshold they must meet. Subgroups must meet a 20 student minimum to be accounted for in state accountability statistics. This threshold is effective for subgroups of larger schools but may hinder the accuracy of accountability statistics for smaller or rural schools.

This threshold represents one reason that local accountability systems could provide more accurate information to schools regarding the best ways to help their students, especially underprivileged subgroups. The other, more impactful reason lies in the specific indicators that local accountability systems could measure.

These school-specific indicators are already present in many schools' self-evaluation systems but are not reported in their accountability reports. One study "identified three categories of measures that districts, states, or charter management organizations increasingly use: establishing a safe and supportive school environment; identifying students who are at risk of failing; and improving student outcomes through more frequent assessments or advanced coursework." (Hamilton 461) The implementation of local accountability systems would allow information regarding these areas to be passed along to the State Board of Education and subsequently used to improve specific schools in these areas and others, as determined by each school. Schools with large underprivileged subpopulations or high volumes of at-risk students who require unique or enhanced support would benefit most from the passage of this bill because they would be able to address these issues in an already established system.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

SB19-204 "Public School Local Accountability Systems" allocates public funds to enhance understanding of specific inputs to school success, and in doing so, mitigates the market failure that lies in this information disparity. Holding all Colorado public schools to the same accountability standards is important for maintaining the validity of comparison, both for the schools themselves in their efforts to improve effectiveness and for parents who use this information to make choices about their children's education. However, it is also vital to account for school-specific circumstances, regarding underprivileged subgroups and at-risk students. The implementation of local accountability systems would go far in balancing these factors to reveal pertinent information to the State Board of Education and the Colorado Department of Education, while also maintaining the comparable standards set forth by the state accountability

system. By addressing this market failure, SB19-204 improves efficiency in the education market and therefore is economically justified. I support its ratification.

## Work Cited

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