HOW TO PRIORITIZE EQUITY IN THE NEW CALIFORNIA DASHBOARD

The Education Trust–West

In March 2017, the California Department of Education released the new California School Dashboard. These web-based dashboards communicate information about schools and districts using multiple measures and color-coded performance levels, with Blue representing the highest possible performance and Red the lowest. This field test version is a meaningful first step. But it is also clear that more work is needed to give parents, students, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders an accessible picture of how schools are doing. In this brief, we offer observations on the new dashboard and suggestions for how California leaders can make improvements so that it better supports equity, accountability, and meaningful stakeholder engagement.

ANALYZING THE DATA, WE FIND EQUITY ISSUES – BUT ALSO BRIGHT SPOT SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

This field test version of the dashboard reveals that *some* schools and districts are serving most groups of students well across multiple areas. However, it also reveals that *most* schools and districts shine in some areas and struggle in others. While every school and district has room to improve, we do find some schools and districts achieving strong results for historically underserved student groups. Even so, the dashboards also show that vulnerable students continue to fare worse than their peers.
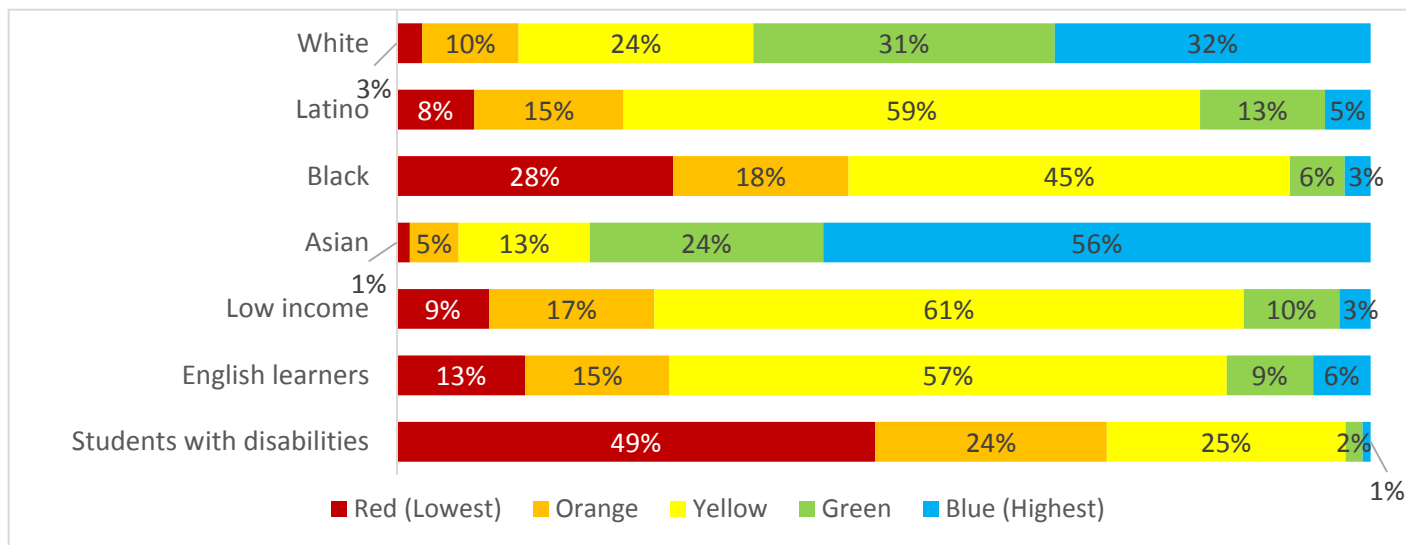
DISTRICTS

- Poway Unified is the only unified district (of 343 statewide) that is Green or Blue for **every indicator for Black and Latino students**.
- Only 7 unified districts are Green or Blue for **every indicator for English learner students**. These districts are Albany City Unified, San Ramon Valley Unified, ABC Unified, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified, Temple City Unified, Brea-Olinda Unified, and Milpitas Unified.
- Only 9 unified districts are Green or Blue for **every indicator for low-income students**. These districts are Pleasanton Unified, Glendale Unified, South Pasadena Unified, Temple City Unified, Walnut Valley Unified, Manhattan Beach Unified, Los Alamitos Unified, Milpitas Unified, and Oak Park Unified.
- Just 1 unified school district and 5 elementary school districts (out of more than 500) are Green or Blue for **every indicator for students with disabilities**.
- Among districts with at least 5 schools, just 2 (out of 147 that have data) are Green or Blue for **Black student suspensions** at each of those schools. These are Travis Unified and Saugus Union. In other words, nearly every medium-sized or large school district with significant numbers of Black students has mediocre to bad performance when it comes to suspensions for Black students in at least one of its schools.

SCHOOLS

- Only 38 elementary/middle schools (out of more than 7,000) are Green or Blue for **every indicator for students with disabilities**. Most of these schools serve relatively affluent communities. However, there are a few exceptions. For instance, about 80 percent of students at Jim Thorpe Fundamental, an elementary school in Santa Ana Unified, come from low-income families and 8 percent have been identified to have disabilities. Yet this school is Green or Blue on every indicator for both low-income students and students with disabilities.
- Only 7 high schools (out of about 1,600) are Green or Blue for **the two high school indicators, graduation and suspension rates, for both Black and Latino** students. One of these, Los Osos High in Chaffey Joint Union High School District, has improved across both measures for both student populations, and has also improved its 11th grade test scores.

- In **English language arts**, schools are 7.5 times as likely to receive a Green or Blue rating for their White students as for their African American students. They are 3.6 times as likely to receive a Green or Blue rating for their White students as for their Latino students. (**See Figure 1.**)

Figure 1: Percentage of Schools Receiving Each Rating for English Language Arts, by Student Race/Ethnicity and Program Participation

Group	Red (Lowest)	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue (Highest)
White	3%	10%	24%	31%	32%
Latino	8%	15%	59%	13%	5%
Black	28%	18%	45%	6%	3%
Asian	1%	5%	13%	24%	56%
Low income	9%	17%	61%	10%	3%
English learners	13%	15%	57%	9%	6%
Students with disabilities	49%	24%	25%	2%	1%

PROBLEMS WITH THE DASHBOARD – AND HOW IT CAN BE IMPROVED

There are four things about the dashboard that have us most concerned:

1. **EQUITY IS BURIED**: The first page a user lands on is called the "Equity Report." (**See Figure 2**.) Given the content, this title is misleading. While it displays the number of student groups that are struggling, the main focus of the report is on the performance for "All Students." The colored icons are for this "All Students" group, and the rest of the data are hard to decipher. While additional subgroup color-coded icons are a click away, this means that equity fails to matter at the top level. This is a problem because a school can be Green or Blue for "All students," even if some or even most student groups are Red or Orange.

Figure 2: Example Equity Report from www.caschooldashboard.org

| Equity Report | Status and Change Report | Detailed Reports | Student Group Report |

The Equity Report shows the performance levels for all students on the state indicators. It also shows the total number of student groups that received a performance level for each indicator and how many of those student groups are in the two lowest performance levels (Red/Orange). The total number of student groups may vary due to the number of grade levels included within each indicator. Select any of the underlined indicators for more detailed information.

State Indicators	All Students Performance	Total Student Groups	Student Groups in Red/Orange
Chronic Absenteeism	N/A	N/A	N/A
Suspension Rate (K-12)	(green icon)	5	2
English Learner Progress (K-12)	(orange icon)	1	0
Graduation Rate (9-12)	(blue icon)	2	0
College / Career Available Fall 2017. Select for Grade 11 assessment results.		N/A	N/A
English Language Arts (3-8)	(orange icon)	5	1
Mathematics (3-8)	(orange icon)	5	1

Consider a district like Palo Alto Unified (**See Figure 3**). The district earns Green ratings for Latino students across each indicator. However, it receives a mix of Red, Orange, and Yellow ratings for students with disabilities. It earns Oranges and Yellows for Black students and low-income students. The Blue "All Students" rating suggests that the district is doing well, while the underlying data reveal that in fact it is struggling to effectively serve Black, low-income, and disabled students.

Figure 3: "All Students" Ratings Compared to Subgroup Ratings, Palo Alto Unified

| Indicators	All Students	White	Black	Latino	Asian	Low Income	English Learner	Students with Disabilities
English Language Arts (3-8)	🔵	🔵	🟡	🟢	🔵	🟡	🟢	🟠
Mathematics (3-8)	🔵	🔵	🟠	🟢	🔵	🟠	🔵	🟠
Suspension Rate (K-12)	🔵	🔵	🟠	🟢	🔵	🟡	🔵	🟡
English Learner Progress (K-12)	--	--	--	--		--	🔵	--
Graduation Rate (9-12)	🔵	🟢	--	🟢	🔵		🟡	🔴

The state should improve the Equity Report so that it communicates more about equity. This may mean creating an overall score or an "equity score" for each indicator that meaningfully weights each subgroup. For example, half of the score could be based on the performance of "All Students" and half could be based on the performance of traditionally underserved groups. Or, the "All Students" color could be downgraded if a certain number or percent of student groups are Red/Orange. At minimum, the state could show color-coded indicators for each subgroup on the landing page.

2. **LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**: A school or district can be Green or Blue for math or English language arts achievement, even if fewer than half of its students are meeting standards. Further, it can slide into the middle Yellow category with low test results. For example, a district can earn a Yellow in math if the average student is up to 95 points below standards and maintaining that low performance over time. More than 40 percent of districts fall into the Yellow category for academic achievement. (**See Figure 4**).

For all other indicators, a school with "Low" performance and that has "Maintained" that performance over time earns an Orange rating. Orange ratings can prompt counties to provide technical assistance to districts. So by recoding an otherwise "Orange" cell as "Yellow," state leaders may potentially be allowing some districts to avoid scrutiny or assistance.

But the reality is, 52 percent of California's students are below standards in English language arts, and 63 percent are below standards in math. In our view, our state accountability should be honest about the extent of the problem, in part so educators and administrators get the additional support they may need. By limiting the number of schools and districts it flags as struggling in academics or any other area, our state does a disservice to children in those schools who may not receive the attention and support they deserve.

The state should re-set the cut points for academic achievement to make them more rigorous. Align the cut points with ambitious yet attainable state goals. In addition, if a school or district has low performance in English language arts or math and has maintained this performance over time, the state should give that school or district an Orange rating instead of a Yellow rating. This would be consistent with how other indicators are scored.

Figure 4: Percentage of Schools Receiving Each Rating for "All Students"*
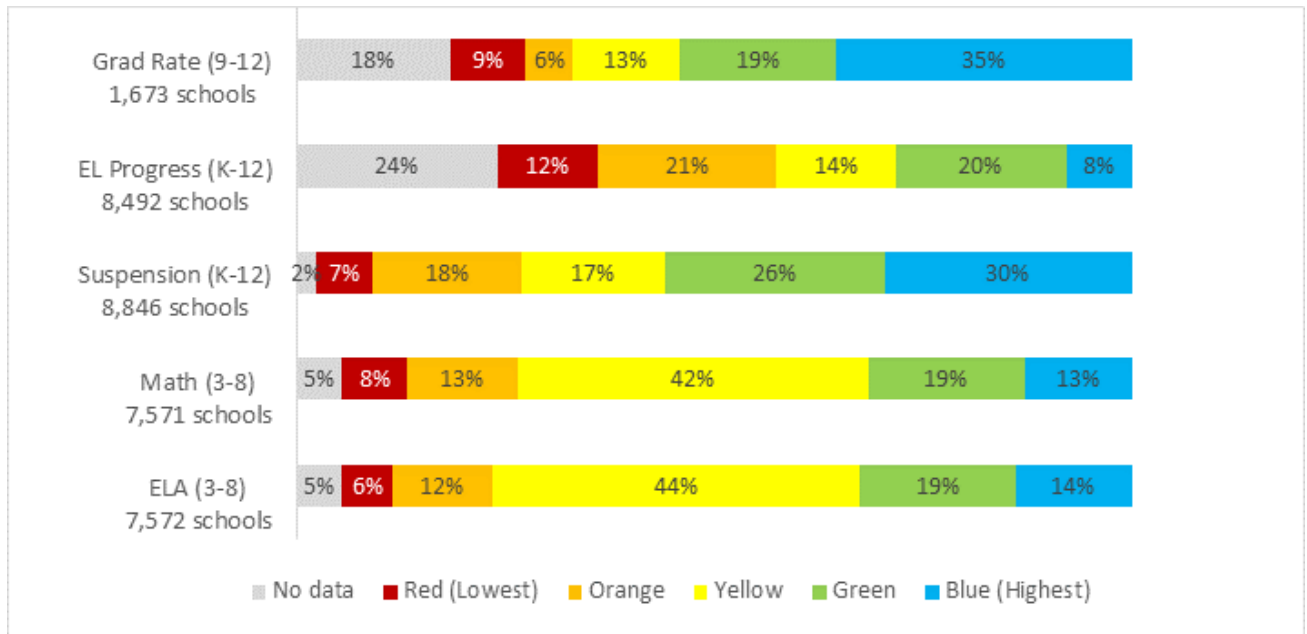
*The English Learner Progress indicator is only for English learners

3. **LIMITED DATA CONSTRAIN "CONTINOUS IMPROVEMENT"**: State officials have been touting the dashboard as a tool for accountability and "continuous improvement." They describe continuous improvement as a culture and process by which multiple measures are used to inform improvement efforts. This means providing schools and districts with data that will allow them to "self-identify their strengths, areas where support is needed, and where support is available within the greater ecosystem of peer learning."

The dashboard does offer some data that administrators, educators, and parents can use to make decisions. But these lagging, limited data are insufficient to inform local continuous improvement. Further, this first dashboard doesn't offer very much to parents hoping to better understand their local schools or compare schools to one another. In fact, parents and other stakeholders can still get richer information and better analytics from other sources. To make the dashboard more useful to these stakeholders, the state needs to round out the measures and improve data collection timelines.

Limited indicators

Despite a broad state commitment to a multiple measure accountability system, we actually have fairly few measures in this first version. Most elementary schools have just four indicators: English language arts test scores, math scores, and suspension rates, with an additional indicator available for English learners. Most high schools have just three: graduation rates and suspension rates, along with the additional EL indicator. About 200 schools did not receive *any* color-coded ratings because they have missing data, are newly opened, have fewer than 30 students in a given category, or for other reasons.

The state is planning to add a few more indicators: chronic absence, college and career readiness, and student growth. Troublingly, it does not plan to add an indicator for high school achievement, even though this is required by federal law. State leaders also plan to report whether districts (although not schools) collected local data on things like parent engagement and school climate. This will help round out the system, but only if the state actually reports the results of those measures. Otherwise, they won't tell us anything more about district or school quality.

Lagging data

Many of the measures are lagging, which is to be expected in a statewide accountability system. But lagging data are less useful in a system of local continuous improvement. For example, the suspension and graduation rates are from 2014-15. For a school principal who is seeking to understand whether her school is disproportionately suspending students or whether her school's restorative justice program is working, this data may not be of much use. However, it *could* be useful to a school board member who is trying to compare historical graduation or suspension rates across multiple schools.

Missing subgroup data

Finally, data on a number of subgroups are still missing. For example, even though it has been nearly four years since the state said it would monitor the performance of foster youth, we still can't see performance data for those students. Additionally, since the state does not report data for fewer than 30 students, data is often missing for subgroups with few students at a school. The state could lower the minimum subgroup size for all students—or at least for particularly underrepresented subgroups, like foster and homeless youth. It already does this at the district level and could extend it to school-level accountability as well.

The state should do the following:

- **Maintain an urgent focus on completing the missing indicators**. These include chronic absence, college and career readiness, and student growth. Add an 11th grade academic achievement indicator, which is required by federal law.

- **Continue to develop the local indicators**. These will add more depth in areas like school climate and parent engagement—but only if the performance standards tell us something about quality.

- **Improve data collection and reporting timelines**. Make data more current, as the state has already signaled it intends to do.

- **Fill in the missing subgroups, like foster and homeless youth.** Establish a 15-student minimum subgroup size for these student at the school level.

4. **THE DASHBOARD IS STILL A DATA REPORTING SYSTEM, NOT YET A FULL ACCOUNTABILTIY SYSTEM**

In creating these multiple-measure data dashboards, the state has taken a meaningful first step toward school accountability. The next step is to connect what is essentially a data reporting system to a meaningful system of accountability. That means making it clear what goals schools are expected to achieve and on what time frame, communicating how this data has been used to identify schools for assistance, and communicating what that assistance looks like.

The state should do the following:

- **Set state goals, and include those on the dashboard**. We suggest the state set these at the bottom of the "Very High" or "High" status level for the indicators required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – academic achievement, graduation, and English learner progress. Reorder indicators on the dashboard so those with state goals are at the top.

- **Include the actual data, such as status and change, on the top level**. This will provide more context and avoid unnecessary click-throughs.

- **Include an overall color-coded rating for each indicator that prioritizes equity.** If the top-level report is to be called the "Equity Report," then subgroup performance needs to matter. Performance for "All Students" should not be the default overall rating, since many stakeholders will focus on that rating and ignore underlying equity issues.

- **Include an overall school classification.** This would indicate whether the school is receiving comprehensive or targeted support or intervention, as required by ESSA, and other school categories that the state may choose to create. Eventually, make it possible for stakeholders to click through to learn about school improvement efforts.

- **Translate the reports into other languages**. A Google translate function is not the same as a true translation. Prioritize translation into languages most spoken in California.

What could this look like, within the context of the current dashboard? See **Figure 5** for one proposed mockup, recognizing that there are many different ways this could be designed.

Figure 5: Proposed redesign of the Equity Report
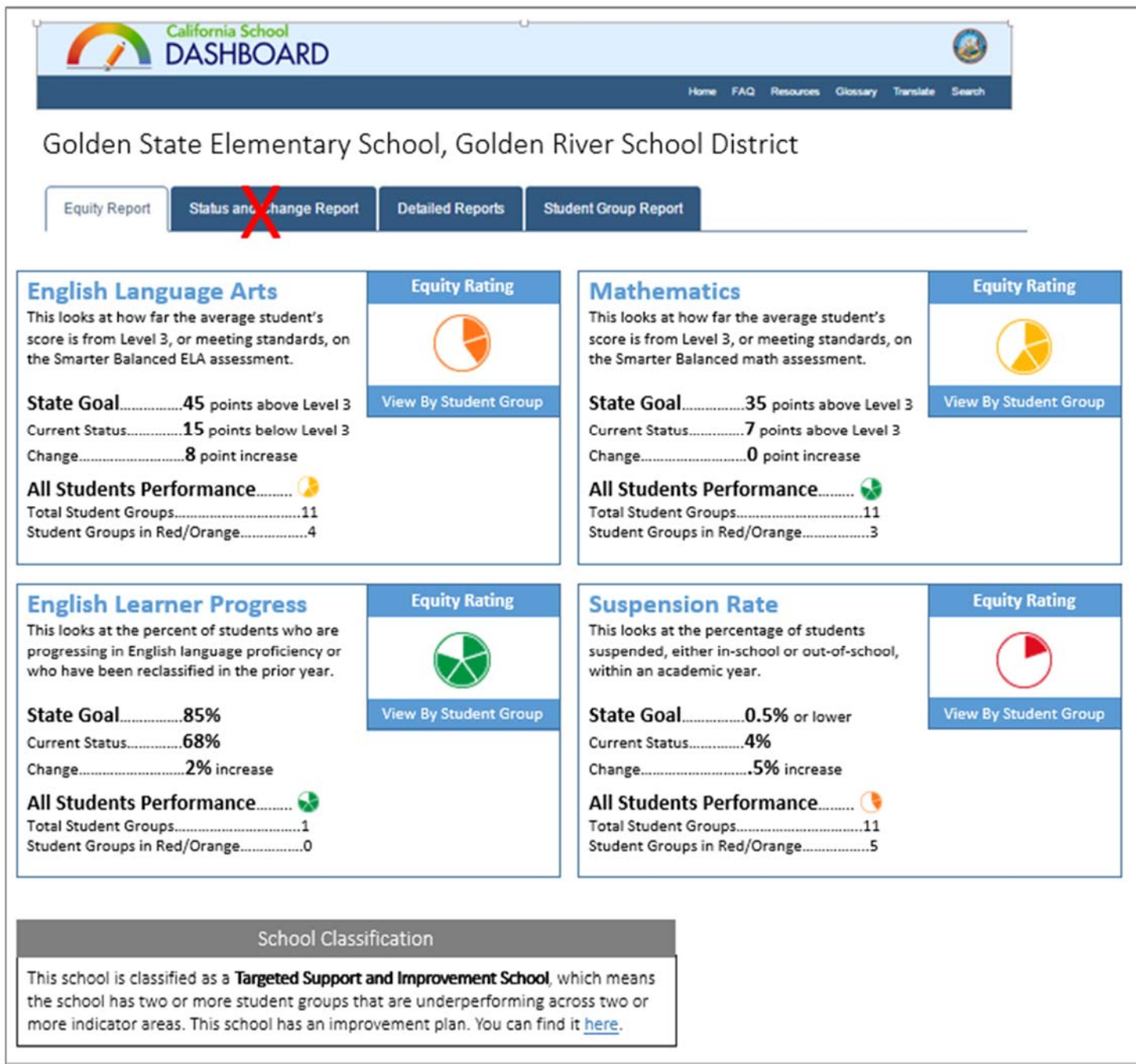
CONCLUSION

The dashboard is a meaningful step toward a new system of school accountability in California. The state is charged with holding schools and districts accountable, which means shining a light on areas of success and challenge, providing support, and taking action when results are low or stagnating. By holding schools and districts accountable, the state can assure the public that all students, particularly those from traditionally underserved communities, will have access to quality schools and meaningful learning opportunities. We encourage the state to embrace this role as it continues to improve the dashboard. With the improvements described in this memo, California can better support educational equity, accountability, and meaningful stakeholder engagement.