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QUALITY COUNTS 2001
A Better Balance

Indicators

A BETTER BALANCE

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The State of the States

By Greg F. Orlofsky and Lynn Olson

For the fifth year, *Quality Counts*, *Education Week's* annual report on public education in the 50 states, chronicles student achievement across the states and grades the states in four areas that are essential to building a high-quality education system. While some of the report's indicators and grading methods have changed, the overall categories remain the same:

- Raising student achievement;
- Developing standards and related assessments for what students should learn, and holding schools accountable for results;
- Enacting policies so that teachers are prepared to teach to the standards;
- Creating schools and classrooms that are conducive to learning; and
- Distributing money for schools equitably and adequately.

Charts

Measures of Student
Performance

Student Achievement: This year's report has no new state-level results from the nation's testing program, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as NAEP. The most recent data are from the 1998 assessments. State results from tests in mathematics and science administered in 2000 will be out later this year.

STATE OF THE STATES Indicator Tables

Summary

STATE TABLES:

Summary of Grades by
State

Student Achievement

Standards & Accountability

Improving Teacher Quality

School Climate

Resources: Adequacy

Resources: Equity

Thirty years of NAEP data show that overall achievement has increased gradually in reading and math—and stayed about the same in science—but that the gap between white and black students has been widening in the past 12 years.

Standards and Accountability: States pressed forward on the standards, assessment, and accountability front last year. Forty-seven states now have set academic standards in all four core subjects, up from 44 last year. In many states, those standards also have become clearer and more specific, based on a review by the American Federation of Teachers.

States also have moved aggressively in instituting testing programs. All 50 states now test their students. A large majority use both multiple-choice and short-answer questions. But only seven states administer essay exams to test subjects other than English. And only two states—Kentucky and Vermont—use portfolios, or compilations of students' classroom work.

A key question about state tests is whether they are "criterion referenced," meaning tied directly to students' mastery of the content of the states' own standards. This year, 40 states reported having such tests in English, and 34 in math, at elementary through high school.

But those tests may not reflect state standards closely enough. Studies by Achieve, a Cambridge, Mass.-based nonprofit group that promotes standards-based school reform, have found that states may test some standards but not others; and that the tests tend to focus more on low-level knowledge and skills than on the more demanding expectations in state standards.

Because the quality of state assessments is so pivotal for standards-based reform to work, this year we changed our methodology to focus more on the details of state assessment systems. Specifically, states get full credit only if they use tests aligned with their standards in all three grade spans—elementary, middle, and high school—and offer the tests in all four core subjects: English,

math, science, and social studies.

In addition, it's important that tests go beyond multiple-choice questions to gauge students' knowledge and skills. Therefore, *Quality Counts 2001* gives more credit to states that also include short-answer questions, extended-response items (such as writing an essay), and portfolios as part of their testing systems. The more detailed analysis caused many state grades on "standards and accountability" to decline this year.

Meanwhile, more states are holding schools accountable for student performance. The number of states that require school report cards jumped from 40 to 45 in the past year. States such as Alaska, Arkansas, and Mississippi now rate all their schools or plan to do so in the future. The total number of states that rate all their schools, or identify low-performing ones, increased from 21 to 27. Twenty states provide financial rewards to successful schools, up from 13 last year. And 27 offer assistance to low-performing schools, up from 20. Fourteen states have the authority to close down, "reconstitute" (fully restaff), or overhaul chronically failing schools.

A solid core of "local control" states—including Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota—are inching toward state standards but have rejected a strong, state-driven accountability system. Such states typically do not do well on the *Quality Counts* indicators, which assume a strong state role in standards, assessments, and accountability.

We also dropped an indicator—the use of a high school exit exam—from the "accountability" category this year. Eighteen states have begun withholding diplomas from students based on exit exams. Last year, eight states received credit for having such exams that were pegged to a 10th grade level of student performance or higher.

But some states now require students to pass such tests to earn a diploma without holding schools—or the adults who work in them—similarly accountable

for their performance. In addition, nine of the 18 states do not pay for remedial instruction for students who fail the exams the first time around. And in many states, students who fail the tests do not have an alternative means to show that they possess the necessary knowledge and skills.

For all those reasons, *Quality Counts* no longer provides credit to states for having an exit exam.

This year's report also does not include the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's rating of the quality of state standards, which was included for information only last year. The foundation didn't update the ratings in 2000.

Improving Teacher Quality: For students to reach state standards, they must have competent and caring teachers who are prepared to teach to those standards. States continued to make progress on improving teacher quality last year. States such as Delaware, Indiana, Vermont, and Wisconsin approved major revisions in their teacher-licensing systems to make them more rigorous and more focused on performance. As the states implement those changes, it should be reflected in their future grades.

North Carolina now holds new teachers accountable for their performance based on portfolios of their work and other performance measures. Florida has joined a small number of states that hold teacher-training programs accountable for their graduates' performance. Several states—including Arizona, Colorado, and Rhode Island—dropped a requirement that prospective teachers pass a basic-skills test to earn a teaching license. Colorado and Kentucky also plan to report on the number of teachers within a school who are teaching outside their subject area on school report cards this year.

Meanwhile, many states enacted pay raises and other incentives to make teaching more attractive and to keep current teachers in the profession.

Quality Counts dropped one of the indicators of teacher quality this year. After prolonged

discussions with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, we decided that the column on the percentage of a state's education graduates who attended nationally accredited teacher- training programs was misleading because it did not fully reflect the pool of new teachers in a state. Therefore, the data are no longer included in the report.

We also refined the indicator on whether states offer clinical experiences for prospective teachers prior to student teaching. States now receive credit only if they specify a certain amount of time that prospective teachers must spend in classrooms before they begin student teaching.

School Climate: A number of states added funding to continue reducing class sizes in the early grades last year. But because the federal government released no new state-by-state data on class size, parent involvement, and student engagement in 2000, most of the information we use to grade states in this category has not been updated.

There is one change in the methodology used to judge the strength or weakness of a state's charter school law. That information is provided to *Quality Counts* by the Washington-based Center for Education Reform. In the past, the center has rated a state's charter school provisions as "strong" or "weak." This year, the CER established a grading system "to more clearly delineate how likely it is that charter schools will grow and thrive in a particular state"; it designated the grades of A and B as "strong" and C, D, and F as "weak." A state earning the "strong" rating last year, but only a B this year, will see its overall grade drop slightly because of the more specific rating system. *Quality Counts* reports the ratings as single grades, from 0, for F, to 4, for A. The number of charter schools nationally climbed last year from 1,680 to 2,069, including 37 in the District of Columbia.

Meanwhile, states continued to press for safer schools in 2000. For example, in Colorado, which in

1999 was the site of the deadliest school shooting in the nation's history, lawmakers passed a "safe schools" bill that gives teachers more authority to discipline disruptive students and provides an additional \$2 million for alternative schools for expelled students.

Resources—Adequacy and Equity: As promised last year, *Quality Counts'* methodology for grading the equity of state finance systems for education has changed. Rather than relying solely on one measure—the variation in spending across districts within a state—we've expanded our indicators. In particular, we've added indicators that help measure a state's efforts to equalize spending across districts.

The "state equalization effort" is a sophisticated, multivariate analysis created by Jerry Fastrup of the U.S. General Accounting Office. It measures the extent to which a state's finance system permits all districts to achieve a certain, base level of funding for the same tax effort. A negative targeting score implies that, generally, districts with relatively less property wealth are receiving more state aid. In essence, a negative score is good news.

We have also added a measure that looks at "wealth neutrality," or the extent to which a district's funding from both state and local sources is related to its property wealth. A positive number here indicates that wealthier districts, as measured by their property values, generally receive more funding than poor districts when state and local dollars are combined.

Finally, we've added an equity measure called the "McLoone Index," which examines the variability in spending per pupil. The index is based on the assumption that if all the pupils in a state were lined up according to the amount their districts spend on them, perfect equity would be achieved if every district spent at least as much as was spent on the pupil smack in the middle of the distribution. The measure, named for the education finance scholar Eugene P. McLoone, focuses entirely on how much effort it would take to get districts in the bottom half

of the spending distribution up to that point. The ratio between what is currently spent by districts in the bottom half and what needs to be spent to achieve equity is the McLoone Index.

The combination of these measures, we believe, more accurately reflects a state's efforts to close its equity gap. Alaska, for example, got an F under *Quality Counts'* old system for calculating equity. This year, it gets a C+ because, while there's a lot of variation in per-pupil spending across districts, Alaska has worked diligently to target revenues toward its poorer districts. Our new methodology also takes into account the fact that some of the spending variations across districts may stem from their unique challenges. Very rural districts in Alaska that cover large land areas, for example, should be spending more per student to cover their higher transportation costs.

This year, we have dropped one of our grading categories under school finance: allocation. In the past, we gave more credit to states that spent a higher percentage of their per-pupil expenditure directly on instruction.

That posed problems, however, because some states with high per-pupil expenditures could actually spend a lower share of those funds on instruction and *still* funnel more resources into the classroom than a state that spent less per student overall. Consider this theoretical example: One state spends \$10,000 per student and targets 60 percent of the money, or \$6,000, to classroom instruction. Another state spends \$5,000 per student and targets 80 percent of that amount, only \$4,000, to classroom instruction.

We've also added a number of ungraded indicators to the "adequacy" category this year, some of which we may include in our grading scheme in the future.

This year, our grades rely largely on education spending per student. That falls short because it's only a state average and does not reflect how a state actually distributes its spending for all of its students.

Although no one knows how much money actually equals an "adequate" education, we've tried to provide more detailed information about the distribution of state spending across the student population by reporting the percentages of a state's students who receive: per-pupil funding at the national average; the national median; \$5,000 or greater per pupil; \$6,000 or greater per pupil; and \$7,000 or greater per pupil. The reader can decide which measure is most appropriate.

In addition, we have included information on the total instructional dollars spent per student in each state.

A Note of Caution: Readers should take care in comparing this year's grades with those in previous editions of *Quality Counts* because some of the indicators are not comparable. We have sought to improve our indicators and our methodology over time to reflect the best thinking about what works in public education.

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