



Our Working Definition of Student Achievement and School Quality

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Education Evolving's ultimate goal is to increase the achievement of all young people. To reach that goal, many high quality schools will be needed.

But talking about “student achievement” and “school quality” means walking into a thicket. Both terms are often defined narrowly, are often equated with high scores on tests of reading and math. Emotions in this discussion run high, especially as public support for testing falls. The two terms have accumulated heavy baggage.

This is unfortunate, because the concepts of student achievement and school quality are critically important in the nation's quest to improve public education. We must define—broaden, deepen—these terms such that they serve as the guiding beacons we need them to be.

This memo defines what we at Education Evolving mean when we use those terms. This is not an argument for why these definitions are the right ones; nor is it a proposal or a strategy for how to improve achievement and quality. Our purpose here is only to define the two terms.

Student Achievement Defined

Students are achieving when they acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will prepare them to lead happy and successful lives. Basic skills in language arts and math are critically important, especially for elementary students, but are not sufficient. They are building blocks, a starting place for moving to other, higher-order dimensions of achievement.

Our definition of achievement has three primary dimensions:

1. **Personal.** Students achieving are prepared to lead lives in which they are content and filled with a sense of wellbeing. They believe in themselves and feel passionate about the careers and vocations to which they aspire.
2. **Social.** Students achieving are prepared to be contributing members of society. They collectively form an informed electorate, upholding our country's core values of liberty, justice, and equality. They show respect and tolerance for others, stand up for those who

are vulnerable, and reject violence and crime.

3. **Economic.** Students achieving have the skills to sustain themselves in financially viable careers, and to contribute to a thriving national economy characterized by high levels of innovation and entrepreneurship.

The knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for these dimensions of achievement are broad and varied. Partially this includes skills in core disciplines like language arts, math, science, social studies, and art. But, this also includes what are sometimes called 21st century skills, non-cognitive skills, higher cognitive skills, and social-emotional skills—which, more concretely, means skills like problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, and persistence.

Definitions of achievement, like learning, must be personalized

Beyond the universal dimensions of achievement described above, many elements of achievement vary by student and family. Public education must both uphold some national norms but also respect pluralism. A full definition of achievement for a given student will involve accepting differences with respect to:

1. **Areas of Focus.** Students have varying interests and natural talents, and so will pursue varying pathways in life. This will mean, especially in high school, that particular students will often spend more time on some subject or project—will branch off and achieve excellence in their own personalized sets of “standards” in one or two areas of focus.
2. **Abilities and Aptitudes.** Achievement is improvement (or “growth”) in what students know and are able to do relative to where they started and relative to their full potential, not relative to a fixed, grade-based benchmark. Students should be supported and nurtured in areas where they struggle, and be pushed to reach mastery in areas where they are strong.
3. **Values.** Students and families have different values, different ideas about what elements of character are important to develop. Character education is an important part of achievement.

As this discussion of student achievement makes clear, the *measures* or *assessments* of achievement must also be rethought, broadened. But that is beyond the scope of this memo.

School Quality Defined

We define high quality schools as those that facilitate the learning that results in student achievement as described above.

Our concept of school quality is based on what statisticians call “value-added”. Schools serve a variety of students, with different ability levels, personal challenges, and family circumstances. A school’s quality is based on the learning it facilitates independent of factors beyond the school’s control. Schools are not “low quality” just because they serve students with high needs, nor “high quality” just because they serve a student body of greater privilege.

In the same way that student achievement is a pluralistic concept, so too is school quality. Schools succeed when their students succeed, so there can be no one size fits all, no silver bullet model of quality school. Different students will thrive in different types of schools. Increasing the number of quality schools will also mean expanding the diversity among schools.

School quality has other dimensions, which support student learning

While student achievement is the most important element to look at when evaluating school quality, there are other dimensions of school performance that can be independently examined. These include:

- 1. Strong mission and model alignment.** Means a school has a clear, compelling instructional vision and is executing its program consistent with that vision.
- 2. Governance quality.** Means a school’s board or site council is legally constituted, complies with laws and rules governing its operation, is free from conflicts of interest, and faithfully upholds its oversight duties. The board respects the executive authority of those running the school, and avoids the temptation to overreach and micromanage.
- 3. Financial quality.** Means a school maintains and follows an approved budget, which is well aligned with the learning program objectives. It pays its bills on time, stays out of debt, accumulates a rainy-day fund balance, and has procedures in place to protect against embezzlement and fraud.
- 4. Operational quality.** Means a school follows good procedure with respect to human resources, keeps staff turnover low, has a well functioning transportation system, reports to state and federal governments as required, and maintains a safe and clean physical environment conducive to learning.
- 5. Assessment and data quality.** Means a school uses assessments and data primarily to inform and adapt the learning for each student; accountability is a byproduct, not the focus. The best assessments are those that are adaptive, embedded into instruction, and able to measure student growth over time.