

School superintendent: Proposed Oklahoma report card plan likely to close "achievement gap"

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After five years of educators and parents enduring a deeply flawed school accountability system, Oklahoma's A-F school report card is on the cusp of truly exciting and meaningful change. On Dec. 15, the state Board of Education passed an accountability system ensuring schools are measured by what matters most. If the Legislature and Gov. Fallin approve it, the much-maligned school report cards will strengthen academic rigor and improve achievement for historically under-performing student populations.

It's disappointing, then, that "Reason for concern with school-grades targets" (Our Views, Dec. 21), wrongly asserted that the recommended A-F system lowers expectations for minority student populations. On the contrary, this proposal expects more from students who have been low performing, demanding faster and more significant improvement to close an achievement gap that has been allowed to fester for many years.

It bears noting that new federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires states to identify and track the progress of specific groups, such as economically disadvantaged students, those with disabilities and certain minority populations. The goal is to move the needle. The proposed accountability system takes kids where they currently are in terms of academic achievement to measure their subsequent improvement by the statewide average of their subgroup. This is meeting kids where they are and expecting them to reach the same goal without excuse or exception. Taking reality into account certainly must not be confused with promoting racism.

For student subgroups, the beginning point may look different, but the end point of proficiency is the same for all children. Or to put it another

way: If a two-car auto race started with one car already more than 10 laps ahead, you wouldn't expect its competitor to catch up immediately — at least not if you are to be fair.

A meaningful accountability system can help spur school improvement and family engagement, and it can incentivize changes long overdue. Last year, for example, 48 percent of the state's African-American students scored proficient in math. That figure rose to 76 percent if you separated out African-American students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or in special education. We know the effects of poverty — hunger, trauma, struggling families — can significantly hinder education achievement. Nevertheless, data shows that of those middle-class black students proficient in math, their middle-class white counterparts on average scored 38 points higher. Are some black students being stymied by low expectations? Something is awry. This new report card system unmask such inequities and compels schools to address them.

To ascribe racist motives to a plan unanimously passed by the state Board of Education and crafted with input from an Accountability and Assessment Task Force — a highly diverse group of 95 education stakeholders — is not only absurd, but offensive. What we have is a better barometer of our schools, one that allows us to effectively tell the stories of individual progress and the academic needs of every child.

Robinson-Woods is superintendent of Millwood Public Schools in Oklahoma City.