Washington's Revised Achievement Index: Are the School Ratings Fair?

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Washington State has used an Achievement Index to rate school effectiveness. An initial Index produced results for a 4-year period (2009–2012) and a revised Index with different indicators produced results for the next 4-year period (2013–2016) after the initial Index did not meet federal accountability requirements. Analyses of the results of the revised Index finds relatively high correlations between Index scores and school socio-economic status. The median low-income level (FRL) of those labeled Exemplary in 2016 was less than 10%. On average, high schools have had better Index results than other schools on both Indexes. Reasons for these findings are described, raising questions about whether the labels and ratings generated by the Index are fair to schools.

Background

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability system was widely viewed as an invalid measure of school quality (Ravitch, 2010, 2012; Bylsma, Sprigg, & Rich, 2011). As a result, in 2009 the Washington Legislature required the State Board of Education (SBE) to develop a statewide accountability system that would use objective and systematic criteria to identify schools for recognition and for receiving additional state support. Specifically, an Achievement (Accountability) Index was to be created that would use "fair, consistent, and transparent" criteria and "be easily understood by employees within the schools and districts, as well as parents and community members" (Washington State Legislature, 2009). The Index was finalized in 2010 after several years of review that included input from 20 technical experts from within the state, stakeholders from various educational associations and agencies, representatives from the private sector, and a dozen national experts (Bylsma, 2010).

The original Achievement Index featured a 20-cell (5x4) matrix. Four subjects (reading, writing, math, science) and the 7-year extended graduation rate were looked at for each of four indicators: (1) proficiency of non-low income students, (2) proficiency of low income students, (3) achievement (Learning Index) vs. peer schools (residuals based on multiple regression that controlled for the percentage of students who were low income, English learners, highly capable, in special education, and mobile), and (4) improvement on the Learning Index from one year to the next. Each cell was given a rating from 1-7 and the simple average of all the cells produced an Index score.

The original Index had several exclusions and adjustments. Results for English learners in their first three years of school were excluded from Index calculations because research showed that it takes at least that long to achieve "academic" proficiency in English (but those meeting standard were included). In addition, no peer rating was produced for alternative schools and schools with no federal meals program, a key component of the peer rating.

The state submitted the Index to the U.S. Department of Education in its application for the NCLB waiver as a way to measure school accountability, but the Department required changes to the Index. As a result, in July 2012 SBE and the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) began the process to change the Index. After receiving input from various stakeholders, a revised Index received federal approval and was included in an updated waiver application. More student subgroups were added to the Index (three are included only for reporting purposes) and several indicators in the initial Index were either dropped or changed.[1]

The revised Achievement Index is more complicated than the initial Index and continues to evolve (Drake, 2013). It was first computed for school year 2010-11 and included 78 cells that were aggregated into 18 cells with different weights for different types of schools. The writing indicator was removed when the state transitioned to Smarter

[1]While the waiver application was ultimately denied by the Department for other reasons (i.e., inadequate rules regarding the use of student growth as a significant factor in teacher and principal evaluation system), the revised Index continued to be used.

Balanced Assessments (SBA) that did not include a separate writing test, the growth measure was dropped for high schools starting in 2014-15, dual credit participation was added for results from 2013-14, and weights were changed as the indicators changed. The revised Index uses a 1-10 scale. Appendix 1 compares the two Indexes.

More changes will occur to the revised Index and be applied to the results from 2016-17 based on stakeholder input that has been gathered since 2015 to prepare the state's ESSA application due in September 2017. Minimal technical review of the results ("impact data") was conducted and made available for review. A group of technical advisors started discussing the finer details of the Index in April 2017.

The state used both Indexes to generate awards for schools. Schools initially received recognition for Overall Excellence when it was in the top 5% of its school type. The initial Index also generated recognition when schools achieved a specified average score on sections of the Index. For example, schools were recognized when the 2-year average rating reached 6.0 for a content area (language arts, math, science), the 7-year graduation rate, and improvement. Some districts started using the Index results to generate their own awards (Bylsma, et al., 2011). The revised Index has more types of awards and uses different criteria (OSPI, 2017). Recognition is based on 3-year averages and a school must have 95% participation in each year and not be in need of improvement based on a *Priority* or *Focus* status to get an award. Awards are not given by school type and are mostly based on norm-referenced criteria. For example, schools get an Overall Excellence award if they are among the top 5% of all schools. Awards are also given for High Progress and Special Recognition for Growth and English Language Acquisition when schools are in the top 5% or 10% of schools. Tier labels are also given based mainly on a school's rank among all other schools. The tier ranges change slightly from year to year (Table 2). The rating system for the revised Index is shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Tier Rating Ranges

	2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016		
TIER	From	To	From	To	From	To	From	To	From	To	
Exemplary	7.85	10.00	7.85	10.00	7.94	10.00	7.89	10.00	7.83	10.00	top 5%
Very Good	6.81	7.84	6.81	7.84	6.97	7.93	6.85	7.88	6.77	7.82	next 15%
Good	5.86	6.8	5.86	6.8	5.93	6.96	5.75	6.84	5.67	6.76	next30%
Fair	4.84	5.85	4.84	5.85	4.88	5.92	4.26	5.74	4.15	5.66	next30%
Underperforming	3.77	4.83	3.77	4.83	3.82	4.87	3.63	4.25	3.86	4.14	
Bottom 5%	1.00	3.76	1.00	3.76	1.00	3.81	1.00	3.62	1.00	3.85	bottom 5%

Table 3: Tier Rating Ranges

Proficiency		Growth Indicator		College & Career		Dual Credit	
Pct Met Standard	Rating	Median SGP	Rating	Graduation Rate*	Rating	Pct Enrollment	Rating
90-100%	10	≥ 70	10	≥ 95%	10	90-100%	10
80-89.9%	9	65-69.9	9	90-94.9%	9	80-89.9%	9
70-79.9%	8	60-64.9	8	85-89.9%	8	70-79.9%	8
60-69.9%	7	55-59.9	7	80-84.9%	7	60-69.9%	7
50-59.9%	6	50-54.9	6	75-79.9%	6	50-59.9%	6
40-49.9%	5	45-49.9	5	70-74.9%	5	40-49.9%	5
30-39.9%	4	40-44.9	4	65-69.9%	4	30-39.9%	4
20-29.9%	3	35-39.9	3	60-64.9%	3	20-29.9%	3
10-19.9%	2	30-34.9	2	55-59.9%	2	10-19.9%	2
0-9.9%	1	< 30	1	< 55%	1	0-9.9%	1

* 5-year graduation rate

Objectives and Methods

This paper asks three questions about the revised Index results.

1. What is the correlation between the revised Index results and a school's socio-economic level as measured by its percentage of low income students (i.e., those who qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch, or FRL)?
2. How have the Index results and the distribution of schools among the tiers changed over time?
3. What are the characteristics of schools that earned the highest rating (Exemplary) for their spring 2016 results?

To answer these questions, the Excel file available from the SBE website was downloaded and converted into SPSS for further analysis (State Board of Education, 2017a). A "school type" variable was added and schools were assigned a category based on their grade span reported in the file: elementary, middle (includes junior high), high, and multiple (e.g., K-8, 7-12, K-12). Buildings that were institutions or had no students in 2016 were removed from the analysis. Schools that reported no low income students because there was no school lunch program had their FRL percentage changed from 0% to no data. Text data entered as >95% were recoded with a numeric value of 95.1 and text data entered as <5% were recoded with a numeric value of 4.9. The resulting file had 869 variables and 2,014 buildings. In some cases, buildings did not have Index results for 2016 or a 3-year average composite Index because they did not meet the business rules to generate a score (State Board of Education, 2017b, 2017c).

To answer the first question, separate bivariate correlations were calculated for each school type using total student enrollment in the school as a weight. Using a weight means larger schools have more influence on the results than small schools and reduces the effect of a few small outlier schools on the results, and it reflects the number of students affected by the ratings. Separate correlations were computed for all schools in the school type and for only the "regular" schools (excluding alternative schools and other buildings not coded as "P"). Pearson correlations (two-tailed) were calculated between the low income percentage in 2015-16 and the Index from 2015-16 and 3-year average Composite Index (average of results for school years 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16). Descriptive statistics were generated to answer the other questions.

Results and Analysis

Relatively High Negative Correlation with School Socio-Economic Status

Table 3 shows that there is a relatively high negative correlation between a school's percentage of low income students and both the 2016 Index and the 3-year average Composite Index. As the percentage of low income students increases, the Index declines. The one exception is for schools that serve multiple grade levels, where the negative correlations were not quite as strong. This is not surprising because these schools vary greatly in the grades they serve and the number of schools is smaller than the other types of schools, as is their total enrollment. The correlation with the 3-year average (based on results from the spring 2014, 2015, and 2016), which is used to generate recognition, is higher than the 2016 correlation.

Table 3: Correlations with School Low Income Percentage (FRL)

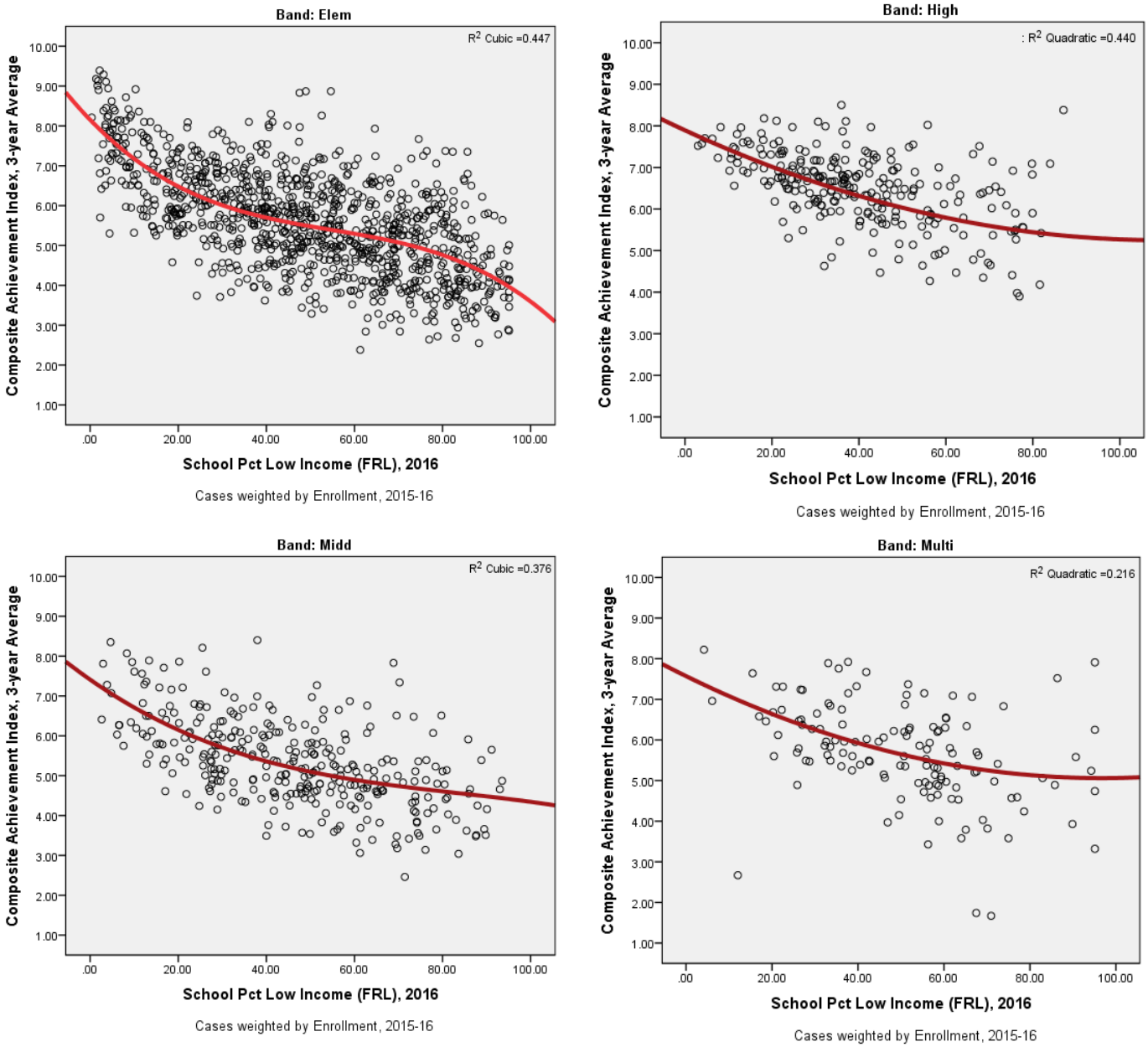
	Elementary	Middle/JH	High	Multiple
All schools				
2016 Index	-.567	-.567	-.577	-.340
N schools	*1050*	*334*	*301*	*211*
3-yr avg.	-.644	-.587	-.628	-.367
N schools	*1027*	*325*	*275*	*186*
Regular school type only				
2016 Index	-.571	-.569	-.608	-.422
N schools	*1042*	*325*	*263*	*139*
3-yr avg.	-.648	-.589	-.655	-.449
N schools	*1020*	*319*	*257*	*133*

Note: All statistically significant at p < .0001 level

Correlations weighted by schoolwide enrollment in 2016

Figure 1 provides a set of scatterplots that help demonstrate the negative correlations between the 3-year Index average and school socio-economic status (low income percentage) among regular schools. Best fit lines and the R^2 associated with each chart are shown to illustrate the relationship between the two variables. The best fit takes into account school enrollment. In all cases, the Index declines as the low income level increases.

Figure 1: Correlation Scatterplots for Regular Schools, by School Type



Changes in the Tests, Participation, and Index Metrics Affect Results Over Time but Still Favor High Schools

Figure 2 shows how the average Index has changed over time for the various school types. Several trends are worth noting.

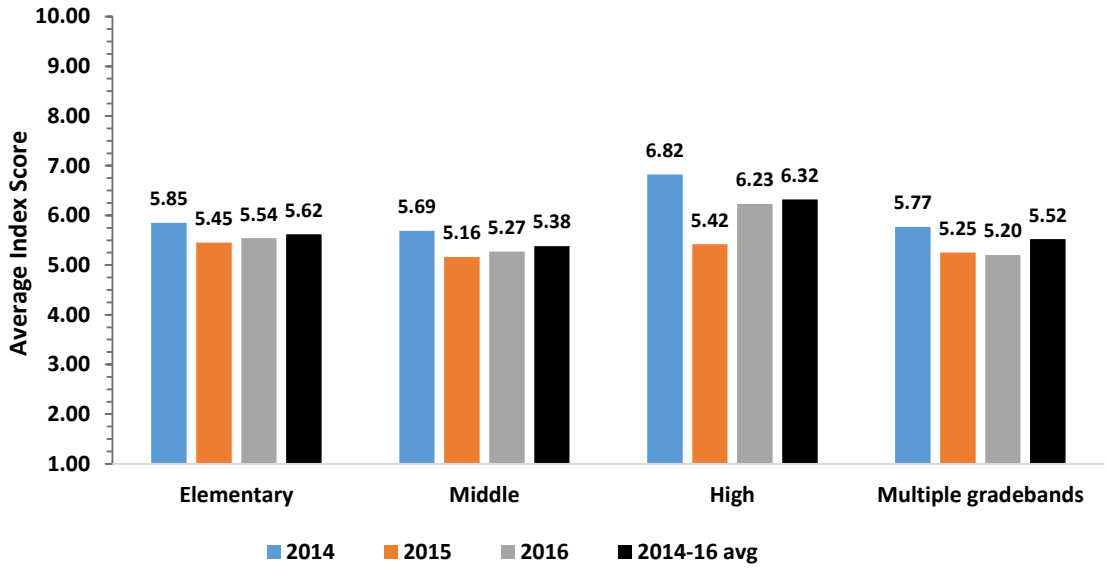
- The results dropped from 2014 to 2015 when the SBA was implemented. Since the Index rating system is fixed, lower percentages of students meeting standard meant the Index declined (see Figure 2).
- The very large decrease for high schools is partly due to a high percentage (almost half) of 11th graders not taking the assessments because they had already passed other tests required for graduation. These students were

counted as not meeting standard. The large jump in the high school Index in 2016 is largely due to the very positive results from the 10th graders who passed the 11th grade English/language arts (ELA) test in 2015. OSPI does not publish results for 10th graders, but it reported that about 74% met standard that year (OSPI, 2015). The students who "previously passed" the ELA exam were included in the 2016 Index results (76% of the 11th graders met standard in 2016 compared to 26% in 2015). A 76% passing rate generates a rating of 8 on the Proficiency portion of the Index. Figure 3 reflects these trends.

- High schools consistently have higher Index results than the other types of schools. Several factors contribute to this trend.
  - The inclusion of graduation rates in the Index helps increase the overall score because (a) higher ratings are easier to obtain compared to ratings on the assessments, and (b) the graduation rate counts for nearly half (48%) of the overall Index because the growth indicator was dropped in 2015. The state's adjusted 5-year cohort graduation rate for the Class of 2015 was 82%, which would generate a rating of 7.
  - High school ELA tests have higher passing rates than the tests at other grades, which generate higher ratings in the Index (see Figure 3). The reading and writing HSPE had higher passing rates than the other grades, and the SBA ELA passing rate of 76% for 11th graders statewide in 2015-16 is higher than all the other grades – an elementary or middle/junior high school with a state average ELA passing rate would get a rating of 6 in almost all the other grades (compared to an average rating of 8 for high schools). The higher ELA ratings for high school were offset recently by lower ratings in math due to the high rates of non-participation as noted above. When high school students start taking the math SBA needed for graduation, the Index will increase for high schools if the results are similar to those of the other school types.

Figure 2: Average Index Results bv Grade Type, 2014 to 2016

Unweighted averages



Distribution of Schools among Tiers Over Time

Table 4 shows the distribution of schools among the various tiers by school type for the initial Index from 2010-11 and the revised Index in 2016. Several trends are worth noting.

- Fewer schools received a tier designation in 2016 than in 2011. The N size used in 2016 was 20 and included only continuously enrolled students, while in 2011 the N was 10 students and included all students.

- The percentage of schools in the Exemplary tier was fairly consistent across all four of the school types in 2016, but this was not the case in 2011 – high schools were more likely and middle schools were less likely to be rated Exemplary in 2011.
- The overall percentage of schools in the Very Good, Good, and Fair tiers were somewhat similar in 2011 and 2016, but there were large differences between the school types each year. For example, high schools were far more likely to be designated Very Good or Good (71%) in 2016 than elementary or middle schools (42% and 33% respectively).
- Fewer schools were rated Exemplary and more schools were in the lower tiers in 2016 than in 2011. This is due to the norm-referenced nature of the recognition criteria of the revised Index – by design, only 5% were given Exemplary status and 20% were given a designation in the two lowest tiers in 2016.
- Middle schools were less likely to be rated Exemplary or Very Good in both years (with the exception of schools that served multiple grade bands in 2011) and were far more likely to be rated underperforming in 2016.
- Schools serving multiple grade bands were more likely to have lower tier designations. Many of these schools are alternative schools serving specialized populations that tend to perform less well on state tests.

Table 4: Distribution of Index Results by Tier and School Type

Results for School Year 2010-11

Tier	Elem.	Middle	High	Multiple	Total
Exemplary	9.6%	4.9%	14.9%	7.9%	9.5%
Very Good	14.1%	13.9%	22.7%	4.5%	14.4%
Good	36.3%	40.4%	32.9%	24.8%	34.9%
Fair	35.1%	35.0%	21.9%	38.3%	33.1%
Struggling	4.9%	5.7%	7.6%	24.4%	8.1%
# schools	1,056	366	383	266	2,071

Source: Bylsma, et al., 2011

Results for School Year 2015-16

Tier	Elem.	Middle	High	Multiple	Total	# schools
Exemplary	5.4%	3.4%	5.3%	4.6%	5.0%	91
Very Good	13.4%	7.4%	31.7%	12.2%	15.0%	276
Good	29.0%	25.0%	39.4%	30.1%	30.0%	551
Fair	33.3%	34.6%	13.4%	29.6%	30.0%	551
Underperforming	13.4%	22.8%	7.0%	12.2%	14.0%	256
Bottom 5%*	5.4%	6.8%	3.2%	11.2%	5.9%	109
# schools	1,030	324	284	196	1,834	1,834

*Some schools were designated as being in the bottom 5% based on results from previous years that carried over to 2016.

Note: Seven online schools fell into the bottom 5% but were not given a tier name. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Characteristics of Schools Earning the Highest Rating

Table 5 shows that, on average, the 91 schools that received an Exemplary rating in 2016 were located in high-income areas. The median FRL percentage of these schools was 9.6%. These results are not surprising given that the strong negative correlation between the revised Index and the percentage of low income students in a school.

Of the 91 schools, 15% were alternative schools that served specialized populations. Also, 19 of the 91 schools (21%) did not receive an Overall Excellence award because, in most cases, they did not meet the 95% participation rate criterion.

Table 5: Characteristics of Exemplary Schools

	Elem.	Middle	High	Multiple	Total
Number of schools	56	11	15	9	91
Median low income (FRL)	7.6%	9.5%	32.3%	14.6%	9.6%
Percent of all Exemplary schools	61.5%	12.1%	16.5%	9.9%	100%
Number receiving award(s)*	55	10	3	4	72
Number of alternative schools	3	4	2	5	14

* Some schools received more than one award.

Conclusions

The validity of a tool (e.g., evaluation, assessment, test) refers to how well the tool measures the constructs it claims to measure. The Indexes that have been used by the state imply a measure of school effectiveness or quality because they are used to label schools with judgment-laden terms (e.g., exemplary, good, fair, underperforming), give recognition, and identify schools needing further assistance. The strong relationship between the revised Index results and a school's neighborhood wealth and a bias in favor of high schools raise questions about the validity of the labels and recognition schools receive. A norm-referenced system that assigns scores and labels based on how the school performs compared to other schools without taking into consideration their demographic context yields labels that do not have validity.

It is not just the labels of Exemplary and Overall Excellence that are affected by a school's socio-economic context. Of the 16 schools that received the English Language Acquisition award, 12 were given to schools in high income areas in Lake Washington, Bellevue, Issaquah, and Mercer Island. Students in these schools are more likely to learn English faster than students in lower-income areas. Some schools in high poverty areas with many students who do not speak English are performing above similar schools (they appear above the trend line in a scatterplot) but are labeled Fair (see Figure 1 and the rating ranges in Table 2).

Other aspects of the revised Index contribute to the results that lack validity. Graduation rates are also highly correlated to a school's socio-economic status, and if a school has many students in low-performing groups, the results for ALL students and the Targeted Subgroups will be very similar and essentially count those students multiple times. This reinforces the averages that yield a low overall Proficiency rating. The state recognized the strong negative correlation between the Index and school socio-economic status and has given a heavier weight for Growth when computing the Index. However, the growth measure, median student growth percentiles (SGP), also has a negative correlation with a school's percentage of low income students, and growth is no longer a measure in the high school Index. (Calculations conducted for this paper yielded correlations of -.360 for elementary schools and -.337 for middle schools.) SGP is another norm-referenced measure that does not measure actual or adequate growth, only how growth compared to others who started with the same score (Bylsma, 2014). As currently constructed, the Index essentially gives recognition to schools based largely on the wealth of the community and students' families, not how effective they are – the median FRL rate for schools rated Exemplary was under 10% in

2016, much lower that the state average (44%). These schools were also more likely to have higher percentages of white students (61%) than students statewide (56%).

The use of a Peer indicator used in the initial Index could help reduce the correlation with school socio-economic status. Schools would be given high ratings on this indicator, even if their performance was below the state average, if they significantly outperformed other schools that had similar challenges (e.g., high levels of low income, ELL, special education, and mobile students). Including a Peer rating based on some sort of Challenge measure in the Index being proposed for federal accountability purposes would provide results with greater validity and meet the Legislature's intent for using "fair criteria" in the Index. This analytical technique is frequently used in the private sector. Mutual funds, for example, are grouped into "families" that have similar portfolios, then ratings are given. Financial analysts would not compare a technology fund to a bond or emerging market fund when determining funds' ratings.

Finally, the added complexity, frequent changes, and reliance on norm-referenced measures makes the revised Index difficult to understand and use. Norm-referenced measures that change every year and that have different weights make it difficult for educators to know what is required to achieve a rating. This lack of transparency appears to violate the Legislature's intent to use criteria that are transparent and easily understood by school staff, parents, and community members. Using criterion-referenced measures would be more transparent and useful, and it would also be consistent with SBE's decision to transition to criterion-referenced measures (Drake, 2013). SBE adopted an accountability framework that stated the system "shall establish objective standards for index performance tiers and exit criteria for required action status. The board does not support a permanent system of moving, normative performance targets for our schools and students. The long-term goal remains gradually reduced numbers of schools in the bottom tiers of the index" (State Board of Education, 2014, section 3b). The 2013 Legislature actually put these principles into law:

> "The legislature further finds that the accountability system must be simple to use and understand. Consequences must be predictable and fair. Differences among students, schools, and districts should be recognized and respected as the system is implemented" (Washington State Legislature, 2013).

Federal accountability requirements, including NCLB, have resulting in schools receiving misleading labels that have limited value. While the process used by state accountability workgroups during the past few years did not focus much on Index results, technical experts have started to engage in discussions that can influence the design of the Index. Given the recent changes in federal regulations, the state may now have more flexibility to think in new ways and come up with measures that meet federal requirements as well as the needs for various stakeholders – educators, parents, and policymakers – by creating a more valid Index that is easier to understand.

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About the Author

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APPENDIX 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ORIGINAL AND REVISED ACHIEVEMENT INDEX

Index Characteristics	Original Achievement Index	Revised Achievement Index
Number of possible cells in the matrix	16 for elementary & middle schools 20 for high schools	65 cells collapsed into 16 cells*
Indicators	• **Proficiency for all (in 2 subgroups)** Reading Math Writing Science 7-year graduation rate • **Learning Index vs Peer Schools** Reading Math Writing Science 7-year graduation rate • **Improvement on Learning Index** Reading Math Writing Science 7-year graduation rate	• **Proficiency for all and targeted subgroups** Reading Math Writing** Science • **Growth*** English/language arts (ELA) Math • **Career & College Readiness** 5-year graduation rate Dual credit participation
Student Groups	Non-low income Low Income (FRL) All students in Peer analysis All students in Improvement analysis	All students • **Targeted Subgroups** Low income (FRL) American Indian/Alaska Native Pacific Islanders/Native Hawaiian African American, Hispanic English learners, former ELLs*** Students with disabilities • **Non-Targeted Subgroups**** Asian, White, Two or more races
Number and Name of Tiers	5 Exemplary Very Good Good Fair Struggling	6 Exemplary Very Good Good Fair Underperforming Bottom 5%
Cell Weights	No weights (simple average creates composite score)	Proficiency is weighted 40% and growth is weighted 60% for elementary & middle schools; weights for high schools depend on which indicators are available*
Rating Type	Fixed (criterion-referenced, does not change)	Variable (norm-referenced, changes every year)
Rating Range	1.00 to 7.00	1.00 to 10.00
Students required to have rating	N > 10 of all students enrolled across all grades in the school	N > 20 of continuously enrolled students across all grades in the school
Test Participation	Non-participants are counted as not meeting standard and assigned Level 0 in the Learning Index	Non-participants are counted as not meeting standard; school cannot receive recognition if < 95% students participate in test in any year

* In 2014-15 Writing was eliminated and Growth (median SGP) was eliminated from the high schools ratings. High schools had either 91 or 104 cells collapsed into 23-24 cells from 2010-11 through 2013-14. Proficiency, growth and college/ career readiness were equally weighted (33.3%) for high schools from 2010-11 through 2013-14.

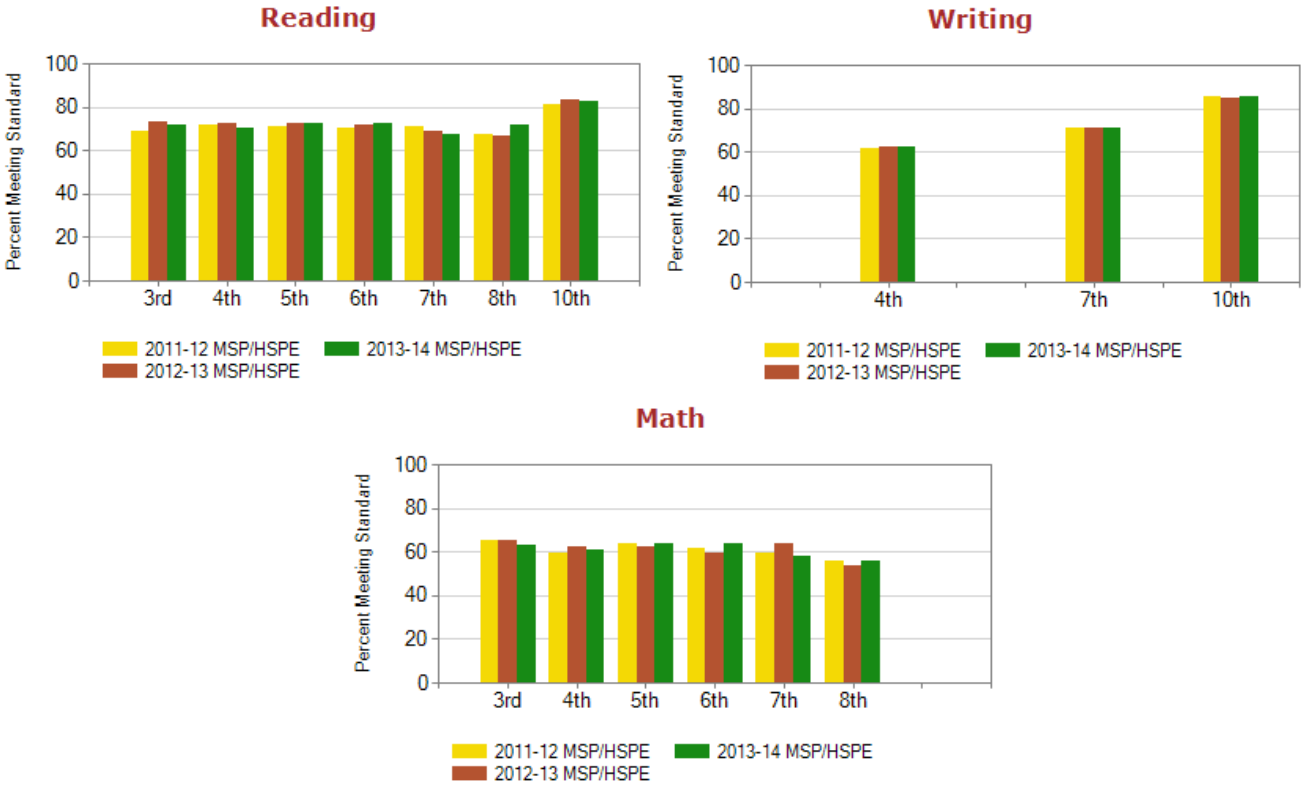
** Removed from the Index in 2014-15 when writing was no longer a separate state assessment.

*** Former ELLs are students who exited the state's program for English learner in the last two years.

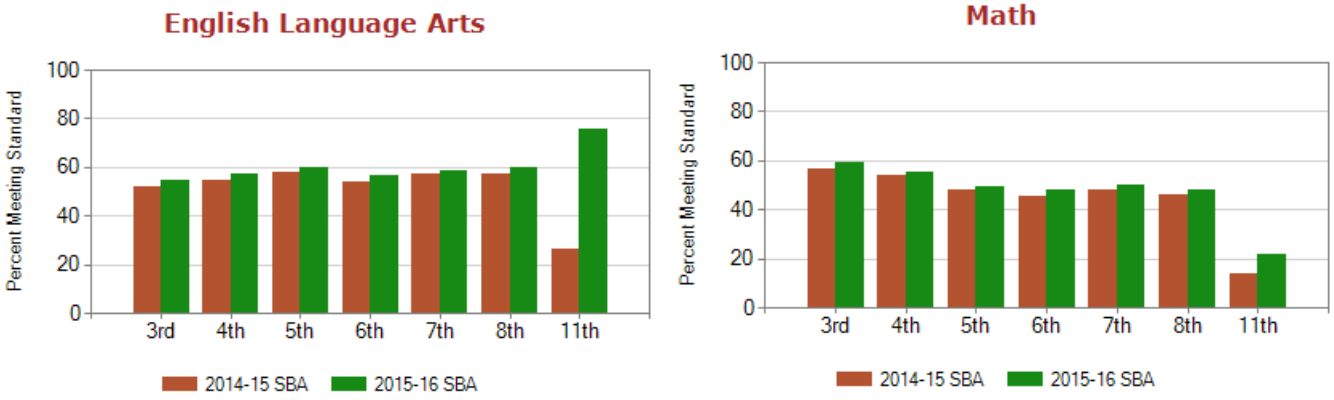
**** Included only for reporting purposes (not used in Index calculations).

APPENDIX 2: STATE ASSESSMENT RESULTS, 2011-12 TO 2015-16

MSP/HSPE Results for 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14



Smarter Balanced Results for 2014-15 and 2015-16



Source: Washington State Report Card, OSPI