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Coalition wants school's 'climate' considered during assessments

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A coalition of student groups and civil rights organizations want the state to assess suspension rates, discipline and "climate" when judging schools' performance.

The push from the Youth on Board, the Boston Student Advisory Council and other groups comes as the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is considering expanding how it judges school performance beyond standardized testing as it puts in place new federal rules, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act.

In a letter to Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester, the groups argue the move would help end the so-called "school to prison pipeline," which refers to the pattern of high suspension and later potential incarceration rate of minority kids.

"We really want to see students' and parents' voice as well as educators' voice being valued in how schools are being measured," said Dave Jenkins, a staff member at Youth on Board.

"Recognizing school climate as a federal indicator helps make sure parents and students understand what's happening in the building before they even set foot in school," said Matthew Cregor of the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice. "The data compiled to help parents understand this is already collected by the state. We're not asking for new data from already busy schools."

The groups want the state to:

- Include parents and students while implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- Assess school safety and school "climate" — a reference to the prevalence of bullying, harassment and excessive discipline in a school — and use federal education funds to improve those.
- Include gay and transgender students as a subgroup whose performance is measured.
- Help incarcerated youths go back to school by providing quality coursework in detention facilities.

DESE spokeswoman Jacqueline Reis in a statement said, "We welcome input on the state's ESSA plan, and we will consider the points in this letter as we continue to develop our plan ... we will continue to try to make our plan as responsive as possible to both the public and to the Commonwealth's goal of a strong education for every student."

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