

Reflections on State ESSA Plans

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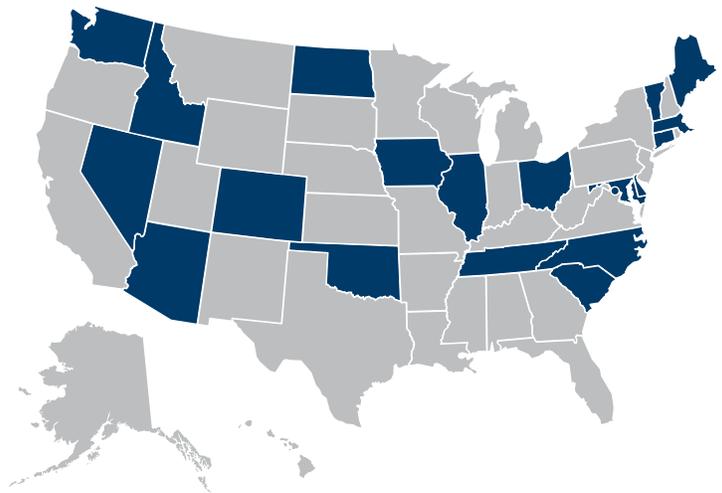
As of May 2017, 17 states submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education to outline their education priorities for the coming years. These plans, required by law under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), are intended to guide states in thinking comprehensively and collaboratively about their policies and to ensure a high-quality and equitable education for all students.

AIR experts have been reviewing these 17 state ESSA plans (as well as three draft plans) to gain insight into states' priorities for education policy and practice. By and large, the plans are consistent with or build on the plans that many states submitted when they requested flexibility under the previous Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In this brief, we share reflections on where states are heading with respect to the accountability measures.

States are taking advantage of increased flexibility to develop more complex accountability measures that reflect multiple indicators of school performance and quality. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education extended flexibility to states under ESEA, allowing states to use multiple accountability measures to evaluate school performance and quality. Since then, many states have focused on multiple student pathways to postsecondary success and the diversity of meaningful benchmarks for measuring students' progress. The majority of the state ESSA plans that we reviewed demonstrate a continuation or expansion of the use of multiple measures, with states proposing accountability systems that incorporate indicators of student achievement growth, college and career readiness, a well-rounded education, and conditions for learning. Approaches from Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, New Mexico, and Vermont blend a variety of indicators for measuring school performance and quality.

AIR staff have reviewed the following state plans. To view a specific state ESSA plan, click on the state name or on the map below.

Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington



For information about individual state ESSA plans, visit <http://www.air.org/page/official-state-websites-and-plans>.

REVIEW TOPICS

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|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Accountability | Pay for Performance |
| Afterschool | School Improvement |
| College and Career Readiness | School Safety |
| Early Childhood | Social-emotional Learning |
| English Learners | Special Education |
| Family Engagement | STEM/STEAM |
| Health and Wellness | Teachers and Leaders |
| Literacy | Technology for Teaching and Learning |
| Needs Assessment | |

The state ESSA plans reviewed for this brief still need to undergo peer review, and they must be approved by the U.S. Department of Education. As a result, the content may change. In addition, states may have updated their plans since our reviews were conducted.

Nonacademic indicators are becoming more sophisticated. ESSA encourages states to be innovative in selecting their additional indicator of school quality or student success, otherwise known as the “fifth indicator.” The use of data regarding conditions for learning—including school climate—as accountability measures is showing increased popularity under ESSA. Whereas only four states (Georgia, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico) used some form of school climate-related measure under ESEA flexibility, at least six states (Iowa, Illinois, North Dakota, New Mexico, Nevada, South Carolina) and the District of Columbia have, to date, included this type of measure in their ESSA plans. Although most climate measures are based on self-reports from students, approaches vary widely. Illinois, for example, will consider only student rates of participation in school climate surveys for now; other states, such as Iowa and North Dakota, will include actual student survey results. Meanwhile, the District of Columbia plans to incorporate the results of a tool that classroom observers use to measure teacher engagement with students. (See Table 1 for further details.)

Table 1. Measures for the Additional Indicator of School Quality or Student Success Proposed in Submitted or Draft State Consolidated Plans Under ESSA

| Measure Type | Submitted State Plans | Draft State Plans |
|--|--|-------------------|
| Chronic Absenteeism Typically, the percentage of students missing 10% or more of school days, including excused and unexcused absences. | CO, CT, DC, DE, IL, MA, ME, MI, NJ, NM, NV, OR, TN | MD, NC, OH, WA |
| College and Career Readiness Includes participation and/or performance in accelerated coursework and/or on tests (Advanced Placement® [AP®] ¹ /International Baccalaureate® [IB®] ² , dual/concurrent, and/or early college coursework); college placement tests; and career technical education pathways as well as postsecondary outcomes (college enrollment, military, employment). | AZ, CT, DE, IL, LA, MA, MI, ND, NM, NV, TN, VT | MD, NC, WA |
| On Track to Graduation Includes participation and performance in benchmark courses or other programming through eighth or ninth grade, sometimes combined with attendance and/or disciplinary data. | CT, IL, LA, MA, NV, OR | WA |
| Conditions for Learning Includes participation or results of instruments capturing student, teacher, and/or evaluator perceptions of school climate, teacher engagement, and student engagement, usually through surveys. | DC, IA, IL, ND, NM, NV, SC | |
| Well-rounded Education Includes participation and/or performance in courses other than those subject to statewide testing (e.g., arts, physical fitness, foreign language). | CT, DC, IL, LA, MI, VT | |

Among the states that are still using attendance as an accountability measure, more are focusing on chronic absenteeism rather than average daily attendance. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), average daily attendance was the most frequently selected “other academic indicator” for elementary schools. With expanded ESEA flexibility, as many as 18 states retained this measure as part of their accountability systems. Average daily attendance, however, is widely acknowledged as a poor indicator for differentiating schools (one of the technical requirements of the “additional indicator” is to aid in meaningful differentiation among schools). Although chronic absenteeism may only appear to be the flip side of average daily attendance, data suggest that this is a more sensitive measure. Under ESSA, so far 13 states have submitted plans, and

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² International Baccalaureate® and IB® are trademarks registered and owned by the International Baccalaureate Organization.

four states have prepared draft plans that include a chronic absenteeism indicator; this move to measure chronic absenteeism represents a noteworthy increase from the ESEA flexibility era, during which only five of the 50 states (Connecticut, Hawaii, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Wisconsin) measured chronic absenteeism in accountability.

Thus far, few state accountability plans incorporate measures of enriched and accelerated curricula or educational experiences. A primary criticism of NCLB was that its laserlike focus on student proficiency in mathematics and English language arts narrowed curricula available to students and neglected other important aspects of child development. In contrast, ESSA has a broader focus. ESSA presents a novel challenge to accountability systems: how to measure the extent to which schools (including entities under Title I and Title IV) provide students with a “well-rounded education.” This broad term includes enriching or accelerated coursework or other educational experiences, in which participation by subgroups is particularly underrepresented. However, only the ESSA plans of a handful of states (Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Vermont) attempt to move beyond core coursework to include indicators of participation or performance in enrichment courses, such as fine arts, music, and physical fitness, which has implications for the goals of quality and equity.

Although the majority of states identify college and career readiness as an indicator, college readiness measures are more fully developed than career readiness measures. Illinois offers a list of five examples of career readiness, which includes an industry credential, military service (including Reserve Officers’ Training Corps), attaining and maintaining consistent employment for a minimum of 12 months, consecutive summer employment, or 25 hours of community service. Tennessee, in its Ready Graduate indicator, tracks whether or not students are on track for one of the three postsecondary pathways: higher education, workforce, or the military.

In terms of college readiness, the majority of states are looking beyond graduation rates and embedding within their accountability plans other measures that are more predictive of postsecondary success. These measures include participation in and performance on college placement tests, advanced coursework (AP/IB, dual/concurrent coursework, etc.), and college enrollment. Approaches range from single measures (college enrollment in Vermont) to sophisticated meta-indicators that embed multiple data points across each of these categories (Illinois, for example).

States are giving more weight to the fifth indicator than we anticipated. Although states have put forward a variety of robust options under the fifth indicator requirement, the impact that these nonacademic indicators will have on school-level accountability designations remains to be seen. One important factor is the weight that accountability systems will accord to these indicators compared to the required academic indicators (proficiency, growth or another academic indicator, graduation rate, and student progress in English language proficiency). Weighting of nonacademic factors is higher than expected under proposed regulations—for example, 10% to 25% of summative accountability ratings—whereas retracted regulations signaled that the original intent of the U.S. Department of Education was that overall ratings would not change based on their score (e.g., through a weighting of 5% or less).

The use of student growth measures has become the “new normal” under ESSA. Under NCLB, educators and administrators alike struggled with the requirement to use achievement measures based on the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level, instead of year-to-year changes in student achievement. Under these guidelines, a school could be labeled as “failing” if a set of students did not meet the state bar for proficiency, even if the students had progressed several grade levels in the course of a year. Policymakers’



efforts to remedy this situation included the student growth measure pilot, launched in 2006, and the Obama era waivers that followed. Under ESSA, student achievement growth is a permitted measure of school-level accountability, and all of the state plans that we reviewed use student-level growth for school accountability. One notable development is the prevalence of criterion-referenced growth measures. Prior to ESSA, states more commonly relied on normative growth measures, such as student growth percentile and value-added measures. Under ESSA, at least four states (Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Nevada) are following Colorado's path and proposing criterion-referenced metrics, such as the adequate growth percentile necessary to be on track to proficiency.

The role of school districts, in terms of both district accountability and their support for low-performing schools, is not well articulated in state plans. Perhaps this lack of detail is because the template does not require states to be specific on this topic. Although references to districts can be found throughout the ESSA plans that many states have submitted, these references are often buried in discussions of school needs and stakeholder participation in decision making. One exception is Tennessee, which devotes an entire section of its plan to district accountability. As Tennessee officials note, “In nearly all cases, the district is ultimately accountable for the management of its schools and for its students’ growth and outcomes.” Page 74 of the plan embarks on a detailed description of the state’s district accountability framework: “Tennessee’s approach to accountability is based on a theory of action that one of the primary roles of the state is to monitor district outcomes (rather than school outcomes), both by evaluating current performance and by providing supports that promote equity, excellence, and continuous improvement.”

The jury is still out on whether states are tightening their oversight of external support providers to low-performing schools. Under NCLB and School Improvement Grants, chronically low-performing schools frequently contracted with external partners to support the improvement process—but some states had tighter quality control mechanisms than others. Thus far under ESSA, Delaware is the only state to *require* the use of an external partner for schools designated as in need of Comprehensive School Improvement. Page 63 of Delaware’s state plan affirms that “by using an external partner to conduct the qualitative needs assessment, the LEA [local education agency]/school will get an unbiased, objective assessment of the school from a fresh perspective.” Eight state plans identify various statewide systems for selecting lead partners. For example, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, and South Carolina will permit districts and schools to select from a pre-approved vendor list. The District of Columbia plans to issue a call for proposals and include feedback from families in the proposal review process. Idaho will permit districts to contract with external vendors to provide school improvement services. The state will carefully vet each vendor through a structured process for scoring applications. An additional 12 state plans include provisions for districts and schools to work with a lead partner to implement the plans. In Maryland, for example, districts will work with their struggling schools to engage internal and external partners to provide support in areas such as data analysis, attendance, instruction, school culture, and climate, family, and community engagement.

The preliminary findings described herein reflect the insights of AIR experts on the accountability provisions of the ESSA plans thus far; in another blog post, we described ESSA plan strategies to address teacher shortages (<http://www.air.org/resource/teacher-shortages-top-10-ideas-first-state-essa-plans>). There is, however, much more to explore in these documents that will shape state and district education policy in the foreseeable future. In forthcoming publications and briefings, AIR will reflect on state ESSA plan provisions for early childhood education, English learners, and special education.