



State Accountability Fact Sheets: Overview and Critical Context

Part of a Series on Implementation of the Every
Student Succeeds Act

By Samantha Batel and Laura Jimenez August 2017

Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) marks a new era in measuring, supporting, and improving school performance. This federal law takes a more holistic view of school quality than its predecessor—the No Child Left Behind Act—while continuing to require states and districts to track and respond to low-performing schools and publicly report results. Rather than just a single test on a single day, annual measures of school performance may now include student growth and other measures of learning, such as chronic absenteeism or access to rigorous coursework. And instead of top-down strategies for improvement, districts will design and implement evidence-based practices that fit the individual contexts of low-performing schools.

States are currently crafting their plans to implement ESSA, which they then must submit to the U.S. Department of Education for review. Seventeen¹ states submitted their plans during the first submission window, and the Center for American Progress analyzed two portions of their overall plans²—the systems they will use to classify and to improve school performance. The authors developed a uniform organizing structure to review states' school classification indicators and strategies to turn around struggling schools to provide individual ESSA plan reviews. The authors summarize key findings below that—with the state fact sheets—are designed to give all states and stakeholders an overview of submitted plans and to provide information to states that will update or have yet to submit their plans.

Methodology

CAP analyzed the federal statewide accountability systems of the 17 states that submitted ESSA plans for review by the U.S. Department of Education for the spring peer review window. The authors provided states an opportunity to review the findings prior to publishing and incorporated feedback when it was provided through August 1, 2017. Any changes made to state plans after that date are not reflected.

The analysis creates a uniform way to organize and weight state indicators and assumes that all applicable indicators are used for school classifications. The actual indicators that states use to classify schools may vary based on a school's student demographics or grade configuration. Furthermore, schools may be organized by different grade spans; for simplicity, this analysis categorizes schools as elementary; middle; elementary and middle; or high schools. As a result, a state's description of its school classification system may differ from this approach, which was designed to give a national perspective.

To complete the school improvement analysis, the authors reviewed and documented states' school improvement timelines, funding strategies, school identification methods, and key improvement strategies. Notably, the review of school identification methods highlights potential areas of misalignment with the law or guidance.³

Summary of ESSA's school performance classification requirements

With shifts in federal education policy, there is a lot of energy around which indicators states will use to classify school performance. States are no longer limited to academic proficiency and can use new measures of student outcomes in addition to once-discounted aspects of school quality. Keeping with the law, states must use at least five types of indicators to classify schools, but the measures they choose and how they choose to measure them vary.

1. Student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and math, which may include student growth for high schools
2. Another academic indicator for elementary and middle schools, such as student growth in ELA and math
3. Progress in achieving English language proficiency
4. Four-year graduation rates, which take the place of a second academic indicator for high schools, and optional extended-year graduation rates

5. At least one measure of school quality or student success, which may include student or educator engagement; student access to and completion of advanced coursework; postsecondary readiness; school climate and safety; or any other measure that meets the technical requirements of the law⁴

This analysis organizes these indicators into seven categories—academic achievement; student growth; English learner progress; early warning; persistence; college and career readiness; and enrichment and environment indicators—to provide a framework for cross-state comparisons. Measures of school quality or student success span the latter four categories.

How states describe their systems to meet the law’s indicator requirements may differ from this organization’s descriptions. For example, states that plan to use science test scores must include this measure in the second academic indicator for elementary and middle schools or as an indicator of school quality or student success.⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, all academic subjects are grouped together.

Overall, every state measures student achievement and growth in reading and math, with 12 states also measuring annual science achievement and three measuring social studies. Every state uses a measure of English learner progress or proficiency, with five states measuring both; 16 states use an early warning indicator, most commonly chronic absenteeism; 13 states use extended year cohort graduation rates in addition to the four-year rate; and seven states use another persistence indicator, such as dropout rate or modified graduation rate. Thirteen states use at least one measure of college and career readiness, and 13 states plan to use an indicator that measures academic enrichment or school environment, such as physical fitness, access to the arts, and school climate.

This analysis also describes how states weight the indicators in each category to determine summative school classifications. On average, achievement and student growth indicators for all academic subjects are each approximately 30 to 40 percent of school ratings. English learner progress, early warning, and enrichment and environment indicators each make up around 10 percent of ratings on average. Persistence and college- and career-readiness indicators are each around 25 percent and 20 percent, respectively, of high school summative ratings on average.

Nearly every state uses a performance index—or systems giving each indicator a percentage weight that sums to 100 percent—to combine measures into a single, annual result.⁶ Four states translate this index into an A–F grade; two states will use 5-star ratings; six states will use performance levels, categories, or tiers; and one state will use percentile rankings. Four states will use only the school identification categories required by ESSA.

States are also required to annually test 95 percent of students and incorporate the participation rate into both their academic achievement indicator and the statewide accountability system.⁷ Seven states describe a ratings or indicator penalty for schools that do not assess 95 percent of students. Six states will use participation rates to determine school supports and improvement strategies. Two states intend to only factor non-participating student scores as zeroes in their proficiency calculation, as required by law. One state will use participation rates as a school classification indicator, while another state indicates that it cannot enforce this requirement. The state-by-state analyses highlight when participation rate directly affects school classifications.

Additional design components not addressed here—aside from notes in select plans—but required by law include: measuring, reporting, and holding schools accountable for the performance of student subgroups; the minimum number of students—or n-sizes—used to calculate and report results; whether states plan to integrate their long-term goals into their school classification systems; and how states plan to meaningfully differentiate certain types of schools, such as schools with variant grade configurations and alternative schools.⁸ The authors intend to explore these elements of school classification systems in future accountability analyses.

Summary of ESSA's school improvement requirements

ESSA's school improvement provisions require states to provide their most struggling schools with intensive support and those with low-performing groups of students with more targeted assistance. To provide these supports, states must use additional resources to fund evidence-based interventions within a three-year improvement cycle. Schools that fail to meet state-set improvement targets over no more than four years receive more rigorous state interventions.⁹

Below are summaries of ESSA requirements in these main areas and a state example for each.

School identification criteria

Generally, states must use all the indicators in their school classification systems to inform the identification of a broad range of low-performing schools rather than relying solely on reading and math scores.¹⁰ Most states use their summative ratings as the basis for identifying struggling schools. For example, the bottom two tiers in Illinois' four-tiered classification system capture the state's underperforming and lowest-performing schools. Vermont, on the other hand, uses schools' current scores and year-to-year

changes to identify those needing improvement. Most states use the numerical score generated by their classification systems to rank the bottom 5 percent of schools. Above all, strong plans have a clear alignment between their school classification systems and how they identify schools for improvement.

First, states must identify three types of schools for comprehensive schoolwide improvement. These include:

1. The bottom 5 percent of schools receiving federal Title I funds
2. High schools with graduation rates of less than 67 percent
3. Schools where the same group of students underperforms without improvement for three years¹¹

Second, states must identify schools for targeted improvement, including:

4. Schools where any group of students performs as low as the “all students” group in the lowest-performing Title I schools
5. Schools where any group of students consistently underperforms according to a state¹²

Most states use similar general methods to identify the three types of schools for comprehensive support and improvement in ways that align with the law’s requirements. For the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools, states typically rank schools by a total score and identify all schools at or below the 5th percentile. For high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, states typically identify schools based on the four-year cohort graduation rate. For schools with consistently underperforming subgroups, states typically identify schools already identified for targeted support that also showed no improvement after three years. Delaware aligns its criteria to identify these schools with ESSA’s requirements particularly well in that its methods to identify comprehensive support and improvement adhere to the methods described here.

States vary significantly in how they identify targeted support and improvement schools, and not every plan complies with the law’s requirements. For example, some states consider the performance of some—not all—student groups to identify schools for targeted support. The law requires that methods to identify low-performing subgroup schools must consider a school’s performance among each subgroup of students in the school. Washington, D.C., is a positive outlier here. Washington schools with any student group performing in the bottom 5 percent of all indicators will be identified as “low-performing subgroup” schools. Schools with more than one student group meeting this criterion will be identified for targeted support for their “consistently underperforming subgroup.”¹³

Evidence-based interventions

Districts must use evidence-based school improvement strategies backed by varying tiers of research evidence on school improvement and student achievement. The gold standard, or strong evidence, uses experimental design. The second tier of evidence includes quasi-experimental studies; the third tier, correlational studies.¹⁴

Oregon districts, for example, receive planning grants to fund evidence-based root cause analyses and participate in supportive state-run activities such as coaching in leadership, initiatives focused on particular student groups, and effective early learning programs.¹⁵ Oregon's approach requires districts to use evidence in each phase of improvement—from planning to implementation of improvement strategies—whereas most states focus solely on the interventions. Justifying each step of the process with evidence requires districts to be more thoughtful and comprehensive in their turnaround approach.

Improvement targets

ESSA requires states to set improvement targets for low-performing schools that identify when they no longer need additional supports.

Most state targets do the bare minimum, requiring schools to marginally improve compared with other schools but not necessarily make significant progress. Illinois, on the other hand, has improvement targets that suggest meaningful improvements in student outcomes. Illinois schools must meet three improvement criteria: no longer perform in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools in the state; achieve a growth trajectory to meet the state's long-term academic goals; and articulate a plan to sustain reforms. Meeting specific growth and achievement goals as well as planning for continued success demonstrates meaningful progress beyond relative improvement compared with other schools.

Funding

ESSA requires states to reserve 7 percent of their Title I funding for school improvement activities and to provide this additional funding to districts in amounts that are sufficient to carry out their improvement strategies.

For example, in Connecticut, 70 percent of the state's districts with low-performing Title I schools reside in just 10 districts. As a result, the state will concentrate its additional federal funds in these locations. The state will grant up to \$500,000 to the lowest-performing schools and up to \$50,000 for schools identified for more targeted support. Connecticut will also make competitive grants available to identified schools residing outside of these 10 districts, pending available funds. All grants will target districts that are using the strongest level of evidence available to justify interventions.

More rigorous interventions

Under the law, schools that fail to improve within four years are subject to more rigorous state-designed interventions.

Most states require these schools to conduct new needs assessments and implement more stringent district-designed interventions. In Massachusetts, for example, schools or districts that fail to make progress within two years of identification are subject to state takeover through receivership or management by vetted school turnaround program providers. Schools or districts may also implement alternative governance structures such as “innovation zones,” providing flexibility from some state and local requirements.

Conclusion

The U.S. Department of Education will review the 17 submitted plans and offer initial feedback; at the time of publication, the department has sent interim feedback letters to nine states.¹⁶ States then can update their plans before the department makes a final determination to approve or deny their proposals.

The individual state fact sheets produced alongside this report use the same format to summarize each state’s school classification system and school turnaround plan. The information captures what states included in their submitted plans to the Education Department; however, states likely have more details that live outside of these plans, particularly regarding their school improvement strategies.

In each state’s fact sheet, Table 1 describes the indicators that it will use to classify school performance and how it will weight those indicators to determine a summative school rating. Table 2 describes each state’s school improvement timeline, and Table 3 details their school improvement funding strategy, including grant structure and funding amounts. Table 4 describes the types of schools that each state plans to identify for comprehensive support and targeted support and improvement. Finally, each fact sheet describes a state’s key school improvement strategies.

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Endnotes

- 1 The indicator weighting and school improvement analyses exclude Michigan, which will not weight its indicators and did not submit methods to identify low-performing schools. The 17 states referenced throughout this brief refer to 16 states and Washington, D.C., which is counted as a state when state totals are provided.
- 2 The authors reviewed the version of state plans accepted by the U.S. Department of Education to undergo peer review. The authors incorporated information from updated plans and feedback from states through August 1, 2017.
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, *Accountability Under Title I, Part A of the ESEA: Frequently Asked Questions* (2017), available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/eseatitleiaccountabilityfaqs.pdf>.
- 4 *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*, Public Law 95, 114th Cong., 1st sess. (December 10, 2015).
- 5 Based on initial feedback from the U.S. Department of Education. For example, see letter from Jason Botel to John White, June 30, 2017, available at <https://ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/laorprelimdetermltr.pdf>.
- 6 Two states, Oregon and Michigan, do not use performance indices. Oregon uses decision rules—in combination with indicator weights—to classify schools. Michigan will not weight the indicators in its school classification system.
- 7 *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 The authors reviewed the submitted consolidated state plans of 16 states and the District of Columbia under the Every Student Succeeds Act. See U.S. Department of Education, “ESSA State Plan Submission,” available at <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/statesubmission.html> (last accessed July 2017).
- 14 *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*.
- 15 U.S. Department of Education, “ESSA State Plan Submission.”
- 16 Ibid.