



Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools

State Supports for Evidence-Based School
Improvement and the Every Student Succeeds Act

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Introduction and summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, renews America’s national commitment to public education and to the belief that all children and youth in the United States deserve a high-quality education regardless of their background or circumstances. Signed into law in December 2015, ESSA offers state education agencies significant opportunities to use evidence to support the improvement of schools and ensure better outcomes for all students.

Much will change in practice and policy as ESSA replaces the law, regulations, and guidance established through the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB,¹ but two elements of the new legislation stand out: the shift away from federal mandates toward greater state and local authority and the emphasis on evidence-based school improvement practices. This report addresses this second element by clarifying the definition of “evidence-based” that ESSA uses, distinguishing it from the “scientifically based research”² provisions of NCLB and providing a framework for how state education agencies can maximize collaborative efforts to implement evidence-based school improvement practices.

Briefly, the evidence-based approach encourages state and district leaders to consider multiple tiers of evidence and examine the strength of the evidence in making decisions. On the other hand, scientifically based research sets a very specific, narrow standard for acceptable evidence. These two terms will be examined in greater detail later in the report.

Most of the early media attention given to ESSA has focused on its clear attempt to address the criticisms leveled at NCLB, including perceived federal overreach.³ Unlike NCLB, ESSA does not mandate particular school improvement activities. Furthermore, there is no separate so-called school improvement funding stream within Title I. Instead, states must now set aside 7 percent of their Title I funds—or the amount the state previously received under Sections 1003(a) and 1003(g) of NCLB, whichever is greater—to support school improvement, and they have significant flexibility in terms of how these dollars are used.⁴ States may also set aside 3 percent of Title I funds for direct student services, such as tutoring and credit recovery.

These provisions offer new opportunities and new challenges for states. States must now plan the use of Title I funds in a way that balances an ongoing commitment to a statewide system of improvement for low-performing schools, including high schools, with other identified needs. Unlike previous versions of the law, ESSA does not specify the school improvement strategies that a state must pursue in support of district, or local education agency, efforts to improve low-performing schools. However, it does require states to approve and monitor local education agency plans for these schools to ensure that they include evidence-based approaches.

Veteran educators and policymakers will recall that NCLB introduced the requirement that improvement policy and practice should be grounded in “scientifically based research.” This standard brought both advances and frustration to the field. It seemed over the past decade that decision-makers were constantly hearing from researchers and experts that almost nothing works, while at the same time product and service providers were all saying that their offerings worked and were supported by scientifically based research. It was hard for policymakers and educators to make the best choices in this environment.

Entering the era of evidence-based school improvement, state education agencies are asking: Will the evidence-based policy elements of ESSA be any different, or will education product and service providers simply replace “scientifically based” with “evidence based” in their promotional materials? Will anything change for the better?

The Center for American Progress and Knowledge Alliance believe that the evidence-based provisions of ESSA are a significant advancement in promoting the use of evidence to support schools in need of improvement and to achieve better student outcomes. CAP and Knowledge Alliance also believe that the shift away from federal mandates and toward greater state and local autonomy is a move in the right direction. Together, these changes have the potential to drive a new era of school improvement in the United States.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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