

Seizing the Moment: A District Guide to Advance Equity under ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is at its core civil rights legislation, offering the nation's 13,000 school districts federal funds to meet the needs of underserved students. In exchange for robust reporting requirements and a commitment to improve underperforming schools, districts can use ESSA funds on a wide range of strategic priorities that improve education outcomes for students. Many school districts across the country have already developed strategic priorities to improve student outcomes, particularly for underserved students, ranging their focus from targeting English Learners (ELs) to addressing funding gaps across schools. ESSA provides these school districts with broad latitude to invest ESSA funds and implement its provisions in whatever ways they think are most likely to benefit their underserved students. As ESSA shifts more autonomy and responsibility to states, districts, and schools, district leaders can seize the opportunity to move beyond compliance and advance their priorities to ensure that every student can achieve their full potential.

In particular, district leaders can leverage the following ESSA requirements to advance equity:

- **Data Transparency:** ESSA's focus on transparency through data reporting (e.g., public report cards that provide data disaggregated by student subgroups, per-pupil spending at the school level, and teacher quality data) serves as a lever to drive and justify district priority areas. By leveraging the data reporting required by ESSA, districts can identify gaps and opportunities in outcomes and use the data to message the importance of districts' strategic initiatives.
- **Funding Flexibility:** Although ESSA's reauthorization did not result in additional dollars for school districts, the flexibility around spending requirements for Title I, Title II, Title III, and Title IV dollars means that district leaders can draw from a number of funding streams to advance their equity priorities. In particular, ESSA alleviates some of the burden of Title I accounting rules and creates more flexibility to spend Title I dollars on underserved students.¹ Title I dollars may continue to be used on initiatives beyond instruction in literacy and math.

¹ See Sec. 1118(b)(1)-(3) of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

- **School Improvement:** For schools identified by states as requiring comprehensive or additional targeted school improvement, district leaders are required to identify resource inequities (which may include financial analyses), to conduct school-level needs analyses, and to implement evidence-based interventions. Districts can use these tools to conduct root cause analyses and to choose relevant interventions to turn around underperforming schools.

This set of guides, which digs into eight ESSA priority areas that may also be equity priorities for school districts, is intended for district leaders focused on strategy. The information will be most relevant and useful for Superintendents, Chief Academic Officers, and other chief-level administrators responsible for implementing their district's priorities. The briefs use ESSA's requirements as a launching point for district actions to advance equity. However, many of the recommendations included in the brief also encourage district leaders to push their agendas beyond ESSA's requirements and to think about how district leaders can disrupt the inertia that traditionally has characterized the implementation of federal grants.

Why Focus on Equity?

Districts across the country continue to serve more and more children with growing needs. As districts adapt to their changing student populations, still too many students' opportunities and outcomes are predicated on family income, race/ethnicity, language status, and ability status. Since 1990, racial, gender, and economic achievement gaps in mathematics have largely remained consistent. In reading across a similar time frame, some achievement gaps have narrowed (i.e., 4th grade White-Black, 8th grade White-Latinx and female-male) but others have widened (i.e., 12th grade White-Black). Eliminating the relationship between these characteristics and student opportunities and outcomes requires district leaders to understand disparities in access to resources, including funding, rigorous coursework, and effective teachers and school leaders. ESSA's focus on underserved students provides district leaders with financial resources to address some of these disparities.

How Should District Leaders Use This Framework?

If they have not done so already, district leaders should use their available data to set their equity priorities, which ESSA's funds and flexibilities can then support. This framework considers eight issues that are often already priorities in many districts and identifies ESSA provisions that could be purposed to support a district's approach to addressing each equity priority:

1. Leveraging School Improvement to Advance Equity
2. Ensuring Equitable Funding
3. Increasing Access to Effective Teachers and Leaders
4. Supporting English Learners
5. Increasing Access to Advanced Coursework
6. Addressing Disproportionate Discipline Practices
7. Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development
8. Improving Access to High-Quality Instructional Materials

Each equity priority has an accompanying guide that includes questions to inform district planning, requirements and opportunities for district leaders related to the topic, examples from districts implementing relevant initiatives, and information on opportunities to blend and braid federal funds across Titles. Read the guide(s) that align with your district's priorities and consider how ESSA's requirements provide a starting point for further district action. Direct excerpts from the statute are included in each brief so that school leaders know exactly what the law requires and allows.

What is ESSA?

ESSA was a bipartisan effort signed into law in December 2015. ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and is the most recent version of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA governs federal K-12 education policy in the U.S., including requirements for annual standardized testing and development of accountability systems for schools and districts, as well as provisions for how states will support under- and low-performing schools and districts. In addition to these requirements, ESSA authorizes key federal funding streams (e.g., Title I, Title II) and programs aimed primarily at low-income and other historically underserved students. While the law requires disaggregated reporting on a number of indicators and a commitment to improving underperforming schools, it also includes some new authority at the local level such as providing district leaders with the financial flexibility to spend ESSA funds across a range of strategic priorities linked to improving student outcomes.

For more on the law see: <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>

For the statute, see: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-114hr5rh/pdf/BILLS-114hr5rh.pdf>

What are the Most Significant Changes From NCLB to ESSA?

Although ESSA is fundamentally similar to NCLB, the legislation did make some changes of which district leaders should be aware. These changes do not necessarily require additional action from district leaders; however, district leaders can leverage some of these changes to advance their equity priorities.

- **Financial Transparency:** District-level and school-level report cards are required to report per-pupil expenditures of federal, state, and local funds, including actual personnel and non-personnel expenditures disaggregated by source of funds. District leaders can use this financial transparency information to illuminate funding and other resource inequities and to think about financial reallocation across schools.
- **Accountability Indicators:** ESSA requires states to use academic proficiency, academic growth, EL proficiency, and graduation rates as academic indicators for their district and school accountability systems. The EL proficiency requirement is a change from NCLB to ESSA. Additionally, ESSA also requires states to use a new school quality or student success indicator as part of their accountability systems. School quality and student success indicators can include measures of student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, school climate and safety, or postsecondary readiness.
- **Title I Flexibilities:** ESSA alleviates some of the burden of some Title I accounting rules, which allows districts more flexibility in spending Title I dollars on underserved students. Further, Title I dollars may continue to be used on initiatives beyond instruction in literacy and math.
- **Shifting EL Activities from Title III to Title I:** Title III continues to provide funding for supplemental services to improve EL proficiency and the academic achievement of ELs. However, a number of activities related to ELs have been shifted to Title I, including the inclusion of EL proficiency standards into state content standards, the administration of EL proficiency assessments, EL proficiency accountability requirements, and the identification of interventions for EL students. Many of the decisions related to EL students in Title I will be at the state level. However, districts have the opportunity to use both Title I and Title III funds to meet state requirements around EL students.
- **Greater State and District Autonomy for School Improvement:** ESSA does away with NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and allows states to set their own achievement goals and timelines for improvement. Whereas NCLB laid out specific interventions for schools not meeting AYP, ESSA leaves it to states and districts to assess their needs, engage with stakeholders, and determine interventions and improvement strategies, as long as they include evidence-based interventions. States must also set aside seven percent of their Title I funds to support school improvement. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, states are required to identify a statewide category of schools for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) based on 2017-18 data, and the state will then notify LEAs about which schools fall into each of these categories. ESSA identifies three categories of schools in need of improvement and details identification criteria and the requirements for their intervention plan [see Table 1].

TABLE 1: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT CATEGORIES AND CRITERIA UNDER ESSA

	CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL INCLUSION	INTERVENTION PLAN
COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT (CSI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lowest-performing 5% of Title I schools • All public high schools that fail to graduate 67 percent or more of their students • Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) Title I schools that fail to improve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District leaders must work with stakeholders to develop and implement an improvement plan that is based on a needs assessment and resource review for each CSI school. • Any CSI school that fails to improve within a state-determined number of years (not to exceed four years) shall be faced with more rigorous state-determined action. • State departments of education establish exit criteria for CSI schools and monitor and periodically review progress made by school districts toward improving CSI schools.
TARGETED SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT (TSI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools where a subgroup of students is “consistently underperforming,” as defined by the state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders develop and implement a school-level plan in partnership with stakeholders. • Although CSI schools are subject to plans crafted and implemented by the district, TSI plans are developed and implemented by the school rather than the district. • School districts must approve the school’s TSI plan and are responsible for monitoring implementation. • If a TSI school fails to improve after a certain number of years (as determined by the district), the district must take additional action.
ADDITIONAL TARGETED SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT (ATSI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TSI schools where the performance of any subgroup of students on its own would lead to CSI identification as one of the lowest-performing 5% of Title I schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leaders develop and implement a school-level plan in partnership with stakeholders. • ATSI plans are developed and implemented by the school rather than the district. • District leaders must approve the school’s ATSI plan and are responsible for monitoring implementation. • If ATSI school fails to improve after a certain number of years (as determined by the district), (1) any ATSI Title I school is converted to a CSI school and (2) any ATSI non-Title I school is subject to additional action by the district.

How Should District Leaders Use Their State ESSA Plans?

ESSA requires each state to articulate their visions and goals for different elements of their education systems, including standards, assessments, and accountability, as part of a comprehensive state plan. All states submitted these plans to the US Department of Education (USDOE) in 2017. State plans varied in their proposals for action, so each issue guide prompts districts to examine specific sections of their state plan and context to understand how the district can align its efforts with the state's ESSA plan and relevant state decisions. For example, is the state proposing to create any new ESSA-funded competitive grants for LEAs? How is the state planning to support districts in school improvement efforts? Will the state be making any significant changes to principal or teacher evaluation requirements that districts can build upon? For more information on your state's plan and timeline, call your state education agency, visit their web page, or check out: <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/statesubmission.html>.

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