

ESSA IMPLEMENTATION

THE OPPORTUNITY

On December 15, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, replacing No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This reauthorization shifts decision-making from the federal level back to state and district policymakers, allowing communities to make tailored assessments and plans to meet the unique nature of their communities and public schools. School board members can take immediate local action and can also weigh in on state level decisions.

TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY: ESSA includes key changes in testing and accountability, eliminating some of the more onerous provisions of NCLB while maintaining a focus on the performance of all students.

- Eliminates Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), punitive labels for schools, rigid non-research interventions, federally required teacher evaluations, and accountability systems based *solely* on standardized tests.
- Continues annual statewide standardized tests in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high schools. Allows states to set a cap limiting the amount of time students spend taking annual standardized tests. Provides funding for states to audit and streamline testing, eliminating duplicative tests. It also provides for a new option for high schools to use a different nationally recognized assessment to fulfil the high-school requirement including the ACT, SAT or AP. Creates a state pilot program for local assessments, driven by teaching and learning (not just accountability) that could take the place of state standardized tests.
- Requires that disaggregation and interventions must be evidence-based. Data will be collected on measures of school quality and climate, disaggregated by subgroups of students, including rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, and chronic absenteeism (excused and in-excused).
- Acknowledges the right of parents and guardians to remove their children (opt out) from statewide

academic assessments where state and/or local policies allow.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

ESSA expands the possible options for school improvement investments, from the four largely punitive School Improvement Grant (SIG) options, and provides an opening for holistic strategies including Community Schools.

- Eliminates the School Improvement Grants Program (SIG) and its four mandated interventions in low-performing schools. Allows local school districts to determine the intervention strategy to be used for school turnaround, including sustainable community schools.¹
- Protects high-poverty schools by ensuring that they receive more per-pupil funding under a demonstration agreement than they received the prior year.
- New positive language about restorative justice requiring local education agency (LEAs) plans to address the need to provide supports and resources in district efforts to reduce overuse of disciplinary practices that remove students from the classroom, which may include identifying and supporting schools with high rates of discipline, disaggregated by subgroups of students.
- State and local funds may be used to implement programs (e.g. PROMISE), that aim to reduce exclusionary discipline practices; implement school-wide behavioral interventions and supports; and to coordinate resources for school-based counseling and mental health programs, such as school-based mental health services partnership programs.
- Allows states to access targeted funds to support local initiatives aimed at improving student achievement in reading and writing from birth through grade 12. This is an important shift that recognizes the continuing needs of students to attain literacy skills that are necessary to ensure that students graduate from high-school college-and-career ready.

SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES IN TITLE FUNDING

- At least 7% of Title I funds must go to school turnaround for the “lowest performing 5%” of schools; one allowable use of these funds is for community school coordinators.
- As in Title I, Title IV provides many funding options for the components of community schools such as the hiring of community school coordinators and funding for all of the pillars named above.
- The *Community Support for School Success Program* provides a small number of grants for full-service community schools. Also included is language that allows for strategies such as: “high-quality early childhood education programs; family and community engagement and supports including engaging or supporting families at school or at home; activities that support workforce readiness including job training, internship opportunities and career counseling, social health, nutrition and mental health services and supports; juvenile crime prevention and rehabilitation programs.”
- ESSA expands the reach of collective bargaining to cover targeted school supports and improvements on Title I and professional development, with pay based on professional growth, the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program (formerly TIF), and all other provisions of contracts impacted by Title I.

School districts have the opportunity and responsibility to take a leading role in the implementation of ESSA. They can help assemble a diverse implementation team; identify evidence-based interventions they would like to use to help turn around low-performing schools (states continue to be obligated to intervene in the 5% lowest performing schools in the state), and weigh in on the state accountability plans. A key aspect of the law is the need to include voices and perspectives from a diverse array of stakeholders, including educators, in decision making at all levels.

The state of MD passed HD 1139 which mandates the MD State Department of Education (MSDE) to inform and provide technical assistance to districts that use Title I and IV funding under ESSA for community school site coordinators. Community and parent/student organizations, labor unions and advocacy groups can reach out to their state DOE’s and districts to make sure these resources are being made available. Additional steps include:

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: School boards can begin by **creating an implementation team or committee** that includes educator, parent, administrator, and community stakeholders who will provide feedback to help craft a district plan. States will develop resource equity plans for the lowest perform-

ing schools in 2016-2017 and the district and local stakeholders are responsible for creating a school improvement plan.²

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TESTING: Districts can contribute on components of the state accountability plan, take advantage of the opportunity for local assessment pilots, help decide what tests will be eliminated, how needs assessments should be done, and how interventions should be designed and by whom. Districts should issue a letter to the state requesting an audit of assessment and reduce unnecessary testing by passing a resolution to restore time for learning.³

Districts can seek approval to use nationally recognized assessments (i.e. SAT, ACT, AP) to fulfill the high school requirement—a potential reduction in federally required standardized testing. Districts should also advocate for their preferred additional indicator of student and school supports; state accountability systems must now include at least one non-standardized test metric, although test scores and grad rates must have greater weight. Districts should also take advantage of a state level advocacy opportunity as ESSA “allows states to decide what happens to schools that miss their participation mark.”⁴

EQUITY AND INTERVENTIONS: Districts are required to conduct an “equity assessment” before deciding on an intervention strategy. The parameters of that assessment are not prescribed by the law, although it does call for an analysis of resource disparities. Districts should begin to redirect resources now to the highest need areas. Districts can identify evidence-based interventions that are permitted under school improvement requirements in ESSA.

LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

The National Education Association (NEA) and **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)** have ESSA guidance and implementation resources available online. **The Center for Popular Democracy** and the **Coalition for Community Schools** provide information on ESSA and Community Schools overlap. **The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University** provides research and technical assistance for districts, communities and partners to create smart education systems.

NOTES

- 1 Sustainable community schools is a proven strategy for increasing equity and school success with six pillars: leadership, culturally diverse and rigorous curriculum, positive culture and discipline practices, transformative parent and community engagement, less teaching to the test, and social, emotional, and physical supports.
- 2 The bottom 5% of Title I schools, add high schools with lower than 67% grad rates and lowest subgroup schools
- 3 <http://www.nea.org/home/60856.htm>
- 4 <https://eia.memberclicks.net/essa-reauthorization>