

The Every Student Succeeds Act: Opportunities and Responsibilities (At a Glance)

By Mark Johnson, State Farm Scholar and Policy Analyst

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015. ESSA reauthorizes the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), which was first enacted as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” Since 1965, ESEA has represented the federal government’s commitment to providing all of the nation’s children with a fair, equitable, and high-quality education. With the passage of ESSA, **responsibility for making critical decisions related to education policy is shifting away from the federal government and back to the states**. ESSA therefore creates a significant opportunity for state and local policymakers to refocus on how best to improve the nation’s schools.

This overview document provides a high-level overview of the key provisions within ESSA. For more information about the law, see the *re:VISION*, *The Every Student Succeeds Act: Opportunities and Responsibilities*, or visit the ESSA section of [The Hunt Institute website](#).

ESSA and Student Assessment

Like the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), ESSA requires that all students be assessed based on state content standards for English language arts, mathematics, and science.

- **Required Tests.** Students must be assessed annually in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8, and once again in high school. Students must also be assessed in science at least once during each of the following grade spans: 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12.
- **High School Assessment.** States may choose to allow local school districts to administer a nationally-recognized high school assessment (such as the SAT or ACT) in place of the state assessment.
- **Testing and Accountability.** A significant difference between NCLB and ESSA is that states are now charged with deciding how test scores should be used for accountability purposes.

ESSA and Accountability

Though ESSA has preserved annual grade-level testing, the law is **less prescriptive** than NCLB about how the test scores should be used. ESSA affords state and local policymakers greater levels of flexibility to make important decisions regarding the specific strategies associated with results-based accountability.

- **Standards.** Statewide accountability systems must be based on “challenging state academic standards”.
- **College and Career Readiness.** The challenging state academic standards are to be aligned with entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the state’s system of public higher education and relevant state career and technical education standards.
- **Goals.** In place of NCLB’s “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) provisions, the state is required to establish long-term goals, which must include the measurement of interim progress toward meeting such goals.
- **Indicators.** The statewide accountability system shall annually measure all test-eligible students, and each subgroup of students. The indicators shown in Table 1 will be used to establish an annual system of meaningful differentiation between all public schools.

Table 1

Indicators to be measured	All Schools	Elementary Schools	High Schools
5 indicators are required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Achievement (with optional student growth) on state assessments • English Language Proficiency • School Quality or Student Success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional Academic Measure (or student growth) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four-Year Graduation Rate

- **Weighting.** Though all of the indicators listed in Table 1 must be given “substantial weight,” when aggregated, “much greater weight” must be given to the academic achievement, high-school graduation, and English language proficiency indicators.
- **Student Growth Measures.** The use of student growth measures (SGMs), as a component of academic achievement, is optional.
- **Other Indicator.** The indicator of school quality or student success allows the progress of schools and students to be measured based on metrics other than standardized test scores, such as measures of student engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, or school climate and safety.
- **Disaggregation.** Results must be disaggregated by subgroup within each state, local education agency (LEA), and school.

ESSA and School Improvement

Under ESSA, the punitive federal prescriptions for low-performing schools are gone. The federal role in ensuring school improvement has not, however, been completely eliminated. As the provisions listed below demonstrate, federal regulations still exist regarding the identification of struggling schools.

- **System of Meaningful Differentiation.** States must establish a methodology for identifying low-performing schools based on a system of meaningful differentiation.
- **School Identification.** States are required to identify a statewide category of schools for comprehensive support and improvement and targeted support and improvement (see Table 2).

ESSA and Ensuring Effective Teaching and School Leadership

ESSA has rendered the “highly-qualified teacher” requirement of NCLB a thing of the past. However, ESSA does still contain a range of provisions that relate to teachers and school leaders.

- **Inequitable Distribution of Teachers.** State education agencies and local education agencies are required to report any disparities that result in low-income students and minority students being taught by ineffective, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students. State plans must also describe how such disparities will be addressed.
- **Student Growth and Educator Evaluation.** Under ESSA, states are no longer bound to the evaluation systems associated with NCLB waivers. Thus, the new law does not require that SGMs be included in teacher and school leader evaluation models.
- **Raising Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness.** ESSA makes Title II federal grants available for states to increase access to effective teachers and school leaders for children of color and children from low-income families.

