

## Evolution of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act • 1965 to 2015

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has an important history. The recent reauthorization of the ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), returns much decision-making authority to the states. The following overview of the evolution of ESEA and federal standards-based education reform policy is presented to contextualize ESSA and help inform how states respond to the new law.

- 1965-1980: Promoting Equity in Access to Educational Opportunities
- 1981-1988: The Push for Educational Excellence
- 1989-1992: The Rise of Standards-Based Reform
- 1993-2000: Federal Focus on Standards-Based Reform
- 2001-2008: Test-Based Accountability
- 2009-2016: Competitive Grants and Federal Prescriptions

### 1965-1980: Promoting Equity in Access to Educational Opportunities

- The original *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965.
- The largest financial component of ESEA was **Title I**, which provided financial assistance to local education agencies for the education of children from low-income families.
- Title I-eligible students were typically taught in “pull-out” classrooms.
- Core decisions regarding curriculum, standards, and personnel matters remained mostly delegated to local government by the states.
- **ESEA was amended four times between 1965 and 1980**, with each iteration of the law providing more precise prescriptions about the use of Title I funds (in order to ensure that the money was being used to assist disadvantaged students).

### 1981-1988: The Push for Educational Excellence

- In the 1980s, the combined effects of a poor economy, rising deficits, and disappointing levels of student achievement gave rise to what became known as the “**excellence agenda**.”
- The excellence agenda, which was supported by a broad coalition of business leaders and civil rights organizations, was premised on the belief that increased rigor in schools would serve to improve education for all students and ultimately boost the nation’s economy.
- *The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act* of 1981 (ECIA) resulted in the renaming of Title I to Chapter 1. Chapter 1 retained the legislative intent of Title I but its funding was significantly reduced.
- The 1988 reauthorization of ESEA again amended the requirements for states receiving Title I funding. The Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act required each state to define the levels of academic achievement expected for Title I-eligible students. In addition, the states were instructed to identify the schools that were not making substantial progress toward raising the achievement of students.

- During Reagan’s time in office, the federal government did not seek to have a direct role in the educational policy. Instead, Reagan pushed for a devolved educational reform model in which state governors and legislators assumed greater responsibility for bolstering achievement.

## 1989-1992: The Rise of Standards-Based Reform

- The shift toward **standards-based reform** began as a refinement of the excellence agenda.
- Standards-based reforms seek to improve education systems through the implementation of aligned standards, testing and accountability policies.
- In 1989, President George H. W. Bush held an education summit for the state governors in Charlottesville, Virginia. During this summit, a plan was developed that called on the federal government to support the creation of national goals that would help improve education systems and boost the nation’s global economic competitiveness.
- The 1989 education summit ultimately culminated in a strategy for the establishment of voluntary national standards, national tests, and school choice. This proposal was entitled America 2000.
- America 2000 failed to pass in Congress, but Bush’s education strategy helped create momentum for increased federal involvement in education based on standards, testing and accountability.

## 1993-2000: Federal Focus on Standards-Based Reform

- Like President Bush, President Clinton was a strong proponent of standards-based reforms.
- The first of Clinton’s educational policies promoting this approach was the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*.
- Goals 2000 established a process for the development of voluntary national education standards and provided grants for states to institute their own aligned standards and tests.
- Separate but parallel to Goals 2000 was President Clinton’s reauthorization of ESEA, titled the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA).
- Under IASA, the states were required to ensure that Title I-eligible students were taught inclusively and provide evidence that learning goals and curricular opportunities were the same for all students.
- IASA also required LEAs receiving Title I funds to identify the schools not making “**adequate yearly progress**” (AYP) and take steps to improve them.
- In exchange for adopting curriculum standards and accountability measures, IASA granted states and localities **greater decision-making authority and flexibility** for their Title I programs.
- However, variation in the implementation of the standards-based reforms, between and within states, led to policy slippage and continued disparities of opportunity.

## 2001-2008: Test-Based Accountability

- Following on from IASA, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) was grounded in standards-based reform.
- NCLB, which was passed by Congress with bipartisan support, was also a concerted attempt by the federal government to fix the **historical shortcomings of ESEA**.
- Dissatisfied with the slow progress made toward raising academic achievement, NCLB required the states to attach **federally-prescribed corrective sanctions** to accountability measures for schools and districts receiving Title I funds.
- Under NCLB, states were required to adopt **academic standards for mathematics, reading, and science**, and establish **assessments** that were aligned to these standards.
- Schools and districts receiving federal funding were required to **annually test** all students in grades 3-8, and once more in high school, in both reading and mathematics.
- In addition, science assessments were to be administered, at least once, during each of the following grade spans: 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12.
- NCLB mandated that achievement data be **disaggregated** and **reported** by **student subgroups**, including: low-income students; students with disabilities; and students from major racial and ethnic groups.
- NCLB also fixed a timeline for school improvement. By the 2013-14 school year, all students, across all subgroups, were expected to reach grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics.
- States were allowed to determine what would count as “proficient” within their own education systems.
- NCLB specified that all core content teachers working in Title I schools must meet state-determined **“highly-qualified teacher”** (HQT) criteria, and that state and local governments must take steps to ensure an equitable distribution of HQT across Title I schools.
- NCLB played a significant role in bringing about the adoption of comprehensive standards-based reforms across the states. However, the flexibility afforded to states to determine their own proficiency levels meant that standards and accountability systems continued to **vary in their scope and rigor**.

## 2009-2016: Competitive Grants and Federal Prescriptions

- Since the passage of the original ESEA legislation in 1965, the decentralized and complex intergovernmental system of educational policymaking has resulted in **uneven patterns of reform** across states and localities.
- It was in seeking to address this persistent concern that the Obama administration enacted a series of policies and legislation that further expanded the federal role in driving standards-based reform.
- In 2009, the federal government used funding from the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) as leverage to push for wider-ranging education reforms.
- Programs associated with ARRA included School Improvement Grants (SIGs), which were authorized under Title I of ESEA, and Race to the Top (RttT) competitive grants. These two programs allocated money for the implementation of one of four federally prescribed intervention models in low-performing schools. In addition, RttT emphasized the following areas for reform:
  - The development and adoption of common standards and better assessments;
  - Expanding the number of high-quality charter schools;
  - Developing data systems that linked student growth and achievement to teachers and administrators; and
  - Raising educator and school leader effectiveness.
- By attaching prescriptive reform initiatives to the allocation of SIG and RttT funding, and later in exchange for flexibility waivers from NCLB requirements, **the federal government was able to exert significant influence over educational policy** at the state and local levels.

### Readings on the Evolution of ESEA

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