

ESSA: New Law, New Opportunity

A BRIEF GUIDE TO EXCELLENCE FOR STATE LEADERS

PUBLIC IMPACT



Introduction

If you are a state or district leader, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a new opportunity. States will receive ESSA funds with fewer requirements and more flexibility on how they may be spent than in prior versions of the federal law.

But decades of reform and school improvement efforts, beginning long before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), strongly indicate that more freedom to spend federal funds is not enough. Achievement shortfalls were very large before NCLB's spending directives; for example, just 8 to 13 percent of low-income students were proficient in reading or math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2000.¹ Post-NCLB, college and career readiness remains elusive for many. Achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students have persisted, and about 40 to 50 percent of economically *advantaged* U.S. students still were not proficient in basic academic skills by 2015.²

Yet, by some estimates, nearly two-thirds of jobs for the current generation of students will require post-secondary education and training.³ Job growth is high in STEM subjects, but schools face shortages of teachers—and much more so *great* teachers—who could prepare students for these jobs.⁴ Students need advanced coursework in all subjects, and they need preparation for it that advances not just their knowledge but their ability to identify and solve problems. Meanwhile, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has fallen.⁵

If you want learning outcomes that really prepare students for their future—and a strong teaching workforce that achieves its potential—you need a new approach.

The success of your educators and their students depends not just on the talent you attract and keep. Schools and districts must be designed specifically to spread a culture of excellence in order for excellence in teaching and learning to prosper. School design is not enough, though: The right people—your *best* teachers and principals—must be entrusted with responsibility for *all* students, and for helping their colleagues succeed at the same level. And you must choose the right approaches to change when schools struggle.

How can you get school design, people's roles, and approaches to change just right to build a culture of excellence in every district and state, one that attracts even more talented people, keeps them for longer careers, and helps them excel? How can you avoid yet another decade of results that fall short and schools that leave teachers burned out and mistrustful of change?

Here we contrast two approaches to ESSA: merely meeting the requirements of key provisions versus promoting strategies more likely to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. Without strong leadership during ESSA planning and implementation, merely meeting technical requirements will be the default. Your state can do better, and here we briefly describe how.

We then share more about schools and districts that have already started moving toward this culture of excellence by designing roles that extend the reach of excellent educators, using new school designs, and taking the right approaches to change—achieving better student outcomes and strong teacher satisfaction.

Beyond the Requirements: Achieving *Excellence* Under ESSA

Four critical areas of ESSA provide opportunities for state leaders to substantially increase the positive impact of federal funds on student learning and educators' careers. The box below summarizes what is **required** in each of these four areas and the opportunities to pursue **excellence** in each area. More detail and linked resources appear below and in the endnotes.

Taking ESSA Beyond the Requirements: Four Strategies to Achieve a Culture of Excellence

- 1. Supporting Excellent Educators**—States **must** pursue students' equitable access to effective teachers and encourage more autonomy for educators. **For Excellence:** Establish strong incentives for LEAs to adopt team-based teaching models that extend the reach of *excellent* teachers to more students, with formal authority for those students' outcomes, pay team leaders more from sustainable sources, and ensure that *all* teachers have daily support to improve. Add paid residencies and multi-school leader roles for greater impact. These models can be used in all types of schools. Use Title II state set-aside funds to support LEAs in making these changes.
- 2. Academic Standards, Assessment, and Supports for Students**—States **must** establish challenging academic standards and aligned assessments. **For Excellence:** Help students achieve higher standards by ensuring that great teachers have accountable roles and time to lead all teachers toward excellence on the job, for higher pay that retains teachers. Use Title II for transition costs.
- 3. Accountability, Support, and Improvement for Schools**—States **must** set academic achievement goals and identify and support schools persistently struggling to meet them. **For Excellence:** Pursue turnarounds or restarts in the lowest-performing schools using methods that have worked best elsewhere: Build a pipeline of turnaround principals and schoolwide teams of teacher-leaders to help all teachers excel. Fund with the 7 percent of Title I A school improvement dollars.
- 4. State and District Reporting**—States **must** report the percentage of ineffective, unqualified teachers and the students they teach. **For Excellence:** Require LEAs to report the percentage of *students* who have *excellent* teachers formally accountable for their learning, to encourage roles that extend great teachers' reach and produce gap-closing learning gains for more students.

1. Supporting Excellent Educators

REQUIRED: States must identify root causes for any students taught disproportionately by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers and describe planned strategies to overcome that disproportionality.⁶ The state must allocate 95 percent of Title II funds to local education agencies (LEAs).⁷ States allocate funds to LEAs and ensure all uses adhere to federal guidelines. Among the information and assurances a state must provide is how it will encourage opportunities for increased autonomy and flexibility for teachers, principals, or other school leaders, such as autonomy over budget and operations.⁸

FOR EXCELLENCE: Establish strong incentives for LEAs to adopt team-based teaching models that extend the reach of *excellent* teachers to more students, with formal authority for those students' outcomes, carve out higher pay for team leaders from sustainable sources, and ensure that *all* teachers have the daily support needed to improve. These models can be used in all schools, not just low-performing ones.

- State education agencies (SEAs) should use a portion of their 5 percent state Title II set-aside to provide technical assistance to help LEAs design team-based models.⁹ This funding should help LEAs and schools design new roles that extend great teachers' reach to more students directly (such as through digital instruction or subject specialization) and through team leadership; construct school schedules to create daily time for co-teaching, co-planning, and on-the-job development; and review and reallocate LEA and school resources to pay teachers significantly more for advanced roles, within regular budgets.
- SEAs should use a portion of their 5 percent state set-aside under Title II to incentivize LEAs to create paid aspiring teacher residencies within these teaching teams, which are sustainably funded out of regular budgets and offer a full year of development, while letting schools screen future teachers for hiring.¹⁰
- SEAs have the option of setting aside an additional 3 percent of Title II funding to support activities for principals and other school leaders.¹¹ SEAs should use these funds to train principals on distributed leadership techniques and forming an instructional leadership team of teacher-leaders, to train teacher-leaders to lead instructional teams, and to pay for technical assistance to form multi-school leader roles and paid principal residencies funded within regular budgets.

2. Academic Standards, Assessment, and Supports for Students

REQUIRED: States must adopt “challenging state academic standards” and aligned academic assessments. States must explain how they plan to support all students in meeting those standards.

FOR EXCELLENCE: Raising standards is a start, but teachers must be ready and supported to up their game. LEAs must build in daily support for teachers to increase their instructional effectiveness and their ability to meet individual student needs. They can do this by helping schools form grade and subject teams led by very successful teachers who become accountable team leaders, and by scheduling time needed for those teams to co-plan, co-teach, and improve together during school hours—that is, job-embedded professional learning. ESSA has expanded the allowable schoolwide uses of Title I funds.¹² States should ensure that LEAs understand they can use Title I funds for technical assistance to help them design instructional teams led by exceptional teacher-leaders accountable for improving learning outcomes of all students served by the team. See item 1 (above) for more.

3. Accountability, Support, and Improvement for Schools

REQUIRED: States are required to set long-term goals for academic achievement and must identify schools in need of support and improvement, including the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools and any high school failing to graduate one-third or more of its students. The state must provide support and technical assistance to LEAs with significant numbers of identified schools. Identified LEAs must develop plans for improvement; the state establishes criteria for schools to exit support and improvement status. States must reserve at least 7 percent of Title I, Part A funds for school improvement, and 95 percent of these funds must be distributed to LEAs either competitively or by formula.¹³

FOR EXCELLENCE: States should pursue turnarounds using methods that have worked best in other schools and across sectors, including encouraging the most effective school designs, talent strategies, and educator roles—including instructional teams of teacher-leaders.

As a start, states should establish an approved list of evidence-based interventions to ensure that school improvement efforts focus on high-leverage strategies.¹⁴ In this list, states should prioritize strategies that put principals who are ready to lead dramatic change in charge of turnaround attempts; attract, retain, and extend the reach of excellent teachers; and drive instructional improvement with meaningful, job-embedded professional development. Access to excellent teachers and leaders are the first and second most important in-school factors affecting student learning, placing them at the top of all evidence-based interventions.¹⁵

If a state or district has a supply of change-leader principals, it can try district-managed school turnarounds—in any school where a capable leader is ready and willing to chart a new course. Encouraging these principals to form a team of accountable teacher-leaders, or “multi-classroom leaders,” who help lead change in each school can help instructional change occur faster and more sustainably, while developing some of those teacher-leaders into future turnaround principals. Successful turnaround principals can also lead multiple schools, while developing other principals on the job. See schoolturnarounds.org for more about turnarounds, and OpportunityCulture.org for more about multi-classroom leadership and multi-school leadership in high-poverty and other schools.

States and districts without an abundant supply of turnaround-ready principals can try a combination of strategies. These can include a limited number of school turnarounds coupled with restarts, in which a district or state contracts with a proven charter school organization to take over a troubled school. In a restart, the students can stay in a school, but the management and leadership of the school changes. Some teachers may remain, but this is in the hands of the charter operator, which is accountable for agreed-upon student outcomes. States and districts must be able to attract charter operators that demonstrate evidence of success with high-poverty populations to make restarts a viable option for success. See schoolrestarts.org for more information and resources about restarts.

4. State and District Reporting

REQUIRED: In addition to data such as academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and per-pupil expenditures, states must report the professional qualifications of teachers, including the percentage of teachers who are inexperienced, provisionally licensed, and teaching out of their field of licensure. This state-aggregated data is compared between high-poverty and low-poverty schools.¹⁶ For schools receiving Title I, Part A funds, the state will need to report the rate at which low-income and minority students are taught by teachers in those categories.¹⁷ If the state uses Title II, Part A funds to improve equitable access to teachers for low-income and minority students, the state will need to report how funds have been used for that purpose.¹⁸

FOR EXCELLENCE: States should require LEAs to report the percentage of *students* who have an *excellent* teacher as the teacher of record in each grade and subject, by school. (States determine the Title II, Part A reporting requirements for LEAs.¹⁹) Progress toward “excellent teachers for every student” will be more likely when the data are tracked and reported.

Research and analysis indicate that students starting behind need well over a year of learning growth consistently, year after year, to catch up, and students in the middle or ahead need that same growth to learn as much as students in other nations.²⁰ Because of this, student growth should be one of the factors, among others, in evaluations that define excellence. In addition, limiting the definition of excellence to a very small portion of teachers will leave out many who also can achieve great learning gains: Include at least 20 percent of teachers, and up to 30 percent, in the “excellence” category, and consider multiyear measures that smooth out natural variations in performance from year to year. States can use the evaluation systems they have in place, or modify them.

Faced with an incentive to increase the percentage of students reached by excellent teachers, LEAs and schools will get creative. They may give excellent teachers direct responsibility for teaching more students than is typical. They may tap excellent teachers to lead and be accountable for the learning of all students taught by a team of teachers. (See item 1 above.) States will need to review their systems for student rostering—linking the right teachers to the right students’ growth scores when multiple teachers are involved.²¹ States should require LEAs to disaggregate these data by student-level characteristics such as free and reduced-price lunch status or ethnicity when subgroups are of a sufficient size. States should also require these data to be reported at the school level, which will highlight within-school disparities in access to excellent teachers.

In addition to adding this measure to their equity reporting, states can also make the percentage of students reached by excellent teachers their “School Quality” indicator within the accountability system.²² Since access to excellent teaching tops the list of evidence-based elements of schooling, the percentage of students reached by excellent teachers is a very strong measure of school quality, would display meaningful differentiation across schools, and would focus school and district leaders on this essential variable.

Excellence-Focused Decisions in Action: Opportunity Culture

While these aren't all the provisions of ESSA with which you'll need to comply, they are key provisions that you can use to lead your state or district toward a more successful future, one ripe with opportunity for educators and students. Excellence-focused decisions about how your schools and districts are designed and the people who work there flow from a set of five principles that form what we call an Opportunity Culture. In a recent study, teachers who were on average at the 50th percentile in student learning gains, who then joined teams led by teacher-leaders known as multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs (who had prior high growth as teachers), produced learning gains equivalent to those of teachers from the 75th to 85th percentile in math, and, in six of the seven statistical models, from 66th to 72nd percentile in reading. Teams had a median of five teachers in addition to the MCL.²³

Opportunity Culture Principles

Teams of teachers and school leaders must choose and tailor models to:

- 1. Reach more students with excellent teachers and their teams**
- 2. Pay teachers more for extending their reach**
- 3. Fund pay within regular budgets**
- 4. Provide protected in-school time and clarity about how to use it for planning, collaboration, and development**
- 5. Match authority and accountability to each person's responsibilities**

More than 225 schools in nine states (and growing) are already designing and implementing Opportunity Culture roles to **reach every student with excellent teaching**. For example, multi-classroom leaders lead grade and subject teams while continuing to teach (usually part time), with full accountability for all the team's students and teacher success. Other teachers extend their reach directly, through such tactics as age-appropriate digital instruction and subject specialization, with extra paraprofessional support. Teachers in Opportunity Culture roles earn typically 10 to 50 percent more than average, within budget.

Many of the Opportunity Culture schools are high-poverty, and have been able to fill positions selectively instead of having teacher vacancies as they did before creating an Opportunity Culture.

Excellent principals also can extend their reach by leading multiple schools, developing other principals on the job. Some districts are using these new school models to create paid, yearlong residencies, which become possible for both aspiring teachers and principals, further strengthening the pipeline of educators.

All of this is funded within each school's regular budgets—school teams decide how to reallocate budgets, with help from published school models—making changes sustainable and scalable within schools, districts, and states.

State and district leaders can read more about Opportunity Culture schools on [OpportunityCulture.org](https://www.opportunityculture.org). The models can be used in **school turnarounds**, higher-performing schools, and **charter school restarts** to make the most of the talent available to each locale.

Whatever the flavor of your efforts under ESSA, there is no reason to settle for just meeting requirements, and a lot of reasons to aim higher. A long history of school reform efforts indicates that schools have the educators they need to achieve excellence for all students.²⁴ But new roles in new school designs, the right people in those roles, and the right approaches to change are essential ingredients to achieving excellent outcomes for far more students and outstanding careers for far more educators.

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Endnotes

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5. Sawchuk, Stephen. (2014, October 21). Steep drops seen in teacher-prep enrollment numbers. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/10/22/09enroll.h34.html>
6. Proposed § 299.18(c)(6)(i) and (ii) would clarify the steps a state must take if it demonstrates under proposed § 299.18(c)(3) that low-income or minority students enrolled in schools receiving funds under Title I, Part A are taught at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers. These steps would include a description of the root cause analysis, including the level of disaggregation (e.g., statewide, between districts, within district, and within school), that identifies the factor or factors causing or contributing to the disproportionate rates and providing its strategies to eliminate the disproportionate rates. See May 31 Federal Register publication of draft regulations, retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2016/05/31/2016-12451/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965-as-amended-by-the-every-student-succeeds#p-566>
7. Section 2101(c)(1)
8. Section 2101(d)(2)(L)
9. Allowable state activities under Section 2001 Formula Grants to States include improving equitable access to effective teachers, developing or assisting LEAs in developing career opportunities and advancement initiatives.
10. Item xi in the list of allowable state activities under Section 2001 Formula Grants to States is “Reforming or improving teacher, principal, or other school leader preparation programs, such as through establishing teacher residency programs and school leader residency programs.”
11. Section 2101(c)(3)
12. Section 1008(b)(7)(A)(iii)(IV)
13. See the Federal Register publication of draft regulations from May 31, *Resources To support continued improvement*, retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2016/05/31/2016-12451/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965-as-amended-by-the-every-student-succeeds#h-53>
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16. Section 1111(h)(1)(C)(ix)
17. Section 1111(g)(1)b)
18. Section 2104(a)(2)
19. Section 2104(b)
20. See Public Impact's *Opportunity at the Top* publications, retrieved from <http://opportunityculture.org/opportunity-at-the-top/>
21. See *Seizing Opportunity at the Top II* for a complete discussion of state policies that allow schools to reach all students with excellent teachers, at <http://opportunityculture.org/seizing-opportunity-at-the-top/>
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