

EDUCATION WEEK Online Summit

# Living With ESSA's Changes

#ESSASummit19

Tuesday, May 14, 2019 / 1 to 3 p.m. ET



## Living With ESSA's Changes Summit

### Online Summit Takeaways

With the Every Student Succeeds Act now in full effect three years after its passage, *Education Week* unpacks how states and districts are using ESSA to transform and customize their education systems, in line with the federal K-12 law's grant of greater autonomy and the guardrails it lays down for quality and accountability.

Using the law's specifics and states' own ESSA plans as a jumping off point, *Education Week* journalists and expert guests answered your questions and guided online discussions in discussions focusing on how the law's implementation affects:

- School improvement and accountability;
- Data reporting and transparency;
- Testing and student assessment;
- Vulnerable groups of students, including English-learners, minorities, and those with disabilities;
- Funding and resources at the state and federal levels;
- New ways of weighing school quality and performance; and more.

Here are takeaways we've distilled from those discussions with you, the *Education Week* readers.



### How ESSA's New Leeway Affects School Improvement and Accountability

**Intro:** ESSA takes a carrot-and-stick approach to school accountability. States get big new leeway in how to fix their lowest-performing school. But they're on a tight leash in identifying those schools and coming up with turnaround plans backed by evidence. **Assistant Editor Alyson Klein** and her guests discussed how states are meeting those challenges, what looks promising, and the potholes so far.

🗨️ **Guests:** Sara Kerr, Vice President of Education Policy Implementation, Results for America; **Carlos L. McCauley**, Director, Center on School Turnaround, WestEd

**Key Takeaways:**

Participants in EdWeek’s online ESSA summit were curious about how money for school improvement—7 percent of a state’s Title I allocation—will ultimately flow to schools. Sara Kerr, of Results for America, pointed to an analysis by her group showing that at least 14 states plan to distribute the school improvement dollars competitively.

The school improvement grants under ESSA will likely be smaller than the \$2 million some schools were getting under the Obama administration’s now defunct School Improvement Grants program. But, in the view of Carlos McCauley, from WestEd’s Center on School Turnaround, that’s actually a good thing. He said less money means that schools will likely have a more focused plan.

In comparison to school improvement efforts under the No Child Left Behind Act the SIG program, Kerr and McCauley note that ESSA gives schools and districts the flexibility to get local communities to the table, focus on what works in the local context, and use data to make tweaks to the plan. And as for whether interventions in low-performing schools will actually be evidence-based as ESSA requires, they suggest that states have control over this; if they really dig and make sure the requirement is enforced, it will yield results for schools.



**Creating Complete, Usable School Report Cards for Educators and the Public**

**Intro:** The nation’s main K-12 law creates powerful tools for seeing how schools stack up against their peers on student achievement, classroom environment, teacher quality, school funding, and more. But that data’s only as good as how complete, accessible, and understandable it is. **Staff Writer Daarel Burnette, II**, outlined the hurdles states and districts face in remaking their school report cards, and how that information can be used by parents, educators, and the public.

🗨️ **Guest:** Katie Carroll, Program Director for Accountability, Council of Chief State School Officers

**Key Takeaways:**

While ESSA will require lots more disclosure on school finance to be reported to the public—including, for the first time, school-by-school spending figures—there continues to be concern that things like school spending amounts will not be comparable across districts, which may undercut their usefulness. There's also concern that states are not publicizing their new report cards in a way that the general public can understand and access them.

Katie Carroll, of the Council of Chief State School Officers, notes that her organization has resources offering examples of how states can move from the development of their report cards to better public understanding and use of those documents. Here's a link: <https://ccsso.org/resource-library/communicating-performance-best-practice-resource-encouraging-use-state-and-school>

There's also been intense interest in how states are engaging the general public on the design of the report cards, including gathering and incorporating feedback. Carroll notes that it's not too late for the public to get involved in this process, with many states aiming at continuous improvement for those tools. Nevada, for instance, includes a brief online survey on its report card to gather user feedback.

Where to look for good examples of states that have innovative ideas in their approach to the new ESSA report cards? Carroll mentions Louisiana, Nevada, and Washington in particular, and suggests a review of what's out there at CCSSO's Accountability and Reporting Resource Library.

<https://resourcelibrary.ccsso.org/>



## Beyond Test Scores: ESSA and Alternative Yardsticks for School Quality

**Intro:** States are on a quest for different ways to gauge school quality and student success, things like school climate and social-emotional learning that don't mirror the same old measuring sticks. But some say they haven't been too creative in breaking with the status quo—in fact, most states have chosen simply to integrate chronic absenteeism into their accountability plans. **Staff Writer Evie Blad** led a discussion of how ESSA's mandate for an alternative indicator of school quality is playing out in practice.

🗉 **Guest: Hedy N. Chang**, Founder and Executive Director, Attendance Works

### Key Takeaways:

Tasked with broadening their definition of school success under ESSA, about three-quarters of states have chosen to incorporate chronic absenteeism into their accountability systems. Chronic absenteeism, often defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days, is viewed as something that can be more

easily measured than other "whole child" factors states considered, like student engagement. About 8 million students were chronically absent from school in 2015-16, missing 15 or more days for excused or unexcused absences, the most recent federal data show.

Students often miss school for a variety of overlapping reasons, and many of them are related to family issues and other out-of-school factors. Confronting the issue will take work from all teachers and staff, respondents said. Some ideas raised in EdWeek's online ESSA summit:

- Engaging curriculum and teaching strategies can be a motivator for students to overcome hurdles that may keep them out of class.
- Schools will need to work with community organizations to meet students' unique challenges, including things like pregnancy and mental health needs.
- Because excused absences count toward chronic absenteeism rates, schools will also face challenges addressing issues like suspensions and sick days that keep students home. That won't be easy.

Educators who took part in the summit also zeroed in on a big concern: students' exposure to trauma. Many of the participants took on students' traumatic experiences as a particular concern in helping them to feel engaged and supported at school. They traded ideas about working with community groups and adopting specific strategies to ensure their schools were sensitive to those experiences and their effects on learning.



## What ESSA Means for Vulnerable Subgroups of Students

**Intro:** ESSA is supposed to shine a bright light on what states and schools are doing—or failing to do—in meeting the needs of vulnerable groups of students and assuring that they do better. **Associate Editor Christina Samuels** dug into how well the law is living up to its promises on behalf of minorities, English-language learners, and students in special education.

**Guest: Allison Rose Socol**, Assistant Director of P-12 Policy, The Education Trust

### **Key Takeaways:**

- State accountability plans generally leave much to be desired when it comes to spotlighting the academic performance of students in various subgroups. An analysis by the Education Trust shows that many states have created school ratings that rely on overall achievement, rather

than pulling out the achievement of students in groups that have traditionally lagged their peers, such as English-learners and students in special education.

- Some states have bucked that trend. For example, Tennessee plans to assign A-F grades to all schools. But 40 percent of the rating a school receives will be based on academic results of low-income students, students with disabilities, English-learners, and a “super-subgroup” made up of black, Hispanic, and Native American students. However, the minority super-subgroup is problematic because it can obscure differences among certain groups, notes Allison Rose Socol of The Education Trust.
- Educators seem to be looking for ESSA to support specific programs. But ESSA, as a policy, was created explicitly to loosen the federal reins on education policy. Thus, many of the nitty-gritty details of how to improve academic performance will be in the hands of states and districts.
- Parents, advocates and others interested in this topic will have to continue looking “under the hood” when it comes to placing a school’s performance in context. For example, Socol noted that in North Carolina, more than 80 percent of schools that received an overall rating of A or B also received a D or F for the academic progress of at least one student subgroup.



## Tapping ESSA Funding and Flexibility in an Uncertain Budget Landscape

**Intro:** There’s money in ESSA for states eager to get creative in funding areas like the arts, health, safety, foreign languages, college-and-career ready coursework, and more. The law also offers states greater freedom in using federal funds in a variety of key areas. **Assistant Editor Andrew Ujifusa** unpacked the potential behind ESSA’s Title IV grants, the “weighted student funding” pilot program, and more.

🗉 **Guests:** **Brian Harris**, Superintendent, Barrington 220 District in Barrington, Ill.; **Anne Hyslop**, Assistant Director for Policy Development and Government Relations, Alliance for Excellent Education

### **Key Takeaways:**

Although there are several areas where the Every Student Succeeds Act provides states and districts a great deal of flexibility, there is still a fair amount of uncertainty as to how much, and where, that flexibility is. One of the clearest examples of this is Title IV grants, which districts can use for education technology, improving school safety and climate, and creating academically well-rounded students.

Educators remain keenly interested in whether the grants can be used on things like instructional coaching and special education (with some caveats, the answers to both are "yes"). In addition, many still do not know that money from Title IV can be transferred into other federally funded programs, like Title I and Title II.

This also reflects that there are a lot of competing interests hoping to get a piece of Title IV money, a dynamic that leads to a diverse set of questions about it. But there seems to be less interest in information about the funding pilot that allows different funding sources to be combined into a single stream that follows individual students. Decisions to participate in this pilot are made at the district superintendent level.



## ESSA and the Student Assessment Landscape

**Intro:** The federal mandate for standardized testing has given educators heartburn for a long time. An ESSA pilot program aims to prime the pump on other ways to gauge student achievement, lets them use SAT and ACT college-entrance exams for accountability purposes, and makes other changes. But it also keeps testing requirements in place. **Assistant Editor Sarah D. Sparks** led a discussion looking at what ESSA means for alternatives to the usual testing regime, and how states are rising to the challenge.

🗉 **Guest: Lillian Pace**, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, Knowledge Works

### **Key Takeaways:**

- While state and district leaders are interested in exploring new ways to assess students, they express ongoing confusion about the basics of how ESSA's testing rules work, much less the various flexibilities available.
- There's a recognition that ESSA's alternative assessment pilot program does not allow districts much flexibility on some of the more stringent aspects of ESSA's assessment system. Schools still must test their students every year from grades 3-8 and once in high school, and they still must find ways to provide modified and alternate assessments for the students with disabilities who need them.
- Lillian Pace of KnowledgeWorks, who works with states on their testing systems, said this has proven particularly difficult for districts trying to develop mastery- or project-based assessments. Moreover, many states changed their own assessment laws and rules to match the

assessment system under the No Child Left Behind Act, and many have not changed those restrictions now that ESSA is in effect.

- So far, only Louisiana and New Hampshire are exploring ESSA's state assessment pilot. School and district staff elsewhere note that without additional funds connected to the pilot, there have been few resources available to develop and test new systems.

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